

On The Use of Criteria: From Anecdote to Meta-Criteria

RONALD REED

NOTE: The following article also appears in "When We Talk: Essays on Classroom Conversation," recently published by Analytic Teaching Press.

It has become apparent — and perhaps if we had paid more attention to Socrates, it would have been apparent for millenia — that the give-and-take of the dialogical process has a special place, indeed a special facility, in the development of thinking, thinking skills, and thinking well.

The dialogical process, as untidy as it is — especially when compared with a treatise or lecture format — always has had a sort of built-in principle of relevance. If, for example, we view the dialogue as a narrative (told by numerous authors), we might suggest that this narrative "turn", this linguistic bend in the dialogue does not further the implicit goals of the dialogues and is, thus, irrelevant and should be discarded or suppressed. That discarding or suppression of the irrelevant seems essential to the very nature of the dialogue.

The anecdotal always represents a narrative "turn." It involves the superimposition of a personal narrative or what might be called the impersonal narratives of the dialogue, i.e., the search for, if not objective then intersubjective, discovery or invention that constitute the dialogue. The anecdotal jars the dialogue and appears as non-sequitur, as anomaly. Some critics, like practioners of what Kuhn calls normal science, reject, *simpliciter*, the anecdotal. Since it is a turn, it is argued, it must not contribute to the development of the dialogue. Other critics, taking a more moderate stance, argue that there are differences among "turns," and that some turns are productive of the goals of the dialogue, while others are not. The movement then became one of identifying the relevant criteria for inclusion/exclusion and applying those criteria to the case. At this point, then, the anecdotal is a "problem" that can always be "solved" by the criterialogical. The anecdotal is not truly anomalous although it always appears so. The appearance is "dissolved" by means of the criterialogical and one is left with an anecdote that

either furthers the end of the dialogue or does not.

One wonders, however, what would happen if one assumed that at least some of the anecdotal were truly anomalous, i.e., that questions of inclusion/exclusion could not be answered by means of recourse to criteria. In large part, the remainder of this paper will involve an attempt to tease out the implications of just such an assumption.

Semantic Impertinence

In a powerful introductory essay to *Myth, Symbol and Reality*, Alan M. Olson points to some concepts that may prove helpful to the "teasing out" alluded to in the last section.

...Professor (Herbert) Mason argues for what might be termed the invitational or participatory aspect of myth. Quoting William Alfred, he refers to myth as having the capacity to "ambush reality," reality here having to do with what one may think to be really real on the basis of highly limited and restricted vision. As such, certain myths may enable the subject to break free from or at least to extend a very limited horizon through the opening of new vistas of possibility and meaning — even when the myth is archaic and presumed to be prescientific. What Mason describes may be likened to Ricoeur's notion of the "semantic impertinence" of metaphor and the disorienting effect of the parable. Myths and symbols may be impertinent in the sense that they force us to confront meanings and possible realities that are quite foreign to us. As such, they disorient us but not unconstructively, because this disorientation may reorient us to what, in fact, is closer to the truth. When this happens the semantic impertinence is innovative and has issued in the growth of meaning. (Olson, 1980, p.4)

Clearly, it makes sense to say that anecdotes perform for the dialogue a role analogous to that which myth does for reality. Anecdotes do "ambush" the dialogue, and they are "semantically impertinent" in the sense that have a "disorienting effect." Now, the issue to be discussed is fairly straightforward: Can the disorientation "...reorient us to what, in fact, is closer to the truth"?

Stated in another way, "Can the anecdotal move us from Dialogue-1, to Dialogue-2, where Dialogue-2 is said to be more meaningful or more educative or more contributive to the growth of the participants than Dialogue-1?" In order to answer that question, consider the following discussion of a Heinz-like dilemma.

A Model Dialogue

Leader:

We have been talking about stealing. Is stealing always wrong? Are there times when stealing is okay? Questions like that.

John:

Right. And I say that stealing is always wrong. It is like murder or lying. You should never do it.

Mary:

I agree with that and I don't agree with it. Stealing is like lying, but just as it is okay to lie sometimes it is okay to steal sometimes... but I don't think murder is ever okay.

Ruth:

Me, too.

Leader:

Me, too what?

Ruth:

I agree and I don't agree. Sometimes it is okay to steal — like if you are absolutely starving and have nothing to eat. Then you might steal until you got some money. And with lying, a bully wants to beat up your friend, it is okay to lie to the bully, to say you don't know where your friend is when you really do. Murder, well if you're being attacked by someone who trying to kill you, then it is okay to murder someone to protect yourself.

