

COMPLEXITY, DIALOGUE, AND DEMOCRACY: THE EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Susan T. Gardner
Capilano University
sgardner@capilanou.ca

Received: 9 June 2022
Accepted: 25 July 2022

Abstract

There is an unacknowledged disagreement on what *kind of dialogue* best supports democracy. Many view democracy as analogous to a law court and so view “democratic dialogue” as a contest between competing advocates who have acquired the kind of “steel trap” critical thinking skills that are ideal for winning in the *external* marketplace of ideas. Others assume that the propensity to seriously reflect on opposing viewpoints *within* the minds of individuals is ideal for democratic maintenance. It will be argued here that our love affair with “critical thinking” that tends to support an external battle of ideas harms democracy. It will be argued that the complexity of our common humanity, the complexity of our form of governance, the complexity of the approaches needed to face wicked problems, and the complexity of the internal engine of personal development requires that we learn to readily engage in open truth-seeking dialogue with those who hold opposing viewpoints and in so doing, enhance the dimensionality through which we view the world. With regard to the educational implications, this suggests that, since engaging in dialogue across difference is the essence of the pedagogical framework that anchors Philosophy for Children, Philosophy for Children ought to be embraced as an essential component of any educational enterprise that views cultivating democratic citizenship as part of its mandate.

Keywords: Dialogue, Democracy, Truth-Seeking, Perspective-taking, Complexity, Differentiation, Self-development, Philosophy for Children

1. Dialogue in the service of democratic cooperation

Being able to engage in dialogue with one another in the sense of being able to talk through differences and come to “generally accepted” conclusions about how best to live together and work cooperatively to face our common challenges would seem to be a necessary condition for the maintenance of a democratic way of life.

Such a claim may seem bland. However, a deeper analysis will reveal that assent to this claim can be garnered from those who have entirely different views about the kind of dialogue to which this statement refers. And worse, these views serve as justification for entirely different potentially contradictory educational strategies.

To say that democracy requires that we dialogue across difference may mean, to some, that individuals learn to consider points of view other than their own and have the capacity to rise above their own egoistic interests and objectively judge which of competing claims are best for the society in which they live. Another way of putting this point would be to say that such

individuals are attempting to reason with others towards truth claims, or to search for ever “truthier” answers (Gardner, 1999, 2009, 2020)¹ – something that is independent of the wishes of any reasoner. In Stephen Darwall’s words (2006), each individual is trying to assume a “second-person standpoint.” Or what Markova and McArthur (2015) would call “mind-share” (ibid.: 11) or “collaborative intelligence” (ibid.: 8). From Kant’s point of view, this would be an attempt to replicate the “kingdom of ends”² (1967).

For those with this view, an education that supports a marketplace of ideas that takes place *within* the minds of individuals, with the concept of “*within*” referring to the fact that individuals actually ingest and reflect on *reasoned* competing claims, would be ideal. Let’s call this form of interchange “open truth-seeking dialogue” with the phrase “truth-seeking” alerting us to the fact that, since the motivation for engaging in such dialogue is to glean a more adequate understanding, such individuals are primed to change their minds only in light of *reasoned* opposing viewpoints rather than *any* opposing view coming their way.³ In similar vein, Dewey (2007), arguing for the importance of educating for “open-mindedness,” notes that is important that this goal not be misunderstood as priming students to be open to any old nonsense; to just hang out a shingle that says “Come right in; there is no one at home” (ibid.: 133).

In contrast to open truth-seeking dialogue, there are those who view democratic interchange as more analogous to a law court and so view dialogue across difference as a contest between competing advocates – each participant continuously shoring up their own arguments while vigorously defending against those of their opponents. The assumption here is that, if there is an external battle of ideas, as in a law court, or the public square, or indeed in many classroom discussions, the best ideas will win. For those with this viewpoint, an education that nurtures “steel trap” critical thinking skills would be ideal for maximizing an individual’s success in advertising their products of choice, i.e., their ideas. This form of dialogue can be aptly named “adversarial,” though, in its more passive form, might also be referred to as “closed.”⁴

It is important to note that, despite its name, since the defining feature of adversarial dialogue is that participants chronically shore up their own arguments and defend against opposing viewpoints, such interchanges need not be pugnacious. It is for that reason that these two kinds of dialogue are often difficult to differentiate. In a classroom setting, for example, both just look like students exchanging ideas. Nonetheless, there is a crucial difference. For individuals

¹ I will resist the temptation to defend truth here except to note that, against the backdrop of the “unsparing revulsion” to which truth and reason have recently been subject on the grounds that references to truth and reason have legitimized forms of domination, Gillian Rose (1996) wonders why a perceived drawback results in an apparently wholesale rejection of the principle involved. “You would expect the discovery of a limitation to require thorough analysis of principle and practice, so that the strengths and shortcomings of ideas and policies may be revised and modified in the light of experience” (ibid.: 2).

