

10. Where Are We?

... the world into which I am flung – or rather into which, when I come to any kind of awareness, I have always already been flung – is, nevertheless, a world only through my projection of what I mean to make it. And some resolution to make of it one thing rather than another, to make of myself one person or another, is inescapable for me. Sheer facts exist only for “scum, offal, or a cabbage.” For me they are always my facts, which I must transcend in some direction, if only in the direction of flight, of madness, or of self-destruction.

Marjorie Grene, *Introduction to Existentialism* (p.49)

It is time to review and close. The post-modern discovery has been that three traditionally separate areas of thought are inextricably linked. Since the word *should* has meaning only in a context of ethical discourse, *epistemology*, the philosophy of knowledge and the knowable, turns into *ethics* when it asks, “*How should I choose my cognitive commitments?*” and “*Which cognitive commitments should I entertain?*” Conversely, ethics blends with epistemology when it assumes there is something to know and teach about the right conduct of a human life, and still more when it concludes as Socrates did, that evil must be a form of ignorance, to the extent that no one could knowingly act against his own best interests. Both epistemology and ethics depend on some *aesthetic* conception of values and valuing, as both must feel and claim that one cognitive commitment, or one course of action, is more apt and elegant than another. Once we reject Plato’s assumption of True Values that are the same for everyone, and the empiricist assumption of a world that discloses itself to the neutral observer’s careful, dispassionate gaze, it follows that there can be no such thing as value-free knowledge.

Today, it may appear that aesthetics, epistemology and ethics are indeed one subject, and that all are in ruins, along with reason itself. If the concept of absolute Truth dissolves in competing interpretations, then there is nothing that can be known with philosophical certainty. In particular, the nature of Man, and of human Good become matters of interpretation on which each person or culture must form its own opinions, grounded (as it may seem) in self-interest and power, and very little else.

To the contrary, we have been attempting to show that a worthwhile concept of reason is still possible for anyone who wants one. We began by accepting Nietzsche’s point that all human cognition depends on acts of interpretation, and that we do not so much receive impressions of the world as construe understandings of it for our own purposes, according to existing

cognitive habits. We accepted too that Man is not a freely perceiving and reasoning spirit, but an embedded, time-bound, social creature who exists within some particular context of conversation – of history. But we have rejected a number of conclusions often drawn from these premises to show that worthwhile notions of understanding, reasoned argument and knowledge are still available. In this final chapter, we explore what these notions might offer to the primal concerns of Socratic philosophy: the nature of human good, and of the good life.

Today, for anyone who lives in a modern city, or follows global events without some ideological axe to grind, it is clear that understanding is an inescapably personal matter. Other persons may seek to influence your understanding, and they may threaten you or do you violence if you express or act on understandings they do not like. But they have no valid grounds for claiming authority to tell you how you should and should not understand. They can offer more or less well-founded suggestions – suggestions you may judge as backed by more or less experience and integrity. But that is all the authority that reason affords. Anyone who presumes to teach must deal in suggestions only, or become a trickster or a tyrant. Likewise, any seeker after Truth must recognize that good and bad suggestions are all he will ever find, and that responsibility for accepting the former and declining the latter remains firmly on his shoulders. Despite all this, as we have seen, a kind of reason remains possible on a basis of integrity and mutual respect.

Personal Epistemology

10.1

Classical epistemology wondered how we could arrive at Truth and valid knowledge given the limited competence of human senses and the mind's propensity for self-deception and wishful thinking. Today, the problem of knowledge is different. On controversial issues, where commitments are strong, and people cling to their own interpretations, we know from both experience and theory that reasoned argument is powerless to achieve consensus. The prerogative of interpretation leaves each individual free to choose the cognitive strategies that suit him best. For any group, even a married couple or a family let alone a global society, this is a very serious problem. Somehow we must find a way to live and deal peacefully with other people who see things differently, while keeping faith with our own perceptions. In short, we must come to terms with the fundamental inseparability of beliefs and values. At this point, the concept of absolute truth becomes unhelpful, and we must begin to speak of "core beliefs" and "personal truths," and then of some kind of personal epistemology – the theory of serviceable understanding by an embodied, social creature.

