

Preface: the Sages and the Elephant

A thing cannot be both true and not true, in the same respect, at the same time.

Aristotle

If I may be permitted an almost unpardonable degree of . . . generalization, I should like to suggest that the central core of the intellectual tradition in the west has, since Plato (or it may be Pythagoras), rested upon three unquestioned dogmas:

- (a) that to all genuine questions there is one true answer and one only, . . . and that this applies . . . to questions of value no less than to those of fact;
- (b) that the true answers to such questions are in principle knowable;
- (c) that these true answers cannot clash with one another . . . ; that together these answers must form a harmonious whole . . .

Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*

There are no facts, only interpretations.

Nietzsche (in paraphrase, origin unknown)

One of the oldest stories about “the social construction of reality” is still one of the very best:

Six blind sages walking through the jungle one day, find an elephant in their path. The first sage, bumping into a broad, flat surface, warns his companions, "There is a wall here." The second feels a thick, round leg and says, "No, you fool, there is a tree." The third sage finds the huge ear and exclaims, "What is this talk of walls and trees? There's only a sheet blowing in the wind!" The fourth, grabs hold of the trunk, and declares, "Surely you are all mad! Someone has hung a hose to dry." The fifth, seizing the tail, says with disgust, "It's far too thin for a hose! It's a rope you're feeling!" And so they argue back and forth, shouting abuse at each other, coming to blows, and finally running off in all directions.

(source: *Inspired Sayings of the Buddha: Udana VI.4*)

The first glimmerings of the scandal of interpretations appeared in modern philosophy with Hume’s work, but reached its full post-modern virulence in Nietzsche’s writings, about one hundred years ago: Cognition is not so much the passive *receiving of* sensory impressions and experiences as the active process of *construing*, or *interpreting* these to suit our interests and purposes.

Interpretation is a function of viewpoint, of an individual’s perspective. As the parable of the blind men warns, no two people see an elephant, or anything whatever, in the same way. What then can we mean by “public knowledge” – or by correct public policy, regarding elephants or anything else? In a global, multi-cultural society, with its bewilderment of opportunities for confusion and conflict, the question becomes urgent. Actually, however, it is a philosophical

problem before it is a practical one: Regarding things (like elephants) that can be “seen” in different ways, does the notion of “truth” have any useful meaning?

Where issues of interpretation are at stake – practically everywhere, as it turns out – not only will it be impossible to decide who is right, but the question itself can be dismissed as meaningless. Except in carefully restricted areas, the clear distinction between truth and falsehood breaks down. Even the simplest questions of fact can be shown to involve divergent habits of recognition and categorization, and to leave abundant room for interpretation. This is embarrassing when we find ourselves unable to call a spade a spade, or to call a "communications specialist" a liar.

Once we accept that cognition is an active process of construction, it becomes obvious that our classical notion of *Truth*, and the crucial secondary concepts of *falsehood*, *belief*, *argument* and *knowledge* that depend upon it, will not work as expected. The first shock of this discovery has worn off, and we are now in a phase of reappraisal and damage control – though of outright denial in some quarters. It is clear today, both on theoretical grounds and as a matter of daily experience, that without classical *Truth*, the ideas of *reason*, and of “being reasonable” are in trouble. In particular, the project of building an authoritative structure of public *knowledge* as a basis for rational public policy becomes problematical, to the point of looking hopeless. Correspondingly, it also becomes clear that we are going to salvage something of these concepts, by acts of faith or political coercion if necessary, for there is no way we can manage a global society without them.

A worthwhile notion of *reason* stands in dialectical contrast – not opposition, necessarily – to *authority*, *tradition*, *faith*, *power*, *custom*, *habit*, *impulse*, and *self-interest*. To the heat of our passions, reason brings a certain coolness, asking us to control and discipline our impulses, our wishful thinking, and our short-term interests for the sake of long-term good. A life governed entirely by reason may be dull, but the life that entirely abandons it is likely to be nasty and short. In any case, whatever reason is to the individual, an ecumenical, secular civilization can have no other governing principle.

