

Unconditional Love:
Reflections on Dick Bernstein's
Thursday Graduate Seminars
at The New School for Social Research

Roy Ben-Shai
Sarah Lawrence College



Volume 7 · Number 1 · 2023 · Pages 94-103

I want to take this opportunity to reflect on Dick Bernstein's seminars. For those of you who have taken Dick's seminars—perhaps some of the ones I took—let this be an opportunity to reflect back on them as well. For those who haven't, let it be a window, however foggy, into an unwritten part of Dick's work. While I have read quite a bit of Dick's scholarship, to me his seminars still represent best who he was as a mind, as a thinker. This text, then, is a commentary on oral philosophy, a *torah she'be'al'pe*, which is Hebrew for "tradition," or, more literally, doctrine by mouth. I will later refer to this oral doctrine by the name of "unconditional love."

Let me begin by describing the seminars and their format. The first seminar I took with Dick was on Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, in the fall of 2003—my first semester at the New School. Over the next four years, I attended Dick's seminars almost every semester, including one on Dewey and Mead, another on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and two yearlong seminars on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The Science of Logic*. They all happened, if I remember correctly, on Thursdays between 2 and 4 pm. And they all had the same simple format: we had a book to read; Dick divided it in the first class into the number of weeks in the semester (or in the year if it was a yearlong class), and then we went around the table and each student chose one of the sections to present on. The student presenting on the first section—the week after the first class—was "volunteered" to the task by Dick. It was a student who had already been in one or more of his seminars and could hit the ground running. The presentations, five to eight pages, were circulated to the group two days before each class.

To my understanding, the real texts of the seminar were the student presentations, not the book. The presentations were *die Sache selbst*, as Dick might say: the thing itself. They were both the means and the ends of his teaching. A lot hung in the balance as a result. Since the classes consisted essentially in reading through a student presentation, much depended on the quality of the presentation, on how good it was for the purpose. I will say a bit more later about what I understand "good" to mean in this context, because good means different things in different contexts, and Dick's seminars were nothing if not *a context*. Dick rarely judged a presentation explicitly in the seminars that I attended, except in general superlatives, and I don't think I ever heard him make a negative comment about a presentation. But what he thought about a presentation was hardly a secret. There were two main tells: the first was that the better the presentation was, the more Dick would interrupt it. You could not get through a line without Dick riffing off it. The other tell was Dick's mood. Dick had a habit of wearing his heart on his sleeve, or on his wristwatch, which he wore

sideways.

I remember one day Dick walking into class, sitting at his chair, banging on the desk with his wristwatch, and declaring something to the effect of: “50 years ago today [I don’t remember the exact number] I made the decision to teach philosophy. It was the *best* decision I ever made in my life!” And so you knew he liked the presentation... I mention this specific event not because it was exceptional, but because it was representative. Dick always read the presentation before coming into class, and his mood was colored by it. There was a sense, to me at least, that reading a good presentation validated and confirmed his vocation as a teacher, reminding him of what it was all about. The stakes in this work were therefore high, for him no less than for the students.

I often reflect on this in my work as a teacher, because, in part deliberately and in part not, I have adopted some of Dick’s ways. And I know that this form of teaching—a methodless method, in a way—makes the teacher very vulnerable. If you have an outline for a class, lecture notes or some agenda prepared in advance, you are less susceptible to changes in mood and in student investment. But when the class revolves around student work, you have to wait and see what happens, what you will read and how it will make you feel (I should note, and you may gather, that Dick would also sometimes come to class grumpy, though this was rarer. It would also come to pass, on such occasions, that we would not read the presentation at all).

This vulnerability is accentuated if you consider that Dick gave no guidelines or set standards for what a presentation should look like, or what it should be about, other than that it should be a commentary on the section we were reading. On this point, I want to quote Megan Craig who said it best in her talk at a conference in the memory of Dick Bernstein at The New School for Social Research: “he always seemed to be on the lookout for new styles, for unique, under-appreciated, creative spirits who might not fit the mold but who might push philosophy to be or to do something it had not yet been or done before.”¹ I believe this was true in the classroom as well. The best presentations, for Dick, were those that illuminated the text in ways he did not expect, those that surprised him in their insight and approach. And he would not fail to show his admiration of that; his riffs off the lines of the presentation were affirmations, they consisted in showing and explaining why the insight was, in his words, “deep” or “deeply perceptive.”

Without any explication to this effect, the *patterns* of Dick’s reactions and affirmations gradually formed into an implicit directive. Beside insight and

¹ Megan Craig, “Richard J. Bernstein and the Soul of Teaching,” this volume.

originality, it mattered that the presentation did good work *for* the seminar. This meant that the presentation captured something essential of the spirit of the section we were reading, its aim and movement, in the context of the book. What made less sense was picking out this or that argument in the text or articulating one's *own* standpoint in relation to it, as one might do in a paper. Besides offering an interpretation of the text, each presentation doubled as an example, a standard. Students therefore not only learned from each other about their respective sections but influenced each other in the process.