In turning its attention from the old epistemology of absolute Truth to that of personal understanding, philosophy may be said to come of age. No longer is it just immature science, or theology without gods, or mere analysis of language and argument. It becomes instead the discipline of rigorous, culture-neutral discussion of all those troublesome, value-laden questions that lie beyond the competence of science. It has the findings of religion, art, science and every other human endeavour to draw upon as needed, but must accept that these are at best conjectures or personal commitments of individual and social groups, and not metaphysical Truths. Its task is to develop and explore the argument around such questions with the greatest possible integrity, but with no insistence that either its premises or its conclusions are beyond doubt.

There's the rub: To claim this new mantle, philosophy will have to renounce its pretensions to universal truth, and accept that it is dealing with controversial issues of competing values and interpretations. It must accept that the best it can offer are well thought-through suggestions, arguments, and structure of argument, rather than definitive answers. Acknowledging its own polyphonic character in this way, philosophy then becomes what, at its best, it has always been: the disciplined, mutually respectful discussion of radically competing understandings; and it can then claim to accumulate knowledge in the sense described above: a seasoned familiarity with the structure of serious argument.

As one aspect of such philosophy, personal epistemology would then be conceived as a discipline of cognitive criticism – the systematic critique of alternative commitments and commitment-systems. Its central concern would be with the *personal* task of developing satisfactory understandings on which to ground and manage a life – and, in this respect, would almost be the basis of a cognitive psychotherapy.

It can be seen at once that the notion of a personal epistemology depends on the ability to reason about values. If values were not the sorts of things that could be criticized and reasoned about, we would have no way applying critical judgment to our understanding. In this case, our actions might be judged on their effectiveness and on their success, but never on their wisdom. It would be impossible to argue that some brilliant technical accomplishment was a bad idea in the first place. Thus, the key to “personal epistemology” must be an educated distinction between values that are authentically one's own, values taken over from people whose esteem we want, and of these again from values that inhere in our games and relationships, or in games and relationships *per se*.

Ultimately, reasoning about values is possible because the basic uses of understanding are the same for everyone. So far as cognition is concerned, all sentient creatures have the same basic needs – to grasp the world in

perceptually manageable chunks; to frame what seems to be happening in terms of what has happened before; to sustain an identity coherent to one's self and to others; to inform immediate intentions and long-term plans. I may not agree with you – my cognitive commitments may be very different from, and hostile to your own – but I can, as we say, understand where you are coming from by reflecting on the imperatives *for you* of *your* situation as *you* must understand it. On such a basis, the President can do business with the Ayatollah, the evolutionist with the creationist, the banker with the communist, the sentient monkey with the sentient squid. They may not like each other, but they will have at least this much in common – that their respective understandings must serve for each the same basic uses. With this much to build on, they can at least begin to talk to one another. They will never wholly reconcile their understandings, their diverging cognitive commitments, but will at least find it possible to *collate* them in an old sense of this word: bring them together for critical examination under the lens of reasoned argument.

Polyphonic Truth

10.2

In a world of divergent understandings, public discourse is difficult. In the past, one way to make it easier has been to impose the expectation of a single understanding, called “The Truth,” on everyone. For various reasons, this approach no longer works very well.

What we have offered here is a suggestion that the idea of truth can be extended and made more serviceable in troublesome cases. Where a number of distinct viewpoints cling to competing interpretations, and there is no mutually acceptable procedure for deciding amongst them, we introduce a notion of “polyphonic” truth, defined as a structure of serious argument (i.e. argument of substantial integrity) among the contending positions. In domains riven by competing interpretations, it then becomes possible to identify the humanly knowable truth of some matter with the structure of argument itself.

This move may seem a little weird, seeming to abandon all the machinery of logic in one swoop. But, on a closer look, there is a double justification for thinking of the structure or “tensegrity” of argument as a kind of truth. First, the tensegrity is readily seen to collapse toward flat, Aristotelian truth when an argument is resolved in the classical sense, with the pull of its contending positions relaxing toward consensus. Second, on the analogy with binocular vision, the juxtaposition and comparison of distinctive viewpoints can be imagined as collating to a unitary, multi-dimensional understanding. The problem then is to show how we can work with “polyphonic” truths of this kind, and how they might avail in the situations where classical truth was wanted. Primarily, of course, we rely on “knowledge” – what we take as “true” – to guide our plans and actions. Just how would polyphonic truth be

used in this way?