A stable, homogeneous world can live by tradition. A very primitive world might live by impulse and naked power. But a complex world of permanent change, with so many conflicts to be contained and managed and so many disasters waiting to happen, has no recourse. Either the centralized reason of government, or the localized, transaction-by-transaction reason of the marketplace – realistically, some appropriate mixture of these – are all we have to go on. Without more far-seeing reason, applied more consistently than has been customary, this planet will not sustain a human population of 6 billion and rising. However, it seems to many that reason is already dead – at least in its classical Western form; and it will take some effort of rethinking to see what

that notion can still mean. The outcome of my own rethinking is the present book.

My view is that classical ideas of reason and public knowledge cannot be patched, because the difficulties with them are radical, not superficial. When it comes to fundamentally differing interpretations, there is no way to repair the classical notion of Truth: it simply ceases to apply. One interpretation may be more convenient than another, or preferable on other grounds; but it is meaningless¹ to ask whether a given interpretation is *True* or *False*. In matters of interpretation, the first epigraph of our preface – the so-called Law of Non-Contradiction – breaks down; and, (with certain reservations to be discussed), the whole system of classical logic goes with it. Once this is accepted, it becomes obvious that we can save some version of reason only by rethinking that notion from scratch, accepting the ubiquity of viewpoints and interpretations as the starting point. Without insisting that there is only one right way to understand and to live, we do not want to admit that “anything goes.” The problem then is to find some way of accepting diversity and plurality, while still rejecting foolishness. Accordingly, we need some version of “perspectivism” that sustains worthwhile notions of coherence, valid argument, and reasonable choice.

Reason must be polyphonic today. It must acknowledge and treat with a multitude of legitimately diverging interests, and with correspondingly different cognitive strategies for rendering the world intelligible. Its crucial task is to maintain a world community in all diversity, not to pinch this diversity toward consensus. In this new role it must teach the language of coexistence and accommodation to absolutists and ideologues of all persuasions, who will otherwise believe that the ideal of Truth requires them to fight each other to the destruction of civilization and the world itself.

One alternative to perpetual warfare of competing ideologies would be some victorious faith that suppresses its rivals. Oswald Spengler wrote about “the second religiousness, that has overcome all doubts forever.” The better hope would be a humbled version of reason, stripped of the old pretension to pronounce universal Truth to everyone, for all time. Reason today must be suspicious of theories, and newly respectful of skills and concerns. It must accept the finiteness, limitation and partiality of all things: that people, institutions and their positions are cursed with the defects of their own virtues, with the folly of their own wisdom, with the weakness of their own strength.

¹ To be technical, it’s what philosophers call a *category error*. As we’ll discuss later, interpretations may or may not be useful, interesting, honest or adequate but cannot, strictly speaking be true or false. Interpretations are not the sort of thing of which the judgment of Truth can properly be made.

On such a basis of cognitive humility and mutual respect, a polyphonic reason is still possible.

To this day, our working notions of reason and knowledge derive from the paradigm of debate in an Athenian law-court. This model remains central to our own law, and to every other situation of rational judgment: To reason means to argue both sides of a case, weigh the arguments, and call the shot. To claim knowledge of something means, in practice, to claim a right to insist that anyone who disagrees with your position is in error. But if we accept that both sides – or all sides – may in some sense be right, and that “truth” (whatever this means) probably lies somewhere among their various perceptions, without attaching securely to any, then it is clear that debate is no longer an adequate paradigm, and that our concepts of reason, public knowledge, and rational action all stand in need of substantial revision. If we are not to abandon these ideas to their enemies – the more radical deconstructionists and sociologists of knowledge – we shall have to re-build them on a paradigm of conversation among overlapping, partial, contradictory cognitive commitments, instead of universal and eternal truths.

The idea of conversation as a method, and of reason as good conversation goes back at least to Socrates; and it's a pity we don't know what discussion with him was really like. In Plato's telling, he sets a mixed example: intellectually and personally courageous, honest, witty, and endlessly resourceful in argument, but also a frightful intellectual bully. His central projects seem quaint today. We no longer think it possible, or terribly important, to find a single *essential* meaning for "justice," "virtue," and all the other abstractions, whose connotations are necessarily fluid. The basic tool of Socratic conversation, his famous *negative elenchus*, similar to the attorney's cross-examination of a witness, is now just one tool of argument among many.

