

Dialogue and Writing Philosophy

Marc Bobro

Clov: "What is there to keep me here?"

Hamm: "The dialogue."

(Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*)

Introduction

Dialogue combines the Greek *dia* ("across") with *logos* ("word" or "speech") to mean a mutual exchange of meaning across space and time. A dialogue involves two or more entities in communication with each other, taking turns in some physical or conceptual space that separates and distinguishes these entities. The discipline of philosophy is no stranger to the dialogue form. Philosophers certainly read many dialogues in their training and still assign them for students to read, including: Plato's dialogues, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, George Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and John Perry's recent *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*. However, philosophers today rarely write dialogues themselves or ask students to write them. Philosophy has veered away from the form. Straight, expository prose is now the standard for philosophical writing in and out of the classroom.¹ Here I argue for its return, especially when it comes to student papers in philosophy.² To be clear, this is not an argument that dialogues should outright replace other forms of philosophical writing, but rather for their inclusion. Then I talk about how to write a dialogue. Finally, I give an example of a student-written dialogue and offer some commentary. But first let us begin with the varieties of dialogues, because, while all have their place in philosophical writing, it is important to keep them distinct when crafting a writing assignment that incorporates dialogue.

Different Types of Dialogue

In a series of articles and books on argumentation and critical thinking, Douglas Walton provides a useful taxonomy and exegesis of the different types of dialogue. These are the six basic types of dialogue, which Walton divides according to its overarching goal: to *persuade* another character that

¹ The best contemporary books on writing philosophy—e.g., Feinberg, *Doing Philosophy*, and Edwards, *Writing to Learn*—do not refer to the dialogue form at all.

² I would also argue that philosophers should employ the dialogical form more often. I wrote portions of dialogue in a published paper on Leibniz and once wrote and presented a dialogue on Descartes' account of immortality at a philosophy conference. I had a colleague do the reading with me.

some particular proposition is true, to *inquire* as to whether a particular proposition or thesis is true, to *negotiate* over items of value, to *seek information* from one or more of the other characters, to *deliberate* over the best way to solve a practical problem, and finally, to *win* at all cost. With some restrictions, one and the same dialogue can have more than one of these goals. All can arguably be used by philosophers and can be featured in philosophical writing assignments.

Persuasive dialogues employ arguments that attempt to show or prove to at least one other participant that some thesis is true. At least two characters in such dialogues have *commitments*, in other words, propositions that they hold to be true at the start of the dialogue. But, as such dialogues proceed, characters typically retract some of those commitments. They are getting persuaded, in other words. “As the various speech acts of asserting, questioning, and so on are brought forward in turn by the participants, propositions are added to or deleted from the participants’ commitment sets” (Walton, 31). Most of the famous dialogues mentioned above are persuasive dialogues, or at least involve some form of persuasion.

Similar to persuasive dialogues, inquiry dialogues also attempt to show or prove that some thesis or particular proposition is true or that there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate the truth or falsity of a thesis or proposition. But departing from persuasive dialogues, “in the inquiry, the whole intent is to minimize or even eliminate the possibility of retraction of commitments as the dialogue proceeds” (Walton, 70). Where a persuasive dialogue can seem frustrating—a two steps forward, one step back kind of feel—there is a kind of inexorability about the inquiry dialogue. Once a proposition has been established there is no looping back to make sure that all of the participants are ready to move on to the next step in the argument. The goal is to advance with new propositions being derived and thus useful for the rest of the dialogue. The focus is on the logic of an argument for a proposition or series of propositions rather than how a view came to be held in a kind of autobiographical fashion. Imagine Spinoza’s *Ethics* written in dialogue form. It is modeled after the demonstrative proof style of Euclid’s *Geometry*, proceeding from definitions and axioms, which are then used to derive propositions which remain true and useful for the remainder of the text. The first part of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* can be read as an inquiry dialogue.

The goal in a negotiation dialogue diverges significantly from both persuasive and inquiry dialogues. The truth or falsity of propositions is the primary focus of the latter two, whereas “the issue in a negotiation dialogue is not truth or falsity, but rather money or some kind of goods, economic resources, or other items of value that are at issue” (Walton, 100). This may seem utterly antithetical to the goals of a philosophy paper. But I can envision some negotiation dialogues working in a philosophical context, for some negotiations have the special goal of “wise agreement,” in which “the legitimate interests of each side to the extent possible, resolves conflicting interests fairly, is durable, and takes community interests into account” (Fisher and Ury, 4). Because there is a focus in interests, as opposed to positions, an effective negotiator may need to empathize with the other participants. And since empathy and empathy-related phenomena are important in understanding social and moral philosophy, crafting a negotiation dialogue that involves empathy on the part of at least one character can be a useful exercise for students, especially in an ethics class.