In Chapter 4, we discussed the obvious difficulty with any form of cognitive pluralism: Thought can play freely around an issue, drawing on diverse concepts and models, and luxuriating in the possibilities they afford. By contrast, tangible choices have no such luxury. To the extent they represent real choices – alternative commitments of scarce resources – they cannot help but be single-valued if they are to be viable. Every decision we make has an “opportunity cost”, comprised of all the things we might have done with the resources expended in doing what we actually did. The time that I spent writing this book, or that you are spending reading it, was not spent tending to more immediate or material concerns. The money a government spends on its police forces and prisons is not available for urban renewal and schools. For any suggestion, anywhere in the universe, the structure of values and possibilities before it, various and beautiful as it may be, must collapse eventually to a single plan – in the long run, to a single life history – and not to any other.

This very serious objection to pluralism forced us to insist on certain distinctions not usually drawn in decision theory – first of all, on the distinction between *epistemic* conversation about perceptions and values, as against *pragmatic* conversation about plans. The crucial point is a simple one: Agreeing on a plan will require mutual recognition of the other players’ “realities” (i.e. their perceptions and values), but does not require agreement on these. The practical issues are matters for negotiation. The cognitive dispute is a matter for dialogue. Confusion of these two modes leads to the use of ideas as ideological weapons, to intellectual chaos and to needless strife. Much conflict may be avoided simply by agreeing to disagree where no agreement is needed. It is needed only when common lines of action and policy must be negotiated, and nowhere else.

The next step was to develop a concept of “knowledge value” as a basis for judging the reliability and adequacy of our polyphonic truths. We follow the argument around some matter, and feel it has given us a pretty good understanding of the situation. Or, we follow the argument and feel that it gives no real insight into the matter, and perhaps leaves us more confused than ever. What makes the difference? We introduced the word *integrity* as a blanket term for those properties of argument, or of conversation in general, that give knowledge value to the resulting structure, and concluded that there are clear and obvious reasons for trusting one conversation and distrusting another. Though not everyone will make the same judgment about which conversation to trust, it is by no means an arbitrary or capricious judgment. We have discernable and justifiable grounds for making it as we do.

In Chapter 8 we discussed the problem of argument and, in particular, the basis for our conception of *reasoned* argument in a polyphonic domain.

How are we to offer “reasoned” arguments for commitments which turn on preferences of interpretation, where logical “proof” is out of the question? It was shown that reasoned argument under these circumstances must be significantly collaborative as well as competitive, however strongly the interlocutors are committed to their respective positions. Precisely because nothing can be “proven”, the knowledge value of the argument process comes to reside in its whole structure of viewpoint and concern and criticism. It was suggested that the technique of argument may be conceived as a raising of embarrassments until it becomes unbearably stressful to defend the position without deliberate and obvious mendacity. It was shown that the concept of reasoned argument depends on a dual commitment – to the integrity of the conversation as well as to one’s own position, and that the pre-requisite for reason is culturally esteemed sensitivity to intellectual embarrassment. The paradigmatic example of reason in argument is not a trial-at-law, but a quarrel with your spouse.

Finally, we explored the concept of public knowledge, which must now be conceived as an accumulation of structures of argument. A sharp distinction was drawn between *ken* (or personal understanding) which is inherently an individual matter, and *knowledge* which belongs to some conversation as a whole. A further distinction was then drawn between the “local knowledge” of some given culture, and the public knowledge of a great many knowledge cultures that compete and overlap.

The usefulness of a public knowledge system constructed along these lines must be determined by experience, in the attempt to build and operate with its polyphonic truths. It seems, however, that our choice is between this sort of public knowledge, and none at all, since no amount of “objective” data and reasoning can overcome our common propensity and prerogative to construct personal understandings to further private values and purposes. A story that prevails by merely by stifling its opposition cannot qualify as *knowledge*, nor is it genuinely *public*.

This being said, sane people also recognize that the need for viable epistemological distinctions between sense and nonsense remains much as it has always been – far greater, actually – in a world as complicated and dangerous as this one has become.

Conclusions

10.3

... there is comfort of a kind in recognizing that if we arrive at some truths in these matters, they would be truths for any order of cognitive being in any world whatever, and not just parochial features of human beings on Earth. We may or may not be the only such creatures, that being for science to say. All philosophy can offer is that if there are beings of this order other than us, they are our philosophical kin, for

the structure of understanding must be the same in any universe – and the limits of understanding will fall indifferently on Alpha Centaurians, if they exist, and us.

