

Between Crisis-Philia and Crisis-Phobia: Reflections on the Community of Inquiry¹

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ABSTRACT: *Conflict is a ubiquitous feature of community life, and communities based on inquiry are no exception. Sometimes, conflict escalates into crisis. A crisis may help a community by providing opportunities for its members to recognize and ameliorate their shortcomings, but it may also destroy a community or limit its ability to sustain productive projects. In this discussion, I articulate two orientations towards crisis: crisis-philia (loving crises and seeking them out) and crisis-phobia (fearing crises and seeking to avoid them). I argue, drawing heavily from my experience as a participant in the Summer Seminar of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, that neither orientation is satisfactory. Instead of crisis-philia or crisis-phobia, we ought to get into the habit of inquiring, as a community, about whether our current obstacles to accomplishing our work derive from being constrained by too much (imperfect) structure or from too little stability. When we find it is the former, we ought to seek crises; when we find it is the latter, we ought to avoid crises. After making my case, I offer an example of what it looks like to implement this conclusion in practice.*

I. Introduction

On August 4, 2018, Ariel Sykes² picked me up from the train station in Morristown, NJ and drove me to St. Marguerite's Retreat House in the nearby township of Mendham: the site of the Summer Seminar of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children.³ When I entered her car, I assumed that she was taking me to an intensive workshop where I would add new teaching techniques to my repertoire without having to change much, if anything, about myself. And while I was looking forward to meeting new people, my expectation was that they would be merely colleagues: professional educators and philosophers with whom I would collaborate, and yet from whom I would remain comfortably alienated.

What actually happened at Mendham was that 24 people formed a community inside of a convent for 8 days. We would have breakfast every morning together at 8:00 AM, after which, with the exception of a communal lunch and dinner and a three-hour afternoon study break, we would attend presentations and participate in Community of Inquiry (COI) sessions⁴ until the conclusion of the final session at 9:00 PM. After that, we would gradually wander into the solarium and continue to inquire, reflect, and *play* together until deep into the night (my longest night ended at approximately 5:30 AM).

My experience of Mendham was the experience of being in an intentional community that is caring enough to allow for both authentic creativity and for the growth that results from subjecting

the products of that creativity—especially the community itself—to critical scrutiny. One aspect of our community that we frequently scrutinized was the possibility of a crisis that could, at any second, puncture our collective, harmonious bubble and show us that our community had opportunities to grow. To be clear, it wasn't that we *were* aware of problems that we simply chose to overlook. Instead, we were aware that a crisis is the sort of thing that can make you *become* aware of aspects of reality that you had previously been protected from perceiving, though they were under your nose the whole time. While the prospect of a crisis was terrifying to us, there always was, at the same time, a hint of excitement in the voices of the more experienced Mendham participants when they recounted their experiences of past crises: crises complete with impassioned screaming matches, premature exits, tears, and poignant resolutions.

The question I pursue below is as follows: should we seek crises in a COI or avoid them? I begin (§II) by presenting David Kennedy's (1994) framework for understanding how conflict is escalated and de-escalated within the context of a COI. I then (§III) use this framework to articulate the relationship between conflict and crisis. Next (§IV) I motivate two extreme positions that one can take towards crisis, which I call 'crisis-phobia' and 'crisis-philia,' and argue that, while neither position is itself plausible, we should search for intermediate positions in order to include the benefits of both and the problems of neither.⁵ I conclude that, instead of deciding always to seek or avoid crisis, we ought to get into the habit of inquiring, as a community, about whether our current obstacles to accomplishing our work derive from being constrained by too much (imperfect) structure or from too little stability. When we find it is the former, we ought to seek crises and when we find it is the latter we ought to avoid it. I conclude (§V) by showing an example of what it would look like to implement this conclusion in practice.

II. Conflict in the COI

Why is there conflict in the COI? According to Kennedy (1994), the answer is that "all persons experience themselves as parts of a greater whole, but we also experience a fundamental, irreducible dimension of discontinuity, because each of us occupies a horizon which both connects and separates us from others" (13). This is to say, there are two ways that we experience ourselves. On the one hand, we see ourselves as part of our whole community. On the other hand, we see ourselves as unique individuals who will always be discontinuous from our community. Sometimes our desire to be part of a community is frustrated by our realization that, in order to be ourselves, we need to act in ways that are in conflict with the role we occupy within the community, and other times our desire to be ourselves is frustrated by an overwhelming need to participate in communal life. Moreover, there are times when someone else's pursuit of being themselves gets in the way of the projects that we have chosen to pursue as individuals or as a community.

There are many different ways that this conflict between the two ways of seeing ourselves can be manifested, and Kennedy identifies five parts of a COI where these conflicts take place. He refers

to these as the “five structural dimensions of the COI,” each of which “is the expression of a communicative, interpretive process, converging on a common body of signs” (3). These five dimensions⁶ are as follows: our *gestures*, the *language* we use, the contents of our *minds*, the various kinds of *love* we feel, and our individual *interests*. For each of the five dimensions, there are dimension-specific ways that conflict is manifested: your hug may bring us closer together or result in my feeling uncomfortable; a convention that we all speak English may help me participate better while making communication more difficult for someone else whose first language is French; she may take comfort in the feeling of solidarity that comes from knowing that we all hold the same view about an important issue and feel frustrated when such a view must be justified to a skeptical audience; the love shared by members of a group for each other may be liberating or stifling; and our interests can be such that our pursuit of them at the same time is mutually inclusive or exclusive. I discuss each dimension in greater depth below (*ii.1-ii.5*).

