

# Conversations and controversies

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*'The thing is, when you say your answer, you think it's right and you think the others are wrong, so, in a way, philosophical questions do have right and wrong answers.'* Ten-year-old boy

## Thinking conversations

There are two ancient Greek words that help to understand an important part of a thinking enquiry or conversation: *eristic* and *dialectic*. Both were used to describe kinds of conversation. *Eris* is the Greek for 'strife – in fact it was the name for the goddess of strife and discord' and *dialectica* is the Greek for 'investigation by dialogue' or 'talking through' (see *The Cat That Barked* on page 112 for more on dialogue). The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates described conversations – not favourably – as *eristic* if they were *combative* or, in Michel de Montaigne's words, if – regarding those engaged in conversation –

'... they no longer know what they are looking for... [One] no longer sees his opponent's arguments, being too caught up in his own... another does not care how much he drops his... guard provided... he can hit you. [Another] exploits the superior power of his voice.'

From *On The Art of Conversation*, Michel de Montaigne (1580)

So, like many dinner-table discussions.

Socrates preferred the word *dialectic* because he saw this as *collaborative* or, again in Montaigne's words, when 'you are in quest of *what is*'. In other words, dialectic should be a 'collaborative truth-seeking enterprise'. Plato, the philosopher who gave us this account of Socrates, turned dialectic into something like a science (and it could be said that scientific method developed from Platonic dialectic). It is chiefly the combined approaches of Montaigne, Socrates and Plato that I have drawn upon to develop my approach to philosophical enquiries.

According to Plato's method dialectic is comprised of the following five components (this is adapted from M.M. McCabe's paper 'Is Dialectic As Dialectic Does?' In Reis 2006):

- *Logical* – the problem must demand resolution in virtue of being a controversy. For example, 'either x is true or x is not true.' (See below for more on this.)
- *Psychological* – those engaged in the discussion must recognise, for themselves, that there is a problem and that it demands resolution. This comes from a sense of puzzlement that the Greeks called *aporia* which means 'without a path'. For example, 'I see now, either x is true or x is not true, but it is not clear to me yet which side of the argument has the strongest reasons.'
- *Sequential* – the steps involved in a philosophical conversation should follow a special order determined logically by questions and replies to those questions.
- *Overview* – those involved in the conversation must seek to achieve an overall view of the discussion that will include where it started, where it has gone and where it is aiming. This is achieved by the members of the group 'stepping out' of the discussion and, at least in their mind's eye, seeing the discussion from the 'outside' including their own contributions and role in the discussion.
- *Virtue* – the group should work towards progress in the discussion and improvement at doing all of the above.

## Thinking controversies

Dialectic (or philosophical conversation) has been described as a collaborative, truth-seeking project. It is also the case that a good story for thinking often includes a controversy, something that is contestable (where those involved will disagree) and where it is far from clear how any resolution may be reached, or what 'the answer' is. I should be clear that I do not mean 'controversy' here as 'adversarial' in the *eristic* manner described above but that there is a problem that makes a logical demand for resolution through a collaborative conversation that begins in disagreement and divergence. If there are a number of thinkers around the controversy then there may well be as many different strategies for resolving the problem as there are thinkers. Seeing the controversy becomes the intrinsic motivation for thinking around and attempting to solve the problem.

# Questions

Here are five categories of question:

- 1 Questions that have right / wrong answers *in an objective sense* (e.g. What is the highest mountain?)
- 2 Questions that have yes / no answers *in a subjective sense* (e.g. Do you like the story?)
- 3 Questions that have *the logical possibility of answers in an objective sense* (e.g. Do human beings have a free will? Is there a god?)
- 4 Questions that have no right / wrong answers (e.g. How long is a piece of string? How do the slithy toves gyre and gimble in the wabe?) because they are *either conceptually incomplete* (the first question) or *meaningless* (the second).
- 5 Questions that make *logical category errors* but that, unlike type four, are conceptually complete and meaningful (e.g. Can you draw a round square? Is the colour red tired? i.e. *roundness* cannot, logically, apply to *squareness* and *tiredness* cannot, logically, apply to *colour*). These questions can be answered in that one can attempt to say why they fail logically.

