

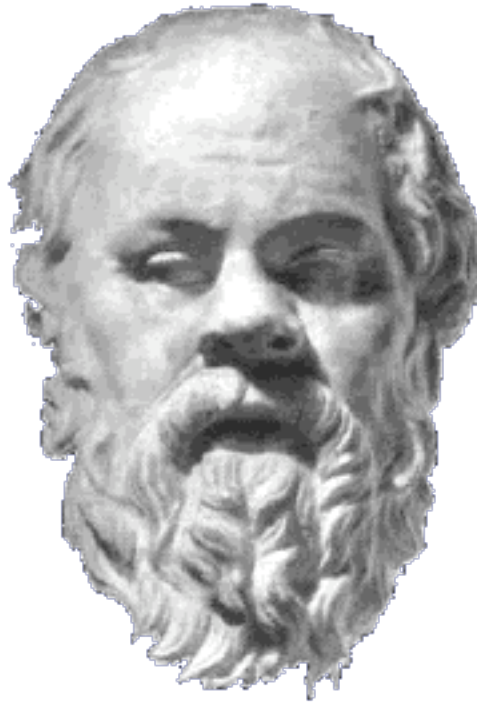
THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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". . . and if I say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living—that you are still less likely to believe. And yet what I say is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you."

—Plato's Socrates



DEAR SOCRATES

Dear Socrates,

Can you please tell me if you have had any influence on post-Socratic philosophers, and, if so, how did you influence them and their thought?

Thank you, Melissa from Cincinnati

Dear Melissa,

Since I myself am now a post-Socratic philosopher, I would have to say that I have had a very great influence on at least one. But seriously, I am pleased to see that many philosophers have accepted the idea of dialogue as their method of doing business. I am much less concerned about whether they accept any of my doctrines ... if I even had any. Plato seems to have been in the habit of attributing many of his to me. Mainly I would question other people's doctrines, or their very doctrinairism.

Did the notion of dialogue come from me? I may have given the practice a certain twist and emphasis that have made the difference. I believe that dialogue is the royal road to knowledge, but this is only because it engenders a hearty and healthy awareness of one's own (and others') ignorance at every step of the way. Perhaps 'wisdom' is the better word for the attainment, therefore; however, I would also like to think that there is such a thing as knowledge, so long as it makes no pretensions to certainty.

What exactly is dialogue? How does one go about it? My practice is just to go to the *agora*, or nowadays more likely into a room, and start talking with whoever happens to be there. It does not matter what the subject is. It does not matter at all how brilliant, or stupid, the opening remark may be or sound (mine or the other person's), or how clear or fuzzy our respective views on the matter at hand. All of that will get sorted out and ironed out as the discussion proceeds. Refinement of thought and argument is itself one of the products of dialogue, for both parties. This may in the end count for more than any agreement or conclusion they may happen to reach. (Notice also, then, that I am not talking about *debate*, which is not a discussion but a contest; debate is really triadic since it implicitly involves appealing to a third party, the audience or judge.)

What happens next, I find, is a long period of communicating. It is not only that my interlocutor and I are exchanging information; we must first become oriented to each other. More: It is two different *worlds* mutually adjusting to each other. More: It is the discovery of a *new* world (the one that is inhabited by one's interlocutor). Despite any outward appearances to the contrary—for example, same race, nationality, religion, language—that other person is as different from you as if he or she *were* of a different race, nationality, or religion, or were speaking a different language or, indeed, came from a different planet.

I cannot stress this point too much. Any two people are talking to each other across a huge gulf. It is so wide that they often do not

even hear each other. *Do you hear me?* So in dialogue we are at first just checking in with each other. We have to find out how much we actually do understand of what the other person is saying. Unfortunately most people miss this. How often I have been considered uncouth when I am simply trying to understand, or make sure that I understand, what the other person is telling me. I may also appear to be stupid, when in fact I am painfully aware of ambiguities in what anybody ever says to me. But if the other person is unaware of those ambiguities, he will simply think me impertinent for questioning his meaning.

The complementary problem is that often my interlocutor will not question *me* to make sure she understands what I am saying. I am just as aware of ambiguities in my own speech as in other people's. Therefore I try to refine my speech, and keep querying the other person to see if she follows what I am saying. I wish, however, the other person would perform that task for herself by questioning me for clarification, as I question her. But she cannot do that if she is unaware of her own ignorance (that is, of the ambiguity in *my* speech). So here again, the other person usually assumes right off that she knows what I am saying and hence not only refrains from seeking clarification but also views my efforts to articulate as tedious if not insulting to her intelligence.

For those who understand the process, the give-and-take of dialogue can be sublime ... at the very least, enjoyable and enlightening. Who better than someone who does not share your most basic assumptions to be able to point them out to you? One may be virtually blind to one's own assumptions, not to mention their possible shortcomings. In science, for example, breakthroughs in a given field are commonly brought about by somebody who is new to that field. But since most people do not understand the dialogic process, there are perils for the one who would engage in it that arise from the defensiveness of others.

