

Lipman and Socrates: A Dialogue

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Residents of the Green Hill Retirement Community spent Christmas as best they could, each with their ailments, each with their old age. They received visits from relatives and friends, some more than others. Several even received gifts. But the festive atmosphere is now behind them. Today the usual routine is back, with the same things repeating in the usual fashion. In the afternoon, Mat and a small group of friends gather for their philosophical meeting, as had become custom. They always assemble in the library, a cosy intimate space with few books but a lot of light, thanks to the large windows overlooking the garden. Every time they meet, they arrange the armchairs in a circle, and Mat gives each participant a copy of a text. They read it out loud little by little and from there are inspired to choose the topic to address.

Today they want to return to a theme that often comes up in their dialogues. Indeed, the festive holiday break has left them with feelings and moods that really make them think. They want to explore questions about the meaning of life and death, and they all participate with great interest and engagement. When it is almost dinner time, Mat closes the session by saying, "Dear friends, today was a rather demanding session. I feel tired but satisfied. We really went all the way on a topic that interests us old people most: what comes after, if anything at all."

Sarah echoes him, "We agree. If it all ends here, it ends in a peaceful sleep; if, on the other hand, there is another life after death, we can continue our inquiries and philosophize together as we please. What could be better?"

Jordan, wanting to make a joke like a learned philosopher, adds: "Asclepius is waiting for more roosters!" Most of the participants had already gotten up and there was no time to ask Jordan about these enigmatic words. The group was walking towards the dining room where piano notes of a Chopin ballad could be heard.

Mat, however, didn't follow them. He stayed a little longer in the chair; he felt very tired. His enemy, the Parkinson's, that has plagued him for so many years, was making him weaker every day, and now, without realizing it, he fell asleep where he was and entered a dream.

He found himself in a large white cloud in motion. A kaleidoscope of images appeared before him, one after the other, overlapping, fading into each other with great speed. He could recognize a few faces here and there: Wynona and Teri, and with them Karen and Will when they were still

children. And many faces of other boys and girls too, children he had met in school. Among and behind them, he saw some portraits of teachers and colleagues that he could hardly recognize. They were all twirling around, appearing for a moment and then were immediately replaced by other figures. Some were hard to make out but had names: Elfie, Harry, Pixie, Kio, Gus... And then, images of St. Marguerite's Retreat House, of the Institute, and his own study. He was also there himself. The cat, too, in its usual spot on the sofa, and Ann was there saying something to him. Suddenly the cloud began to darken, swallowing the images and covering everything around it. In an increasingly swirly movement, it quickly moved away towards the horizon, taking everything away in its path.

At that moment Mat woke up. He looked around, but the Green Hill Retirement Community was gone. He couldn't tell if he was still dreaming. Now he was in a lovely garden. A soft light filtered through from the branches of majestic trees, laying its rays on large green lawns crossed by long avenues, where human figures walked without making any noise. A most profound stillness reigned in that place. Mat felt relaxed and light, in good shape. Looking around, he saw that one of those figures from earlier was coming towards him, with a big welcoming smile.

"You must be Mat, the newcomer... It's a pleasure to have you with us. You know how it is... Here we are still the same. It's not that we are bored, but we are quite perplexed."

"Perplexed? Why?"

"What concerns us is that, of all those who come from the living world, nobody has the qualifications to join us. But you, dear Mat, apparently have them."

"I'm starting to understand something, but not quite. Can I ask who you all are? And also, based on what credentials would I deserve to be part of your group?"

"You know, when Socrates died, he promised himself that, if he had an afterlife, he would have dedicated even that to inquiry by dialoguing with friends on, let's say, *philosophical* issues. We are all here. I am Crito of Alopece."

"Crito... How lucky I am! So, the one I see in the middle must be Socrates..."

"Yes, it's really him. Here we continue to appear as we did when living, even if, of course, we no longer have a body."

"And the others? Who are the others?"

"They are all those who have practiced philosophy by dialoguing and putting their face to it, taking on all the risks of the undertaking. Over there with Socrates are Apollodorus, Critobulus, Hermogenes, Aeschines, Antisthenes, Ctesippus, Simmia, and Terpsion. In the other small group nearby are Xenophon, Aristodemus, Simon the Shoemaker, and then Phaedrus, Phaedo and... in short, all the Athenian disciples and some others who joined, like Epictetus, for example. But let's get closer. You will recognize all of them. Do you understand now why you are here with us?"

“I think so. I, too, believed in the value of philosophical dialogue and the practice of orality as joint inquiry... But tell me, Crito, what are the topics you generally investigate? I suppose that we don't have the same problems here as we did in the city. I already notice, for example, that we don't have communication problems. I have the impression that our thoughts meet and recognize each other on the fly, without the need to utter words.”