I would like to think of Socrates as a kind of Athenian Zen master – less sceptical than his Far Eastern counterparts about the power of language, but committed as they were to teaching intellectual humility and right living by example. One thing he certainly taught was the game of verbal inquiry and dialogue that came to be known as “philosophy.” He repeatedly denies that he knows the answers to the questions he raises but never seems to doubt there are true answers to be known. What is not clear from Plato is a question of priorities: Which did Socrates regard as more important: the *process* of philosophical discussion, or the *answers* that might emerge from it? Plato, for his own part, certainly wanted and believed in True Answers; and it is tempting to imagine he may have misunderstood or misrepresented his master in this crucial respect. If so, he must be regarded as the founder of a fruitful mistake – a detour that led back, after 2500 years, to the authentic Socratic teaching of

discussion for its own sake. For it is clear by now that philosophy has never achieved consensus on any of its fundamental issues but, at best, only a deeper understanding of these. In short, the running argument of philosophers - generated a tradition of reasoning, but not a body of Truth.

It is possible, (though perhaps no more than wishful thinking on my part), to conjecture that this was what Socrates had hoped in the first place – that he had never expected his method to yield definitive answers, but merely a balanced understanding of the concepts at point. Be this as it may, we can still affirm that Socrates was crucially right that public knowledge comes not from the revelations of mystics, nor from the inspiration of poets, nor from the divination of priests, nor from the rhetoric of politicians, lawyers and public relations men, but from the conversation of gentlemen.

Of course, several allowances are needed: First, the term *conversation* must bear a broader meaning than it has in the Socratic dialogues. Today it must include the systematic interrogation of nature through scientific experiment. It must also include the craftsman's feel for his tools and materials, the tenderness of lovers, the clash of armies, and every other encounter characterized by reciprocal engagement, interpretation and adaptation. It is prior to, and larger than language; it is grounded in transactions that are not even *semiotic* in nature. It certainly includes the Socratic language game called philosophy, but only as a special case.

Second, it is no longer acceptable, as it was in Socrates' day, to confine participation in public affairs and discourse to male property owners. In today's world, the idea of a "gentleman" can no longer be restricted by sex or income or ethnic group. Even standards of competence have become suspect. These days we feel that all persons meeting minimum standards of civility – all who can suspend their clawing for advantage long enough to consider an issue in the round, with some attempt at balance and dispassion – should be accepted as - "gentlemen," whose two-cents-worth is in principle welcome. In practice, the situation is more complicated. Conversations have become more specialized than they were in Socrates' day. Since unrestricted conversation is necessarily incoherent, some eligibility restrictions are unavoidable. No serious conversation about particle physics or Indian temple statues should care very much about my opinions on these matters, because I know nothing worth mentioning about either. On the other hand, provided I am willing to learn, and to refrain from idle disruption, there is no reason why my curiosity and perceptions should not be welcomed, and my serious concerns taken seriously. With these caveats, we can still say that public knowledge emerges in the conversation of "gentlemen." We can make the same point by saying that public knowledge emerges in the dialogue of participants who respect certain standards of civility and intellectual honesty – that is to say, among persons who

do not impair, but contribute toward the integrity of their discourse. It emerges nowhere else.

We might describe the philosophical revolution of the last hundred years as a shift from the *either-or*, adversarial structures of *debate* to the polyphonic structures of *conversation*. A debate is a verbal conflict between cognitive adversaries, a confrontation of rival arguments intended to be persuasive and preferably valid as well. The characteristic of debate is contention between the opposing sides with their conflicting demands for adherence and loyalty. This agonistic style evolved in the law court and the parliament where material interests oppose each other by all means short of armed violence. Indeed, formal debate is more often the occasion for a partisan show of strength than an effective vehicle of persuasion and decision. Certainly, debate is not the vehicle of primary cognitive influence. It does not determine how people's realities are perceived, conceptualized, and shared. The sharing occurs in the more fluid processes of dialogue, and then of conversation in general; and it is to these that we must look for a renewed conception of reasoning and knowledge.

In their critique of classical rationalism, the relativists and deconstructionists scored a number of telling points. But too many of these writers worked in a malicious, hostile spirit: pressing sound arguments too far, and arriving at clever and suggestive, but ultimately silly conclusions. They lost sight of the concern that has been central to philosophy from antiquity to the present day: to establish the idea of public knowledge and public policy on a solid intellectual basis. Revision of that tradition is certainly overdue; Plato's foundation stones are crumbling, and can no longer support the vast, sprawling structure that has been built upon them. But we cannot afford to ignore Plato's central concern: We cannot discard the ideal of Reason.