In a dialogue where the main goal is to seek information, there is an exchange between two or more participants, one or more of whom has specific information that another participant desires or needs. It can come in the form of an interview, a solicitation for advice, or consultation with an expert. Walton describes this kind of dialogue as “asymmetrical in nature, yet highly collaborative, and non-adversarial” (Walton, 126). Some philosophical dialogues have certainly adopted this as a goal. In Leibniz’s dialogue *New Essays on Human Understanding*, the character, Theophilus, tries to understand the philosophical system of the character Philalethes, who represents John Locke, by going through, section by section, Locke’s own *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.³ I can also see this as a useful way of writing dialogue for students. Consider a class on existentialism where students are assigned to write an imaginary dialogue between a reporter and Simone de Beauvoir, with the purpose of understanding the relationship between her existential ethics of freedom and second-wave feminism.

Deliberative dialogues have the goal of solving a practical problem shared by the characters. “They discuss different ways of proceeding or propose solutions, and they divide into factions or points of view, each arguing that one of these proposed lines of action is the prudent course to pursue” (Walton, 151). While there will be disagreement and argument, such dialogues do not come across as adversarial, since “the aim is for them to come to agreement on a line of action or policy they can implement together” (Walton, 151). So, imagine two or more characters in a dialogue engaging in a debate over Peter Singer’s work on world aid. However, their goal is not to determine whether his claim that those not living in poverty have a duty to help those living in poverty is true—perhaps they are already convinced that it is true—but rather to figure out the most efficient and equitable way to donate.

Finally, let us look at eristic dialogues. Such dialogues probably mirror more closely the common usage of the word ‘argument’. For in ordinary language, “argument” often “includes the idea of a quarrel, a kind of angry or adversarial verbal exchange based on a conflict between two parties (perceived or real)” (Walton, 178). Walton notes that “with the exception of the ancients (notably Plato and Aristotle) logicians of the past have pretty well expunged eristic dialogue from their concept of the argument” (Walton, 178). So, in a dialogue that values careful, reasoned argument, eristic dialogue has little place. But eristic dialogue still has a place, at least when it comes to learning philosophy. Imagine a two-part assignment where the first part reveals two characters seeking victory in argument, by using any and all means, including fallacies, obfuscations, and rhetorical devices, to confound the opponent and win. Then a second part where the characters are not allowed such means. Further, let us be honest here. Philosophers like to think of themselves as purely objective seekers, not of winning arguments, but of finding the truth, or at least coming to some agreement with others. But in practice, philosophers sometimes engage in heated, eristic exchanges, namely, quarrels. Should philosophy teachers totally ignore this side of their discipline?

Which kinds of dialogue from the above list are best suited for the philosophy classroom? That depends on the philosophy instructor’s approach to philosophy. Since reasoned argument is often considered the “bread and butter” of philosophical investigation, and philosophy is often taught by

³ Yes, it has a goal of persuasion—Leibniz is trying to show that his own system makes more sense than that of Locke’s—but it is nonetheless undoubtedly also intended as an exegesis of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

learning and analyzing arguments, and the seeking of truth—whether about it is the truth about reality, the right thing to do, or the correct interpretation of a philosophical work—is often the goal of philosophical argument, persuasive and inquiry dialogues are naturally suited to such an approach to philosophy. But philosophy does not always just concern itself with reasoned argument and the seeking of truth. As shown above, dialogues that seek information, negotiate, deliberate, and even express emotions can also be appropriate, depending on what the philosophy instructor is trying to accomplish.

Why use the Dialogue Form?

All of the above varieties of dialogue can be featured in philosophical writing assignments, but should they be? Here I argue for an affirmative answer. I have been assigning dialogues for many years, ever since I began teaching my own classes in graduate school. I hesitate to speak for other disciplines, but the dialogue (in all of its forms) is particularly suited for philosophical writing, especially when it comes to having students learn and practice philosophy. Here are three reasons why.

First, philosophical writing should value alternate interpretations, opposing viewpoints and perspectives, other disciplines, and any experience or detail that has any chance at knowledge or truth. Inspiration and ideas can come from any and all sources. If you devalue the views of others, simply because these views do not align with your own, why should others who have such views discourse with you? So many beginning papers are too one-sided, written “under a banner,” so to speak. Thesis papers can perpetuate this one-sidedness, especially when the instructor demands that the student write with feigned confidence. Assigning dialogues, especially of the persuasive, inquiry, negotiation, and deliberative varieties, is a way of making a paper much less one-sided, without simply commanding, “Don’t write so one-sided!” Writing a dialogue compels the author to determine and articulate what each side will most likely say in response to each other. A conversation between two people naturally brings out the reasons one holds a particular position, which is very important in any philosophy paper. In fact, because the dialogue form is naturally suited for giving reasons for holding certain positions, it can help in both writing a good essay as well as gaining further understanding of the topic. If the dialogue structure is not what the final philosophy paper calls for, I would still recommend writing a dialogue as a draft and then “translate” it into the assigned format.