² Quoting Aristotle, Dewey (2007) notes that in the mass of people, vegetative and animal functions dominate. Such persons are not truly ends in themselves, for only reasons constitutes a final end (ibid.: 187).

³ While what is “reasonable” to consider is difficult to determine *a priori*, it is nonetheless safe to assume that there are many positions that have been solidified with a sufficient degree of reason and/or evidence (e.g., climate change, evolution, raping children, torture for fun) that reopening them for further consideration would seem imprudent except under extraordinary circumstances.

⁴ Habermas (1992: 61) uses this term to describe how Robert Horton (1970: 154–155) depicted the Azande mindset, for whom, in contrast to scientific reasoning, no counterexample was effective in altering their view of the world. “Here then we have two basic predicaments: the “closed” – characterized by lack of awareness of alternatives, sacredness of beliefs, and anxiety about threats to them; and the “open” – characterized by awareness of alternatives, diminished sacredness of beliefs and diminished anxiety about threats to them.”

engaged in adversarial dialogue, the goal is to try to convince others of what they already know to be true – to champion for their own position. For individuals engaged in open truth-seeking dialogue, the goal is to genuinely engage with opposing viewpoints in the hope that, with communal effort, a deeper understanding of the issue will emerge.

Though, clearly, there are other kinds of dialogue, e.g., communicating for connection, analyzing these two specific kinds of dialogue is crucial because, as I shall argue here, one kind of dialogue, i.e., open truth-seeking dialogue, nurtures democratic maintenance, while adversarial dialogue does the reverse. For that reason, it is imperative that educators be aware of the fact that, if they nurture raw critical thinking skills in the absence of nurturing the habit of being genuinely open to reasoned opposition, they may be unwittingly fertilizing adversarial mindsets that are toxic to our way of life.

Ultimately it will be argued that an *appreciation of the complexity* of (1) our common humanity, (2) our form of governance, and (3) the approaches needed to face wicked problems, requires that we learn to readily engage in open truth-seeking dialogue with multiple others. This form of dialogue is also necessary for (4) the continuing complexification of the self.

Based on these four positive dialogical by-products of open truth-seeking dialogue, that mirror the four deleterious consequences of adversarial dialogue, the case will be made that educational systems that do not enthusiastically embrace the practices that nurture an open truth-seeking dialogical mindset (practices that are typical of Philosophy for Children⁵) are seriously falling short.

But let us begin by a deeper of analysis of adversarial dialogue.

1.1 Competing Advocates

Since proceedings in a courtroom are symbolic of “justice being served,” it is hardly a stretch to assume that those whose work is fundamental to that system, i.e., legal advocates, are themselves paragons of “judicious thinking” in the sense of being capable of adjudicating fairly between competing claims. It is in this light that “critical thinking” courses have become the darling in educational circles. After all, if all our youngsters are all “lawyers-in-waiting,” our capacity to communicate well with one another would be exceptional, no?

No!

The deduction that since lawyers serve in the justice system, they themselves must be able to think justly is faulty; something referred to as a “fallacy of division,” i.e., assuming that what is true for a whole is also true of all or some of its parts. The mandate of legal advocates is not “just thinking.” On the contrary. The mandate of legal advocates is to advocate for one side only and to demolish, as far as is humanly possible, the arguments of the opponent. Lawyers alone, without a jury or a judge, would not produce justice. Lawyers alone would create a stalemate: each arguing to the death that their side ought to prevail.

And that is what happens when we assume that democracy is all about “the marketplace of ideas.” We are educating youngsters to be expert advocates of their own ideas – their clients, and then we are surprised when intransigence becomes the norm in public discourse.

Such surprise would seem hypocritical. If we are training our youngsters to be lawyers-in-

⁵ <https://www.icpic.org/>

waiting, intransigence is precisely what they are being trained for. How could it not be? Do you really want your lawyer to say in mid-trial: “well, maybe my client is guilty after all”? Even the opposing team would view this as outrageous.

And that is how most people view changing their minds in mid-discourse: outrageous. If we want to test the mettle of ideas, they need forceful and unwavering advocacy.

At the heart of this conundrum is a faulty metaphor. Reasons are reified as active agents, while reasoning people are viewed as merely passive observers – as if ideas themselves do battle and that reasonable people need only look on to see which side wins. That this view maintains life is not surprising: it carries with it the advantage that we humans need not take responsibility for the final outcome. It’s all about reasons.

But, of course, it is not all about reasons – or at least not only about reasons. Ultimately the final adjudication between competing reasons must take place within the minds of reasoning beings, and for that adjudication to take place, those minds must have the *capacity* to hold a number of differing viewpoints at any one time, and the *will* to judge the merits of competing arguments on the basis of the strength of the reasons alone. Both the *capacity* and *will* to engage in such responsabilizing activity requires nurturing.

But what about numbers?