To arrive at an epistemology that allows for divergences of viewpoint and yet envisages something better than a chaos of conflicting interpretations, a certain judiciousness is needed. Unfortunately, however, most of the writers from Nietzsche onward who attacked the myth of Truth preferred being clever to being sound. On the other hand, most of the literature in defence of Reason is too technical, and strikes me as excessively timid. I have not found any convincing attempt to meet the anti-rationalist assault along its whole front, give ground where necessary, and see what remains. This is what I have tried to do.

The problem is to recover worthwhile notions of truth, knowledge and reason once it is accepted that we have no direct contact with the world-as-it-is. The evidence of perception gives no better than *indirect* contact, mediated first by built-in features of the senses and the nervous system, then by the ready-made categories of a language and culture, and finally by the individual's desires and fears and interests. The problem is to agree with Nietzsche that all cognition is ultimately an act of interpretation, (as cognitive science now

confirms) and still disagree with the deconstructionists that utterances and objects have no meanings to be understood and respected, and that *reasoning* as between people who do not share the same interpretive prejudices is an idle exercise. By way of a precis, let me try to say in a few paragraphs where I think epistemological sanity must today be sought:

Meaning, we must agree, is never simply given, but has to be constructed by a brain prepared to do so. Our human brains have been prepared by evolution to interpret the physical world in fairly similar ways, and also to find value in things and activities that help to keep us alive and propagating our genes. Beyond that, we are largely on our own. It is not surprising that we have different interests, values and priorities because we confront the world from different positions, with very different strengths and weaknesses. Given these differing values it is equally unsurprising that we create, choose and form commitments to different interpretations of the events and things around us. An interpretation, after all, is a kind of cognitive strategy: an approach to making sense of things, and thereby managing our lives. Each of us is fully entitled to do this as best he can, and has no option but to do so. I can buy into the world views of some authority or other – in fact, lacking firsthand knowledge, on most issues I cannot help but do so – but the authority I choose to follow is my own responsibility, since any punishment for his deficiencies is not on his back but on mine.

My communication with other people is greatly facilitated if we share a common language and culture, but it does not depend on such pre-established rules, as the structuralists insisted. If it did, I could never have learned my first language and joined the speech community around me. Rather, it is predictable that a dozen speakers of different languages marooned on a desert island would develop means of understanding each other and of making themselves understood; their descendants would speak a full-blown human language. It is predictable that human spacefarers marooned on a planet with sentient squid would develop means for communication with the squid. Language is something more than a game of modulated breathing noises, governed by arbitrary rules. It is a medium for the exchange of suggestions whose ultimate intelligibility is grounded in a very basic commonality between speaker and listener – that they are both open, energy exchanging systems in the same universe.

Primarily suggestions prompt us to feel, or intend or act in a certain way, but insofar as they seek to direct our perceptions and thoughts, they also *begin* to be the sort of thing for which judgments of truth or falsity are meaningful. However, public truth value is not a property of individual suggestions or statements, except in the ideal case that argument converges to consensus. On controversial matters, truth value is a property of the argument as a whole,

dependent on the *integrity* of that argument. For any issue on which values and interpretive preferences conflict, public knowledge is the structure of argument around that issue – the body of concern and reasoning that has developed round it, as articulated in all the books on the subject in a good library. Getting my head around this argument (so that I understand where its various stakeholders “are coming from”) is my best hope for gaining a *judicious* or *public* (as opposed to a *partisan*) understanding of the matter. Public policy regarding this issue, if there is to be any, should be a clear-sighted response to public concerns around the issue in their totality. Policy that serves the interests of a successful coalition in disregard of other significant concerns cannot be called *public* in any genuine sense. A foisted partisan policy does not become authentically public merely because it has the apparatus of the state behind it.