At each of the five dimensions, then, we can ask whether what one person is doing is fostering, hindering, being fostered by, or being hindered by what others in the community or the community itself is doing. I use the word ‘conflict,’ to refer to such hindrances and the word ‘coordination’ to refer to such fostering. This is to say, a community with hindrances that are greater in number and severity is, by definition, a community with more conflict and less coordination, and a community with fosterings that are greater in number and severity is, again by definition, a community with more coordination and less conflict. Additionally, conflict and coordination can happen with respect to a single structural dimension, some set of structural dimensions, or all five structural dimensions considered holistically. When I do not specify a particular dimension or set of structural dimensions, I am referring to all five considered holistically. Such holistic assessments are rough, and I am not committed to any particular formula for how to aggregate levels of conflict or coordination across dimensions (e.g., how to balance greater coordination at one dimension against greater conflict at another).

ii.1 The dimension of gesture

A place like Mendham provides opportunities to examine aspects of communal life that would otherwise go unexamined. An occasion for such reflection happened one day when I was having lunch with my friend Léa C. Brillant and I noticed that she was touching my arm from time to time while we were talking. Normally this isn’t the sort of thing I would take note of—it’s a fairly common thing that happens during conversations after all—but, primed by having been reading Kennedy, I had already been thinking consciously about gestures and how we use them in conversations. It occurred to me that she and I had different gestures in our repertoires for making physical contact with friends: for the most part, I limit myself to hugs and handshakes and only use them when saying hello or goodbye.

After I mentioned this to Léa, we spent a few minutes attempting, and yet never quite succeeding, to figure out how to get me to move in a way that didn’t seem like a parody of her natural execution of the gesture of touching someone’s arm during a conversation. This process changed our

friendship in two ways. First, it highlighted particular differences between my approach to interacting with people and hers. In this way, it showed us one way that we were less than perfectly coordinated in the dimension of gestures. Second, it initiated a path towards better, though never full, coordination. As I tried, but never fully succeeded, to execute her natural gesture in ways that were progressively less awkward, we simultaneously experienced both movements towards greater coordination and the realization that there would always be a limit to how coordinated our gestures would, in the end, be.

While we are generally not as aware of our gestures as Léa and I were in the lunchtime conversation that I just described, as Kennedy notes, every time we are around other people, the ways that we arrange the various parts of our bodies—whether through activity or inactivity, tension or relaxation, movement towards or movement away—affect everyone else in our vicinity (3-4). We can feel when our gestures are producing tension or relaxation in our community when we attend to the ways that our bodies respond to the gestures of others (e.g., how do we reposition ourselves and feel in response to gestures like the one that person over there just made?), to the ways that our own gestures make us feel (e.g., if our shoulders are raised, how does it feel?), to the ways that others respond to our gestures (e.g., does that person come closer when we move towards them or shrink away?), and to the ways that our gestures fit into the interactive system of gestures responding to other gestures (e.g., how well does someone's level of movement fit into the rhythm of gestures around them?) (5-6). When we attend to these gestures, we become aware of the ways that we can achieve greater coordination with those of others and of our community as a whole and of the limits to such coordination.

ii.2 The dimension of language

On the final day of Mendham, Ariel revealed to me that she had taken an immediate disliking to me when picking me up from the train station because, as a result of the way I used language, I reminded her of other Analytic Philosophers whom she had seen fail to embrace the pragmatist spirit of Mendham in the past. At the beginning of the week, I was in the habit of using philosophical terms, such as realism and relativism, and making references to famous philosophers, such as Martha Nussbaum, that I wrongly assumed everyone else would understand. Joe Oyler, the Mendham Workshop Coordinator, made it clear to me, with both his words and his gestures, that he wanted me to stop what I was doing and use language that was common to everyone present during inquiry sessions.

In the end, I successfully redeemed myself to Ariel (at the time that I am writing this article, she and I are co-organizing a winter writing retreat, planning a multi-city facilitation tour, and co-authoring a paper that has already been accepted for a presentation in February of 2019), but coordination of language is never guaranteed. Mendham attracts inquirers from a variety of countries each year, and many of my favorite conversations were with people whose first language is French. While people were generally happy to accommodate my inability to speak French, there were

situations where a French-speaker felt compelled to express a number of nuanced ideas too quickly for them to use English. In such cases, I would wait for the conversation to subside and then request a distillation of what had just happened.

As Kennedy notes, while speakers of different languages must work hard to find a common language for communication, members of different communities and disciplines (in this case analytic and pragmatist philosophers) who speak the *same* language often have distinct enough ways of talking that they must translate from the methods of engagement specific to their communities and disciplines to a common way of communicating with one another (e.g., by using frameworks that they have studied together and drawing from their individual and shared lived experiences) (6). As is the case with gestures, our attempts to coordinate language reveal both possibilities of coordination and the inevitable discontinuities that render complete coordination impossible. Even in the case of Ariel, differences in the stylistic habits that we bring with us to our co-authored works remind us that we are distinct individuals.

Before moving on, I want to discuss one further difficulty for coordinating language. I remember trying to have a conversation with someone sitting all the way across the dining room table from me on the final morning of Mendham and, due to a combination of her English accent, the ambient noise of the room, the size of the table, and the fact that I was operating on less than 2 hours of sleep, I did not understand anything that she was saying. This amounted to a failure to coordinate language, in the sense that the sounds we were producing were literally not at the right amplitude for communication to occur. In a dialogue, we need to make sure that we do not talk at the same time as others or jar or confuse each other with the pitch, volume, or speed of the sounds we make. When our sounds are well-coordinated, it seems like we're working together to sing a single song with roles for different voices, and the increases and decreases in pitch, volume, and speed are anticipated and welcomed by all participants. Kennedy refers to this as the "musical element in speech" (7).⁷

ii.3 The dimension of mind

One night in the solarium, the difference between two fundamentally different orientations towards approaching mysteries was thrown into sharp relief. The conversation went almost exactly like this (I have identified myself, but the other identities have been disguised and PERSON 2 is an amalgamation of at least two people):

PERSON 1: All you do is complicate things; you use flowery language to make stuff more obscure.