Leader:

But is that murder or is it killing in self-defense? (No response.)

Leader:

Okay, let's hold off on that question. Let's go back to stealing. Say there's this guy, let's call him Heinz. Heinz' wife is very sick. She'll die if she doesn't get this expensive medicine. But Heinz has no money. Now the question, the dilemma, is this. Should Heinz steal to save his wife?

John:

I don't know that's really hard. I mean stealing's wrong, and you shouldn't do it. Is she really sick? How sick is she? Will she die?

Leader:

She dies if she doesn't get the medicine.

John:

Then I think he should do it. I mean it is his wife.

Mary:

Yeah, and what if it's his girlfriend or just somebody

he knows. Should he do it then?

John:

(No response.)

Mary:

What if everybody knows someone who is really sick and may even die if they don't get something, some medicine. Should everybody steal then?

Ruth:

Why didn't Heinz have any money? Why didn't he save up his money? When my mother lost her job cause she was sick. It was two years ago, and my father was really scared and angry, and my brother and sister, they were angry, too....

At this point, then, a semantic impertinence. The dialogue, previously, had meandered (as dialogues tend to do) from discussion about stealing to one that looked at ways in which lying and murders were analogous or not to stealing. Ruth jars the conversation by the introduction of her personal narrative.

If one listens closely, and with a bit of patience, one could predict (or one might find in this particular anecdote) that Ruth has, in fact, turned from the dialogue. Not only has she introduced a different form (the personal narrative) but she has stopped addressing the issue at hand. Previous to Ruth's remark all the discussants had tried, in perhaps elliptical ways, to deal with the issue at hand, viz., how can we help Heinz solve his dilemma? The patient leader, then, respectful of the fact that anecdotes cannot be ruled out and that many people reason through the anecdotal would, nonetheless, at some point, bring Ruth back to the issue at hand. In effect she/he would suggest that interesting as the anecdote is, it is of little help in solving the dilemma. The anecdote, strictly speaking, is meaningless in the context — it does not relate.

And there, precisely, is the problem. The application of the criteria precludes the nurturing of the seeds of a discussion which could easily divulge some of the most significant trends in contemporary philosophy. In Ruth's remarks are all the elements of the Lawrence Kohlberg-Carol Gilligan dispute. Ruth, as nascent feminist, instead of attempting to solve the dilemma, relates an anecdote where the conditions that led to the dilemma are precluded. Here, if the leader is astute and does not feel bound by the criteriological he/she may find himself/herself in a position where the nature of dilemma, the meaning of objectivity, the structure and justification of ethical systems, and the differences and similarities between women and men are and must be discussed. Poor Heinz, it is true, is still caught in his dilemma, but Ruth, Mary, John, and the Leader have moved to what appears to be a far more fruitful area.

The Context of Semantic Impertinence

Feminist scholars have, over the past twenty years, attacked what is claimed to be gender-free view of objectivity, i.e., the view that the real has certain characteristics and that these characteristics can be discovered by impartial observers. Some feminist scholars argue that knowledge of the real is always knowledge from some perspective, through some personal history, and within a specific context. Reality, in effect, emerges within the gestalt mentioned above. Thus all changes in gestalt create different emergent properties. Even the most inane of perspectives, when properly mined, yields something new about the nature of the real. Thus, echoing the classic pragmatic dictum "Every difference makes a difference" and even more so recalling Dewey's sometimes forgotten remarks that experience qua experience always discloses something about the real, it might be said that **all** gestalts should be encouraged since all are constitutive of reality. The simple fact that a given perspective does not make sense, does not cohere, within a given context is hardly grounds for rejecting it. What that lack of sense should do, if feminist scholars are right in their claim that meaning is a function of context, is to provide a spur to look for the context in which that meaning is framed and which in turn more of the real is disclosed.¹

Say now that the argument is extended. Assume for the moment that some anecdotes can be subsumed under, call it Dialogue-1, i.e., they can be made to cohere within the dialogue, but that there is another class of anecdotes, the truly anomalous, which if pursued would destroy Dialogue-1, but would lead to Dialogue -2, -3, ... N. How does the leader decide what to do? Even if one assumes that every anecdote will be meaning-incremental if just the right context (dialogue) can be found, it does not follow that every context will be of equal worth. If the leader uses criteria of relevance, he/she will have a nice algorithm for decision making but, unfortunately, that algorithm will frequently mitigate meaning-increment (the Heinz example). To choose among potential dialogues, the leader will be forced to a consideration of meta-criteria.

