



Fences and Neighbors

Moderating Discussion Groups for Fun and Non-Profit

By Steve Whiteman

Goals

Just as good fences make good neighbors, good moderation makes for a good discussion. Capable leadership enables thoughtful conversation while maintaining congeniality. Its absence can lead to narrowness of focus, argumentativeness, and frustration.

The primary goal of a skilled moderator is for all members of the group to go home in a good mood (without risking a DUI, that is). A discussion is a failure if people leave discontented; the long-term prospects of an unhappy forum are poor. For the vitality of an ongoing group, a shallow but friendly discussion is preferable to a profound but bitter one.

The secondary goal of a good moderator is for the majority to have found the discussion interesting. On a very good day, some may even have learned something.

But it must be stressed: congeniality first, enlightenment second. People must not go home with a bad taste in their mouth. A moderator who keeps this in mind can't go far wrong.

Benevolent Servant/Dictator

It's important for the group to see the moderator as an impartial facilitator. The moderator is there to help the group explore the subject, not to dominate the group or even to actively participate in the discussion.

So long as he performs his job fairly and well, the group will grant him certain powers. Just as ninety percent of life is just showing up, ninety percent of moderating is acting like a moderator. Do so and people will follow. The successful moderator is really just a humble servant of the group - in the guise of a benevolent dictator.

It shouldn't be necessary to set too many ground rules. But the group should be persuaded that its fundamental mission is to

enjoy each other's company while exploring a subject for the enlightenment of all. Specifically, participants are not there to argue the correctness of their views or the foolishness of others', and pontification and/or debate should be discouraged. Therefore, subjects on which people are likely to hold strong, fixed views, like politics, religion, or sex (or free will...) are best avoided.



The Process

Following are suggested guidelines. They assume the event is not a lecture or a debate, but a group discussion.

Attached to each guideline are examples of its application.

Preparing for the Discussion

It pays to be prepared. If the group will be discussing a book, article, or tape, read/watch/listen to it beforehand. Jot down the main points and make note of obvious counter-arguments. Don't go overboard: you'll only have time to cover the most important issues.

Prepare open-ended, non-confrontational questions to elicit the key points and to touch on the most obvious contrary points of view. (An open-ended question is one that can't be answered with a short response.) After covering your author's point, you could plan to ask how a noted critic would respond, and how your author might reply to that critic. A half-dozen or so questions should suffice for an hour's discussion.

If there is no material to preview, but the topic is known, do a little research on your own.

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Google is your friend.

Application: Let's say the group will be discussing the book *Dogs: Man's Best Friend or Hounds From Hell?*

First of all, the title suggests the book is controversial, pitting dog lovers against dog haters. If that's the case, it would have been better to have assigned a less polarizing work, one with a title like *From Predator to Protector: The Evolution of Man's Best Friend*.

But let's say you're stuck with the former work. As you read it, make note of the single most important fact or point in each chapter. Try to group them into a small number of umbrella issues, and frame a question for each issue to elicit discussion.

Establishing the Framework: one topic, multiple issues

Frame the discussion with a short historical or thematic introduction. Outline the topic and the key sub-topics ("issues") you plan to cover.

Application: Not so good: "So, what did you think of the book?" Or, "So, does everybody here love dogs or do we have any closet dog haters?" Or, "Boy, the author sure hates cats, doesn't he?"

Better: "Today we'll be discussing *Dogs: Man's Best Friend or Hounds From Hell?* It covers a number of subjects having to do with... The author is Lassie O'Hound, the president of the Collie Collective of Conyers. She is widely known for her well-publicized feud with Canine Chung, the president of the Snellville Shih Tzu Society, as well as..." And, "It seems to me that the most productive topic for discussion is how dogs evolved from wild animals to domesticated ones. Apparently some of that evolution was through natural selection and some was through the deliberate intervention of man (etc.)..."

Starting the Discussion

If the discussion covers predetermined material, ask for a volunteer to briefly summarize it. Keep them on topic, and allow no editorializing at this point. If they skip key points, ask for help from the group and/or briefly and objectively complete the summary yourself.

If there is no material to cover, open the discussion with a broad framing question.