Second, whether or not any knowledge or agreement has been reached, it should become evident that it is not you or your agenda that is the most important feature of your piece of writing. It is rather the issue under discussion or problem to be solved, and sometimes even knowledge or truth.⁴ Philosophical writing should, at least sometimes, challenge the reader to question their own assumptions, views, and prejudices; it should undermine the security and surety the reader may feel. The dogmatic reader should feel especially uncomfortable. This does not mean that the reader is wrong. It is just that the reader should feel unsure at some point in their reading of the paper. Bertrand Russell put it aptly: “Dissipate certainty.” The dialogue form—especially of the persuasive,

⁴ I recognize that this might sound old-fashioned to ears that have soaked in structuralist and other postmodern thought, but the pursuit of truth still guides much of philosophy. It is certainly taught this way in most philosophy departments.

negotiation, deliberative, and eristic varieties—naturally renders all sides on an equal standing, initially at least.⁵

Philosophical writing should also challenge the author. In other words, the virtue of humility applies not only to a person's character but also to philosophical writing. Dialogues are great in delaying your judgment. Do not rush a philosophy paper. And if your judgment never arrives, it is fine to end a dialogue at an impasse (*aporia*). When learning philosophy, it is probably best not to pressure yourself into taking a confident stand anyway. It is premature for that. Philosophical questions are notoriously difficult, with some debated for thousands of years. Why should you be expected to have a firm belief with regard to justice, beauty, determinism, the structure of reality, etc.? Realistically, how many students are aware of the debates talked about in a philosophy class before taking the class? Writing dialogues is a great way of having students debate a topic without committing themselves to any one position. Information-seeking and inquiry dialogues, or even persuasive dialogues where the author simply attempts to persuade while making no claims to actually finding the truth, function particularly well in this respect.

Regarding the third reason to write in dialogue form, I need to make a distinction that is commonly made in some disciplines—e.g., literature, film studies, and rhetoric—but less so in philosophy. There is the *diegetic*, which refers to the implied world of the work; that is, the setting, characters, words, sights, events, and sounds that “belong to the narrative.” Then there is the *non-diegetic*. This refers to the elements “outside the narrative,” such as the narrator, background music, opening credits or closing credits, and introduction or conclusion. The audience is aware of these non-diegetic elements, but the characters of the work are not. Much of philosophy today has no diegetic elements; or, to put it another way, there is typically no distance between what is happening on the page and the reader. It is often written as if the author and the reader are working *together* to address some philosophical debate. Any “distance,” for instance, in terms of clarity of communication, is unintentional.

Importantly, too, what is written today in philosophy typically is not intended to capture just one way a philosophical debate could go. It is supposed to offer what the author considers is the *best* or most *comprehensive* way to address a debate. But dialogues capture one take of a philosophical debate, that in real life could have gone in different ways, with no intention of it being the best or most comprehensive take. Consider an analogy. Beethoven's compositions, especially in the cadenzas, were actually transcriptions of his own improvisations. By looking at the transcriptions themselves, in isolation, we cannot tell that they capture only one version of Beethoven's playing that would change every time he played. We tend to think that “classical” music is all planned out in advance—like a typical essay is—but Beethoven himself was known for his improvisational abilities on piano. His published cadenzas were just one “take.” Listening to Beethoven live, one never knew what one would hear. For publication and posterity, he would notate his cadenzas, but only one of the many versions. This frustrated him because it was not representative of his actual playing and musicality. This is analogous to a good philosophical conversation. It's not about it going one and only one way.

⁵ I would argue that the least successful of Plato's dialogues are the ones that seem to portray Socrates' interlocutors on a lower intellectual plane.

Philosophy as practiced by philosophers in real time does not have a prescribed path; it can go in various, sometimes surprising, ways. Plato, and others who wrote in dialogue form, aimed to capture in writing what it *feels like* to engage in philosophy. This is the diegetic. A discourse written in standard essay format will never fully capture this experience, just as a transcription of an improvised passage, will never capture what it is like to listen to Beethoven's playing. By writing dialogues—whether they are persuasive or eristic—students create or recreate naturally for themselves what often happens in philosophy.

