

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

We are in the process of scanning Dr. Adler's first book, *Dialectic*, in order to make a digital copy available to you. He wrote this book in 1927 when he was 25 years old, and it is so rare that if you do find a copy on the Internet, it will cost anywhere from \$100 to \$200. Following is an excerpt to whet your appetite.



SPECIMENS OF HUMAN DISCOURSE

Dialectic might have been discovered otherwise than through the criticism of traditional theory and the consideration of history. It might have been observed where it actually occurs in the conversational practices of human beings, their arguments and controversies, or in those dialogues which the rewind holds with itself in the solution of its intellectual difficulties. It might have been discovered, in other words, in the proper sphere of its being—in discourse.

To behold dialectic as it is actually occasioned and in the diverse manners of its occurrence should precede the attempt to describe it analytically. Discourse may be made an object of study, and analysis can then reduce the variety of its manifestations to abstract order. This abstract order must not seem imposed upon the dialectical process; it should rather appear to be, as it is, derived from all the various ways in which dialectic can take place; and to guarantee this perception, observation should precede analysis. It might also be asserted that the dialectical process never actually occurs in the formalized pattern which subsequent analysis reveals; with respect to that formal structure, the dialectical instances of conversation, argument, and intellectual deliberation are either incomplete, in an alogical order, or imperfect, through some one or another possible deviation from the archetypical procedure. This very imperfection recommends such cases as illustrative subject-matter, for were human discourse to embody dialectic in its abstract and formal perfection, the analysis of it might be a thing of beauty, but certainly of little use.

The following instances have been chosen because they are fairly commonplace and humanly familiar; if they develop profundity, that itself is a commonplace circumstance for it is the nature of profundity to be ubiquitous in discourse. Most human conversations usually dwindle or stop at the point where profound and abstruse considerations seem inescapable if the conversation is to be prolonged; and this should be well observed, for it is this inevitable leading of discourse into dialectic, and of dialectic into philosophy, which may be said to constitute the deepest significance of both discourse and dialectics and which may occasion a reinterpretation of the meaning of philosophy. That, however, is the theme of the third part of this book. For the present, the examination of specimens of discourse is to be undertaken simply with a view to exhibiting in the manner of a botanist or an entomologist, the variety of species which, however, seem to possess a certain homogeneity of form. The only comment to be made upon these specimens at present is merely to guide in the observation of them, but not to analyse them. They are presented in an order roughly designed to progress from extremely simple cases to more involved and complex ones. They do not all assume the dramatic form of the dialogue; some are conversations of the sort that occupy moments of soliloquy.

(I)

The story is told of Mr. Lincoln that in one of his earlier campaigns for the legislature, he turned to his opponent and said, "Sir So-and-

So, suppose I called the tail of a mule a leg, how many legs would the mule then have ?”

Mr. So-and-So replied, after a moment’s thought, “The mule would then have five legs, Sir.”

“No,” said Mr. Lincoln, “the mule would have only four legs. Calling the tail a leg doesn’t make it one.”

The conversation went no further. Both Mr. Lincoln and his audience were satisfied with the sharp, concluding sally, which seemed to distinguish Mr. Lincoln for excellent horse-sense, and his opponent for being made an ass without being called one.

But the conclusion is not entirely satisfactory when considered apart from the particular political occasion in which it was useful. Objection might be raised to Mr. Lincoln’s easy solution of his own question. If the tail is called a leg, there is an answer to the riddle which is neither five nor four. It might be offered that the mule in question would then have only one leg, for if the specific appendage which hangs from the coxycygeal limit of the vertebral column is designated as a “leg”, that symbol retaining its customary and conventional meaning, then it seems questionable, at least, whether the four appendages which serve as supports for the mule’s body can properly be designated by the same name. The difficulty arises largely because the name “leg” and the name “tail” can be defined both to connote certain structural aspects of the mule’s body, and certain functions which they serve in the mule’s life; and also to denote, or point to, this or that about the mule. “Calling the tail a leg,” which Mr. Lincoln took to be a less subtle matter than it really was, creates the conflict in discourse above suggested, and allows for three possible assertions: that the mule has only one leg; that it has merely four legs; that it then has five legs.

