

11 November 2014

Bryan Brown (BSc Natural Science 3rd Year)

A Dialogue on Dialogues, Entomology, and Truth

Alice (with fervour): ... and that's why the Free Masons are hiding the fact dinosaurs developed the first vaccines!

Bob: ... Huh... I see.

Alice (confused): What, you don't see that *obvious* connection?

Bob: No, no, it's not that, it's just that... well, we've been sitting here for two hours.

Alice: Point?

Bob: And I haven't had a word in edge-wise.

Alice (abashed): Oh, sorry.

Bob: No, that's fine I guess. It's just....

Alice: What?

Bob: Well, I mean, with a tirade that long, I have to agree, don't I?

Alice: I don't follow.

Bob (slowly): OK, think of your point, thesis, opinion, whatever, as a sword.

Alice: Sword, got it.

Bob: Now, if you strengthen your thesis, opinion, whatever you metaphorically sharpen it.

Alice: Gottcha.

Bob: Continually using your sword however, tends to dull it. You stop having a keen edge, or concise point. Sure, you bludgeon your point home, but it isn't nearly as fine as it should be.

Alice: So what you're saying is an active dialogue is like what, a whetstone?

Bob: Precisely! By subjecting your thesis to open debate, you have a chance to keep your thesis on point. You get to refine it, make it stronger.

Alice (doubtfully): I supposed you're right....

Bob: You don't sound convinced.

Alice: I'm not, not entirely. May I?

Bob: Certainly!

Alice (thinking for a moment): OK, so we've sharpened your sword. You've whetted it, and whatnot. But now you've spent the better part of a day sparring and you can't speak with the depth that a "tirade" grants you.

Bob: ... Alright.

Alice: See, I might not know what you're talking about.

Bob: Often the case it seems. Example?

Alice: You speak to me about... beauty.

Bob: But I don't--

Alice: You do. For the sake of the argument, play along. Say you work with fashion models.

Bob (brightly): Deal.

Alice: If I debate you, someone who knows "beauty", where I'm not as... trained, we can debate all day, but can you really say I've put up a fair fight? In order for debate to truly take place, we must be on somewhat even footing. See, monologues are fabulous for this reason! I can speak at will, and at length, about my strengths. I'm able to walk you through, step by step, to a point of my choosing. Further, if you debate my points, my opinions, how can I be certain we'll end up where I want the dialogue to be? You could tangent off into something completely unrelated and derail my train of thought. Monologues allow me to show you the truth of a matter.

Bob: That was clever.

Alice: Pardon?

Bob: You monologued about monologues.

Alice: ... Right. Meant to do that.

Bob (analytically): Of course. Now I will admit you make a point, but you have a fatal flaw.

Alice (wearily): ... Go on....

Bob: You speak of your truth as a definitive place. An end point and goal.

Alice: It is, though!

Bob: Is it? Let's go back to my luxurious life of pin-up--

Alice (annoyed): Fashion.

Bob: --fashion models. Can I say, definitively, that I know what Beauty (capital B), is?

Alice: ...I suppose not....

Bob: Exactly! My ideal Beauty (again, capital B!) is not what you may find beautiful.

Alice (taken aback): Dear god I hope not!

Bob (unimpressed): I'm going to ignore that. But seriously, my Western notion of Beauty isn't yours. How can I expound, rant, rave even to you about it? You have completely different values than I do! In order to find a truer definition, we have to "battle it out". We should come to knowledge, or truth, by trial and error. Debate.

Alice: Eh... I suppose for some things that works.

Bob: ...Thank... you...?

Alice (defiantly): See, what about facts? Math? Physics? Engineering? Can we debate on how to build a building, or should we leave it to professionals?

Bob: Professionals, naturally!

Alice: So your dialogue only goes so far. You need "expounding, ranting, raving" when you speak about concrete things.

Bob: Ha! Concrete. Buildings. Funny.

Alice (further annoyed): Uhg.

Bob (waxing philosophical): I do see your point though. Where dialogues help us discover the "truth" about perhaps metaphysical things such as beauty, or some such notion, where monologuing through writing, speeches, et cetera, tells us about physical "truths". Epistemology requires both methods to truly realize the truth of knowledge. It can't be one or the other, but both are required. Or at least some mixture of the two.

Alice: Agreed. And Bob?

Bob: Yeah?

Alice (smiling playfully): ... that was a monologue.

Bob (flushed): Oh, hush! Your theory on the Free Masons is ridiculous! Clearly vaccines were introduced by lizard men disguised as the CIA!

Alice: OK, so I've been thinking....

Bob: A solid start, usually.

Alice (unimpressed): Funny guy. But I was thinking, during our little debate earlier we touched on the "Truth". What is this "Truth" really? When you speak of Truth, you speak as though it is intangible, or up to interpretation.

Bob: Well, according to Plato-

Alice (sardonically): Let me guess, "The Allegory of the Cave"?

Bob: Well... yeah. Why not?

Alice (expounding): It's just... that allegory is EVERYWHERE. Any first year Philosophy Major can tell you about the Allegory of the Cave.

Bob: Are you a first year Philosophy Major?

Alice: Well, no.