Some might argue that, in a democracy, it doesn’t matter if ideas are ever tested in the (internal) marketplace of anyone’s mind. All that matters is whether ideas are tested in the (external) marketplace of persons. If the process is set up so that the majority rules, why not encourage people to argumentatively fight to the death in support of their positions, and just let the numbers determine the outcome? May the group with the most votes win.

Let us examine this option.

1.2 Tribal Advocacy in a Democracy

According to Joshua Greene, organizing ourselves into competing tribes is a natural human propensity. In his book *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them* (2014), Greene argues that the cooperative tendencies that have given humans such an edge over other species could not have evolved unless they conferred a competitive advantage on those groups who were internally more cooperative (ibd.: 24), i.e., cooperation evolved as a competitive weapon, as a strategy for outcompeting other groups (ibd.: 347).

Green notes that what often keeps groups together is not reason, but arbitrary values. For one group, black sheep must not sleep in the same enclosure as white sheep. For another, women must have their earlobes covered. For another, singing on Wednesdays is strictly forbidden (ibd.: 3).⁶ Thus, Greene suggests that even within tribes, reasonable dialogue is rarity.

For that reason, the winner in the so called “external marketplace of ideas” between competing tribes is rarely determined by reason. This is so because tribal loyalty and “tribal common sense” produce “gut feelings” about what is right and wrong, so that when challenged to explain their positions, since tribal members rarely know why they feel the way we do, they make up a plausible sounding story and go with it (Greene 2014: 298) – in modern day lingo,

⁶ This tendency to form tribal loyalties in service of arbitrary values is one that can be easily produced in the lab. For example, experimenters were able to create strong tribal loyalties within research subjects merely as a function of those who preferred the paintings of Paul Klee over Wassily Kandinsky (Bloom 2013: 117).

this is called “playing to the base.” This tendency toward “nonrationality” is compounded by the “boomerang effect”; a situation in which a counterargument is experienced as a violation of one’s right to one’s own opinions, which then prompts tribal members to adopt a hedgehog stance (Hermans/Bartels 2021: 80).

Tribal advocacy is thus a threat to democracy for a number of interconnected reasons: (1) it creates enemy camps; (2) It precludes the kind of dialogical interchange necessary for optimum democratic evolution; (3) It short-circuits the possibility of utilizing our best reasoning tools to tackle the wicked problems that we face. And (4), it also, as we will see, forestalls personal growth.

By contrast, a commitment to guaranteeing that all citizens receive an education that ensures that, individually, they are able to create a marketplace of ideas *in their own minds* not only avoids these downfalls, it moves those downsides to positive side of the ledger. It is to that topic that we shall now turn.

2. Reflecting on open truth-seeking dialogue

2.1 Reasoning “above” particular interests

Let us examine the following scenario.

Citizens in Tribe A believe that everyone should wear black. Citizens in Tribe B believe that everyone should wear white. The citizens of these two tribes not only cannot dialogue with one another about the appropriate apparel, they cannot even live side-by-side. Just seeing the color of the other’s tribal robes puts them in a rage. Since Tribe C, that advocates wearing only red, is bigger than either A or B, their inability to live together in mutual protection is very much to their detriment.

As luck would have it, an “Enlightened Individual” comes along – let’s call her EI – who suggests that this dispute can be resolved by reason. EI notes that since white reflects heat it is best worn in a hot climate, and since black absorbs heat it is best worn a cold climate. Note that EI’s suggestions are based on truth claims, so they are “tribe-neutral.” And since EI is clearly not siding with one tribe or the other, the chances of her solution being accepted are enormously enhanced. Hermans and Bartels (2021) refer to this “meta-position perspective” (ibd.: 35) as taking up a “helicopter view” – one that helps to leave behind individual emotional investment (ibd.: 38) and so suspend judgment and tolerate uncertainty (ibd.: 63).

And that is precisely why open dialogue in the search of truth (a.k.a. the best reasoned position of all competing alternatives) is so different from advocacy. Everyone can swear allegiance to truth, or the best alternative, regardless of tribe since everyone can assume that things will go better if what they believe is true is, in fact, true.

The concept of “truth,” of course, is not itself uncontentious. However, if we adopt the view that truth can be approached through a process of falsification (Peirce 1955; Popper 1985; Gardner 1999; Gardner 2009; Gardner 2020), since falsification is only efficient if the original set of truth-contenders is maximized (i.e., the best solution is the least worst of all contenders), we arrive at the conclusion that the degree of confidence in the product of a truth-seeking process ought to be proportional to both the original set, as well as the rigor of the process. And since the set cannot be infinite, and since humans have mortal minds, confidence in the product of any truth-seeking process can never be absolute. It is for that reason that truth-seekers tend

to be “open” to amendments of a product of a truth-seeking process should new *reasoned* suggestions come along. Truth-seekers, in other words, are committed to *reasonably* engaging with others in order to ensure that a fair marketplace of ideas takes place *within their own minds*. This requires that they genuinely listen to all relevant *reasoned* viewpoints⁷ and adjudicate their merits on the basis of reasons alone, rather than on their source (Gardner 2009).