PERSON 2: When you dissect things into their parts you don't actually learn about them. There's mystery in the world, and you can't learn about it by dissecting it because when you dissect it you kill it.

PERSON 1: What does that even mean? You're not actually solving problems or learning anything—you're just writing poetry.

PERSON 2: Go to bed.

ME: I think that both of you are doing something valuable and I want to see if our conversation gets better once we're all on the same page about what that is. On your approach [gesturing towards PERSON 1], we use philosophical tools to clarify what all of the parts of seemingly mysterious things are and figure out how they work. This approach makes sense if you want to make sure that the mysteries you're studying are *really* mysterious rather than simply things that we haven't yet devoted enough time to figuring out. On your approach [gesturing towards PERSON 2], we try to experience a mysterious thing as a whole without dissecting it. This makes sense if you're worried that there are some things in the world that don't survive being dismembered, and so the only way to actually experience them—as opposed to the lifeless components that remain after dissection—is to use interpretive tools that allow us to observe them as wholes. Ultimately, though, I think we need different people doing both approaches because I think that we learn different things from each one.

PERSON 2: I want to hug that comment.

PERSON 1: [nodding] okay.

ME: We all think that there are real mysteries in the world that we should explore, but we're just disagreeing about *how* to do that. And, again, I think a variety of approaches within our community is best.

PERSON 1: That's right.

The conversation continued, but I want to end the dialogue there and discuss what had happened so far. We began with a clash between two very different perspectives about how to approach mysteries. I then made the moves of *beginning* to distill these perspectives and suggesting that they were both important for a single community based on inquiry. To be clear, these moves alone are insufficient to transform a conflicted community into a harmonious one. Within the context of a particular inquiry session, showing care for the inquiry—precisely identifying one question and then pursuing that question, and only that question—may mean having to collectively choose between pursuing the inquiry in a way that makes either PERSON 1 or PERSON 2 unhappy. And since, in the dialogue excerpt, the work of clarifying what the positions of PERSONS 1 & 2 actually amounted to had just begun, it was not yet clear which inquiry questions would be satisfying to whom. However, moves like these can help us begin to explore the degree to which our perspectives can be coordinated with each other (e.g., we're all aimed towards the goal of exploring mysteries), the extent to which our different perspectives can be coordinated with our collective project of organizing a COI, and the limits to both kinds of coordination given the ineliminable discontinuities between us.

Speaking more generally, our thoughts, feelings, and perspectives are complex and personal, but when we exchange sounds and gestures with others, we learn some things, but not all things, about their internal worlds. When we are open to this process of exchange and learning, we have the opportunity to progress towards, as Kennedy puts it, “a coordination of perspectives” (7). In a

community coordinated at this dimension—the dimension of mind—we state when we are confused, check in to make sure that we understand the arguments others are making, and offer examples to support or critique each other’s conclusions after adequately describing them. In a community conflicted at this dimension, we talk over each other and persist in misunderstanding each other’s positions because we do not devote sufficient effort to offering or receiving explanations of perspectives.

ii.4 The dimension of love

In one of the most helpful COI sessions I participated in at Mendham, I learned two things about the variety of erotic love that people can feel for one another: it is fairly obvious when we are experiencing a *process of falling* in love with someone, but it is less clear whether we are ever in a position to determine, in the moment, that we are certain that we are in the *state of being* in love with them; and processes of falling in love with someone happen when we have the poignant feelings associated with strongly believing that we understand them (we *get* them) and that we’re understood by them (we’re *gotten* by them). Given that Mendham is a community that fosters deep understanding between participants, there is always a danger that people will begin to fall in love with each other.

When processes of erotic love between people are well-coordinated, the results can be profoundly beautiful and satisfying. When I asked whether people had fallen in love at Mendham in the past, Ariel shared stories where this had happened; in one case, two Mendham participants even went on to get married afterwards. Love at Mendham isn’t always well-coordinated, however, and, although, as far as I know, this did not occur at Mendham during my time there, when love is unrequited it can feel devastating. Moreover, there are obvious cases where any romantic pursuit can be destructive. According to Kennedy, there is always a risk of “sexual and/or emotional exploitation, and emotions of jealousy, unrequited love, excessive diffidence, etc.” (8).

Erotic love between people is not the only kind of love found in Mendham. One night in the solarium, around 3:15 AM, someone asked how we were supposed to be awake for a very long day that was set to begin with breakfast at 8:00 AM the next morning. One of the participants responded with (and here I am paraphrasing), *you literally eat the inquiry; that’s where you get your energy from; that’s your food*. Over the next few days, I found that she was entirely correct. The love for the inquiry is a powerful force that, when coordinated towards a common goal as opposed to directed by different individuals towards disparate ends, can propel us forward even through exhaustion. Kennedy describes this drive to push forward in the inquiry as a “hunger” (8).