“I see that you're beginning to settle in. You will discover many other differences. Now, please, let's go see the others so that everyone can greet and welcome you as you deserve.”

“And Plato? Is he also with all of you?”

“You know, when Plato got here, he was very surprised and rather disappointed. He expected a different world, a kind of illuminated sky full of eternal forms with souls who, whirling in the void, would be blessed with the contemplation of pure ideas, a place where inquiry would end with the final possession of the full, eternal truth.”

“Is it not so?”

“No, it's not the case. What's eternal is only inquiry. Even in this other world, truths are contained within discourses, in their intersection and support of each other, in their rubbing.”

“In the end, how did it go with Plato?”

“After the initial disappointment, he resigned himself to the evidence and he continued to do what he usually did in life (apart from writing), that is *dialeghestai*.”

“And what about his relation to Socrates, what can you tell me?”

“Dear Mat, I say that we have definitely moved on from that question. It is closed once and for all! Here there are no conflicts, and nobody lies. Plato explained that he had decided to write the dialogues that his master was making in the city only to preserve their memory for future generations.”

“But, did he also explain to him why in his writings he put also different things than what Socrates had really said?”

“Of course, Mat. But this is water under the bridge... Here, we've arrived now. Let's go see Socrates. He's waiting for you.”

In Mat's eyes, Socrates looked exactly as he had always imagined him based on the iconography he knew. In a way it was like watching a movie, with the only difference being that now he could communicate with him. Meanwhile Socrates went towards him and greeted him with these words:

“Mat, my friend, you are welcome in the garden of the *Sokratikoi*!”

“Socrates, if I could, I would be extremely enthusiastic to have you present here! For me you have been a such an influential master...”

“Emotions are dangerous and, fortunately, we are free from them in this place. We are also free from the masters. Here we all have equal dignity.”

“Socrates, you taught us this during your life with your words 'I know that I know nothing'.”

“Yes, this is true. I tried to make people understand the importance of this principle, but with mortals it is almost impossible.”

“I think we agree that there is only one path: philosophizing together.”

“Of course, we all agree on this, but you see how many we are... We are too few, don't you think?”

“You know, Socrates, I have spent my life teaching thinking, but I started with children, from the age of 5 or 6, hoping that, if they start young, maybe...”

Meanwhile a small group had formed around Socrates and Mat and everyone was tuned into the thoughts they were exchanging. At that point Xenophon intervened, commenting:

“Be careful, Mat. Don't let Plato hear of this project of practicing philosophy with younger children. He always thought differently on this subject, you know.”

Everyone was very curious, and Phaedrus said:

“I'd like Mat to tell us about philosophy with children. It seems like a very intriguing topic to me. Socrates, you too have had some experience with teenagers during your life.”

“To tell you the truth,” Mat replied, “I first thought that even the youngest children were capable of philosophizing having made a comparison between the questions all children ask adults, and the questions Socrates asked his fellows Athenians. To me it seemed like these were the same kind of questions, that is, ‘illegitimate’ questions.”

“Do you mean,” Phaedo intervened, “that they were *considered* illegitimate by the Athenians for Socrates to ask just as they are by adults for children to ask?”

“Yes, exactly. Children, too, are like gadflies: they ask questions that adults find annoying. But you will all agree that it is with these kinds of questions that one begins to philosophize. I had a further similarity in mind: Socrates was silenced by hemlock; children are silenced by indifference or by discipline.”

Feeling as if he were called to participate, Socrates said:

"I like to be compared to children and their desire to ask 'illegitimate' questions, as you called them, Mat. However, in this regard, a question would come to my mind: in your opinion, am I like a child because I philosophize, or do I philosophize because I am like a child?"

Mat felt slightly confused about this question, but at the same time he was completely sure that he was in the presence of Socrates. Then he gave this answer: "And you, Socrates, what do you think?"

"If we're sharing the premise that philosophizing begins with asking 'illegitimate' questions, then, tell me, Mat, was I asking those questions for the same reasons that motivate a child? Or must we assume that the reasons are different?"

"Different, without a doubt."

"Therefore, now we must investigate the reasons for this difference..."

"Do you mean, Socrates, that we must understand the reasons for the difference between the child's reasons and the philosopher's ones?"

"I see you are following me closely... Now, tell me, my friend, could a child avoid asking his questions or is he constrained to, in a sense, by his age?"

"I would say he is constrained by his limited experience as well as by his need to understand the world."

"And will we say the same thing for the philosopher or something different?"