Arthur Danto, *Connections to the World* p.41

There are traps at both extremes: classical rationalism on one hand, uncritical relativism on the other. The dogmatic rationalist is unhappy with diversity and wants everyone to understand things in a single fashion – his own. The thorough-going relativist carries tolerance and suspension of value judgment to a point of intellectual and moral paralysis. The former dooms himself to endless, futile struggle against the currents of diversity. The latter has no ground for reasoned objection to head hunting or human sacrifice or clitorectomy or anything at all. Any item in someone's cultural repertoire is entitled to respect as such.

Perhaps no one today would defend either dogmatic rationalism or unqualified relativism as philosophical positions. Still, there are real dilemmas here: When does tolerance become apathy? When do moral energy and intellect turn into bullying? Candide, it seems to me, offers good advice here: *We must cultivate personal gardens of understanding, invite those who wish to share them – and leave others to do the same.*

Gardens of understanding have one great advantage over real plots of land: They can be enriched indefinitely without encroaching on your neighbour. We can offer cuttings from our choicest blooms; we can make suggestions; we can even criticize, and argue for our preferences. But we will be wise to keep our remarks within certain bounds of respect and politeness; and we must not allow ourselves to forget that it is finally, as a matter of fact, the other guy's garden, however egregious his taste and judgment may seem to us.

In this spirit one might write a book on cognitive philosophy that suggests a certain understanding of these matters and presumes to give advice about the tending of personal gardens. Anyone who does not like the suggestions is free to ignore them, or to write another book:

- 1) Regarding personal epistemology – the management of an individuated garden of understanding – we need to have personal commitments, and need to have the courage of these, without trying to pass them off as absolute truths. We must feel free to live by and argue reasonably for our hard-won understandings without encroaching on the freedom of others to do the same.
- 2) A second suggestion, corollary to the first, is that your own understanding is simply *one* possible understanding – no less, but also no more. It may even be a misunderstanding – a cognitive strategy you will eventually regret and wish to revise. A cognitive opponent may be as well meaning and reasonable as yourself, and perhaps as justified in

his commitments, however irritating or inconvenient. Our desire for sureness, and consequent readiness to demonize those who disagree with us, makes conflict more bitter and more intractable than it needs to be.

- 3) Just because you are entitled to your own opinion does not mean you need to have one. It is surprising how many otherwise intelligent people feel obliged to have an opinion on every “hot” topic. But, as we are now in a position to see, it is every bit as intellectually respectable to suspend judgment, in an attempt to get your head around the argument as a whole. Often much more so.

In general, with respect to any issue, at least four stances seem reasonable: The first of these is simple *indifference*. You may not care enough about the matter to form an opinion on it – let alone do the work of digesting the argument as a whole. Nor should there be any social stigma in confessing frankly that you have no interest (in either sense of the word), and are willing to leave the matter to others to settle or quarrel over as they will. From a second reasonable stance, that of the *concerned bystander* you may have no direct interest in the outcome of an argument, but a rather strong interest in the way it is conducted. Third, for your own good reasons, you may hold a personal commitment to one side or the other, while stopping short of insisting that your side has the *truth*. Fourth, you may prefer to avoid forming any commitment on the issue; you may prefer to keep “an open mind.” It is this last stance that we’ve been discussing: If what you want is genuinely public knowledge on a controversial matter, this fourth, *comprehensive* stance is preferable to any commitment, and even to the most consensual position.

- 4) But there is no merit in keeping an open mind past the point where commitment becomes necessary, nor in feigning a detachment we do not feel. When we get hungry, we have to eat, and to do so, we must eat *something*. We are committed once we have ordered the meal, but would go hungry otherwise.

Our choice of food can be reconsidered before each meal or shopping expedition, but many of our choices are irrevocable, or very expensive to alter; and, once made, they tend to last a lifetime. Some commitments we are born with, or acquire in earliest childhood, and are almost beyond our conscious recognition, let alone modification. In cognitive matters as in others, freedom is precious precisely because it exists to be invested. We need commitments, including cognitive ones, to stay alive; and some are much healthier than others. It makes perfect sense to strive for the healthiest understanding within our mental

reach, even when we have ceased to believe that there is such a thing as absolute truth. Wait for ripeness; endure uncertainty in patience; choose and shape your commitments with all caution. Live them boldly once they are made.