To help understand what is meant by ‘the logical possibility of ’ imagine that the first of these questions, ‘What is the highest mountain?’, was asked a thousand years ago or so before the answer was known, at a time when it was not able to be answered. It would still have to be granted that the question at least had the *logical possibility* of being answered – in other words, it could well, one day, be answered. This we know because it has been.

Two and four are of very little interest from a thinking point of view because either the question is intellectually uninteresting because it is uncontroversial (see type two) or because it is meaningless (see type four). Three is often confusedly mistaken for four because these questions are *believed* to be unanswerable due to the fact that they are currently unanswered. Just open a philosophy encyclopaedia and look up ‘free will’ and you will see plenty of answers given by many well-known philosophers from Gottfried Leibniz (Ariew and Garber, 1989) to Harry Frankfurt (1971) on this problem. If they believed that their answers were nothing more than answers in the type two or four sense, then they would not have bothered to have offered them. To simply and starkly illustrate the logical status of philosophical questions and therefore philosophical conversations consider the following

'big question': Does God exist? Logically and grammatically speaking, this question demands resolution: either A) it is true that God exists or B) it is not true that God exists. A philosophical discussion of this question will focus around the logical and conceptual reasons there might be in support of A or B. This may, of course, include establishing why the dichotomy (A or B?) that is entailed by the grammar / logic of the question may need to be dissolved ('Could there be option C, D, and so on?').

### *Badly asked questions*

It should be noted that there is a particular way that type four and five questions – or badly asked questions in general – are of intellectual interest. That is, when a group is able to 'unpack' the characteristics of the question that render it problematic. For example, if a group of children recognise that you need to have a *frame of reference* (i.e. a particular piece of string) before the question 'How long is a piece of string?' can be properly tackled, or if they notice that you need to have meanings to the words 'gyre' and 'gimble' before you can begin to discuss how the slithy toves did so, then there has clearly been a good outcome to any enquiry that led to this. Type five questions are not as useful for discussion as, in my experience, young children are not so aware of metaphorical and literal distinctions and are consequently less likely to see the logical categorical errors as errors. The discussions usually end up very confused with younger ones.

It is worth noting that type five questions can be made sense of, if not logically, then metaphorically; for instance, Andrew Marvell's 'a green thought in a green shade', from the poem 'The Garden' (Bate 2005), but one needs to have a grasp of metaphor to be able to approach thoughts such as these. (See 'Making effective use of the moral' on page 64 for more on the shortcomings of a stimulus.)

Though there is value in asking, exploring and unpacking questions of this type (type four and sometimes type five) the important point is not to think that good philosophical questions such as *How do you know that you know? Is the mind the same as the brain? What is the nature of time?* (All type three questions) are of this type (i.e. type four or type five questions). Good philosophical questions are, in this sense, not unanswerable and it is not the case that any answer given to these questions is, as with type two questions, automatically *right*. Which leads me to...

## *The Marmite problem*

It is often said that philosophy (with children) is good because ‘there are no right and wrong answers’ or that ‘in philosophy everyone’s opinion is right’. I think one needs to be warned against this approach to using stories for thinking and philosophical discussions. If it is true that there are no right and wrong answers, then the discussions are in danger of being rendered pointless. Take a discussion about whether Marmite tastes good or not. Some will say ‘I think it tastes good,’ others will say, ‘I think it tastes disgusting.’ It is obviously true that if you believe that Marmite tastes good / disgusting [delete as appropriate] then you will think that the statement ‘I think Marmite is good / disgusting’ [delete as appropriate] will be true. And it really doesn’t matter that we disagree about it. There is no tension or contradiction if one person thinks that Marmite is nice and someone else in the group thinks that it’s disgusting. In short: as far as a class of children is concerned, there is simply no controversy here. An ‘I agree’ / ‘I disagree’ discussion around this is simply a sharing exercise.

Sharing exercises can be good, of course, for all sorts of other reasons, such as psychological and social, but for something to have value from a *thinking* point of view, I would argue that the story or object of consideration must contain a genuine controversy; something that demands resolution. However, one must be careful here too. Even if it is true that a story should contain a problem that demands resolution it doesn’t mean that you or the children will be able to do so. The philosophical problem of free will (i.e. whether or not we have one given the predictable, mechanistic nature of the universe) is a problem that, logically, demands resolution but is notorious for being irresolvable.