So, three reasons to assign dialogues have been given and defended: (a) dialogues naturally allow various positions to be considered, (b) dialogues compel a delay in judgment and accordingly help foster a sense of intellectual humility, and (c) dialogues reflect philosophical praxis.

I want to add a couple of supplementary points about the writing of dialogues. First, I prefer philosophical writing that emulates the spoken word and its usual simplicity, directness, and personality. Any complexity and subtlety that it carries should be in the content of the concepts involved and the paper's logical development, not in its choice of words. Dialogue, being basically a conversation, is better suited to emulate the spoken word than is the standard essay format. Maybe it is for this reason that even the term is more welcoming. "Dialogue" has all sorts of positive connotations. Google the term; it always references something positive. More traditional formats do not. "Essay," "paper," "defense," and "thesis," do not tend to excite the student. But "dialogue" can. Writing one can be fun. The student may actually want to write the paper; it is a different and creative way to write a philosophy paper. Indeed, sometimes a change in format or structure alone helps overcome the bad habits students have picked up, but in a new and enjoyable way. And the dialogue form greatly increases the chances of papers varying, with the vast possibility of different characters and settings. Few teachers, if any, enjoy the prospect of reading papers that are very similar to each other.

There is one important caveat: Some students balk at writing dialogues. By the time they take a philosophy class, they may have developed fears regarding "creative writing." Interestingly, some of the blame for this lies at the hand of teachers themselves. In a popular college textbook on writing, the authors write: "Many creative writing teachers are inclined to feel that writing good dialogue is a gift. You have it or you don't. You were born with an ear for dialogue or you weren't" (Skwire & Skwire, 115). Whether or not this is actually true—and I have my doubts⁶—I have two replies. First, writing philosophical papers in dialogue form need not be thought of as "creative writing." Such a term usually gets applied only to fiction writing. So, the kind of standards applied to "good dialogue" here do not necessarily translate to philosophical writing. Second, even so, anecdotally, far fewer students have a fear of writing dialogue than those who fear writing standard essays.

Second, dialogue is a tried and true form of philosophical writing. This is not to say that it is the only tried and true form, or that it is superior overall to other forms. The dialectical, give-and-take, less

⁶ From my experience, people certainly learn writing at different rates, but given time, the gap between the "born good" writers and the "learned to be good" writers becomes so diminished as to become negligible. The distinction therefore amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy. So even if the authors of this writing textbook are correct, they shouldn't tell students this.

one-sided approach that I have articulated above can certainly be achieved outside the dialogue form. My argument has been to show that dialogue, in its varieties, is naturally suited to achieve those goals and easier for students to fulfill. Here, I want to emphasize that it has some serious provenance. Some famous philosophical dialogues are mentioned in the introduction, but the dialogues of Plato perhaps set the best example.

Plato certainly agreed that the dialogue form is well suited for philosophical discourse. All of the varieties of dialogue that Walton discuss manifest themselves in Plato's dialogues. There are characters who attempt to persuade Socrates, and of course Socrates spends ample time trying to persuading them. But also, there are characters who seek information from Socrates. Socrates too seeks information from others. Think of his famous recounting in the *Symposium* of what he learned about love from Diotima. There is inquiry-extended investigations with no retractions. There are negotiations and deliberations where the goal is not primarily the truth, but of coming to agreements and solutions to practical problems. There is of course quarreling as well—characters who seem to say anything to simply win a debate. Given that it is so suited for philosophical discourse, it might be surprising to learn that in Plato's dialogues we find everything we expect from great literature: symbolism, suspense, allusion, humor, references to other works, and unforgettable characters. We also find drama, comedy, tragedy, biography, autobiography, and social commentary. There are lampoons of personalities such as Aristophanes, himself a lampooner. Plato's portrayals of these, plus Socrates of course, are so good and complete that it is effectively impossible to distinguish Plato's depictions from the historical. Plato, the person himself, is curiously hard to pin down too. This is due in no small part to the fact that he chose to write dialogues exclusively. Moreover, beyond the rare reference, Plato's dialogues never include himself as a character, and so he never speaks to us directly. He is, in effect, the playwright and manager who loiters backstage behind the characters. Even if he did render himself a character, we would not know if that portrayal of himself is accurate.

A dialogue between two or more entities can be housed within one person.⁷ "Philosophy is the mind's dialogue with itself," writes Plato in the *Theaetetus*. Since the central character of his dialogues, Socrates, did not write anything down, Plato's dialogues may be more himself dialoguing with himself by asking questions and trying to answer them or by setting up several different frames of reference, and comparing and contrasting them. Perhaps it is Plato himself examining his own assumptions in order to understand himself and challenge his preconceptions of the world. Famously, Plato has Socrates assert in the *Apology* that "the unexamined life is not worth living." The dialogue itself is a way to examine oneself. Since we do not know which views from which characters actually represent Plato's own views, it is tempting to think that one or more characters are being used as mouthpieces for his own ideas. But even concerning the famous Platonic Forms, it is not easy to find a passage where this theory is unequivocally endorsed and championed. In fact, the most explicit mention of the Forms—located in Plato's *Parmenides*—is followed by a series of objections to them.