"Something different, Socrates."

"We must say, therefore, that a child is not a philosopher just as a philosopher is not a child. Does this conclusion seem correct to you?"

"Correct, without a doubt, Socrates."

"So, dear Mat, see if you agree with this difference: children really *are* the way they are, philosophers act *as if*. I am capable of irony, they are not."

"That's right, Socrates. I agree."

"Despite this, you're right to hold that even children, for *their* reasons, can practice philosophical dialogue, as long as they are sufficiently able to speak and communicate."

At that point, many asked Mat questions to find out more about his philosophy with children program, and the conversation went on. When it seemed like everyone learned enough, Socrates made a proposal:

“I would like to ask Mat to give us a demonstration of his way of doing philosophy, as he did with children. Please, Mat, choose which of us should answer and start asking questions.”

“To tell you the truth, I'm not used to asking the questions, not like you, Socrates. Moreover... dialogue, as I proposed it, is never between just two people.”

“In what sense?” Epictetus asked, and added, “If I had admitted several people at the same time to my philosophical clinic, the discussions would have become confused and disorganized.”

In support of Epictetus, Socrates said:

“I, too, believe that speaking one at a time, agreeing on who questions and who answers, is an indispensable rule for philosophical dialogue.”

Plato had arrived shortly before but had remained a bit aloof listening in with a somewhat indecipherable expression. It was then that he intervened with the calm and serenity that befits the place where they were:

“In my opinion, if the dialogue aims to discover some truth, it cannot be done in any other way. It is the philosopher who, by pressing the interlocutor with his maieutic questions, leads him towards the awareness of his ignorance and, from that, towards the truth. We all remember how Socrates did with Meno's slave.”

Socrates was a little perplexed by Plato's words, but then, with the utmost calm and serenity, he said:

“Thinking back to that scene as you described it, I must say that I was not behaving like a gadfly but like a towing ox, with that poor boy struggling to double the area of a square... Up to a certain point in our path he arrived at things by himself, but, since he realized that the solution could not be doubling the length of the side, I did nothing but drag him almost by force towards the truth, the one I had in mind but not *he*.”

After that Plato added: “It would have been well done if my doctrine of recollection had proved true...”

And Socrates: “But, now we know how things stand. So, dear Mat, would you like to explain better how you understand philosophical practice?”

“We must experience it in order to understand it better, but I'll try to summarize what I did by saying that, in essence, I bet everything on the community of inquiry. In other words, this is it: a philosopher causes a dialogue to start, vouches for its seriousness and its value, orchestrates it during its execution, facilitates the most critical passages. Eventually, the sense of community increases, together with the energy directed to inquiry. In such a social and intellectual environment, the conversation moves in all directions so that everyone can both ask and answer, contributing to the

advancement of a common *logos*.”

At this point he was interrupted by Socrates who remarked:

“Dear Mat, in doing so, isn't there a risk that everyone will express his or her own *doxa* or even the first thing that comes to mind without anyone examining it? And that the final result turns into a mere showcase of opinions?”

“I admit, Socrates, there is this risk, especially when the narcissism that always rages among mortals becomes particularly aggressive. It is precisely because of this that the *gadfly* must turn himself or herself into a *facilitator*. That is, favouring the passage from the showcase of opinions to the construction of a polyphonic dialogue, rising from the public space of the ‘between’.”

“Tell me one more thing, Mat. Do you think that, instead of refuting a *doxa* directly and personally as I have always done, it is preferable to wait for a self-criticism to which everyone would submit, comparing his or her belief with those of the other interlocutors?”

“Precisely so: by comparing and contrasting the manifold beliefs, and with the wise and observant support of the facilitator... The results begin to be seen when the participants in the dialogue are transformed into a community of inquiry, wherein both social and intellectual relationships are kept alive, and knowledge arises ‘as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, [and] it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled.’ I'm sure that someone will be in high spirits recognizing his own words.”

Hearing this quotation from his *Seventh Letter*, indeed Plato seemed to show signs of a smile. In any case, he made his way, joining the group that had gathered around Mat, whose words had aroused curiosity and several comments. Mat did not want to dodge Socrates's invitation for him to give a demonstration of his philosophy with children. So, after gaining everyone's general attention, he said:

“I consider it a great reward to have been welcomed into the garden of the *Sokratikoi*. In life I learned a lot from Socrates, and I developed his teachings in my own way as required by the times and places in which I lived. But I see that something profound brings together all of us, here where differences of space and time do not count. It will be a great joy for me if you all take part in this circle of thought. Let us therefore unite to perpetuate the practice of philosophical dialogue indefinitely and everywhere.”

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