Application: Not so good: "So, Martin, do you have a dog?" Or, "Dogs are great companions, aren't they?" Or, "Sally, is Cindy your best friend or a hound from hell?"

Better: "Would anyone care to briefly summarize what the book has to say about the evolution of the dog?" And, "Did the author mention any other major stages in the evolution of the dog?"

Discussing an Issue

Listen actively. Balance keeping the discussion on track with allowing it to flow naturally.

If the conversation bogs down, ask a question to come at the issue from another angle.

Move from the general to the specific. Just as you begin the conversation with a general topic and then introduce specific issues, follow the same pattern within the issues.

Be sure occasionally to solicit the thoughts of those who have yet to speak.

Application: No so good: "No, the author said..." Or, "As a matter of fact, dogs did not evolve like that (etc.)..." Or, "I thought it was interesting how the evolution of long-haired dogs allowed fleas to migrate from China directly to Snellville, Georgia."

Better: "So what was the author's main point there?" Or, "How does that fit with the author's contention..." Or, "How would a shepherd or a rancher see that?" Or, "What impact did the evolution of the dog have on other entities? [Then, if necessary...] People? [Then...] The environment? [Then...] Fleas?" Or, "What was your impression, Michael?"

Keeping to the Issue

A bit of digression is normal; let it go on a short while to see if it will right itself on its own. (Once the group realizes the benefit of a little structure, they'll be less tolerant of sidetracking.)

But if things start heading toward a ditch – and as the moderator, you are the sole arbiter of this – you must bring them back on course. Wait for a natural break (like when the speaker pauses) then calmly jump in. Restate the original question or the last relevant point and ask if there are additional comments, agreement or disagreement, another angle, etc.

If the speaker was making a relevant point but was rambling, first summarize their point to acknowledge their contribution, and then ask what the group thinks about it or how it fits with an obvious contrasting point of view.

The same holds true if someone gets out of line or tries to dominate the conversation. Just jump in at a pause, perhaps summarize their point, and then ask for a response to the dominator's point, or get back to the issue at hand, or move on to the next issue.

If the dominator takes over again, use the same process but don't acknowledge their point. This will signal that the domination is unwelcome.

Usually there's no need to directly confront a digresser or dominator. Just calmly lead the group out of the ditch and back on the path.

Application: Not so good: "We're not going to cover that. Getting back to the subject..." Or, "What does that have to do with the price of tea in China?"

About the name "The Eudaimonist"

A eudaimonist (pronounced "yoo-DIE-mon-ist") is one who believes that the highest ethical goal is individual happiness and personal well-being. The term is derived from the ancient Greek word *eudaimonia*, which means, roughly, "well-being."

Disclaimer

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Fellowship of Reason, Inc.

Mission Statement

The Fellowship of Reason® is an open, benevolent, and vital rational moral community in which we celebrate our lives, our freedoms, and our philosophy of reason. We study ethics.

Fellowship of Reason, Inc. is a Georgia nonprofit corporation and a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) corporation

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Subscription Information

12 monthly issues of this newsletter is \$15 per year.



Don't hit that snooze button!

FOR Merchandise

The mug you have to have.

FOR coffee. FOR tea. FOR a friend.

Mugs are \$6 each or 2 for \$10.



FOR Polo Shirts and T-shirts are also available. Members Price is \$25 for Polo Shirts and \$15 for T-Shirts.



Prices include domestic shipping, inquire for international shipping.

Contact us at any FOR function (see page 9)

Questions? info@fellowshipofreason.com.



Byrd – Snider Wed

Allison Laura Byrd and John Christopher Snider are pleased to announce their marriage on Friday, April 14th, 2006 in Roswell, Georgia. We extend our thanks to our families for celebrating with us, and to our friends for their support and congratulations! -- Chris and Allison"



Expanded Adult Education Program

New starting April 2, 2006 – THIS SUNDAY!