For a Mendham community to flourish, a third kind of love is important as well: agape love, which is the desire to merge with and lose ourselves in the larger collective entity of our whole community (8). On the final night of Mendham, all of the participants performed plays they had written inspired by Matthew Lipman’s philosophical children’s novel, *Pixie*. The play I participated in was a collaboration between myself and a close-knit group of colleagues from the Brila organization in

Montréal. In general, they brought to Mendham a unique blend of kookiness and unbridled creativity that became one of the defining features of our community. For example, our play includes a scene where five of us dressed as lobsters are on top of a table eating spinach out of a doll-version of David Kennedy; one of the lobsters, after pretending to be choking on ideology, coughs up her spinach onto my face. The agape love shared among the lobsters that evening was palpable.

However, there is always the danger that a cohesive group of people who love each other very deeply will turn into a clique that will disrupt whole-group processes of Agape love. On David's birthday, I joined the Brila group in offering what must have been one of the most disruptive and whimsical birthday gift offerings that he has ever received. The five of us marched up to David in the solarium; I carried a cupcake while they sang loudly in French. Once we reached him, the others stopped singing, opened their mouths, and dumped sprinkles all over the cupcake I was still holding (it isn't clear to me how or when they filled their mouths with sprinkles). The spectacle disrupted the comparatively calm and reflective atmosphere of a room full of people drinking wine and reflecting on a week of inquiry. Although situations like this made the discontinuities between the relations of Agape love between the members of the group and the relations of Agape love shared by the community as a whole clearly visible, the presence of the Brila group still, in my opinion, made an entirely positive contribution to the Mendham community; in addition to their years of experience inquiring and the insightful ideas that each of them brought with them, they created opportunities for eccentric and even absurd activities that enriched our community and which others were invited to help shape.

ii.5 The dimension of interest

Participants come to Mendham to satisfy different interests, and, as Kennedy notes, the process of coordinating these interests is a constant negotiation for each person "with the group as a whole, within various subgroups, and with each individual within the group" (9). At times, this coordination requires people to refine their goals when such goals are incompatible with the flourishing of the community. When I asked Ariel, I was told that, in past Mendhams, some participants—who happened to be analytic philosophers (it often seemed as though I were doing free PR for analytic philosophy)—were frustrated and disappointed because they were not allowed to simply lecture others into giving up what they took to be elementary philosophical errors resulting from not being up to speed on the literature in the relevant subdisciplines. I understand their frustration; on one or two occasions early on in the week, it occurred to me that I was wasting my time listening to mistakes that would have been quickly corrected during the course of a good undergraduate philosophy class. In my case, my frustration disappeared as the days went on and I found that, regardless of the topic, participating in a COI helped me learn new things that I would not have learned on my own (my deepest goal in coming to Mendham was to learn as much as I could from the experience). In past years, there were cases where coordination never happened and the frustrated individuals either left or stayed and made everyone else miserable.

In some cases, a community is able to adapt to provide new opportunities for individuals to flourish in ways that, in turn, benefit the community. In my own Mendham experience, I was fortunate enough to be given time to facilitate a COI where the object of inquiry was a live performance I gave of a composition I had written for solo violin (at the suggestion of a Mendham participant, I later decided to name the piece, *Mendham*). But this opportunity for me came with a cost. I learned, during the process of writing this article, that another participant had been hoping to give a presentation about one of his areas of research during the time that was given to me for my session. In a community, a decision that allows one person to pursue their interests can also result in someone else's not being able to do so. Unfortunately, such conflicts are inevitable when two people want the same resource and it can only be used by one of them.

III. On Conflict and Crisis

Kennedy describes the role of *crisis* in the COI as follows: “Doubt and belief—a complex web of instinctive beliefs and assumptions, mostly vague, many of them at any given point in time altogether unconscious—crisis in constant state of dynamic tension. It is when these belief-habits come into crisis, are thrown by experience into a state of perplexity, that the act of search, of investigation begins” (10). On this usage, the term ‘crisis’ refers to a state of perplexity where, following a disruption of our activities, we do not know how to go on. In a good inquiry, crises of this sort are ubiquitous. They happen whenever we offer a position that is then met with a challenging example or counterargument, prompting us to have to decide whether to defend or abandon our position.

I articulated above (§II) five different structural dimensions of a COI where conflict can take place, and, on this general conception of ‘crisis,’ each of the conflicts I described can produce a crisis. When, for example, A rolls her eyes and crosses her arms while responding to a point B has just made, she is engaging in what Natalie Fletcher (2014) refers to as *body taunting*: “the combined ‘vocabulary’ of flesh—gestural, postural, physiognomic, kinetic expression—with which inquirers both deliberately and inadvertently provoke, dismiss, intimidate or alienate one another as they attempt to co-construct meaning” (14). As a result of A’s body taunt, B may become perplexed about whether she has anything of value to offer to the community, “resulting in missing perspectives and an imbalance of contributions, which in turn damages the community’s dynamic” (16). If others around B become frustrated at her for not contributing, they may become unsure about whether to continue to allow her in their community, leading to conflict at the dimension of Agape love, which, in turn, could lead to questions about whether they ought to accommodate B’s use of language, coordinate their perspectives with her, and be sympathetic to her interests.

There are many different kinds of crisis, and I want to draw four distinctions⁸ between them. First and second, we can distinguish between different kinds of crisis by looking at the *actions that are disrupted* and the *thing that disrupts* the action. Your action of walking to work is disrupted if, along the way, a road is closed, an emergency forces you to attend to something else, or you receive a phone call

from a publisher who is excited about your manuscript and would like you to catch the next plane to New York so that you can begin your new life as an author. While on one level of analysis, these three interruptions interrupt the same action (i.e., the action of walking to work), they differ along a third dimension: *severity*. The first disruption interferes with your particular path to work without interrupting your continuing to travel to work (e.g., by another path); the second interferes with your currently taking steps to go to work without necessarily affecting your future decisions with respect to traveling to work (e.g., you may resume your action once the emergency has passed); the third interferes with your current and future steps towards work (e.g., you may decide to go immediately to New York, quit your job, and never return to your old home again). In this way, the third disruption is the most severe of the three crises.