With these points in mind, I would say that the implicit standard for a good presentation was less in the *logos* than in the *ethos*. The *logos*—the specific interpretation of a specific text—could, and in fact would, vary. On this I revert again to Megan Craig who said in the same talk that Dick “knew that souls change over time and that what animated a given soul at one time, might not in the future... he knew his students were complex individuals who would react to texts in different ways, and he encouraged all of us to be open to multiple interpretations, to learn from one another, and to work together.”² In good seminars, and all those I attended were good, if to varying degrees, the presentations harmonized, in the way in which Heraclitus understood it when he said (according to Aristotle): “the finest harmony is composed of things at variance.”³

If the *logos* was the interpretation of the text in question, the *ethos* pertained to two things: first, the character or spirit of the seminar, which was made up of this harmony of perspectives and voices, and second, the *disposition* toward the text, regardless of what text it was.

Here, I take the liberty to formulate a pedagogical principle on behalf of Dick and name it, “unconditional love.” I should first qualify my use of the term. I do not assume that unconditional love is necessarily a good or wholesome thing. Parents, for example, sometimes say, or are said, to love their children unconditionally, and yet the children, for this very reason, can often feel unloved, unseen by their parents. A version of this problematic underlies the notion of *recognition* in Hegel's account of the master-slave dialectic. The master cannot receive recognition, a confirmation of their value, from their slave. This is what we mean when we say, “captive audience.” And children can sometimes be heard saying, “you only say this because you're my

² Ibid.

³ This fragment is cited in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1155b5 and is brought here in Richard McKirahan's translation, from Patricia Curd, ed. *A Presocratics Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), 47.

mother.” To paraphrase Hegel: “in the night of unconditional love, all cows are loveable...”

As a pedagogical principle, however, unconditional love is not blind or indifferent to its object, but an intent and selective mode of *seeing*. I base this principle on two things that Dick said to me, and perhaps to others as well. The first of them he told me when we were in his office, discussing the difference between Heidegger’s philosophy of history and Hegel’s. I told him that, as I was reading Hegel on history, I was struck by how blind Heidegger’s understanding of history was to such things as peoples, wars, revolutions, in short, anything that is not philosophy. Dick cut this line of thought short. “I am not interested,” he said, “in what a philosopher is blind to, but in what he sees.” I don’t know how many times I quoted this statement to my students. From my various interactions with Dick, in and out of class, I know precisely what he meant by that. To see what someone sees is to see, and care about, what they care about, what animates them, what they love. The best critique, he would often say, comes after you truly understand someone, and to “understand” is to know not only what they think and do, but why. Here, I can also draw support from Dick’s writing. In the preface to his study of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, after listing some of his reservations regarding Freud’s analysis of Judaism—indeed, some of the things Freud was blind to (“He tends to underestimate the creative importance of rituals, ceremonies, narratives, customs, and cultural practices...”), Bernstein writes:

I have refrained from developing these criticisms here because I believe that informed critique can be based only on an understanding of what Freud is saying in its strongest and most coherent formulation. This is the limited but complex task that I have set out to accomplish in this book.⁴

What makes the principle of unconditional love unconditional is that it is a *principle*, a working principle, and a priori at that. It sets up a disposition, a mode of attention to the text. The “limited but complex task” is one that limits itself to working *within* its subject’s limitations, and invests in unearthing its subject’s complexity, its richness, rather than its impoverishment, its shortcomings or its lacks. I take it as a given that what a philosopher or a text is blind to is categorically infinite and that what they see is categorically finite. I could illustrate this point by saying that I have

⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xi.

only two hands, while I am missing any number of them. The same applies to people in general, to all of us. Especially because philosophical vision is imbued with caring, it is partial and often idiosyncratic. But for that reason too, attuning one's vision to the vision of the text, or someone else's vision in general, takes attention and intentionality.

I prefer the word "love" to describe this mode of attunement over other terms that Dick himself and his intellectual interlocutors would sometimes employ in this context, like "hermeneutics of generosity" or "principle of charity." Perhaps I am being a stickler for terminology, but I think these terms convey a completely different *ethos*. Generosity, charity, even goodwill, imply some sort of benevolence, as if we did something for the benefit of the text or the author. The same goes to phrases like "suspension of judgment," which imply that one holds oneself, and one's own mode of caring, back. Love, to me, or a labor of love, is more a matter of joy, selfish joy, than of benevolence, as much a taking as a giving, and more about "going all in" than holding back.

What made a presentation good for Dick, to my understanding, was a loving attitude to the text, meaning joyous, invested, desirous, and therefore also playful, creative, and of course deeply attentive. This attitude would come across not only in the capacity to see what the text sees, to see with its eyes as it were, but also to show it. If presentations were polyvocal, or I should say polycular, it is because they were *interested*, in the Arendtian sense of "inter-est," being-in-between,⁵ a product of a relation between two visions. The presentation itself is a mode of seeing and limited at that—there are things in what the text sees that the presentation sees and shows and there are things it doesn't. I think it was *this* seeing that most interested Dick—what the presentation *did* see, and not what it didn't. And I think that what he aimed to cultivate in class was above all this *interestedness*. The text in question was secondary in this respect, a platform.

