

On Joining the Conversation

Richard E. Miller and Ann Jurecic

The rhetoric scholar and literary critic Kenneth Burke described the exchange of academic ideas as a never-ending parlor conversation, “Imagine,” he wrote,

that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.¹

With this extended metaphor, Burke offers us a way to think about how to write academic arguments. Preparing to write a paper about a topic that is new to you is like entering a parlor where a “heated discussion” is already taking place. For a while, all you can do is read what others have written and try to follow the debate. Then, after a bit, you begin to figure out what’s being discussed and what the different positions, conflicts, and alliances are. Eventually, after you catch the “tenor” or drift of the conversation, a moment arrives when you feel you have something to contribute to the conversation, and you “put in your oar.” And so you begin writing, even as you know that you won’t have the last word—that no one will ever have the last word.

Doubtless, there is much about Burke’s vision of academic writing that won’t surprise you: to write, you need to understand what others have written about the problem or question that intrigues you, and you must be able to represent, analyze, and synthesize those views. You also have to be interested enough in joining the conversation to develop a position of your own that responds to those sources in compelling ways. What *is* surprising about Burke’s scenario is that the conversation never ends: it is “interminable.” There are no decisive arguments in Burke’s parlor, or even any strongly persuasive ones; there is only the ceaseless exchange of positions.

Why, it’s reasonable to ask, would anyone choose to engage in a conversation without end? To answer this question, we’d like to walk you through an example of a writer working with multiple sources to explore an open-ended question.

Magazine journalist Michael Pollan writes about places where nature meets culture: “on our plates, in our farms and gardens, and in the built environment.” In his article, “An Animal’s Place,”² Pollan grapples with the ideas of Peter Singer, a

¹ Richard E. Miller and Ann Jurecic. *Habits of the Creative Mind*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016.

² Michael Pollan, “An Animal’s Place.” *New York Times Magazine*. 10 November 2002. Web.

philosopher and the author of an influential book, *Animal Liberation*, which argues that eating meat is unethical and that vegetarianism is a moral imperative. Pollan makes his own view on meat eating clear from the very first sentence of “An Animal’s Place”: “The first time I opened Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*, I was dining alone at the Palm, trying to enjoy a rib-eye steak cooked medium-rare.” He’s being purposely outrageous, dramatizing his resistance to what he knows of Singer’s ideas. But he hasn’t yet read *Animal Liberation* and he knows that engaging with Singer’s text is going to be a challenge, because it’s “one of those rare books that demands that you either defend the way you live or change it.”

When Pollan opens *Animal Liberation* at his table at the Palm, he transforms the steakhouse into his own Burkean parlor. Having entered the conversation late, he tries to catch “the tenor of the argument.” He discovers that Singer not only opposes eating meat but also objects to wearing fur, using animals in experiments, or killing animals for sport. While these practices may seem normal today, Singer argues that they will someday be seen as expressions of “speciesism,” a belief system that values humans over all other beings, and that will be looked back upon, in Pollan’s phrasing, as a “form of discrimination as indefensible as racism or anti-Semitism.” At the core of Singer’s book is the challenging question: “If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?”

Pollan discovers that, although Singer’s ideas were far from mainstream when *Animal Liberation* was first published in 1975, Singer’s campaign for animal rights has since gained many intellectual, legal, and political allies. At the time that Pollan’s article was published in November 2002, German lawmakers had recently granted animals the constitutional right to be treated with respect and dignity by the state, while laws in Switzerland were being amended to change the status of animals from “things” to “beings.” England had banned the farming of animals for fur, and several European nations had banned the confinement of pigs and laying hens in small crates or cages. In the United States in 2002, such reforms had not yet been addressed by legislation, but today animal rights are no longer a fringe issue.

Pollan also discovers that a crowd of scholars and writers is clustered near Singer in Burke’s parlor. Among them is Matthew Scully, a political conservative and former speech-writer for President George W. Bush who wrote *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, a best seller about the routine cruelty toward animals in the United States. Also present is eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who argued that even though animals cannot reason or speak, they are owed moral consideration because they can suffer. Beside Bentham are legal scholar Steven M. Wise and the contemporary philosophers Tom Regan and James Rachels, and off to the side is novelist J.M. Coetzee, who declares that eating meat and purchasing goods made of leather and other animal products is “a crime of stupefying proportions,” akin to Germans continuing with their normal lives in the midst of the Holocaust.

Pollan wants to resist Singer’s insistence on the moral superiority of vegetarianism, but before he can build his argument, he needs to find his own allies in the ongoing conversation. He is intrigued by John Berger’s essay “Why Look at Animals?” which argues that humans have become deeply confused about our relationship to other animals because we no longer make eye contact with most

species. This helps Pollan to explain the paradox that, even as more and more people in the United States are eager to extend rights to animals, in our factory farms “we are inflicting more suffering on more animals than at any time in history.” From sources as varied as Matthew Scully’s *Dominion* and farm trade magazines, Pollan learns that these farms, also known as Confined Animal Feeding Operations, or CAFOs, reduce animals to “production units” and subject them to a life of misery.

But these sources don’t particularly help Pollan to stand up against Singer’s insistence that everyone who considers eating meat must choose between “a lifetime of suffering for a nonhuman animal and the gastronomic preference of a human being.” Unhappy with either option before him—to refuse to pay attention to the suffering of animals in factory farms or to stop eating animals—Pollan brings a completely new voice into the parlor: not a philosopher or a writer, but a farmer. Joel Salatin, owner of Polyface Farm in Virginia, raises cattle, pigs, chickens, rabbits, turkeys, and sheep on a small farm where each species, including the farmer himself, performs a unique role in the ecosystem. The cows graze in the pasture; afterward, the chickens come in and eat insect larvae and short grass; then the sheep take their turn and eat what the cows and chickens leave behind. Meanwhile, the pigs compost the cow manure in the barn. In this system, the mutual interest of humans and domestic animals is recognized, even when the animals are slaughtered for meat. In life, each animal lives, according to its natural inclinations; and when it is slaughtered, its death takes place in the open. Nothing is hidden from sight. Pollan concludes that slaughtering animals, where the process can be watched is “a morally powerful idea.” Salatin convinces him that animals can have respectful deaths when they are not, as they are in factory farms, “treated as a pile of proto-plasm.”

Pollan’s visit to Polyface Farm is transformational. He decides that “what’s wrong with animal agriculture—with eating animals—is the practice, not the principle.” The ethical challenge, in other words, is not a philosophical issue but a practical one: Do the animals raised for meat live lives that allow them to express their natures? Do they live good lives? Pollan decides that, if he limits his consumption of meat to animals that are raising humanely, then he can eat them without ethical qualms. Pollan is so pleased with his creative solution to the problem that Singer posed that he even writes to the philosopher to ask him what he thinks about the morality of eating meat that comes from farms where animals live according to their nature and appear not to suffer. Singer holds to his position that killing an animal that “has a sense of its own existence” and “preferences for its own future” (that is, a pig, but not a chicken) is wrong, but he admits that he would not “condemn someone who purchased meat from one of these farms.”

Does this mean that Pollan has won the argument? Not really. The discussion in Burke’s parlor has not ended. New voices have entered to engage with both Pollan and Singer, and new ideas have emerged about sustainability, agriculture, economics, and ethics. Curious, reflective, and open-ended thinkers continue to enter, mingle, and depart, “the discussion still vigorously in progress.”