Fourth, crises vary with respect to whether they contribute to or detract from individual or group flourishing. For example, I believe I am better off because a chance encounter with academic philosophy led me to question whether a career as a professional orchestral violinist was really for me (I determined that it wasn't). On the other hand, I have met other musicians who regret ending their musical careers and believe that their decision to do so detracted from their flourishing in the long run.⁹ Moreover, a crisis that eventually helps me flourish may, in the long run, detract from your flourishing or the flourishing of our group (or vice versa).

In addition to the general term 'crisis,' I am going to introduce the term, 'existential crisis,' to refer to a crisis where someone, or some group, is perplexed about whether or not to continue existing, either per se or as the bearer of a particular socially-constructed identity. Sometimes life events like retirement can lead someone to abandon one socially-constructed identity, become perplexed about who they are, and then eventually take on a new one. For example, I once spent several weeks getting to know an ex-physicist who had become extremely wealthy by designing weapons for the US military during the cold war. When I met him, he had already gone through the process of retiring from physics, being perplexed about what social role he now occupied, and eventually becoming a renowned and beloved patron of the arts. In other cases, a combination of life events can produce an existential crisis that will leave someone perplexed about whether to continue to exist per se: to ponder what Albert Camus (1955) described as the "only one serious philosophical question... suicide" (3). Philanthropist, businessman, and inventor George Eastman responded to such a crisis on March 14, 1932, when he famously shot himself in the heart after writing the following note: "To my friends, my work is done—why wait? G.E."

IV. Between Crisis-Philia and Crisis-Phobia

It is uncontroversial that some crises, in the broad sense of crisis, are valuable. If we never subject premises to counterarguments, then we should not have much faith in them, for the crucible of testing throws the actual or apparent deficiencies in a premise into sharp relief, leading us to reject it, refine it, or gain a more nuanced understanding of it and what it can do. In the same vein, a COI community that is never challenged also suffers from having not been properly tested.¹⁰ A crisis

provides us with the opportunity to reject, refine, or gain a new appreciation for the strength of our community: our proposed solution to the question, how should we coordinate a specific kind of communal life based on inquiry?

What is controversial, however, is how to answer the following question: should we seek *all* crises, including existential crises? When answering this question, it is important to keep in mind that the power individuals have to cause or prevent existential crises in their groups varies depending on how much of an impact one individual's action will have on the group as a whole. In the case of revolutions faced by states, a particularly dramatic sort of existential crisis, Theda Skocpol (1988) and E. J. Hobsbawm (1989) have argued that individuals have so little power that their intentions are explanatorily irrelevant. In the case of a group of friends, each individual has considerably more, though never complete, power to cause existential crises at will. Individuals in a COI are more similar in power to individuals in a friendship than to citizens in a pre-revolutionary state. Although they are still constrained, they are always in the position of being able to ask, "should I increase the probability of an existential crisis by contributing to greater levels of conflict or decrease this probability by contributing to greater levels of coordination?" In the context of a COI, this question can be asked with respect to each of the five structural dimensions.

One answer to this question is that we ought never to seek existential crises. Call this position, *crisis-phobia*. Although the real Edmund Burke did not endorse crisis-phobia across the board (e.g., he supported the American Revolution), someone who does could find support for their position in the reasons he offered in his critique of the French Revolution in his (2003 [1790]) *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. According to Burke, if we allow people to change "the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken" (81). The danger of breaking this continuity is that progress in art, science, manufacturing and every other area of life will be impossible because there will be no stable mechanisms to preserve the fruits of yesterday's advances today so that they can be enjoyed and built upon tomorrow. As a result of this instability, "the commonwealth itself would, in a few generations, crumble away, be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality, and at length dispersed to all the winds of heaven," and this harm is "ten thousand times worse than those of obstinacy and the blindest prejudice" (82).

There is a clear disanalogy between the French Revolution and a crisis in a COI: no matter how all-encompassing a COI feels when we are in the midst of it, no serious harms are likely to result from its premature conclusion. The cataclysmic dangers that concerned Burke with respect to the former simply do not apply to the latter. However, we have a reason to preserve a COI to the extent that it is doing important work that depends on continuity. Crisis-phobia will be endorsed by someone who thinks that this reason always defeats, even if just in practice, the countervailing considerations that motivate escalating conflict. Such a person will think that we ought always to discipline ourselves in such a way so as to avoid threatening the continuation of the COI. To do otherwise is to risk losing out on discovering the most reasonable answer to an important question.

Crisis-phobia is one extreme position that we can take towards existential crises; the opposite extreme is the position that we ought always to seek out existential crises. Call this *crisis-philía*. While it would be false to characterize Paulo Freire as someone who endorses crisis-philía across the board, we can, as was the case with Burke and crisis-phobia, motivate a crisis-philía position by starting from his position and then adding a few additional assumptions. In his (2018 [1968]) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes a binary world populated by two sorts of people: the oppressors and the oppressed. His goal is to articulate a pedagogical approach with which the oppressed will eliminate both the oppressed and the oppressors by transforming them both into new sorts of people who are “no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving liberation” (49). Freire’s call is not simply for internal change at the levels of people’s attitudes and beliefs, but for the transformation of “the world of oppression” (54), which may even involve violent actions on the part of the oppressed (56).