2.2 The challenges of reasoning toward truth

Though truth is clearly a laudable goal, nonetheless, there are several reasons why engaging in this process is particularly onerous. For one, it creates uncertainty and we humans are biologically programmed to abhor uncertainty, as is evidenced by the fact that neurological studies that shown that, its opposite, the *feeling of certainty* has an addictive power similar to that of crack cocaine, both of which activate of the limbic system, the brain’s primary reward system (Burton 2008: 24).

For another, turning one’s back on treasured beliefs can threaten both self- and social-identity. If I am a gun-carrying lobbyist and have many friends in the NRA, it will be well neigh impossible for me to seriously consider that the proliferation of school shootings serves as a good reason to reform gun laws without jeopardizing my sense of self as well as my social standing.

As well, in this age of “cancel culture,” engaging in impartial consideration that results in a “measured” response may result in serious personal harm, as was the case for Professors Erika and Nicholas Christakis, headmasters at Yale, who were forced to resign merely for questioning whether the university should be involved in regulating potentially offensive Halloween costumes (Campbell/Manning 2018: 18).

Reasoning towards truth, in other words, is not for the faint of heart. We need to acknowledge, from the get-go, that there are strong biological and social forces that make reasonable interpersonal dialogue across difference highly unattractive. For that reason, the burden of proof lies with anyone who suggests that, nonetheless, it is critical that individuals in a democracy learn to welcome a confluence of ideas in their own minds and to judge the worth of competing claims impartially. This is the burden that I shall take up here.

Specifically, I will argue that we should encourage and teach our youngsters to engage in reasonable interpersonal dialogue across difference because: (1) we need to learn to live comfortably and cooperatively side-by-side; (2) we need to reinforce the evolutionary potential of the democratic process; (3) we need to harness all the rational tools available so that we may enhance the possibility of coming up with ever better solutions to the ever more complex problems that we face; and (4) it is an essential process by which we grow as persons.

I will deal with these four advantages in turn. Before doing so, however, it is important to note that the four advantages that accrue from wide-spread adoption of open dialogue are the mirror images of the four downsides of the wide-spread adoption of adversarial dialogue and for that reason, this mirroring, in and of itself, is further support for the claim that educational enterprises ought to create opportunities for students to engage in open truth-seeking dialogue rather than continuously support the easier route of promoting the kind of “critical thinking”

⁷ See footnote 3.

that is essential for advocacy.

3. Four advantages of open truth-seeking dialogue

3.1 Living comfortably and cooperatively side-by-side

If I view democratic interchange as little more than tribal advocacy based on the assumption that the best team will win, I will be both a poor winner and a poor loser. If I win, then I win, so too bad for you. If I lose, since my interests and those of my tribal mates are at stake, I will not be inclined to embrace the policies that enhance the interests of the competing tribe just because of some technical decision-making strategy such as voting produced that result.

George Monbiot, in his book *Out of the Wreckage* (2018), argues that this inclination to see the world in terms of winners and losers is exacerbated by our dog-eat-dog capitalist economic backdrop, that has convinced us that material satisfaction is the highest good, and has thus propelled us down a narrow corridor self-interest, self-enhancement, and immediate gratification (ibid.: 19). Through this lens, we see ourselves as people striving against each other to overcome individual problems rather than as people striving together to overcome our common problems (ibid.: 21). Since seeing ourselves as consumers rather than citizens strengthens our extrinsic values and competitive urges, it is hardly surprising that, in this milieu of “winners and losers,” we resent “big government” when its efforts may result in my losing a notch or two.

Why should I agree to have my tax dollars spent on a bridge or subway that I myself and few of my tribal mates ever use, or fork over my hard-earned dollars so that you will be better able to approximate my standard of living? If I am a winner and you are a loser, well, tough bananas!

Such an adversarial attitude is perverse. When democracy descends into a vicious competition between winners and losers, it is not just tough bananas for losers: it is tough bananas for everyone. A democracy that is constantly subject, for example, to tax revolt and tax evasion so that the lives of the “have nots” are in a constant spiral downward, while the “haves” are spiralling the other way, is headed, as Monbiot claims (2018) for wreckage.

And to add insult to injury, it is evident that this view of seeing life as a competition is seeping into the very roots of modern society. Monbiot notes, for instance, that between 1997 and 2007, research showed a sharp shift in values in 9- to 11-year-olds in America. Community feeling used to be at the top of the list; now, with celebrity culture and social media, social standing comes first, and community feeling is 11th. It is no wonder then that, in this vicious competition for social standing, a popular weapon of choice is the beauty app on young people’s phones that is ever at the ready to retouch photographs (ibid.: 63). They would sooner see Jane or John slip on a banana peel than have Jane or John outrank them in the pecking order. Such an adversarial attitude, such a blank and pitiless gaze (Yeats 1921), by its very nature, poisons the possibility of developing the kind of “latent sympathy” that is activated when others suffer harm. The old creed of “love thy neighbor” is being replaced by one in which “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity” (Yeats 1921).