⁷ The ancient Greeks had a tendency to represent thought as an internal dialogue. Now, we do not have direct and authoritative access to all of our mental states, so internal dialogue can also be a way of articulating or guessing at mental processes, e.g., motivations, that are not necessarily conscious. Euripides' *Medea* is a perfect example. See Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy*, 59.

Dialogue Structure

Students of philosophy have all read dialogues, but in writing one what do you need to do? It is not as simple as transcribing a conversation. Do not try to emulate a real life conversation, for often these are disjointed, jumping from one topic to the next. During breakfast at a Las Vegas hotel, I once overheard a conversation between four people that managed in less than 15 minutes to cover 4 totally different topics: meat processing, bowling, working at Walmart, and alien abduction. It was fascinating to listen in—at least it had this going for it—but the conversation moved very quickly between one subject to the next; there were no logical transitions. Though this conversation was not dull, real life conversations certainly can be. To write dialogue that both flows and is interesting, look at the transcripts of good plays and of course Plato himself.

The best dialogue has been said to be an artistic rendition of how we speak, but I would also add it needs to have some sort of logic to it. Consider the following advice from a book on writing: “After you become used to the imaginary-dialogue technique and develop your confidence in using it, you will notice that a dialogue will often gather enough momentum to require little conscious direction from you. It will, in a sense, direct itself. When this happens, don’t worry. It is a good sign, an indication that you have fully engaged your imagination and given yourself to the intellectual exchange with your imaginary opponent. Let the dialogue continue; what develops will usually be very useful. If it begins to turn away from the important concerns involved, just steer it back again” (Ruggiero, 2015). I have two points to make in response. First, letting your imagination run may not, and probably will not, result in an “intellectual” exchange. And even if it does, it will probably be of little use in answering a philosophy prompt. Perhaps the result will be eristic, but even the eristic dialogues of Plato have a kind of logical structure to them. The above advice is much better suited for the kind of conversational dialogue found in fiction. Second, the suggestion that dialogues can simply write themselves is perhaps the worst kind of advice that student writers are given. It is analogous to telling a beginning piano student, “Just let your fingers float over the keyboard. Relax. And now play!” Stream of consciousness playing (or writing) is suitable only for the trained and experienced. And, even then, it may not be the best advice.

In your dialogue you can include anything you want for the sake of clarity, logic, and completeness. So even movie dialogues are not the place to look. Film is usually about showing, not telling. Inner dialogue is eschewed. What the character actually thinks is often left up to the viewer’s interpretation. In philosophical writing, for the most part, the aim should be clarity and comprehensiveness. Some great philosophy is vague of course, as in philosophical novels, poetry, and parables. But this is one aspect of great philosophy that probably should not be mimicked by undergraduates.

As mentioned previously, a dialogue is an exchange between two or more characters (or perhaps even one person and their conscience, or a “better self”). Often the characters are listed at the beginning of the dialogue, but sometimes they can just appear in the course of the dialogue. An introductory sentence or paragraph is usually helpful. In other words, offer a narrative at the start to introduce the characters (and perhaps the scenario). Consider this title and introductory paragraph to

a dialogue I received 20 years ago. Unfortunately, I do not recall the exact wording of the prompt, but it had something to do with St. Anselm's proof for God's existence.

TITLE:

"In The Purgatory Known As Bakersfield, There Isn't Much To Do, But To Question The Existence of God, And Hang Out in Denny's Bar"

SETTING:

"Suppose that on the way to Los Angeles in a beat-up old Ford Taurus two twenty-somethings break down in Bakersfield, the result of the car's transmission having fallen out while cruising at a hundred and ten miles per hour. The momentum from the car's velocity is enough to carry them into a nearby rest-stop, where a more than benevolent tow-truck driver awaits to tow their Ford to the nearest mechanic, for a more than ample fare. The circumstances of the moment send Desmond and Leo spiraling off into a philosophical inquiry concerning the nature of God and the questioning of his existence, to which the tow-truck driver occasionally chimes in."

After reading the title and setting, I wanted to read further, and not only to hear what the author had to say about Anselm's proof for God's existence. That's the non-diegetic. I also wanted to see what Desmond, Leo, and the truck driver would say regarding God. That is the diegetic element. Stoking the attention of an experienced professor who has assigned and graded thousands of papers on God's nature and existence is not easy to achieve. The paper did not disappoint either.