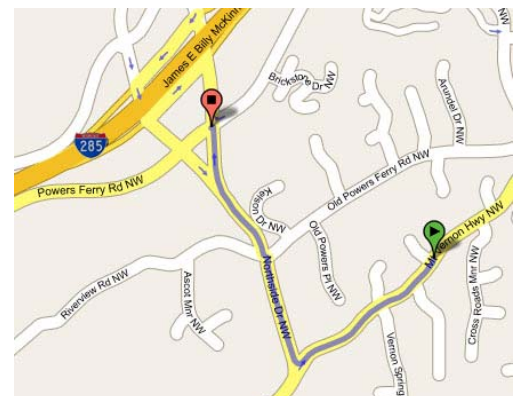
FOR's exploration and development of our common ethical ground moves to a new time and a new place:

Time: 10:30 AM to Noon on every First Sunday of the month

Place: Crowne Plaza Hotel
 6345 Powers Ferry Road
 Atlanta, GA 30339

For program description, see "We Study Ethics" in this issue.

See you there!



Crowne Plaza (red) is less than a mile from Forum (green)

Fences and Neighbors (cont. from Page 2)

Better: "So Carla's point is that... Folks, how would the author respond to that?" Or, "What would you say is the strongest counter-argument to that?" Or, "What other thoughts do we have on... [the issue at hand]."

Moving on to the Next Issue

Keep an ear on the conversation and an eye on your watch. When it's time to move on, summarize the previous issue and introduce the next one. Note its connection to the previous issue or other context.

Application: Not so good: "Now that we've beaten that horse to death, let's discuss..."

Better: "So it sounds like the group believes the key factors in the domestication of the dog were... That leads us to the next section of the book where the author discusses..."

Concluding-Summarizing the Topic and Important Issues

Now the discussion is winding down.

- You worked from the notes you made when you previewed the material;
- You began with a short overview and a framing question, and moved from the general to the specific;
- With an eye on the clock, you covered the most important points but did not rush the conversation;
- You coaxed participation from the shy ones while deflecting domination by the assertive ones;
- And you remained neutral, resisting the temptation to tell the group how misguided they were.

Most important, everyone seems to be in a good mood.

Birthdays

May Birthdays

May 2	Frank V
May 21	Dan B
May 29	Carla B
May 29	Geoff M

Now, do a final summary of the conversation. Ask if there are any further thoughts. If there's nothing else, thank the group for their attendance and remind them of the next meeting.

Application: Not so good: "OK, time's up. Anybody seen any good movies lately?"

Better: "Was there anything else that struck anybody while they were reading the book? What about you, Frank?" And, "It sounds like, on the whole, the group found the book informative. In particular, we liked the sections on [X and Y]... but found the coverage of [Z] a bit skimpy. And several of us were surprised to learn that our ancestors bred dogs from wolves specifically to bring them their pipe and slippers after a hard day of hunting and gathering in what is now Conyers, Georgia... Is all that about right?" And finally, "I'd like to thank everyone for coming, and remind you not to miss our next meeting, where we'll discuss Felicia Feline's companion volume *Cats: A Better Mousetrap, or Just Sarcastic Dogs?*"

Consider this.

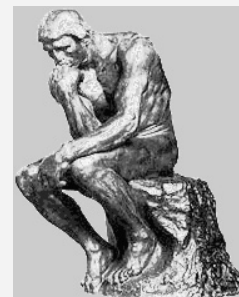
National Day of Reason

Thursday, May 4, 2006

www.nationaldayofreason.org

Consider the alternative.
Unreason? Not reasonable?
Anti-reason?

We invite your comment!



Meaning of Membership

Regular membership:
\$35 per year

Contributing membership:
\$70 per Year

Lifetime membership:
\$700

Contact Information

To talk to somebody about
Fellowship of Reason call:

Chris at 678-585-0406
Vera at 404-577-7968
Martin at 770-471-9800
Dan at 770-831-3010

In order to enjoy the benefits of the Fellowship of Reason, you need not be a member. All of our activities are free and open to the public. A number of non-members regularly participate with us and are most heartily welcome.

Why then become a member of the Fellowship of Reason?

The Fellowship of Reason exists by virtue of the generosity of its members and friends. People you know contribute money, property, services, and time in order that the value we all enjoy continues to exist. The services by performers at FORum, by executive committee members, by hosts and hostesses, and by planners of events are vital to the existence of FOR. Those volunteer services are, in fact, FOR.

Membership is, simply, a clear statement that you wish the Fellowship of Reason to continue to exist. Membership is not the only way to make this statement. Some non-members are generous contributors of money, property, and services. In fact, we all benefit by the mere attendance of non-members at FOR events.