In contrast to polarizing advocacy, if citizens learn to genuinely listen to one another, if they learn to genuinely reflect on the merits of diverging viewpoints, they will not see the other as the enemy. They will, rather, recognize the other as human, like themselves and, like

themselves, just trying to figure it all out. In genuinely open truth-seeking dialogue, individuals are more inclined to discard their simplistic white hat/black hat lens and come to recognize that frailty and magnanimity are possible traits in all humans: they will come to recognize, in Marx's terminology (1971: 240-241), their "species being."

Echoing this viewpoint, Hermans and Bartels (2021) argue that we are all more forgiving when we take the position of I-as-a-human-being than when we identify ourselves in terms of group identity (ibid.: 141). In support of this position, they refer to empirical research (ibid.: 140), done by Wohl and Branscombe (2005), that showed that less negative emotions emerge when we see others as human rather than as competing tribal members. In this particular study, subjects were divided into two groups. In group 1, Jews were asked to read a text describing the Holocaust in terms of Germans and Jews. In group 2, Jews were asked to read a text describing the Holocaust in more general terms – as an event in which one group of people had behaved in an aggressive way toward another. The subjects in group 2 were far less accusatory than the subjects in group 1. The same study was carried out on native Canadians, with the same results.

How we see one another matters! Open truth-seeking dialogue inaugurates the possibility of seeing others in all their complexity, and, in so doing, dampens the negative emotions that erupt through the use of the primitive defense mechanism of "splitting" others into camps of all good or all bad (Bond/Gardner/Christian/Segal: 1983). For those of us who cherish the democratic way of life, this is an important message. We need to understand at a deep level that there is nothing inevitable about the maintenance of democracy⁸; its emergence is not the end of history (Fukuyama 2021). Citizens will not care for and protect a way of life if that way of life ensures that they hate and are hated by those of multiple intersecting tribes (Crenshaw 1991), whether those tribal markers are skin color, race, ethnicity, religion, social status, political party, cultural or historical background, or tribal grievance. Adversarial dialogue solidifies wedges. Engaging in open truth-seeking dialogue does the reverse.

This belief, that open dialogue will help to dissipate polarization spurred Kirk Schneider, an American Psychologist, to create a handbook in promotion of his own method of encouraging dialogue across difference (2020). In it, he describes the work of a group called "Braver Angels," a grass-roots organization that promotes facilitated dialogue across difference. As of January 2020, it had 9,000 members across all 50 American states and had conducted nearly 1000 workshops with highly conflicting political partisans (ibid.: 17). Schneider is at pains to stress that the aim of these methods is to help individuals dialogue with one another so that they can "walk in each other's shoes" rather than persuade or change each other's minds (ibid.: 18).

The underlying philosophy . . . is that by learning about and *understanding* the positions of others, people will gradually begin to see the common humanity they share, and on that basis bolster the ability to coexist and potentially even thrive with one another. (ibid.: 69, emphasis added)

⁸ Brendan Sweetman, in his book, *The Crisis of Democratic Pluralism: The Loss of Confidence in Reason and the Clash of Worldviews* (2021), for instance, argues that due to a loss of confidence in reason and the practical failure of public discourse (ibid.: viii), there is "a looming and quite deep crisis facing the liberal form democratic form of government" (ibid.: vii).

Schneider concludes his treatise by noting that one reason why open dialogue is so important is that research has shown that our assumptions about those of other tribes is largely made-up (!): that, for instance, both Democrats and Republicans imagine that almost twice as many people on the other side hold extreme views than they really do (ibd.: 75) and that, generally, those with the greatest level of hostility to their political opponents understand them the least (ibd.: 76).

The moral of this part of the story, then, is this: Open truth-seeking dialogue increases understanding; increased understanding foregrounds our complex common humanity; recognizing our complex common humanity enhances the possibility of living comfortably and cooperatively side-by-side; hence open truth-seeking dialogue enhances the possibility of living comfortably and cooperatively side-by-side.

3.2 Optimizing democratic evolution

In his book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama argued that – in the Hegelian sense of clashing competing ideologies – Western liberal democracy can be viewed as the final stage of humanity’s sociocultural evolution: that, combined with capitalism, liberal democracy is the pinnacle to which humans can aspire in terms of governance. It meets needs efficiently while allowing individuals to live relatively “free” lives.

So, given this background assumption that, relatively speaking, we are living in the best of all possible worlds, it is surely not presumptuous for those of us who live under a liberal democratic umbrella to assume that, therefore, things ought to work relatively smoothly. There are problems, of course, but, since we live in the best way possible, we expect that solutions ought to be readily at hand. If there is racism in the police force, well, no problem. Let’s just defund the police. If there are signs of climate change, well, no problem. Let’s shut down pipelines.