One path to crisis-philía begins with the choice to see all social life in terms of Freire’s oppressor/oppressed binary. When we are limited to seeing all social life in these terms, then all of the moves made by people within a COI will be seen as moves either of the oppressed or the oppressors. The second step is to assume that all of the social roles they adopt while making these moves are roles that help maintain this binary. Once we see the COI in this way, we have a reason to continually seek out existential crises; becoming perplexed about whether or not to continue along in our activities and socially-constructed identities (i.e., the activities and identities of oppressors and oppressed) gives us the opportunity to examine and reject the binary world of oppressor/oppressed in order to construct a new world of humans seeking liberation.

Neither crisis-phobia nor crisis-philía is a reasonable perspective to take. On the one hand, a proponent of the former will ignore the important kinds of growth and progress that can result from becoming perplexed about, and eventually abandoning or modifying, ways of organizing individual or social life that are suboptimal. At Mendham, one participant explained to me that he was frustrated because he believed that the COIs he was participating in were too focused on ethics and not focused enough on aesthetics. He chose to avoid raising this issue because he did not want to interfere with the norms for selecting questions that were already in existence. While his decision had the benefit of allowing a question-selection process to persist that was working fairly well, it had the disadvantage of leaving the biases our community had towards ethics and against aesthetics unexamined and unchallenged. While the person I am referring to is not a proponent of crisis-phobia all the time, it is possible to imagine someone who always, and in all circumstances, shies away from conflict in the COI, with the result that important opportunities for progress are missed.

On the other hand, a proponent of crisis-philía has a limited number of moves when it comes to reacting to social phenomena in an imperfect status quo. While such a person is adept at escalating conflict in the hope of dismantling social practices to which they object, they are without tools for identifying the aspects of our current institutions that we would be better off preserving and improving rather than burning to the ground. On one occasion at Mendham, a participant boldly

exclaimed that the training they were receiving was inadequate for learning how to facilitate COIs with children. I responded, as did several others, by empathizing with the person's frustration and suggesting ways that they could still get value from Mendham and reach out to experienced facilitators for help. While the person I am thinking of is not *always* a proponent of crisis-philia, it is possible to imagine an inquirer who is. Such a person will always escalate conflict in inquiries in an attempt to disrupt the inquiry whenever they have an objection to some aspect of how it has proceeded. Such a pattern of behavior would severely hinder the community's pursuit of the inquiry.

I have referred to crisis-phobia and crisis-philia as *positions* that one can take towards crisis, but it is also important to think about these concepts in terms of virtues and vices of character. In his discussion of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aryeh Kosman (1980) describes virtues and vices of character as, "dispositions toward feeling as well as acting" (104). In the context of this discussion, a *crisis-phobe* is someone who has a disposition to fear crises and to act in such a way so as to prevent them, and a *crisis-phile* is someone who has a disposition to desire crises and to act in such a way so as to cause them. As we have seen, crisis-phobia is a vicious disposition that will produce a deficient amount of change, while crisis-philia is a vicious disposition that will produce an excessive amount of change. Aristotle argues that we should develop virtues of character that are intermediate between the states of vicious deficiency and vicious excess:

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. (1107a1-a5)

The plausible positions, about what dispositions we ought to have with respect to crisis, are discovered through attempts to recover the benefits of crisis-philia and crisis-phobia without their excesses or deficiencies.¹¹ One such attempt is found in Maughn Gregory's (2006) discussion of Douglas Walton's "eristic" dialogue type, which is characterized "as a quarrel that serves the purposes of airing participants' complaints and thereby facilitating mutual understanding" (170). While Gregory acknowledges the value of eristic dialogue in bringing unconscious conflicts to the attention of the community and sometimes being "the only mechanism available to participants who have become disempowered within the community," he sees eristic dialogue as a deviation from the proper forms of dialogue in an inquiry; when eristic dialogue occurs, he thinks it should be managed by "maneuvers of affective and cognitive discipline" that redirect the community back to other forms of dialogue (171). In arguing that such disruptions ought to be avoided and managed, he takes a position that is closer to crisis-phobia than crisis-philia, but he departs from the extreme crisis-phobic position by recognizing that such disruptions, though we should avoid them, can still have value.

Other attempts are closer to crisis-*philia* than to crisis-*phobia*. Pavel Lushyn and David Kennedy (2004) argue that the COI environment is one “in which there is continual struggle—at its best a happy struggle” (109). The struggle happens because any time there are two different individuals interacting in an environment, they are “in an impositional relation,” but such that “complete imposition by any one element is impossible” (109). In what Lushyn and Kennedy refer to as a “monological classroom” environment, a teacher is presumed to have all of the knowledge about the subject and any discrepancies between what the students do and what the teacher wants them to do are understood as situations where the teacher should impose on the student: to correct a mistake (108). In a dialogic classroom environment, such as a COI, mistakes are understood differently; they are discrepancies between the teacher’s model for how students ought to think, behave, and be evaluated and the students’ own models for how they ought to think, behave, and be evaluated, and these discrepancies can create a crisis that leaves both teachers and students perplexed about whether and how to modify their respective models. A mistake is valuable because it “brings the model into the crisis through which it transforms towards greater adequacy” (109). In this way, there is constant conflict between teachers and students, and, furthermore, it would be counterproductive for a teacher to attempt to fully eliminate this conflict.

While Lushyn and Kennedy stop short of a full endorsement of crisis-*philia*, they describe the COI as an environment in which crises are both ubiquitous and productive. Moreover, by constantly pushing facilitators to be perplexed about how to impose substantively without imposing fully, these crises are existential crises for facilitators who see themselves as occupying any of the usual socially-constructed identities associated with norms of leadership and collaboration. This is to say, if a facilitator enters a classroom while seeing herself as a *leader*, she will become (productively) perplexed about whether to continue existing as a leader once she grapples with the requirement that she not impose *fully* (e.g., she may refine her conception of ‘leadership’ or abandon the social identity). Additionally, if another facilitator thinks of himself as a teammate, on equal terms with everyone else, he may become perplexed about whether to continue along in that role once he is confronted with the community’s need for him to impose in such a way so as to foster the caring, creative, and critical thinking of others.