Bob: Then humour me.

Alice (mockingly): Don't I always?

Bob: ... Anyways.... According to Plato, we couldn't see the Truth by ourselves. We needed to leave the cave of our own illusions and let the "Good" reveal it to our souls.

Alice (flatly): That sounds ridiculous.

Bob: Hey! He was the grandfather of philosophy!

Alice: And?

Bob : What do you mean, "And?", the man deserves respect.

Alice: The man who wrote "What's that under your cloak, Phaedrus, in your left hand" deserves my

respect?

Bob (meekly): Admittedly not his finest moment, but you're being rude!

Alice: He was a dirty old man!

Bob: And ad hominem attacks on a man who has been dead for several hundred, neigh, thousands of years makes you better?

Alice: OK, fair point. Sorry, go on.

Bob: ...no.

Alice (apologetically): Please?

Bob: ... Alright. But that was rude.

Alice: Oh, get on with it!

Bob: Alright, alright! So, of the many lessons we can glean from the Allegory is that Truth must be revealed to use via the Good. Plato tells us that the Truth revealed is that of the...?

Alice (matter-of-factly): Forms. Plato's Forms.

Bob: And the Forms are...?

Alice (as though reciting): The divine templates through which everything is based. Trees, rocks, animals, everything. Perfection.

Bob: Exactly.

Alice: So how does that relate to a the Truth, as we are trying to define it?

Bob: Well, we cannot truthfully discern the Forms, but we do have a semblance of what is more correct, don't we? A four-legged table with a flat top is better than a three legged table with an uneven top, right? Therefore Truth cannot be concrete, but subjective. It all depends what we compare something true. X object/subject is closer to the Truth than object/subject Y. Get it?

Alice: Nope. Don't buy it.

Bob: Why?

Alice: Because I just can't see the world we live in to be less... real than some old Greek guy's ideals. If I, say, want to hit you really, REALLY hard--

Bob (calmly): I'd rather you didn't.

Alice (evilly): Don't tempt me. This world can't be an illusion, then. I feel things. My senses take things in. Everything is real. Solid.

Bob: But how do you know your senses are not lying to you?

Alice (patiently): Yes, the classic argument is that our senses aren't perfect, but that doesn't really matter. Whether or not our senses lie to us doesn't mean the world doesn't exist. Further, even if the world didn't exist that wouldn't make our minds or souls the arbitrators of Truth.

Bob (intrigued): Explain that to me.

Alice: Well I'm sick of the stupid binary that plagues people's interpretations of the real world. The mind isn't some magical, unconnected... thing! Plato was wrong. His focus is on the mind as some

great vehicle for enlightenment, when it itself is only made manifest by the very biology he opposes!

Bob: He doesn't--

Alice (pointedly): He does. He puts the mind on some pedestal but it's directly affected by the interactions with the real world. Chemical make-up and all that. Our experiences cause synapses to fire in certain ways, affecting our perceptions. The mind is a result of physical changes, not some immutable soul.

Bob: And how would he know that in ancient Greece?

Alice: He doesn't need to! He knows the body rules over the mind. He preaches how the good life takes willpower. The constant struggle against the "monster" part of his soul. The mind isn't impervious to the body, it is a victim to it.

Bob: I suppose....

Alice: Plato wasn't perfect. Not by a long shot. I look to Nietzsche's point of view here. Plato sets up the binary of Mind over Body, which is absurd. Plato has been deceived, creating a philosophy of images, ideals, notions rather than a philosophy of the material world. A "Philosophy of Representation" over a "Philosophy of the Real"!

Bob: Now who sounds like a first year?

Alice (exasperated): Whatever. I don't even care. I'm just tired of the same old thing. I mean, how can our world be the copy? How is it even possible for the world which created the minds of Plato, Nietzsche, Descartes, or any other genius be just a poor imitation? Nietzsche was right, it's not Mind over Body but Body over Mind. That's what matters.

Bob: ... So how does that relate to Truth?

Alice: It relates in that it brings Truth down to the material level. Like my example with the engineers, Truth must be concrete, based on the body and nature. I mean, if Truth really is about the mind, who says it can't be corrupted? What if the person dictating Truth is a lunatic?

Bob (begrudgingly): Well I suppose--

Alice: Truth can't possibly be that wishy-washy. It's absurd!

Bob: I don't know, you just want to write off the mind entirely, then.

Alice (reassuringly): Not at all! The mind is certainly important! It has to exist to make sense of the world around us! The mind isn't something to be tossed away or unappreciated, I just don't think that it's what makes the world what it is.

Bob: I guess that's a start. Glad to see the mind isn't completely useless after all.

Alice (coolly): Well, in practice... there always is the exception to the rule, right Bob?

Bob (with fake hurt): Oh, you wound me!

Alice (teasingly): Don't worry, I'm sure you'll live.

Bob (contemplatively): You know, if this was written out like a play, it would be awful.

Alice (with dread): Uh oh.

Bob: I mean, it makes me think of Plato's views on Mim--

Alice (venomously): I swear to god, Bob. If I have to hear you talk about Plato one more time....

Bob: (quickly): OK, shutting up.

Alice (happily sarcastic): You're too kind.