For the idea of reason and its program, here is the outcome as I see it. Outside of very limited, formal domains, the classical notion of intellectual proof is empty: no one can be forced to believe something against his will. But it is mistaken to conclude that reasoned argument is therefore impossible, and that cognitive influence is only a matter of rhetoric, and self-interest. Reason is not proof. Reason is *ratio* – comparison and measure, a climate of respect and civility, a sense of proportion and justice, a resolve to factor each perspective at its due weight. In a word, reason is a quality of *integrity* in the conversation. Its goal is not persuasion but mutual clarification; its technique is not debate but dialogue. The anti-rationalist thinkers have made no case against reason, as such, but have destroyed the Platonic fantasy of quasi-mathematical proof regarding concepts that do not carry rigid meaning. We will never agree on the meaning of *justice* as we agree on the value of *pi*. Nor do peace and civil tranquillity require that we do so. Law and good government do not depend on consensual values and truths, but on the integrity and strength of a political process.

Far from being a novel conception of reason, we are returning, on the contrary, to a very old one. The English word *argue* is cognate with the French *argent*, and the Latin *argentum*: silver. To *argue* a point originally meant "to make it clear as silver," which is not necessarily “to convince” – to conquer the other’s mind by intellectual force. Reasoned argument cannot force anyone to see the elephant in a particular way. But in pressing for clarity, it can make it all but impossible to overlook parts of the elephant, and unendurably embarrassing to pretend to do so.

Reason can never close a conversation. Reason simply constrains the further development of conversation by raising a suspicion of willful blindness, and keeping it raised until the point in question is conceded. This grants reasoners a large measure of freedom without giving them absolute freedom.

They can interpret as they please – but at their own risk of looking like buffoons or liars when the events make fools of them.

We'll find that reason and knowledge, construed on a basis of honest conversation, are fully adequate to the legitimate purposes of science, government, and other forms of public thought. On the other hand, they will not support the sort of crude reductionism or scientism that wants to insist that anything not measurable is unimportant, or that the latest scientific theory on some subject is the only truth there is. Reason is not the instrument of capitalism, nor of socialism, nor of any political ideology whatever. In fact, reason is not the tool or sponsor of any position, but rather a moderator between positions. Primarily, reason is not a tool at all, but a quality of relationship – a climate of conversation, as we might say. If you must conceive it as a tool, think of it as a kind of filter, or nonsense-trap – working to keep the foolishness to a minimum, while holding a balance among the viewpoints with some claim to seriousness.

As it begins to unfold in Chapter 3,² this book's central idea is that truth becomes an attribute of individual statements only in the limiting case that no serious argument is raised against them. For issues that depend on value and interpretation, truth is an attribute not of one or other position that may be taken, but of the argument as a whole. That argument acquires knowledge-value and epistemic authority to the extent it has what we may call *integrity*, to put the quality in a single word. A brawl has no knowledge-value; religious warfare has none. But from the disagreements of great minds down the ages, much may be learned about the human condition. Likewise in economics: Public knowledge on the subject may be found (if anywhere) in the argument amongst followers of Adam Smith, Marx, Schumacher and others, provided we are not deluded that it is found in this or that camp to the exclusion of all others.

It makes sense to form commitments to a position – and to argue for it, and propagate its values and understandings, and seek to further its agenda. It is intellectually respectable to be an honest advocate: One does not have to be a judge. But what is most important is to recognize, as the law actually does, that an advocate has obligations to the integrity of the argument in court, and not exclusively to his client. He is more than a hired “mouthpiece”; he is an officer of the law and the judicial process. Quite similarly, a university teacher or his book may advocate a particular viewpoint or hypothesis, or may attempt judiciously to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the important viewpoints

² Chapter 1 is a broad introduction to post-modern thought as a crisis for the idea of reason. Chapter 2 offers a critique of the communication engineer's concept of *information*, and substitutes that of *suggestion* as a more adequate basis for what follows.

and hypotheses in play at a given time. But, what the university as a whole has to teach its students are the skills of getting their heads around an argument, and then of positioning themselves, with intellectual integrity, within it. This is equally its role in the faculty of theology and in that of physics.

These fields have different conventions about what counts as serious argument. They differ chiefly in that physics is supposed to be value-free, while theology is preeminently about “worth-ship” and the creation and recognition of values. But they are subject to identical standards of scholarship and intellectual integrity. Their writings count as public knowledge to the extent they competently encompass, recapitulate and digest the entirety of relevant argument around the matters in dispute.