How does one proceed after the title, setting, and list of characters? Make each character in your dialogue hold a different position. Keep the characters consistent. If, for instance, one of your characters initially thinks that machines cannot think, you do not want to put arguments into their mouth that claim machines can think, unless of course they change their mind in the course of the dialogue. Give your characters unique voices if they represent different philosophical points of view. This is not accomplished simply with their names. Calling your characters "Wittgenstein" and "Popper" will not render their relationship compelling unless you make it so. It is also important that there be some disagreement between at least two of the characters. A dialogue with characters just patting each other on the back is boring. To be compelling, even an inquiry dialogue needs *disputants*, in other words. Moreover, at least two of the disputants should be reasonably intelligent. To my mind, for all of the virtues of Plato's dialogues, sometimes you get the sense that Socrates is just *so much smarter* than those he is in conversation with. When this occurs, the reader can feel sorry for them.

Plato was an accomplished wrestler himself and Socrates may have dabbled. What Socrates does by dialoguing with others is to wrestle with and slip free from certain premises and ideologies. Think like a group having a conversation, instead of an individual pushing an agenda. This conversation does not have to be chaotic and confusing. All characters in such dialogues are liable to change as they proceed. One character begins a dialogue with another by stating a view or by asking a question. Another character, in lieu of this new information, is changed by it and then formulates a response. The first character's response has a similar effect on the second, who is changed, and so on.

Importantly, as in all philosophy papers, whether it is persuasive, inquiring, seeking information, negotiating, deliberative, or even eristic, you need to ensure that you answer the essay prompt. This will include some preparatory work before you go ahead and write your dialogue. In particular, this will require analyzing the essay question and some initial planning. Most essays have an introduction, main body, and conclusion. A dialogue is no exception. Let me clarify. It should have elements that resemble these things, but it is significantly different. A dialogue typically does not tell the reader exactly what will come next, but you as the author should lead them through it so they can follow what you are saying. Ensure that your reader knows what is going on—that there is a clear train of thought throughout the dialogue. Remember your goal; in other words, do not just have the characters ramble on. Sure, make the dialogue funny or entertaining if you wish, but ensure that what the characters say is important. And make sure it is clear to your reader what the ending position is. Do the characters agree? Do they agree to disagree? Have they made a new discovery? And so on. Or, is the ending just an impasse? That is fine, too.

Example of a Student Philosophical Dialogue

TITLE:

“Knowledge”⁸

SETTING:

Father Majd arrives in heaven, having lost his life pushing a young man from a bus; entering a small chamber, he meets (in awe) his Maker.

TEXT:

God: Welcome to Heaven, child; I’ve been expecting you for a long time now. I can tell you’re nervous. Don’t be. Hmm. You’re probably wondering why you were brought before Me, and so suddenly. Well, let me make that clear: Every soul enters the Pearly Gates unready, and needs first ask me such questions as will prepare them to join the heavenly hosts. So ask, and I will answer, and the last clouds will be wiped from your consciousness.

Majd: Why, Lord, I hardly know what to ask. This is such an honor. Never did I suppose that I would have such an opportunity to find answers.

G: Now you have it. So what’s your first question? You’re not quite fit of mind to live in paradise for all time, but soon you will be.

M: Let me think. My life has been spent trying to understand You. So starting there, what was Your meaning just now? When You said You were expecting me?

Commentary: The dialogue here has the goal of seeking information. Majd desires to learn from God. But we do not know yet the specific subject of discourse. Note the title. It’s not a misspelling, but rather an allusion to knowledge in the present or “now.”

G: Was I not clear? I’ve awaited this moment of reunion with you since your birth; more expectantly while your final hour was drawing nigh.

⁸ I thank _____ for permission to use his dialogue.

M: Quite so? I mean only that all my teachers back on earth assured me that—well—even one as I could surprise even You.

G: Ha. Well, that you never have, child. Nor did they, nor anybody. Now this perturbs you?

M: Yes, Lord. My death was not an act of fate; I chose it. Deliberating for a moment, and without compulsion, I saved that man's life, knowing that I might die.

G: That you did; you chose your death, bravely, and as few would.

M: Indeed. But were my act made freely, how could You have expected it? Was it just another link in a chain of causes? Am I a pawn of predetermination?

Commentary: The subject of the prompt is now clear. The author takes quite a long time to make it clear, but because of the length of the paper, it is worth it.

G: No. I gave you that power of deliberation—and never once have I acted in vain. Vain, indeed, it would be were I to give you this power while your every choice was merely necessitated by the past. Furthermore, I know you don't doubt this; every man's belief is proven by regret, pride, and other such feelings.