These three assertions, in answer to the query, “How many legs has the mule in question?” illustrate a number of things which happen frequently in discourse. Incidentally, three types of mind are more or less exemplified in Mr. Lincoln’s commonsense refusal to make distinctions in discourse which do not seem to be matters of fact, in Mr. So-and-So’s identification of distinctions in discourse with matters of fact, and in the third party’s dialectical conception of the problem as one merely of making distinctions in discourse. Mr. Lincoln and his opponent were both concerned with a question which might be phrased, How many legs has a mule if you call the tail a leg? They verged on an experience of dialectic

which they did not enjoy because they did not properly understand the only question over which issue could be taken, to be: What does it mean to call the tail of a mule a leg? What at first seemed to be a matter of fact thus becomes a matter of discourse, and dialectic occurs as soon as any one of the three answers is given to the second of these two questions.

It is not here asserted that the correct answer to that question is either one, four, or five. To make that assertion would be equivalent to asserting the answer as a matter of fact, and further discourse would be gratuitous. That the question offers the possibility of three answers, no one of which need be asserted as a matter of fact, indicates the dialectical character of the question, and emphasizes the fundamental aspect of discourse which renders it dialectical, the possibility of opposition and controversy.

That aspect of the dialectical process which is concerned with the problem of definition is nicely illustrated by this story. The force of definition, its range, the relation between its denotative and connotative dimensions, could be studied in terms of this simple issue in discourse which came from calling a tail a leg. And in part the attitude taken toward each of the three answers and one's understanding of their significance would be determined finally by the theory of definition applied. If the tail is to be called a leg, and the legs are still to be called legs, the meanings of both "tail" and "leg" are thereby altered; or perhaps, if the tail is to be called a leg, and legs are to be called otherwise, then "tail" is given the meaning of is "leg" at least to the extent whereby tails and legs remain distinguishable and accurately numerable, if legs are called by some other name. There is no question about whether tails would ever be mistaken for legs in fact it is simply a question of how many tails or legs a mule has, "if the tail be called a leg."

Each of the three answers to the question is true in terms of specific interpretative context, determined by the definitive act; and it is true only in the context of one or another given system of defined terms. That the mule has five legs is a proposition which can be neither significant nor true nor false taken as an isolated proposition, an entity abstracted from its setting in discourse. This applies equally to the other two possible assertions. But if the proposition is understood in the light of certain definitions which could be offered it might be made both intelligible and true. Its truth would be the truth of following properly from an arbitrary origin in discourse. By itself it would neither be true nor false, nor is its truth to be judged in terms of the facts. The facts, it is assumed, if they are facts, remain unaltered, yet each of the proposi-

tions can be so interpreted systematically that they can be asserted-significantly and truly. The mule may walk on its four legs and wag its lonely tail for ever, and never be able to determine the answer to the dialectical question asked about it. It has done excellent service, however, in illustrating clearly one of the chief functions of dialectic in the treatment of assertions, not as capable of being true in themselves in isolated status, nor capable of being true in relation to the facts, but only in terms of a systematic context of interpretation, a set of other propositions, some of which are definitive.

To carry this little discourse concerning the properties of the mule any further in an effort to resolve some of the difficulties which have been generated, would lead the discussion into the making of abstruse and subtle distinctions and definitions about identity, likeness and difference, substance and attributes, structure and function. It might be possible in such terms to come to an understanding of the three assertions which would resolve their ambiguities, adjust their conflicting claims, and perhaps make possible their mutual translation. But human conversations usually stop far short of such ultimate intellectual pursuits, partly because the introduction of the abstruse and the subtle frequently evokes epithets of derogation or of protest such as “sophistry” or “hair-splitting” or “scholasticism”, or even sometimes “dialectic”. Such a judgment would not be unfair, for it would certainly be dialectic; but just as certainly was it implicitly dialectical in origin as it would be in this eventual termination.

(2)

Very often after witnessing the performance of a play a person confesses his enjoyment and adds by way of praise that the characters were very real.

His companion has not found pleasure in the presentation and particularly finds no warrant for the assertion that the characters were very real. Rather the opposite. It was a poor piece for the very reason that the *dramatis persona* seemed so absurdly fictitious and impossible. The competent performance had been wasted on an unconvincing concoction.