If you want FOR to continue to exist, won't you clearly say so by becoming a member today?

Letters to the Editor

I greatly enjoyed the essay in the April issue on Eudaimonist Metaphysics, although I would remind readers that this does not represent a comprehensive or official organizational statement on the subject. ... I wanted to address one contradiction [in the essay].

The essay does not sufficiently define what is meant by "nature", "nurture", or even "volition", but statements like "the act of seeking knowledge...of necessity, assumes that we can act beyond our nature and nurture" (emphasis mine) does not logically follow under any set of definitions. The Law of Identity states, "to be is to be something" (i.e. to have a nature). The essay establishes early on that eudaimonists "have no faculty...that reveals the transcendental." Would not transcending (i.e. "acting beyond"

the natural) be...the supernatural?

We can resolve this contradiction - and avoid any semantic pitfalls - simply by clarifying that human beings are by our nature, self-revising knowledge-seekers. Therefore, to learn, to grow, to add to our understanding of five seconds ago does not transcend our nature. It is our nature.

Thanks,

Chris Snider, Trustee

2006 Survey Update

In order to offer you a full and accurate survey summary and corresponding material, the 2006 survey results will appear in the June issue of the Eudaimonist. Stay tuned!

We Study Ethics: After the End of Faith

First Sundays at 10:30, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, FOR's ongoing adult education class continues our current program: "After the End of Faith." Our purpose is to simply state what is our common ethical ground in the Fellowship of Reason, to describe systematically the modern eudaimonist ethics.

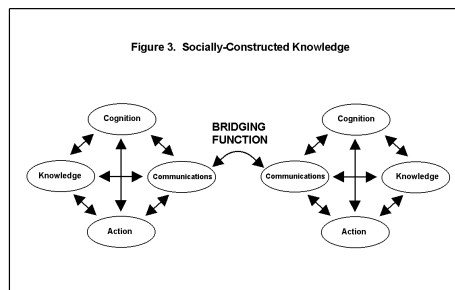
On Sunday, April 2, we summarized our discussion to date of the background topic of "knowledge." We concluded our knowledge is constructed by ourselves, built up from regularities we perceive.

ON Sunday, May 7, the topic of discussion will be Meaning and Explanation – why knowledge matters at all, constructed as it is. Why is it so powerful, despite its open-ended nature?

Please plan to participate, as we map out our

common ground.

Any input to this program should be directed to David Ziebell at dziebell@bellsouth.net.



Where is the Ultimate Meaning?

(Figure from http://www.cim-oem.com/bridge_8c18c.html)

Note:
New Time and Place:
←

May 2006

May 2006

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

June 2006

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18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	May 1	2	3	4	5	6
		Frank Vickers bd 7:30pm Philosophy Club (Sally's house)	7:30pm Invisible College (Vera's house)			
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
10:30am Adult Education (Crown Plaza) 1:00pm FORum (NWUUC)		7:30pm Fiction Book Club (Beth's house)	7:30pm Invisible College (Vera's house)	7:00pm FOR Symphony		11:00am Nonfiction book club (Chris and Allison's house)
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
8:00am FOR-Runners		7:30pm Philosophy Club (Sally's house)	7:30pm Invisible College (Vera's house)			7:30pm Potluck (Kate's house)
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
Dan Barber bd 8:00am FOR-Runners		8:00am Deadline for newsletter submissions	7:30pm Invisible College (Vera's house)	8:00pm Pub night		6:30pm Movie night (John's studio)
28	29	30	31			
8:00am FOR-Runners	Carla Bauer bd Memorial Day		7:30pm Invisible College (Vera's house)			

June 2006

June 2006							July 2006						
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							30	31					

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				June 1	2	3
					David Dreading bd	
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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25	26	27	28	29	30	
8:00am FOR-Runners	Jan M. bd		7:30pm Invisible College (Vera's house)	Allison Byrd bd		

Events

For detailed info on all upcoming events, visit
<http://www.fellowshipofreason.com/calendar.htm>

FOR Runners: Sunday 8 a.m.

