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In the Mood for a Little Dialogue?

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A Dialogue About Whether or Not to Dialogue

"Writing dialogue is the only respectable way of contradicting yourself." -- Tom Stoppard

"You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts." -- Kahlil Gibran

"For me theorems are true or false pretty much independent of their corresponding proofs; my internal beliefs must be the final arbiter of whether I accept or reject the mathematics I see." -- Richard Hamming (famous Mathematician)

“Most men will not swim before they are able to. Is that not witty? Naturally, they won't swim! They are born for the solid earth, not for the water. And naturally they won't think. They are made for life, not for thought. Yes, and he who thinks, what’s more, he who makes thought his business, he may go far in it, but he has bartered the solid earth for the water all the same, and one day he will drown.” -- Herman Hesse, Steppenwolf

"If, as my philosophy teacher was fond of quoting (or paraphrasing) A. N. Whitehead, all of western philosophy is an extended footnote to Plato and Aristotle, why then I'm but a footnote to a footnote, the mere right parens of the closing parenthetical remark." -- Raam Gokhale

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Scene & Players: The scene is once again Wadeswar, the eating establishment in Pune that has been a recurring place for many of Raam’s dialogues. As far as the players, several you already know as denizens of other dialogues. One, however, new to the format, is currently in far off America and can't enjoy the wonderful vegetarian food and even more wonderful company. But don’t worry: as Ram is about to count heads, he'll make the introductions.

Ram (on the phone): I have to go now, dear. Abhay and Gita are here and Supratim may call at any moment.

Gita: Is that Arpita? Say hello for me. Hello and (looking mock-seriously at her watch) goodbye...ha, ha just kidding.
(kidding or not, Ram cuts the phone)

**Abhay:** Done? I have a question if I may open, though your friend Supratim hasn't called in yet. Nothing too complicated; a simple matter of counting. Counting Supratim and of course yourself, I gather you're expecting four participants or 'victims' as you so amusingly put it, but the quotes you emailed us--none of which I can think of excluding to match the number of participants as is your usual custom--are five in number. What gives?

And oh the title: ha, ha, isn't it a little too much like a seedy guy opening a raincoat and saying, "You want to buy a watch?"

**Gita:** Oh I like the title just fine although I already have a watch (again mock-seriously holds up her wrist). Perhaps because I see it more like a different question: namely, 'Anyone for tennis?' Dialogues are after all verbal tennis, though they ideally should be ‘played’ for the love of the game rather than points, even if ‘love’ is a point of sorts, the starting point, the ‘unpoint’.

And regards the mismatch between quotes and participants, maybe Ram's invited a fifth without telling us. Say that reminds me: how is Kedar?

**Ram:** Very funny. You know we don't exactly see each other I to I these days (here Ram dots an imaginary i to indicate which homonym/homophone he means though it must be pointed out that i with a dot is yet another homonym/homophone.)

You know I must confess I'm a little intimidated by the prospect of juggling four participants let alone five. True, I did that well enough in the prison dialogue--you remember Gita, I kind of dragged you into that after Sushama introduced us. But that may've just been a happy accident.

**Gita:** Yeah as I recall, Geoffrey Klempner used the words, "in his inimitable style". I for one enjoyed the inclusion of a little poetry in that dialogue...come to think of it, didn't your first dialogue--the Slumdog thing--also have a poem? Maybe with this one we can make three the charm?

**Abhay:** Hmm...if I would've known the poetic history, I might've liked a poem in our aesthetics dialogue too where it clearly would've been appropriate. Though I don't know--the 'To dialogue or to treatise?' question I suspect doesn't lend itself to poetry.

**Ram:** Funny you should say that Abhay. I actually had penned a poem for this occasion and it surprisingly even alludes to Kedar though at the time I didn't know he would come up in either name or person.
Gita: Interesting! May we hear the poem?

Ram: OK, but this is just the first part...

To die a log or to live life large and logical

That is the, or those are the

Questions we utter in many voices

Or is it just one horn of the tried and true dilemma, the excluded middle?

Anyway those are the questions--respectively!--I should say

Or risk losing the respect of the figurines,

That is those that work with figures: the mathematicians.

I know: it happened to a friend of mine once,

Or is it a one-time friend to whom it keeps happening?

He was a silly man or perhaps a funny boy who satirized the ‘School of Athens’,

With Plato of the dialogues middle-fingering the sky,

And Aristotle of the logical analytics middle-fingering the earth.

...I really shouldn't make so much fun of Kedar, but he just seems to bring that out in me.

Gita: Funny poem, Ram, and only a bit silly! Too bad Supratim missed it.