Subjectivity, the Infinite Regress, or the Special Status of Meta-criteria.

The dialogue leader finds himself/herself in much the same position as scientists who are to choose among paradigms. If there is, contrary to fact, an overriding meta-paradigm, that meta-paradigm will generate a choice among paradigms. Since there is no such paradigm, the choice at first glance appears to fall back on issues related to subjectivity, i.e., which paradigm is most pleasing to a given scientist.

Kuhn has pointed out that the situation might not be that extreme. There are considerations that while they do not determine the issue, are influential. (Kuhn, 1970, pp. 92-110) Those considerations do not serve as algorithms but they do suggest that decisions need not be based on mere subjectivity.

The following is meant to be a non-exhaustive set of factors (call them non-algorithmic meta-criteria) that a dialogue leader might consider when deciding whether to follow a given turn:

1. Is the particular narrative-dialogue the sort of one that seems hostile to any turn? Dialogues mentioned previously do have their own gestalts, their own particular nature. Some are quite open-ended and hospitable to turns. Others are closed and almost by nature, preclude the anecdotal. Discussions about personal identity are, for the most part, examples of the former. Those about the workings of Aristotelian logic are examples of the latter.

Again, to return to Philosophy of Science for a cue, Paul Feyerherd has the following to say about the way in which ideologies are held, "Any ideology that breaks the hold a comprehensive system of thought has on the minds of men contributes to the liberation of men. Any ideology that makes man question inherited beliefs is an aid to enlightenment. A truth that reigns without checks and balances is a tyrant who must be overthrown, and any falsehood that can aid us in the overthrow of this tyrant is to be welcomed." (Feyerabend, 1989) The dialogue that is most hostile to the turn is that dialogue which is in most need of the turns.

2. The potential implicit in the anecdote: Santayana's marvelous phrase "hushed reverberations" is appropriate here. The leader has to listen hard, listen like the father hopes in Richard Wilbur's "The Writer", for the meanings that dance through and around the anecdote. In order to decide among anecdotes, the leader has to have some idea as to where the anecdote could lead if properly nurtured.

3. The novelty of the anecdote. Even though all anecdotes jar, some have more of a scholarly mien and appear, in some sense, dressed for the dialogue while other arrive in more outlandish garb, a Gracie Allen in a room of bankers. Novelty entails nothing, but it does give the leader reason to suspect that a radically new perspective is being introduced. To that extent, the leader might be well-served by focusing more on novel anecdotes than the more run-of-the-mill ones.

4. The track record of individual anecdotists. In the course of numerous dialogues, almost everyone has recourse to the anecdotal. Some people, historically, introduce turns that when followed are significant. Other people, historically, tend to turn the dialogue in directions which are less significant. Inductive principles

would suggest that the wise leader would follow those with the best track record.

5. The hunch of the leader. G.E. Moore said that one should always go step-by-step until one found oneself in a position in which one is forced to leap. And then, of course, one must leap.

The dialogue is a craft-like thing — a methodical, step-by-step, criteriological sort of endeavor. Still, it is not only a craft-like thing. To some extent, and the extent might point to the art of the dialogue, it is a very intuitive sort of affair. Its vitality depends on the sorts of leaps that are allowed, and on the quality of those leaps.

In other places,² I have argued that classroom talk should be thought of as conversational rather than dialogical. The present paper is an attempt to frame that argument in the language of dialogue rather than conversation. The impetus, however, remains the same. Paraphrasing Feyerabend, I am calling, simply, for tolerance in matters dialogical. As disciplines grow (and it seems to me Philosophy for Children is both a discipline and is growing) it is a commonplace for things to become formalized and mechanized. One sees, as it were, through the discipline and one is, somehow, less capable of being surprised or startled by that which is seen. It would be a shame if growing expertise in the management of the dialogue conversation were purchased at the expense of the vitality of the dialogue conversation.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Sally Hagoman for the overview on recent work in Feminist Scholarship.
2. See for examples, "Inventing a Classroom Conversation," in *Studies in Philosophy for Children*, eds. Ann Margaret Sharp and Ronald F. Reed. Temple University Press, 1992.

REFERENCES:

- Feyerabend, P.K. "How to be a Good Empiricist — A Plea for Tolerance in Matters Epistemological" in *Readings in The Philosophy of Science* eds. Barach A. Brody and Richard E. Grandy. Prentice Hall, 1989.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- Olson, Alan M. *Myth, Symbol, and Reality*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1980.

Ronald Reed, Ph.D., teaches in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Central Arkansas.