1

THE TOWER OF BABEL

IT IS FITTING TO begin any survey of philosophical encounters with the biblical allegory of the Tower of Babel:

> And the people said, Go, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. So, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.[1]

1. Genesis 11:4–9 (King James Version).

This is a good place to begin because it puts up front one of philosophy's most striking facts—the reality of disagreement and absent consensus. Why should this be?

Does the reason perhaps lie in mutual incomprehension, with different philosophers simply talking past one another? This was the view of the English philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood. As he saw it, different philosophers with discordant philosophical positions occupy separate and disconnected thought worlds. Adherents of conflicting theories literally "talk a different language," so that when one makes an assertion and the other a denial it is not really the same thing that is at issue. As Collingwood wrote:

> If there were a permanent problem *P*, we could ask "What did Kant, or Leibniz, or Berkeley, think about *P*?" and if that question could be answered, we could then go on to ask "was Kant, or Leibniz, or Berkeley, right in what he thought about *P*?" But what is thought to be a permanent problem *P* is really a number of transitory problems, P_1, P_2, P_3, . . . whose individual peculiarities are blurred by the historical myopia of the person who lumps them together under the name *P*.[2]

On this view philosophical disagreement lies in incomprehension: thinkers of different places and times simply discuss different things—that appearance of disagreement about the same matters is an illusion lying in the eyes of the beholder.

But Collingwood's proposition does not square with the reality of things. Philosophers do discuss the same issues: the issues of moral obligation that concerned Kant are the very selfsame ones with which we still grapple today; the problem of free will that concerned Spinoza is the same one that troubled William James. Indeed the very issue that Collingwood addresses—the problem of philosophical discord—is exactly the same issue about which Immanuel Kant long before him deliberated, condemning this situation as "the scandal of philosophy."

2. R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 69.

Philosophy then is the battlefield for a clash of divergent evaluations and beliefs. And there is ample ground for seeing its conflicts as real disagreements issuing from different priorities and different values. Time and again it emerges that those disputes are not spurious illusions engaged by linguistic incomprehension but rather differences as to priority and weight in the assessment and interpretation of evidentiary considerations. When Machiavelli rejected the significance of morality in international affairs and Kant insisted upon it, they were not discussing different issues in reciprocally incompressible terms. The medieval schoolmen rightly held disputation to be a natural procedure of philosophizing exactly because philosophical positions are inherently debatable. Almost invariably philosophical questions admit of conflicting and yet not wholly implausible alternative responses.

Philosophy is a lot like engineering—albeit engineering with concepts rather than with materials. The airplane of today is a lot more complicated than that of a century ago. So is the automobile. And so is philosophy. For in philosophy as in engineering every "improvement" designed to reduce some problem or other creates further different problems of its own. And in both fields it transpires that perfection is unattainable. We have to do the best we can with the materials at our disposal. None of our resolutions of the issues are free of problems, and with complexity comes disagreement.

Does disagreement serve any constructive purpose? Evidently it can and should. For it provides each participant in a controversy with an incentive to extend and deepen our knowledge in a search for convincing reasons. Coping with reasoned disagreement is clearly a goad to inquiry and precludes yielding too readily to our initial inclinations to identify our options with the uncontestable truth of things.

RELATED ANECDOTES

21. The Ship of Theseus **63**
47. Aldrich's Box Paradoxes **141**

FURTHER READING

Borges, J. L. "The Library of Babel," a short story originally published in his 1941 collection *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* [*The Garden of Forking Paths*]. Buenos Aires: SUR, 1941; republished in its entirety in *Ficciones* (*Fictions*) in 1944.

Cohen, Aver, and Marcelo Darcal, eds. *The Institution of Philosophy: A Discipline in Crisis*. Chicago: Open Court, 1989.

Collingwood, R. G. *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1939.

Rescher, Nicholas. *The Strife of Systems*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985.

Rohl, David. *Legend: The Genesis of Civilisation*. London: Century, 1998.

Smith, W. T. *The Evolution of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Tomasello, M. *Origins of Human Communication*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.

2

AESOP'S DONKEY

A CANON IS NOT only a contraption that goes "boom" and projects shells—or an official in a cathedral church—but also a list of works accepted as authoritative in a certain field. And while the tales of the Greek fabulist Aesop (ca. 640–ca. 560 BC) do not figure on the established canon of philosophical books, they are nevertheless full of instructive philosophical ideas and lessons and in consequence not infrequently cited in philosophical discussions.