A third member of the party found the play delightful but precisely because the characterizations were so fanciful, so odd and unlikely. A work of great imagination.

An argument ensues if they ire in a favourable physical environ-

ment for discussion, over cups or glasses, and have the time to squander in an idle fashion. The controversy probably revolves around the asserted and questioned “reality” of the characters, or more-generally, perhaps, the “realism” of the entire play. The argument cannot be about whether the play was enjoyable or not; it surely was so in two cases, and not in the third, and although such facts were undoubtedly responsible for the occurrence of the controversy, arid for the differences of opinion the discourse which eventuates therefrom must ignore them. Enjoyment was experienced by two persons, but for different reasons; whereas two persons in essential agreement concerning the point at issue, do not at all agree in the emotional colouring of their common perception. This is obvious in the way in which they diversely phrased their judgments, having more or less similar intent.

The argument which takes place never determines, of course, whether the reasons given for finding the play satisfactory or unsatisfactory were actually the causal determinants for the decision about and reaction to the play, or whether they were merely those reasons, given after the aesthetic response and judgment, which are technically called rationalizations. The argument is not concerned with this problem, although at another time it might be; it is concerned for the present with the question of the realism of the play. The possibility of non-rational, emotional determinants in this discussion must not be forgotten, even though they can never enter into and be stated in the discourse. They constitute the imponderables of any argument, its non discursive and irrational factors.

The characters were real, says the one; they were recognizable. I know their duplicates in life.

Not so, says the second. They are much overdrawn and exaggerated. They are psychologically impossible. You must be misled concerning your acquaintances if these are their prototypes.

They seem very much unlike my friends, says the third. But they are certainly not unreal in the sense of being psychologically impossible. That is precisely what is delightful about them. They are psychological possibilities, quite fantastic, perhaps, but quite consistent in their own natures.

I am certain that I know those people well, replies the first. They are terribly real to me—but hardly having consistent natures. They don’t know what they are about—they are neurotics, all of them, and so are my friends.

I suppose, says the second, that there is no use arguing with you about whether you know them or not. If you do, they probably seem real to you. Thank God, my friends are not like that. They seem outlandish and impossible to me. Perhaps being neurotic means being unreal to me.

Quite possible, you incorrigible extrovert, adds the third. And now I know why you didn't enjoy the play. You didn't understand it. Perhaps you are right (to the first), they are neurotics. But they are not types at all. Every neurotic is as much an individual as every extrovert. They are not real because they resemble somebody you know. They are individuals, and have individual characters. They are not abstract patterns to be compared with originals off the stage. As individuals they are very well done, well created.

But, interrupts the first, you've changed your position. According to what you are now saying, no characters can be real, if it is unfair to judge them as types or because they resemble somebody you actually know. Every character would be unreal in that case, if the character has what you call individuality. I agree with you (to the second). These characters are not real for you because you don't know my friends; if you did, you probably would agree with me, wouldn't you?

Yes, says the second, I should call them real in that case. The only real person in the play for me was that simple-minded chauffeur. Quite possible, and quite real.

But as for you, the first again turns to the third, what in the world can the word real mean to you?

I guess I have changed my position, admits the third. But now I can state what I really think about all this clearly. I object to calling characters in a play either real or unreal. They are creations, just as you and I are creations, and as such they are either good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, attractive or unattractive, in terms of whatever standards you are pleased to judge them. But to call them real in the sense of resembling a creation of another sort is a meaningless way of talking. Are they real if they resemble one another? Are you and I real because we may happen to resemble one another. No, that would mean nothing. Well, then, it is nonsense to judge characters in a play real because they are prototypes, or because you recognize something else in them.

But don't you make any distinction between a real person and a fictitious person, asks the second. You and I are real. We are alive

and exist. And when you call a character real you mean that because it resembles someone who is alive and exists he could be real even though he isn't. You don't ever mean that the character is really-real. You simply mean that the character could be real. It's a possible character. That's why I agree with you (to the first); but I don't see what you do about the distinction between real and fictitious, between possible and impossible.