The beauty of dialogue as a learning mechanism is, simply put, that two heads are better than one. (Note, by the way, that I do not say that dialogue is a *teaching* mechanism, since in this process both participants are learners, who are helping each other to learn by participating in the process. This is why I have always denied that I am a teacher.) The 'two heads' enhance learning twofold. For not only does each person have the direct advantage of hearing new ideas from the other person, and also of receiving critiques of one's own ideas from a different perspective and basis of experience, but one is also stimulated thereby to generate new ideas of one's own. These are distinct sources of novelty that augment and improve one's thinking.

Yours as ever,

Socrates

Dear Socrates,

I have a query about objectivism versus relativism. I'm studying philosophy, and my lecturer says that I cannot take a relativistic standpoint in my arguments because relativism is a lazy philosophical paradigm to use. By this it is meant that if everything was relative, there would be no need for moral debate, etc. But surely objectivism is an imperialistic paradigm to superimpose upon a situation, because its foundations are Judeo-Christian. And isn't ethics evolutionary? If so, how could there justifiably be objective moral grounds? Our very sense of morality is in flux.

P. Difford

Dear P,

Your lecturer has encountered lazy relativists, I have no doubt, for they are a common breed among students, many of whom would rather let everybody believe what they like than have to think about who is right. And yet, put to the test, none of them is a relativist: If the teacher were to give them an 'F,' they would protest at the injustice.

But objectivists—to use your term—can also be lazy if they merely assume that they themselves are right. You are not lazy because you have given arguments for your position, so I will stir myself to reply to them.

This is a tricky business, to be sure. Relativism is a doctrine that can apply across the board, not just in ethics. Thus, somebody could believe that truth itself is relative, meaning, in effect, that people holding contradictory beliefs could both be right. In other words, to *believe* that something is true is the same as for it to *be* true; hence, there is no such thing as a false belief. But this immediately escalates to the absurd, for then would not both the relativist and the objectivist be right? They hold opposite views; but if relativism is true, then both of those views would be correct so long as they are maintained or believed.

But that is not the end of it: It seems that relativism must also be *false*. For relativism is equivalent to the assertion that objectivism is false. But, according to relativism, objectivism is just as true as relativism since the objectivist believes it. Therefore, if relativism is true, then relativism is false. That, my friend, is a paradox; it is usually taken as a sign that the hypothesis is false.

An alternative route to the same conclusion is to point out that for relativists even to maintain their own position amounts to a contradiction, since they are asserting it to be true. But this means they are denying its opposite. Hence they implicitly subscribe to a notion of truth that is contrary to their thesis—truth as an absolute, truth in the sense of something that can withstand beliefs to the contrary.

But perhaps all that I have said amounts to an *ignoratio elenchi*, since you do not claim to be opposed to truth itself in a non-relativist sense, but only to objective *moral* truth. So what you are suggesting is that it is ('objectively') true that morality does not consist of ('objectively') true propositions. Such an hypothesis is not objectionable in form; it is as unexceptionable as asserting that Zeus and Hera do not exist (but other things do). Morality, then, according to you is a kind of mythology, or else a kind of custom.

You present two arguments. One is that morality evolves. So maybe it was OK, even obligatory to sacrifice the first newborn a few thousand years ago, but it isn't OK anymore. But I reply: Was it really ever OK to do that? Something can be a prevailing practice—even today—and yet be wrong, yes? Or do you believe that there is nothing whatsoever for the lone individual to stand up for in the face of the tide? I submit that what you call 'evolution,' we might better label 'reform.' Alternatively, we could say that what is evolving is not morality, but our understanding of it.

Since a thoroughgoing relativism regarding truth has been rejected, can we not simply analogize the moral situation to that of non-moral truth? In science one can observe an 'evolution,' if you will. But it is not that the Earth went from being flat to being round, but only that our beliefs altered—is it not so?—and, presumably, in the direction of truth. (Although note: I am not insisting on any historical inevitability in the direction of greater knowledge, either in science or morality. Sometimes we regress. Nevertheless, the truth remains what it is.)

Your other argument I find more intriguing: the idea that our religious heritage has something to do with our sense of the objectivity of morality. (I ignore your reference to 'Judeo-Christian,' since I

encountered exactly the same sort of ‘imperialism’ with Euthyphro, a priest of the ancient Greek gods.) In a world of multiple and contradictory beliefs about morality, a God who lays down the Law can seem to settle the matter. But, of course, that settles nothing, since beliefs about God vary as much as beliefs about morality. With this you would agree, perhaps. But I consider a belief in God to be a manifestation of a belief in moral truth. You and I differ, I think, as to which is the cart and which the horse.

Simply put, then, I see the task before us as trying to determine what is true: about God, about the universe, about how to live. My preferred method is dialectic. Thank you for indulging this penchant of mine.

Yours as ever,

Socrates

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