A splendid instance of the philosophically instructive stories we owe to Aesop is his fable about "The Man, the Boy, and the Donkey." It runs as follows:

> Once upon a time an elderly man and his son were going to market with their donkey. As they were walking along by its side, a countryman passed them and said: "You fools, what is a Donkey for but to ride upon?" So the Man put the Boy on the Donkey and they continued on their way. But soon they passed a group of men, one of whom said: "See that selfish lad letting his father walk while he rides." So the Man ordered his Boy to get off, and got on himself. After a short distance they passed

> two women, one of whom said to the father, "Shame on you for making your poor son walk while you ride." And so, the Man puzzled about what to do, but at last took his Boy up before him on the Donkey. By this time they had come to the town, and the passersby began to jeer and point at them. When the Man stopped and asked what they were scoffing at they replied: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself for overloading that poor donkey of yours with your hulking son?" The Man and Boy got off and tried to think what to do. After much thought they at last cut down a pole, tied the donkey's feet to it, and raised the pole and the donkey to their shoulders. They went along amid the laughter of all who met them till they came to Market Bridge, when the Donkey, getting one of his feet loose, kicked out and caused the Boy to drop his end of the pole so that the Donkey fell off the bridge, and his fore-feet being tied together he was drowned. "That will teach you," said an old man who had followed them: "Please all, and you will please none."

The first and most obvious lesson here is that there is just no way of pleasing everyone: different people are going to have different opinions about how to proceed in any given situation, and no one resolution among such alternatives is going to satisfy everyone. So what to do?

Perhaps one can manage to minimize dissatisfaction. A look at the situation from the angle of table 1 shows that alternatives (3) and (4) alone contain level 4 rankings. So let us rule them out of contention. And as between (1) and (2) the superiority of (2) stands: the Man/Boy situation being symmetric here, one might as well let the Donkey decide—reflecting that larger truth that what matters is not just voting but who gets to vote.

Table 1. Preference ranking for this alternative

Alternatives for Riders	*Man*	*Boy*	*Donkey*
(1) only the man	1	3	3
(2) only the boy	3	1	2
(3) both	2	2	4
(4) neither	4	4	1

The situation is also instructive in illustrating the limits of rational decision theory, which will, of course, yield the right output only when one provides the right input. In the end the key operative principles here are—or should be—as follows:

- The interests of people trump those of animals.
- Frail elders can bear strain less well than healthy youths.

Presumably, then, the old man should by rights ride and the lad walk along. The focus on *preferability* rather than mere *preference* makes the approach of the philosopher not something rather different from that of the decision theorist.

And a further lesson also looms in the background. The donkey story is in a way profoundly emblematic of the situation of philosophy. It pivots on the fact that there are several mutually exclusive alternatives: the number of riders on the donkey can be 0, 1, or 2 and that's it. But no matter which alternative is selected, there will be problems and possible objections—no alternative is cost free in this regard. The challenge is to carry out a cost-benefit analysis—not to find an unproblematically cost-free option but to identify that alternative whose balance of assets over liabilities, advantages over disadvantages, plusses over minuses is optional.

Philosophy is much like that. Its issues always admit of alternative resolutions and none of them are without their problems and difficulties. The challenge is not that of finding the flawless resolution but of finding one that is preferable vis-à-vis the risk because its balance of assets over liabilities—of instructiveness over oddity—is an optimal one.

The philosopher's work is thus primarily one of assessment and evaluation. Often—and especially when the issue of modes of living are on the agenda—the philosopher is not called in to identify the alternatives: others (novelists, for example) are often better able to do that. The philosopher's concern is criteriological—to explain and implement the standards that define the reasons for accounting one alternative as better than another. The task is to provide the materials on whose basis one can reasonably decide which side of the question has the strongest case in its favor.

RELATED ANECDOTES

61. Saxe's Puzzling Elephant **176**
93. Simon's Satisficing **260**

FURTHER READING

There are many excellent—and often beautifully illustrated—editions of Aesop's fables.

Black, Max. *Perplexities: Rational Choice, the Prisoner's Dilemma, Metaphor, Poetic Ambiguity, and Other Puzzles*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Cahn, Steven M. *Puzzles and Perplexities*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.

Fisher, Alec. *The Logic of Real Arguments*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.