As we have seen, some conflict in a COI is inevitable and it can lead to productive crises. But when we have too much crisis –when we only look for objects to critique and tear down– we miss out on opportunities to benefit from our past projects and successes by preserving and building upon them. For this reason, it would be a mistake to conclude that, in all situations, we ought only either to escalate or de-escalate conflict. Instead, we sometimes need tools for escalation and we sometimes need tools for de-escalation.

According to Aristotle, we use reasoning to find the intermediate virtue between the vices of excess and deficiency (1138b20), and also that the “virtue of a thing is relative to its proper work” (1139a16-20). What this means, in the context of the COI, is that we have to figure out what the proper work of the COI is and then use reasoning to figure out whether the greatest barriers currently

to our carrying out that work are caused by the chaos of instability or the constraints of imperfect conventions and institutions. In the case of the COI, the proper work is to find the most reasonable answer to some important question. When the barrier to accomplishing this task is too much chaos, we need to use tools for de-escalating conflict so that we can begin and sustain productive projects of inquiry. When the barrier is the latter, we need to use tools for escalating conflict and seeking a crisis.

This task is easier said than done. One complication is that we do not always agree about which danger is more severe. Such disagreements may be prompted by differences in access to particular facts (e.g., people with different amounts of experience, expertise, or social standing will notice different things about the COI) or differences in interests (e.g., someone who is unhappy with the inquiry question will have a reason to emphasize the negative aspects of the inquiry, while someone who is happy with the inquiry question will have a reason to emphasize the positive aspects of it). In addition, research in moral psychology suggests that differences in our approaches to crisis may also track psychological differences between different groups of people.¹² In *The Righteous Mind*, psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) argues that, in the context of the United States, political liberals score higher on *neophilia* (their orientation is to be open to new experiences) while political conservatives are *neophobia* (their orientation is to be cautious of new experiences) (172). It would be irresponsible to conclude that liberals are crisis-philes and conservatives are crisis-phobes, but, since crisis-philial and existential crisis-phobic orientations are towards a specific kind of change, it seems plausible that, as a result of these documented differences in psychological orientation to new experiences in general, there could be differences between groups of people with respect to crisis-philial and crisis-phobic orientations as well.¹³

Another difficulty is that we sometimes disagree about what the proper work of our COI should be. If one person thinks that all of the most important questions are ethical questions, then she will think that the proper work of the COI is being carried out by a Mendham community where only ethical questions are selected. But someone who takes a more expansive view of which questions are important will think that the important work of the COI is not being carried out.

Instead of embracing a general attitude of loving or fearing crisis, inquirers in a COI should search collectively for the most reasonable answers about (a) what the proper work of our community should be and (b) whether our pursuit of that work suffers from a dearth or an abundance of chaos so that we can then escalate or deescalate conflict accordingly. In the pursuit of such answers, we should remember that we all differ with respect to our perspectives and orientations towards crisis and also that an authentic encounter within the COI can produce productive crises that will lead to our being productively perplexed about what our own perspectives and orientations towards crisis and the work of the COI should be. In the end, there is no overarching answer to the question of whether we ought to seek or avoid crises because the answer to this question depends on the unique obstacles and opportunities faced by our community in the pursuit of the ends set by our community.¹⁴

V. Implementation

According to the *Philosophy for Children Facilitation Handbook* of the IAPC (2008), the final step in an inquiry is to implement the warranted hypotheses arrived at through the earlier stages of the inquiry. Specifically, this implementation takes the form of adopting a new habit that will solve some problem: “the ultimate end of an inquiry is a reconstructed habit that ameliorates a problematic situation” (34). In light of this tradition, I am going to conclude this article by discussing what it would mean to implement the judgment I defended above.

In the past, I have made the mistake, as have virtually all of us, of falling into the trap of crisis-phobia or crisis-philia. When we fall into the trap of crisis-phobia, we are so unreasonably terrified of the potential consequences of being without a particular relationship, project, or organization that we fail to subject these things to the sorts of disruptions that could produce a productive crisis. When we fall into the trap of crisis-philia, we are so quick to disrupt what appears to be unsalvageable or suboptimal that we destroy it, to our peril, without first taking the time to understand the important work it was doing. Going forward, I want to navigate in the space between crisis-philia and crisis-phobia by inquiring about whether our current barriers to flourishing derive from too much or too little chaos. But what does implementation look like in practice? I want to close by offering an illustrative example from my own teaching practice.

I direct Madison Public Philosophy (MPP), an organization that shares philosophy with the Madison, WI community through P4C programs and public performances. In one of our P4C workshops for a local community partner, our plan was to write an adaptation of Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, share it with a group of 4th and 5th grade students, help the students come up with questions about the story suitable for inquiry, and then facilitate their inquiry about one of their questions.¹⁵ When I asked the students to sit down in a circle in the middle of the room so that we would all be sitting at the same level as everyone else, all but two boys, who insisted on remaining in chairs, did. If we refer back to Lushyn and Kennedy (1994), we can describe their refusal as a clash between my model, as a facilitator, for how the students should behave and their own models for how they should behave. While we did not engage in a formal COI about where the boys should sit, the community made its position clear: the other students in the room showed, with their body language, that they were annoyed at the behavior of the two boys, one of the community partner’s regular staff members repeated my request, and the two boys got out of their chairs and sat on the floor. In this case, the community solved its problem of how inquirers ought to arrange their bodies by moving towards greater order, which was manifested as a uniform seating arrangement.