This is where I believe the confusion arises. Because many philosophical problems are such that they have often failed to be resolved, many people then – mistakenly – think that they have no *possibility* of being resolved. Even though a philosophical problem may not have been resolved for thousands of years every philosopher who engages in a discussion to try to resolve it, be they big or small, young or old, should entertain the idea that ‘today they will resolve it!’, even if, as is likely to be the case, they are unable to do so.

## Identifying controversies – ‘but’-ing the issue

A useful rule of thumb for identifying whether a question or issue is controversial is whether it can be ‘but’ed, if you will. To make clearer what I mean by this I’ll give some contrasting examples. The picture book story *The Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister (1992) tells of a fish that gives all his pretty scales away in order to make friends. Presumably the story is attempting to teach that happiness comes from having friends and it is better to share than not to. Take a question like ‘What do you think the story is about?’ This is an example of a ‘Marmite question’ because what you think the story is about is, to some extent, up to you. If one person says ‘I think it’s about friendship’ and another says ‘It’s about sharing’, they can, of course, both be right about this. In other words these ideas are ‘and’ ideas: it is about friendship *and* it is about sharing, and presumably, it is about a relationship between the two: that friendship has something important to do with sharing.

A question like ‘What do you think the story is about?’ may be an important step in how you approach a discussion around the story, especially if you want to include a comprehension aspect to their thinking about the story. You may encourage debate around the issue, so, if someone says ‘I think the story is about X,’ you may follow this up by asking the class ‘Is there anyone who disagrees with this?’ This is a classic example of the sort of questioning that, though it contains the language of agreeing and disagreeing, is still very much in the subjective realm. This means that the so-called ‘disagreements’ are not genuine areas of controversy. In other words, though the children may disagree (which here simply means to ‘have different opinions’), they can all be right. Hence, they are not genuine controversies.

Genuine controversies come about when ‘I disagree’ means ‘I don’t think X is right, correct or true’, for instance where X is ‘I think that  $2 + 2 = 5$ ’. It is in this sense that I think it’s a mistake to say that ‘in philosophy everyone can be right’. Well, not if it’s a genuine and controversial object of philosophical enquiry.

Now let us take another example from the same story such as a question like: ‘Is it fair that the Rainbow Fish has to give his scales away?’ And let’s suppose that someone responds by saying, ‘Yes, because it’s better to share?’ and then someone else says, ‘(But) I don’t think it is fair because it wouldn’t be fair if you had to give away your arms and legs just to get friends’. The controversy here being: it is good to share but there are surely limits on what

one should share, in this case, body parts; the underlying question being: *what is it fair / unfair to expect someone to share?* I have bracketed the 'but' because the child may or may not have said the word 'but', however, whether he did or not, I hope you can see how this is a genuine 'but' issue because *it cannot both be fair and not fair and it is far from clear how to resolve this issue.*

It is this tension that demands resolution and therefore makes it a genuine controversy. This does not mean that the answer will be clear to you and it does not mean that the discussion will be resolved. As well as being examples of good philosophical enquiry you will also notice that it is these kinds of issues that more easily fuel discussions.

I should qualify this by adding that though I said that the first example was an 'and' issue children may still use the word 'but'. The question to ask yourself in order to identify whether the discussion is an 'and' or a 'but' issue is: *can what child P said be true at the same time as child Q?* If yes, then it is an 'and' issue. If no, then it is a 'but' issue.

## **Problematizing a story**

Problematizing a story is about identifying and bringing out the sort of controversy I have been describing in some detail in this section. A good story for thinking creates the controversies through the narrative itself and, in this case, all that is needed then from the teacher or facilitator is to ask the right question. I argue that it is precisely because asking the right question is so crucial to identifying controversies that the questions in enquiries benefit from being formulated and selected by a skilled facilitator / teacher rather than the children when the aim is to problematise a story in a certain specific way. The next section is dedicated to questions and questioning.