The irony built into the above comments points to the fact that it is this very assumption, that solutions ought to be readily at hand in this best of all possible worlds, turns out to be a cyclopean threat to our very way of life. These simplistic visions – that we should be able to flick the right switch to make problems go away – are what Gopnik (2019) refers to as “unicorns” – or what Rose calls prospects for a New Jerusalem (Rose 1996: 14) are the problem: they are perfect imaginary creatures that we chase but will never find (Gopnik 2019: 14). Though imaginary, these visions are dangerous. Precisely, because of their beauty and simplicity, they are powerful instigators of warring camps. And since we have promoted advocacy dialogue, the result is a lot of useless yelling and a great deal of resentment towards those who are standing in the way of clear solutions.

Tribal advocacy dialogue, in other words, reinforces a one-dimensional lens that paints governance in fake simplicity. If, by contract, citizens were educated to engage in open truth-seeking dialogue and allowed themselves to recognize the myriad of implications and permutations of the various potential ways of handling the challenges we face, they would come to see complexity instead of simplicity, and so understand that anger in response to unsolved problems is not only inappropriate; it is naïve. As Gopnik points out (2019), in the complex society in which we live, social reform will *always* be necessary since “each time we alter a society, new inequalities and injustices appear and are in need of remedy” (ibd.: 45). We need

to accept, in Browning's words (1855), that our reach will – and *should* – always exceed our grasp. Like a sophisticated ecologist who listens to the land through which she moves, so, through dialogue, we will recognize that, as in any ecosystem, there can never be a static state of equilibrium and, as a result, will embrace a vision that Gopnik refers to as “Darwinian”: We will recognize that the best way by which a society can adapt to its challenges is through thousands of small incremental changes (ibd.: 225), hence the title of Gopnik's book: *A Thousand Small Sanities* (2019). We will cease to indulge in grandstanding for “perfect” since we will accept that we cannot possibly know what “perfect” even looks like when trying to figure out how 8 billion human beings in ever-changing circumstances on an already failing planet are best able to live together.

Nonetheless, we ought to be able to recognize and embrace *better* achievable alternatives to the status quo and so get comfortable with knowing that solving this crisis long enough to get to the next one is the work that must be done (Gopnik 2019: 198).

In a similar vein, Hermans and Bartels (2021) argue that democracy is inevitably a thorny path with abysses on both sides. They note that, “These abysses can only be avoided when democracy is considered not as an existing social reality, but as permanent learning process of falling and rising, a learning process that never reaches a culmination point” (ibd.: 170–171).

All of which echoes a truth promulgated by Dewey that “democracy has to be invented continually and shaped by current living generations. Democracy is a continuous process of debate and dialogue, even within individuals” (Hermans/Bartels 2021: 177).

The moral of this part of the story, then, is this: Open truth-seeking dialogue will increase our capacity to recognize the entangled intricate relationships of the democratic system in which we live; recognizing the entangled intricate relationships of the democratic system in which we live will increase our capacity to optimize its evolutionary potential; ergo, truth-seeking open dialogue increases our capacity to optimize democratic evolution.

3.3 Mounting adequate responses to wicked problems

Open truth-seeking dialogue is indispensable for mounting appropriate responses to the enormous challenges faced by humanity. Some fifty year ago, Rittel and Webber (1973) argued that, since some problems are “wicked” as opposed to “tame,” they call for entirely different approaches. “Wicked” problems are characterized by multiple competing definitions of the nature of the problem (Raynor 2014), so, for that reason, they cannot *in principle* be solved (Bentley/Toth 2020: 2). However, they can be managed more or less well⁹ (Bentley/Toth 2020: 212). To the degree that this is true, it suggests that it is time to stop getting mad at each other over the fact that these *&*& problems have not been solved – something Philip Wilson does in his recent screeds on climate change (2021a, 2021b, 2021c). It is time to stop looking for villains to blame. And certainly, as Bentley and Troth (2020) argue, whining is never a good idea (ibd.: 72), since we ourselves are often the most common enemy of constructive action and fruitful collaboration both because of our way of viewing problems, i.e., we fail to see their wicked complexity, as well as our style in working with others: it is when we ignore, label, demean, or blame, that things fall apart (ibd.: 197).

⁹ For those trying to mitigate the horrors of drug addiction, this is referred to as “harm reduction.”

Raynor (2014) argues that the most appropriate solutions to wicked problems are “clumsy solutions” in the sense that different groups of people “accept a common course of action for different reasons on the basis of unshared epistemological or ethical principles” (Bentley/Toth 2020: 112). This allows people to “rub along with each other by not questioning each other’s motivations or worldviews too deeply” (ibid.: 112). Clumsy solutions are “inherently inclusive” (ibid.: 112), i.e., inclusive across tribal worldviews.