M: I agree, Lord. All of that would be quite in vain, as would Your punishment and reward for souls, were our choices to act rightly or wrongly predetermined. Yet, were they not, how then do you possess foreknowledge of them? If my act to give my life for another had been free, as You say it is, then how could it be known? Were it free, it would be uncertain until the moment I made the choice. Obviously this would be impossible to predict, until the moment of decision.

G: Perhaps I cannot do what you consider impossible. Yet I was expecting you, that was no lie. So how?

M: I once visited a man in prison; his fate was to be on the morrow decided by a jury. I prayed for his sinful soul, and he guiltlessly told me his sins in detail.

G: I say, what gumption. Tell me, child, what was the worst?

M: That is surely for You alone to judge, my Lord. But I'll say the one that matters here: he regularly went to oracles seeking prophecies—and yet the man was fearful of the coming dawn. I put this to him. How could he still be afraid when—in his mind—he had recourse to Your divine foreknowledge. The oracles, and You, already knew the outcome of the trial. So what was to fear? I asked. Either his guilt or innocence was already necessitated by Your foreknowledge.

G: Certainly. Had I true knowledge of tomorrow, then if anything happens besides what I know will, I would have been wrong. His reply?

M: He said I had the whole thing wrong. It wasn't for predictions that he went to oracles; he went for advice. Foreknowledge would be categorically impossible, even for You; the actions of free agents cannot be predetermined. Such would be no more logically permissible than making twice two five.

Commentary: First, there is a nice example, originally given by Alexander of Aphrodisias, that raises an important objection to divine foreknowledge. The examples ties an abstract difficult subject to a concrete situation. With philosophy, this is difficult, but so very important. Second, the writing is impressive, with consistent characters and voice. Not only is the writing clear but also it stylistically matches the setting and context. Do you find yourself treading the edge of the diegetic and the non-diegetic?

G: The man was no fool. For actions to be free, they must be so until decided upon, and therefore are beforehand uncertain. Why then did he come to oracles?

M: As I said, for advice. While, it would be impossible for the outcome of this trial (a contingent truth) to be known with certainty, You can have knowledge of every possibility. Thus, through the oracles, You are supplicated for advice. You know if X happens, Z will follow; yet regardless of Your advice, Y may be done instead. In this way, You don't know the future actions of free agents with certainty, only as contingent possibilities, until they are actualized as certainties. As further proof, he gave his own story as an example. He'd lived a life of crime, had made a career of it; yet one day decided to change his ways. His oracle's steadfast advice was to leave that very week. So he did. In his haste, however, he left a breadcrumb trail. Within a month his associates found him, and, confronted, he'd been forced to kill one of them. For this he was arrested, imprisoned, tried, and executed.

G: I see the point. Such an end would not have befallen him had the oracle not made such a prediction, and, in his mind, I knew exactly what would happen to him. In that way, I knew that in giving him this prediction I would sentence him to death; and thus I too am guilty of such a horrible thing.

Commentary: Here we find another objection to divine foreknowledge. Again, it is one that Alexander raised. What follows is Alexander's "solution." We also see that this dialogue involves the elements of persuasion. God is attempting to persuade Majd that Alexander's view is mistaken.

M: As I said, his erudite solution was that You knew not the outcome, because it was contingent on such things as You could not possibly be certain of. It was then merely advice that You gave; it was an attempt, so to speak, at giving him the best result, which he in his faulty choices forfeited. Strangely, his oracle then entered the cell and said he was mistaken. She *did* know with certainty what would happen; this doesn't impose necessity upon those events, rather they impose necessity upon her foreknowledge. But I only laughed. That is no distinction great enough to rescue free agency.

G: I understand resolutely, but they're both quite wrong. You'll understand shortly, and the only thing required is that I show you that, quite frankly, they and you hold a sinfully conceited view that places The Lord your God on your level of consciousness.

Commentary: This is the first clear reference to Boethius, whose view in *The Consolation of Philosophy* is that human consciousness and thus knowledge is distinct from divine consciousness and knowledge. It also becomes clear that Boethius' own answer to the problem of divine foreknowledge is represented here by God. The reference to sinful conceit perhaps does not mirror Boethius' text, but within the frame of this dialogue where there is a bit of liberty with the characters, I am OK with it.

M: Do I? Is it that You are capable of the impossible, and can know with certainty the conditional?

G: Regardless of that, you mistake my form of knowing for your form. To begin with, understand that a thing is not what it is, but is how it is perceived, and thing may be perceived in many ways. Let me continue your allegory of myself to you further, in order to show you in how many ways a thing may be differently understood: Does even the most basic, immobile life have the power of sensation?