Since we did not know the students we were working with and we only had a small amount of time to spend with them, the other MPP volunteers and I had previously decided that we would read the text aloud to the students (i.e., instead of having them read it). However, the students communicated to us, first through their body language and then with their words, that they wanted to read the text too. This was another clash between the model of the facilitators and the model of the

students, but this time it seemed that the structure we had tried to impose was creating an obstacle to the community's accomplishing its work of engaging in a truly collaborative process. We changed course and the students read the remainder of the story. However, the need for more structure became evident when one boy wanted multiple opportunities to read; we established an order of readers.

Through the remainder of the reading process, the question-selection process, and the inquiry into the question, our community oscillated between requiring more structure and requiring the dismantling of suboptimal structures. Rather than being a manifestation of crisis-philia or crisis-phobia, our decision to build or dismantle structures varied and depended upon the changing situations that presented themselves in the community. And the processes of figuring out what problems there were in our community and how whether or not our solutions to these problems were successful were collaborative processes in which the agency of everyone in our community –the students, the community partner staff, and the MPP facilitators– was respected.

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Endnotes

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² In this article, I refer to both the authors of published works and to people whom I met at Mendham. For published authors, I follow the convention of using their full name when mentioning them the first time and their last name for subsequent mentions. For people whom I met at Mendham, I follow the convention of using their full name when mentioning them the first time and their *first* names for subsequent mentions. When someone falls into both categories, I use their first name when referring to statements they made at Mendham and their last name when referring to their published works.

³ To quote Megan Laverty, “The IAPC Summer Seminar at Mendham has a long tradition. Beginning in 1983 the IAPC began holding P4C residential workshops at St. Marguerite’s Retreat House at the Episcopal Community of St. John Baptist in Mendham, New Jersey. In the 1980s and 1990s, they were held multiple times a year. Today they are held annually” (Megan Laverty, personal communication, October 12, 2018).

⁴ A COI is a dialogue practice where a group of people experience a stimulus, such as a story, a work of art, or a musical performance, collectively decide upon a question inspired by the stimulus, and then work together to find the most reasonable answer to that question. A facilitator helps the participants along in the inquiry by gently guiding them to show care for each other, care for the inquiry (i.e., by not deviating from the question), creative thinking, and critical thinking. For a full explanation, see the (2008) *Philosophy for Children Practitioner Handbook* of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children.

⁵ As I discuss below (§IV), my account is broadly Aristotelian.

⁶ In his original text, Kennedy also uses the word ‘communities’ to refer to these five dimensions.

⁷ Much more could be said about the musical element of speech. A more indepth treatment could incorporate Dmitri Nikulin’s (2010) work on dialogue (*Dialectic and Dialogue*) and Jean-Luc Nancy’s (2009) work on listening (*Listening*).

⁸ These distinctions are meant to be illustrative rather than comprehensive. They are useful for showing that there are many different dimensions along which crises can differ, but I do not take myself to be articulating a complete theory of crisis.

⁹ It is possible for someone to wrongly think that a crisis has contributed to, or detracted from, their flourishing, but I set that complication aside here.

¹⁰ In the context of Mendham, Ariel Sykes put this point as follows: a Mendham without a crisis is not a good Mendham.

¹¹ One thing that crisis-phobes and crisis-philes have in common is that they are both participants in the COI, but in different ways (i.e., the former group wants to preserve it, warts and all, while the latter group wants to escalate crises within it). There is, as Plato scholar Emily Fletcher pointed out to me, an option that departs from both crisis-philial and crisis-phobic: the individuals who simply are not invested in the project of the COI

and do not take any stance on conflict or crisis (Emily Fletcher, personal communication, October 18, 2018). Such individuals are analogous to the ones Socrates refers to as ‘misologues’ in the *Phaedo* (88c-89e), except that, in the case at hand, their hatred is for inquiry rather than for argumentation or logic.

¹² Aristotle writes that we are not born with virtues, but instead we “are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit” (1103a23-25). It seems plausible that Haidt’s empirical research can be made consistent with Aristotle’s claim by noting that different people are naturally disposed to be closer to the vices of excess or deficiency than others with respect to particular virtues, but that they still can be trained to move towards the mean.

¹³ Since I am not presenting a metric for measuring degrees of crisis-phobia and crisis-philía, more work would need to be done before this claim could be evaluated.

¹⁴ I do not give a *name* to the virtue between the vices of crisis-philía and crisis-phobia because I am not sure whether we have a pre-existing concept that refers to it. While a full discussion would go beyond the scope of this article, there is Aristotelian precedent for this move. In his discussion of ambition and unambitiousness, Aristotle argues that the virtue in between is “without a name.... But where there is excess and defect, there is also an intermediate; now men desire honour both more than they should and less; therefore it is possible also to do as one should; at all events this is the state of character that is praised, being an unnamed mean in respect of honor” (1125b15-25). The basic idea is that we can infer the existence of an intermediate virtue by reflecting on the relevant vices of excess and deficiency, but there is no pre-existing concept that refers to the virtue in this case.

¹⁵ An undergraduate volunteer named Grace Gecewicz and I came up with a detailed storyline about a group of young people who leave a movie theater where they have been living for as long as they remember. I then wrote a short story based on this storyline. Philosophy graduate student Dani Clevenger and undergraduate student Joe Venuta helped me facilitate the inquiry into this text with the students.

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