Here is the point to note that this approach is not good for everyone or good absolutely. I don't think there *is* such a thing as "good absolutely." For some students this pedagogy—this learning atmosphere and mode of relation to the text and to others' interpretations of it—was liberating and empowering, for others it could be

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 182.

restrictive. Some would sooner prefer a *disinterested* or a conventionally critical approach. Some would want to hear the professor's sustained analysis of the text or engage more with published commentaries. A principle is not only *unconditional*, it is also a *condition*, a *precondition*, an implicit *contract* that I think everyone tacitly signed when joining Dick's seminar, especially those who did so for the second time. This is what made them *Dick's* seminars one and all.

I realize that, by outlining this methodless method, by underscoring the primacy of *ethos* over *logos*, I leave much that is unspoken. In my experience, Dick's art in the seminar was a matter of intuitive genius, and I mean this as an observation rather than an accolade. It was a *reaction* of his whole being, expressed through moods and interjections, amplifying certain lines of thought, nipping others in the bud, but it was not a doctrine, a decision, or a policy, and he had no rule book for it to follow or to bequeath. It was an art of *attunement*, a tuning of souls, as Megan Craig nicely put it, which is a tuning of disposition and mode of seeing in the direction of interestedness and caring.

Unconditional love was therefore both a means and an end; like all principles, it was abstract in the beginning of the seminar, not even spoken—exemplified in the first presentation and in Dick's use of it—and gradually actualized over the course of the seminar, not only in a growing understanding of the *logos* of the text but in the cultivation of a philosophical-collaborative *ethos* of reading, seeing, and listening.

There is of course a great deal of *pathos* involved here as well. Dick had a towering presence, and his moods—his raging enthusiasm, his anger sometimes, which were expressed more in tone and gesture than in words—could, like a storm, or like music, take over a room and infiltrate souls. This was partly his manner of attuning the atmosphere. But the atmosphere or attunement was nothing without the reading of the text—the instrument to *be* attuned and to attune according to. As I had mentioned above, this kind of teaching renders the teacher vulnerable, helpless to an extent. Since the actual work on the table was not done by Dick and he could not control it, he had to wait and see what happens. Even when regarded as a principle, the cliché applies to love: you cannot force it on someone, you wouldn't even know how. I think it is partly because of that vulnerability, passivity even, that Dick got so excited when a presentation worked well. It was, if nothing else, a huge relief—there will be a class today, and the seminar was working, and he could teach.

I mentioned above that there were *two* things that Dick said to me and that I see as articulating the principle of unconditional love. The first was, “be interested in what another sees.” The second was an advice Paul Weiss gave to him in an early stage

of his career, that he would resort to whenever he felt down, especially when he was bogged down by what he saw as academic pettiness and intrigue. The advice consisted of four words and an exclamation point: “*Look to the greats!*” He cherished this advice and often paid it forward to his students and colleagues at similar times of need. What it means is this: if you feel pulled down by forces that are outside your control, *look up*. Look to the people you admire, that inspire you, that remind you why you chose this line of work, and who you want to be like. This maxim too is a matter of orienting vision: look *up*, not down. Inasmuch as it is within your power to do so, look at what is most worth seeing, what empowers you rather than what disempowers you. I think that this applies to the academy as it does to the reading of texts—not everything in a text is of equal worth, and not all texts are equally loveable. And it matters whether you invest your mental energy in pulling out the weeds and calling out blind spots, or rather in underscoring what is most valuable and insightful; what enriches your own vision.

“Greatness,” like “goodness,” is not an absolute, disinterested standard. Tell me who your “greats” are and I will know a bit more about who *you* are, and what you care about. Greatness is as much a product of a loving gaze as what inspires such a gaze. And although greatness is, by definition, the exception rather than the rule, there was no shortage of it in Dick’s world. He was *a lover* in that sense—he loved to look up to people. He admired many and he never shied of professing his admiration. I also believe that he truly and deeply wanted his students to produce work that he could look up to, and often they did, not in small part because of this love. As to me, when the going gets rough, I not only think of these words, “Look to the greats!,” but of Dick himself, someone to look up to.

I want to conclude this paper with a couple of lines from Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse (Fragments d’un discours amoureux)*. These lines conjure up for me a fond image of Dick, who had a remarkable talent for not finishing his words and his sentences, as if they had become redundant halfway through:

... the lover, in fact, cannot keep his mind from racing... His discourse exists only in outbursts of language...

... [His kind of] sentence is not a “saturated” one, not a completed message...

Such sentences... remain suspended: they utter the affect, then break off, their role is filled.⁶

⁶ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 3-6.

Bibliography

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.

Bernstein, Richard J. *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Craig, Megan. "Richard J. Bernstein and the Soul of Teaching." *Dewey Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2023.

Curd, Patricia, ed. *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*. Translated by Richard D. McKirahan. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011.