M: Indeed, they do. They have empirical experience at their disposal.

G: And what of those higher animals, gifted with motion? You'll agree, no doubt, that they have more. Higher animals have imagination. By this I mean they may expand upon simple sensation and may even conceive of their own good, their own interest and disinterest.

Commentary: The explanation of imagination here is unsatisfying, though to be fair it is not crucial to the prompt.

M: And men, if I may interject, have something still more. We were gifted by You with another way of looking at the world: reason.

G: If by that is meant that I gave you the power of abstract thought, of seeing universals, then assuredly. You may see among men the general quality of being a two-legged creature.

Commentary: Language is not inclusive here, but the context and setting perhaps justifies it. Perhaps, but then again, although the debate harkens back to medieval times, the setting of the dialogue is contemporary. Remember the bus paper? So I would recommend "humans" instead of "men." The capital You and Your in reference to God is a nice touch—unnecessary, but reminds us that although the subject matter has ancient roots, it perplexes Christians to this day.

M: Then what, if I may hazard a question, if not a guess, is the nature of Your level of consciousness?

G: Good, child. Good. Mine is of understanding; I perceive the simple Forms behind things. Now this you'll never grasp. But let a further comparison suffice for my purposes. Neither sensation nor imagination will grasp how reason sees things. Suppose, then, that the two were together to say that their understanding is correct, and yours false? You'd say no, "Mine is the superior, yours is the lesser, and it's the fault of your own inferiority that you can't see this."

M: Undoubtedly, Lord. Their grasp of the universe renders them incapable of regarding the universals that I see. Yet their stupidity in no way limits me. So, and I am merely thinking aloud, neither does mine Yours?

G: Indeed, you're now getting it. You see in another way I am not like you; I am eternal. You exist in time, I do not. By this I mean more than just that I am without beginning or end. Rather, I fundamentally do not exist in time. I am atemporal, so to speak. I do not travel through time, from past to future.

M: So this is Your solution? You are atemporal; Your seeing my future actions imposes no necessity upon them, because to You they are not future events.

G: Quite so. Strictly speaking, the gift of foreknowledge would be logically impossible. I lack such a thing. What I have is *providentia* which may be said to be more equivalent to seeing through space than through time. After all, to me there is no past, nor future, only the eternal present. To me all things in all times are laid out at once, and I perceive them as one; no distinction exists between your birth and death. I know them both at once, but you know them one at a time.

M: It becomes clear. You knew the prisoner's verdict, but in so doing imposed no necessity upon it. To say that You did could be likened to the ludicrous assertion that my physically seeing the man in his cell imposed upon him the necessity of being in that very cell. I saw him there because he was

there; You saw that he would be executed because he was executed—though perhaps my language is itself too temporal.

G: Right. I see that he is executed, or perhaps that is *being* executed. Regardless, I do not travel through time, from past to future. I exist in the eternal present. I do see the future, because to me it is merely what is.

M: Well, then I'm glad to finally arrive. I hope the wait wasn't too long.

G: Ha. You were already here—already are.

Commentary: This paper makes a simple comparison and contrast between Alexander and Boethius very compelling and memorable, in the form of a dialogue that involves both information-seeking and persuasion. A very abstract, and in the wrong hands, boring topic comes alive and even ends with a bit of humor.

Conclusion

Machiavelli wrote that as he sat reading ancient authors he would ask questions of these authors and they would answer him: “Evenings I return home and enter my study, and at its entrance I take off my everyday clothes, full of mud and dust, and don royal and courtly garments. Decorously attired, I enter in to the ancient sessions of ancient men. Received amicably by them, I partake of such food as is mine only and for which I was born. There, without shame, I speak with them and ask them about the reason for their actions, and they in their humanity respond to me” (Grudin, 67). If Machiavelli transcribed one of his imagined dialogues with these long-dead thinkers, he would have written a dialogue. And in fact, his *Art of War* is a philosophical dialogue. My student, who wrote his paper on Alexander and Boethius, was effectively, even if not literally, in dialogue with these ancient thinkers too. Writing about philosophy in this way brought this student very close to other philosophers and their subject-matter—in this case, divine foreknowledge—much more so than if he had written about divine foreknowledge in standard essay format. The reader of the student's dialogue—me—certainly enjoyed the paper more than I would have otherwise. Dialogue is good for not only the student, but also the teacher.⁹

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⁹ I wish to thank _____ and two anonymous referees for this journal for their helpful comments.

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Address Correspondences to:

Marc Bobro, Ph.D
Professor & Chair, Philosophy Dept.
Santa Barbara City College
Email: mebobro@pipeline.sbcc.edu