Without this ability to see the complexity of the issue and so get comfortable with clumsy solutions, warring tribes, in their warring with one another, move ever further from helpful responses. As Green (2014) points out, our tribal allegiances can make us disagree even about the facts. Greene notes, for instance, that

In 1998, Republicans and Democrats were equally likely to believe that climate change is already under way. Since then, the scientific case for climate change has only gotten stronger, but the views of Republicans and Democrats have diverged sharply, to the point that in 2010, Democrats were twice as likely as Republicans to believe in the reality of climate change. This didn’t happen because Republican scientific literacy and numeracy dropped over the decade. Nor did it happen because Democrats got dramatically more scientifically savvy. Rather, the two parties diverged on climate change because this issue got politicized, forcing some people to choose between being informed by experts and being good members of their tribe. (ibid.: 94–95)

Climate Change (like racism, sexism, child poverty, crime, etc.) is a wicked problem, that threatens the very existence of humanity, to say nothing of all other species that cohabit our planet. Tribal loyalties and adversarial dialogue are getting in the way of the kind of creative and cooperative interchange that undergirds clumsy solutions. Open truth-seeking dialogue with those who think differently, by contrast, may be enough to avert mass extinction, something that is at least a necessary condition for democratic wellbeing.

So, the moral of this part of the story is this: highly complex problems require intricately complex multilateral coordinated responses; open truth-seeking dialogue is a necessary condition for mounting intricately complex multilateral coordinated clumsy responses to highly complex problems; ergo, open truth-seeking dialogue is necessary if we are to respond adequately to the wicked problems that we face.

3.4 The continuing complexification of the self

It has been argued that dialogue with those who think differently is critical for the possibility of living comfortably and cooperatively side by side, for the continuing evolution of democracy, for being able to see the complex challenges we face and for being able to mount the kind of clumsy responses that are necessary to adequately respond to the wicked problems that humanity faces. However, since dialogue with those who think differently is difficult in the extreme, many may find arguments presented thus far too abstract and impersonal to serve as a strong incentive for entering the lion’s den. For that reason, this last argument may be the most motivating. Open truth-seeking dialogue is important not just for the above reasons but also because it is the only process by which we as individuals grow as persons, at least insofar as one assumes the personal and/or ego development of the sort discussed by Loevinger (1976),

Piaget (1967), Mead (1934), Turiel et al. (1974), Loevinger et. al (1970), Kohlberg (1969), Ginsburg et al. (1969), Gardner (1981) is to be taken seriously.

What is interesting about this developmental perspective, at least within the present context, is that it brings us back yet again to the notion of complexity. The background assumption of developmental theories is that selves begin in simplicity and develop (or not) through complexification, i.e., through their capacity to entertain an ever greater number of perspectives at any one time.

The easiest and perhaps the most persuasive way to understand self-development is to start at its beginning. According to George Herbert Mead (1934), humans first become conscious of themselves, i.e., self-conscious, when they learn to see themselves from the perspective of another – a process supported by empirical research in which chimps were only able to develop a concept of self when they were exposed to social interaction (Gallup 1977). Cooley (1964) refers to this as the “looking glass self” (ibd.: 184).

Just as a self-concept first emerges as a function of the capacity to imagine oneself from another’s perspective, so those selves continue to grow through the kind of dialogue that fuels their capacity to imagine an ever-greater number of viewpoints at one and the same time. It is only, in other words, by seriously reflecting on the claims and counter claims of others and then potentially synthesizing them into new creative wholes, that it can be said that we as persons grow as a function of “quantitative expansion and qualitative upgrading” (Gardner, 1981). Or in Dewey’s words (2007), the wider or larger self, which includes rather than denies relationships, is identical with a self which enlarges in order to assume previously unforeseen ties (ibd.: 257).

Ross Poole makes the same point when he says that “I do not grow by manipulating what you believe” (1991: 143). If I am to learn from what you say, I have to be prepared to change my understanding of the issues and its bearing on my beliefs (ibd.: 145). And he adds that I must recognize that the value of what you say is precisely that it is independent of me (ibd.: 145); that I do not begin our interchange with an outcome in mind. I participate in dialogue with the understanding that neither of us can know what we are going to create until, like an artist, we have before us a vision that speaks to us (ibd.: 176, ft).

So, the moral of this part of the story, then, is this: engaging in open truth-seeking dialogue is necessary to access different and potentially incompatible perspectives; accessing different and potentially incompatible perspectives is necessary for a self to grow as a function of quantitative expansion and qualitative upgrading; ergo, engaging in truth-seeking open dialogue is necessary for personal growth.

4. An education in support of democracy

It has been argued that the complexity of our common humanity, the complexity of our form of governance, the complexity of the approaches needed to face wicked problems, and the complexity of the internal engine of personal development requires that we learn to readily engage in open truth-seeking dialogue with those who hold reasoned opposing viewpoints. In doing so, we enhance the differentiation through which we view the world. Since engaging in open truth-seeking dialogue across difference is the essence of the pedagogical framework that

anchors the worldwide movement of Philosophy for Children¹⁰, this suggests that Philosophy for Children (P4C)¹¹ – or a program like it – ought to be embraced as an essential component of any educational enterprise that views social and personal wellbeing as part of its mandate. In essence, then, this entire paper has been written in support of this claim.