- 5) In the interests of peace, civility and reason, where practical dealings are concerned, keep the pragmatic conversation firmly separate from the epistemic one. The goal of epistemic argument is a “meeting of minds.” It is a patient labour toward mutual intelligibility, and the collation of competing viewpoints into a publicly recognized structure of concern and argument. The ideal outcome of pragmatic conversation is a “win-win” resolution that leaves each player better off than he could hope to be with no agreement reached. One suggestion from our study, confirmed by all human political and legal experience, is that the negotiation of concrete issues does not require consensus on values and paradigms. Another is that getting your way is usually less desirable in the long run, than working out a “sweet” arrangement that satisfies your vital concerns, but those of the other parties also – that all parties have an interest in preserving, that no one has much incentive to change.
- 6) To specific ethical problems (Save the Rembrandt or the cat? Starve with the children or dine on grandma? Restrict the economic liberty of some to alleviate the misery of others?) I do not see how there could be any universal, “objectively” valid answer, once it is accepted that people are entitled to their own values and understandings. Nor can I imagine any ethical consensus today that has turned its back on the principle of freedom of belief and conscience. It would require a global state with limitless force at its disposal to establish a standard moral code today. If successful, the resulting consensus would have nothing to do with reason.

In fact, I can see only two ethical maxims whose universality remains defensible in the post-modern world. The first of these is: **Do what seems best, all things considered . . .** The second is: **Don’t foul your own nest: Don’t wreck the conversations you depend on.**

These principles leave a lot to private discretion, but they avoid complete ethical subjectivism. The first not only allows, but also requires the moral agent to exercise his best judgment. It implies that he can be held to account – asked to explain why what he did was his best judgment at the time. The second principle requires the moral agent to refrain from damaging his own habitat – social as well as physical – according to his own best understanding of what constitutes “damage.” Further ethical strictures can be added according to cultural

or personal taste, but these seem to be consequences of the logic of conversation itself – requirements for intelligible thought and relationship. They seem to be the only possible basis for moral argument across cultural boundaries, absent more specific, common understandings.¹

- 7) Our last conclusion is that any person in a position of authority – as parent, teacher, manager, professional expert, or political leader – is a custodian of the integrity of his constituency’s conversation, unless he both wishes and has the strength to prevail through naked power. Leadership is not just a matter of controlling political “spin,” “spreading the discontent,” and maintaining a governing coalition by keeping the swing vote on your side. Protecting the integrity of public discourse has become a survival task of civilized government, because without substantial integrity, the *res publica* – or “public concerns” – will become increasingly splintered, chaotic and violent, until there is no community left, larger or more sophisticated than an armed band. The habit of government by propaganda and outright deception is proving a leisurely form of suicide for nations and their establishments. Its result, now clearly observable, is a vicious circle of collapsing “credibility” for the government, and the political community itself.

Closing

“What is Truth?” asked Pontius Pilate, an experienced civil servant. The conclusion of our story is that on matters subject to competing interpretations, there can be no singular truth. Lacking “the truth,” we must make do with understanding – usually with many competing understandings. Understanding of some matter is a function of what I make of it, and of what we all make of it – of personal commitments and arguments together. That is the long and short of it: All human understanding has been won by minds confronting but also collaborating with each other in conversation – more specifically in that form of conversation called *reasoned argument*; and it’s a good bet that the quality of anyone’s understanding will depend rather directly on the integrity of that argument as a whole, and on the integrity of their participation in it. Reason both can and must be a critic and gatekeeper of the passions, as well as their good servant – honest, loyal and competent. Its task is not just to help me get

¹ These two strictures might be seen as a weakened form of Kant’s famous “Categorical Imperative”: his requirement to act on principle that we would wish to see accepted as the universal rule. The requirement suggested here is that we attempt to act in such a way as to be able to explain, truthfully and without embarrassment, why we thought we were acting in our own best and largest interests.

what I want, but to help me decide what I want; and sometimes to help me decide what I *should* want, given the connection of other selves to my own. Nothing we care about is best understood by ignoring the singular, embodied character of viewpoints, nor by ignoring all viewpoints except our own.