

CHRISTIAN CONTE, *WALKING THROUGH ANGER*

Boulder: Sounds True, 2019, 232 p.

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BOOK REVIEW

The ability to have “difficult conversations” in order to resolve personal and political conflicts is absolutely paramount. Now, it would seem, more than ever. The field of conflict studies is rich and ever-growing. However, only recently have there been attempts to incorporate the role of people’s emotions into conflict studies. Most of the research examines how emotions affect the processes and mechanisms behind conflict creation. More recently yet, emotion’s role in conflict resolution has started to be examined as well.

It would thus seem Conte is adding to the field with his “evidence-based” theory of how to better manage “emotional conflicts”. He calls his approach “Yield theory” and its main goal is to outline the techniques of a constructive approach to disagreements. When applied, then, it follows three steps. First, you listen to what the other side has to say. Second, you validate if you understood correctly. Third, you explore the possible solutions. Conte goes on to elaborate on these steps in the rest of the book.

At the core of yield theory is *compassion*. Conte claims he worked with problematic inmates for half of his career. During this time, he realized that changing people’s minds and behavior requires understanding them. This is also where the evidence for his theory mentioned above comes from. For Conte, real understating is impossible with prejudices. In the book, he calls this “meeting people where they are” instead of where you think they should be (p. 53). This is the first of eight “components” of yield theory. The explanation of these takes up most space of the book, about two-thirds. This fact was what actually raised a red flag for me, as in essence the components are very simple and could be put into one paragraph. I will do so now and put Conte’s ordering of them in parentheses.

The practice of yield theory consists in (2) accepting the situation after (1) understanding it. Further, one (5) must not entangle one’s wishes, biases and desires in a conflict as these make us not open to ideas and actually put up our defenses and increase our aggressiveness. Instead, one must (3) let speak “authentic self”, which Conte, without much-needed clarification, takes to be our consciousness (65–67). Next important part of this practice is (4) lessening our anger by seeing the situation through the other side’s perspective. Furthermore, one needs (6) to always try “expanding awareness” by doubting. This then leads to (8) higher awareness of what one believes and why they are engaging in an argument in the first place. Finally, (7) cultivation of creativity is needed to apply all this effectively.

This list, if maybe reductive, should illustrate how the eight components of yield theory simply do not merit 141 pages of the book. But that is the exact amount of pages Conte spends explaining the components. He does so by way of illustrations of real-life examples or fictional stories. In some

places, he invokes simplified scientific explanations and schematic philosophy in order to support his theory further. But nowhere does he consult the established literature in the field.

All this leads me to conclude that Conte's book is in no way academic or scholarly. Rather, it is a book of the self-help sort – the sort that aims to show the reader how they can help themselves to a better life. Take a quick characterization of self-help books in one of the popular video essays on the topic: “most of the self-help books can be summed up in a few bullet points,” as most of them “have the same writing style – a bit of humor, a bit of ease-to-digest science, a bit of anecdotes”. In this respect, Conte's book is no different.

As to the validity of his account, not much positive can be said either. Not only does he wrongly take anger to be the only emotion worth mentioning when it comes to conflicts (cf. 22, 52, 103, 128), but he also implicitly holds the outdated view of the dichotomy between emotions and rationality (cf. 30, 45, 48, 84f, 176). Without wanting to commit the fallacy of appeal to authority, I have conducted a quick search for Conte and his theory on Google Scholar. It did not yield (pun intentional) any reassuring results either.

In the end, I believe Conte would have done better, had he familiarized himself with a very similar book published only three years prior to Conte's own – *Emotions in Conflict* by Eran Halperin.

Readers wanting serious scholarship should do the same.

Bibliography

Conte, Ch. (2019): *Walking Through Anger: A New Design for Confronting Conflict in an Emotionally Charged World*, Boulder: Sounds True.

Halperin, E. (2015): *Emotions in Conflict: Inhibitors and Facilitators of Peace Making*, New York: Routledge.



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