We meet every Sunday morning at 8 a.m., except FORum Sundays, at the southwestern entrance to Piedmont Park on 10th Street. Breakfast at Flying Biscuit follows at 9 a.m. Walkers and joggers welcome! Martin Cowen coordinator: 770-471-9800.

Philosophy Club: 1st/3rd Tuesdays 7:30 p.m.

Philosophy tapes are played to a small private audience in the living room of a volunteer on the 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of each month. Free. Sally Hull coordinator: 404-257-0454

Fiction Book Club: 2nd Tuesday 7:30 p.m.

Members and friends of FOR meet on the 2nd Tuesday of every month at John and Beth's house. For book selections and more information, go to:
www.fellowshipofreason.com/fiction.htm.
 Beth Holley coordinator: 404-754-7519.

Non-Fiction Book Club: 2nd Saturday 11 a.m.

Members and friends of FOR meet 11 a.m. on the 2nd Saturday of every month at Chris and Allison's house. For book selections and more information, go to:
www.fellowshipofreason.com/nonfiction.htm.
 Allison Byrd coordinator: 404-372-4089

FOR Symphony: Thursday, May 11, at 7 p.m. in Symphony Hall. This is the final of six concerts in the 2005-2006 ASO Concert Season. Martin Cowen coordinator: 770-471-9800.

Potluck: 3rd Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

Members and friends of FOR meet monthly for a potluck supper. Bring something good to eat or drink to share. Our next potluck is Saturday, May 20, 2006 at the Kate Miller's residence. David Ziebell coordinator: 678-591-1510

Movie Night: 4th Saturday, 6:30 p.m.

Members and friends of FOR enjoy a monthly movie night at John's studio using his extraordinary equipment. FOR's next movie night is Saturday, May 27, 2006. Arrive at 6:30 p.m. Doors will be locked for safety! Movie starts at 7:15 p.m. Free. John Grover coordinator: 404-754-7519

Pub Night: 4th Thursday, 8 p.m.

Members and friends of FOR meet on the 4th Thursday of every month at Manuel's Tavern at 8 p.m. for adult beverages and adult conversation. FOR's next pub night is Thursday, May 25, 2006 at 8 p.m. Scott Carper coordinator: 404-964-6697

Movie Night News

Currently: classic films that explore totalitarian states from two sides.

In April, we watched Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

In May we will watch Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*

This infamous propaganda film documenting the Third Reich's 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally features a cast of thousands -- including Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Joseph Goebbels, Rudolf Hess, Hermann Goering and other top officials. Images of cheering crowds, precision marching, military bands, banners lining Nuremberg's streets and Hitler's climactic speech illustrate with chilling clarity how Germany fell under his spell.

Some of the film making techniques have inspired directors to this day, and some of the deifying images of Hitler and his followers have been used in propaganda and advertising images worldwide.

A question to ask is: does beauty and portrayals of heroic ideals in art follow from totalitarianism and the goals of the propagandist? In Nazi Germany, Maoist China, and Stalinist Russia, some of the most "inspiring and heroic" art and sculpture of the last century was created. Despite the heavy quality of the style, it is interesting that these "cultures" produced art of inspiration while freer cultures in Europe were creating soft and distorted impressionism and the beginnings of abstract expressionism with a decidedly revolutionary bent. It is also interesting to study the difference in Art and culture before and after a cultural revolution. Revolutionary art inspires fear and angst. After the revolution, the state requires the artist to focus on heroic inspiration. Another question to ask, is whether the same techniques used in free market advertising (as opposed to the government-sponsored propaganda here), are as manipulative of mind and inspiration? And if so, is there a problem with being "inspired" by branding and corporate image?

Join us at FORum:

1st Sunday at 1 p.m.
 (Meet, Greet at 12:30)

May 7, 2006

Join us for We Study Ethics

FOR's Ongoing Education
Program

**1st Sunday
at 10:30 A.M.**

David Ziebell
Facilitator

Celebratory Announcements

Do yourself a favor and remember a good thing that happened to you this month:

Please, write it down: _____

Now do the membership of FOR, Inc. a favor by relating this fact during FORum next month!

Fellowship of Reason

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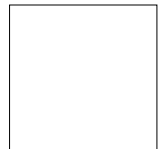
A Rational Community for the
New Millennium.



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