This is not to say that this is an easy ask. Facilitating Communities of Philosophical Inquiry (CPIs) on issues of genuine relevance so as to see and hear the cues that suggest that closed mindsets are in need of opening, intuiting how to bring that opening about, all the while keeping the dialogue moving forward toward a deeper understanding like “a boat tacking into the wind” (Lipman 1991: 16), needs fairly in-depth and extensive training – though it is one that can be fairly easily accessed in one of the many P4C training centers around the world¹².

To those who might resist the call to educate in this new way, the message contained herein is this: if educational enterprises do not support the dialogical complexification of the self, and with it, the complexification of how we see others, how we view governance, and how we understand the wicked problems that we face, if they, instead, maintain their love affair with enhancing the critical thinking skills of individual students, then they are guilty of doing little more than sharpening the tribal weaponry that is destroying democracy from within.

As Monbiot (2018) points out, the narrower the curriculum – and the closer it is tailored to the expectation of commercial employment – the more children it fails (ibid.: 56). Educating children primarily so that they can be winners in the dog-eat-dog capitalist economy will virtually ensure that their assumption about dialogue will be the same. Such an education may very well be ringing the death knell of democratic governance. As Dewey points out (2007), education in a democracy cannot be justified solely by its potential for material output (ibid.: 93): the purpose of school education ought to be organizing the powers that ensure growth (ibid.: 42).

5. Conclusion

In her book, *Fascism: A Warning* (2018), Madeleine Albright, US Secretary of State from 1997 to 2001, warns of the precarious state of democratic governance around the world. In America, the number of citizens who say that they have faith in their government “just about always” or “most of the time” has dropped from 70 % in the early 1960s to below 20 % in 2016 (ibid.: 113). And to punctuate this dire message, Joshua Keating, writing for Freedom House¹³ (2021) notes that less than 20% of the world’s population lives in a “free” country – a statistic that has shown a consistent downward trend for the last 15 years.

¹⁰ Philosophy for Children is practiced in 63 countries and in 24 languages. There is an abundance of research that supports the claim that this sort of pedagogy positively supports the capacity to dialogue across difference. <https://www.icpic.org/>

¹¹ For those interested in a more precise description of P4C, there are virtually libraries of books written on the subject, as well as several journals devoted to the topic. <https://journal.viterbo.edu/index.php/atpp>
<https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/childhood>
<https://jps.bham.ac.uk/>

¹² See lists of such centers at <https://www.icpic.org/>

¹³ Freedom House has been publishing its annual Freedom in the World report for the last 47 years. Each year the U.S.-based nongovernmental organization assesses the world’s countries on a range of measures of political rights and civil liberties, dividing them into categories of Free, Party Free, and Not Free.

For those of you are not induced to near panic by the above, it might be of benefit to reflect on the alternative if we let what we have slip through our fingers.

You are born and grow up in a society where ideological loyalty to the regime determines where and how well you live and the job you have. You can be detained for political reasons and consigned to a prison camp and may be tortured, worked to death, or starved. If you are accused of a crime, you and your family members may be executed. If you are a woman who is abused by government officials, prison guards, and police, you have no recourse. The practice of religion is prohibited. Possessing an electronic device with international reach is a crime. Surveillance is nonstop, as is the propaganda blasted from loudspeakers set up in apartment buildings and village squares. (Albright 2018: 205). And if you laugh on a day of mourning for a past leader, you can be disappeared (Parekh 2021: NP2).¹⁴

What is the matter with us? It may be true that democratic governance is always partial, flawed, and even sometimes oppressive but, as Monbiot points out, it is all that stands between us and the unmediated power of money and weapons (ibid.: 113). It is all that stands between us and being ordered when, and when not to, laugh.

It is only fitting to end this discussion with the words of Matthew Lipman, a logician at Columbia university, who left his tenure-track position in 1972, and devoted his subsequent career to promoting Philosophy for Children (P4C) – a pedagogy that promotes precisely the kind of dialogue that requires individuals to entertain and attempt to adjudicate conflicting perspectives in community with others. And though it has become a worldwide endeavor, it, nonetheless, remains on the outskirts of both education systems and its parent discipline.

Of this, Lipman (1988) wrote:

The greatest disappointment of traditional education has been its failure to produce people approximating the ideal of *reasonableness*. It should be evident, however, that the cost of our tolerant attitude toward *unreasonableness* are now far beyond our reach. We may still smile indulgently as we read of the legendary figures of history who were splendidly capricious and magnificently illogical: they savaged their victims, but they did *not endanger everything*. This is no longer the case; *we will have to reason together or die together*. (ibid.: 18, emphasis added)

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¹⁴ These claims specifically refer to North Korea.

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