I guess, thinks the third, that you two agree sufficiently about what you mean; but I'm afraid that I disagree thoroughly with both of you. As I think more about all this, it seems to me that fictions live and exist, only they live and exist in a different way from the way you and I do. They lead the lives of characters in a play or in a book; they exist as fictions. You and I exist as human beings who were born of woman rather than of a man's brain. But we are all real in our own way, though it is clear that the way is very different. I should agree with you that whatever is possible is real, and what is impossible is unreal, but what is impossible? I couldn't possibly be you, any more perhaps than these characters could possibly exist as you and I do. But they are possible as characters, and exist as such, and are real as such.

If they contradicted themselves in their own natures, then they would be impossible and unreal. But they don't do that. That's why they are real and possible for me; but very different from anything I know. That's why I enjoyed the play. It exercised my imagination.

Oh, we agree essentially, says the first, all of us.

Yes, says the second, it's just a matter of our experience being different. If it were the same we should agree perfectly, except about the use of words. He (the third) wants to use the word real in his special way, but as long as we understand the way he is using the word, it's all right.

Our experiences are certainly different, concludes the third. But more than that our own natures are quite different. I don't really think you (to the second) could ever enjoy a play like this; and I don't think it is just a matter of using words. I think there are good reasons for distinguishing between different kinds of existence, and of trying to understand the relation of possibility and reality. I don't think we agree as much as you think.

Well, never mind, replies the first. We agree enough. If we don't stop here we'll get into all sorts of hairsplitting distinctions and


philosophical riddles. Let's leave well enough alone. We've had enough enjoyment and enough agreement for one evening.

And the discussion ceases, or turns to other topics. The controversy may be ended, but it has certainly not been concluded, and it may or may not be possible that it ever could be.

It was a discussion about words, the meanings of such words as "real", "exist", "possible", "resemble", "consistent", "self-contradictory", "fiction". But it was an unclear discussion. It was unclear not only because emotional and egocentric factors were productive of differences of opinion; but more fundamentally because those opinions, however founded, were not submitted to the clarification which might have been given them by a more thoroughgoing dialectic. Dialectic was implicit throughout this discourse, but as it made itself more and more apparent toward the end, it was avoided deliberately. However polite and pleasant it might be considered as a social occasion; intellectually it was an instance of bad manners.

Had the discourse gone on further and been more explicitly dialectical, the parties to it might not have reached greater agreement than they did. What actual agreement they did reach is difficult to ascertain because of the indefiniteness with which they took and left their terms. But the possibility of their ever completely agreeing or understanding one another may be fundamentally conditioned by the limitations and privacy of their experience, the irrational elements in their several personalities, as well as perhaps by the profound difficulties in discussing some of the terms that would have eventually entered the discussion. The acknowledgment of such conditions does not justify, however, an evasion of dialectic, or further attempt to plumb the depths of discourse.

It is clear that facts played little part in this discussion. It either was a fact or was not that the characters in the play resembled the first person's friends. That was to be admitted; or if doubted, it could not be argued about. It was rather the implications of the resemblances which taken for granted, or admitted as fact, created discussion by raising the question. Could such resemblance between characters on and off stage be used as a criteria for judging the reality of the characters? In other words, could "reality" be taken to mean that sort of thing? All the other genuine issues in this short controversy were of the same nature. They could be stated in terms of such questions as, What does it mean to say that fictions can be real? What does it mean to say that a character exists? What does it mean to say that a character is possible? And in the consideration of these questions, distinctions were made between the really (or

existentially) real and the real by resemblance; between reality and existence; between fictions and actualities; between the possibility which a thing has in its own nature; and the possibility it has because of the natures of other things. In short, this was, in germ at least, a philosophical discussion, and might have provoked more sophisticated disputants to brilliant dialectic. 

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hello Max;

A new word needs to be created for what I feel as I read through Adler's words. It is a combination of fun, happiness, joy, release, salvation, importance, relief, renewal, plan, simpatico, resilience, path, road, destiny, belief, possibilities, rejuvenation, and so much more.

The tape is very helpful, too. I'm as giddy as a school girl who has found the dreamed of teacher.

But I need to work with Plato now. That requires much diligence.

But I enjoy, I enjoy.

Celeste Regal

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Mark Michals

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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