Supratim (his voice coming out of Ram's phone): Oh no--I heard it. I've been on for a while now.

Ram: Supratim? But how? Did anybody else hear the phone ring?

Abhay: You know what must've happened? When you hung up on Arpita you must've inadvertently pressed the wrong button and picked up Supratim who just happened to be calling in at the same moment.

Supratim: Hmm...maybe wrong button to hang up on Arpita but right button as far as I'm concerned. Have we started?
Ram: How to answer that question? Perhaps with a line from the 'Yes' song. (Here, Ram, seeing questioning looks from everyone, elaborates). You know the Zen-like American rock group ‘Yes’? Anyway the line is "Time is a measure before it's begun." Even if there is a beginning to time like in the big-bang, we can still ask what happened before that beginning. So it is with these dialogues. They percolate in our heads, and before that in perhaps other heads, long before they’ve officially begun.

Gita: Why don't you tell us more about that alleged quote of Aristotle you emailed us? 'Alleged' because I couldn't find it on Google. That seems like a good place to begin.

Ram: Yeah I tried getting the exact wording, but I too couldn't find on Google the version I remembered from my grad school teacher. Anyway it went something like this: We reason better when by ourselves than with others. My teacher attributed it to Aristotle whose reason it’s supposed to be for preferring demonstration over dialectic when doing science.

Of course, a demonstration is only as good as its premises or, as Aristotle called them, the first principles which can't themselves be established by demonstration. So for knowledge of first principles, Aristotle does reserve a role for dialectic but he also says in other places that such knowledge is had by induction and also by Nous, his mysterious Active Intellect.

Now there's a lot of controversy over the exact role these three play in actual inquiry but, as I'm not really interested in exegesis, I'll propose what I think is the most charitable interpretation--charitable in the sense that it best jibes with the way science is widely thought to work today.

Induction plays a role in the formation of maximally-explanatory or projectable concepts or predicates from sensations. Thus 'green' is more projectable than grue for those of you familiar with Goodman’s riddle. Aristotle's Passive Intellect, which "becomes the intelligible form of all things", is responsible for this type of induction, which, as they say 'cuts the world at its joints.

Induction also plays a role with dialectic in coming up with maximally-explanatory or deductively-integrated propositions about these concepts that the Passive Intellect has perceived. This activity which we call abduction is performed by the Active Intellect through a combination of what we today call induction proper and dialectic. The Active Intellect clearly and the Passive Intellect less so (and perhaps only when exegesis is 'stretched' to cover modern developments like Goodman's riddle), both operate by the 'invisible hand of habit' and, to the extent habits are formed by experience, Aristotle may be
regarded as an empiricist even though he exalts demonstration. Expanding on what my teacher said, demonstration is only the preferred method for laying out results already discovered through a combination of immediate experience in the case of the formation of concepts and accumulated experience or wisdom in the case of abductive first principles about those concepts. In this way, the Passive and Active Intellects are responsible for guiding induction and dialectic to a true conclusion in the search for first principles to serve as starting points for a deductive exposition of a scientific theory.

That at any rate is, I think, the most charitable interpretation of Aristotle's sometimes confusing characterization of what he's doing--confusing because as you can see, these are complex issues.

Gita: Kudos Ram for a wonderfully concise explanation of Aristotle’s scientific method! You might be not 'merely', but 'nothing less than the right paren's of the closing parenthesis remark' to paraphrase your own quote.

Now I think I know the answer, but those unfamiliar with Aristotle may be confused about one thing. If Aristotle does reserve a role for dialectic or dialogue in apprehending the first principles, what are we to make of the quote, 'We reason better when by ourselves than with others'?

Ram: Good point Gita! While for Plato, dialectic was dialogue--i.e. reasoning with others --for Aristotle, dialectic is more a form of reasoning which we could conduct by ourselves. Aristotle's form of reasoning is the currently accepted form in philosophy, science and academia for that matter. That form I'll call the treatise approach. Thus we have the two types of inquiry: dialogue and treatise.

Abhay: I take it's a forgone conclusion that you're going to side with the dialogue form of dialectic, the 'to dialogue' answer to the question posed by your subtitle--whether or not to dialogue--being like Descartes’”I think therefore I am”, almost a performative utterance, if I've understood that phrase correctly.

Ram: Well, "I think therefore I am" is supposed to be a performative utterance in that it’s true whenever you’re thinking or rather when you’re doubting.

Hmm...at any rate I am not sure 'whether or not to dialogue' can be described as a performative utterance. Perhaps it can better be described as a self-answering question. Anyway, you look like you had a further comment Abhay?

Abhay: Yes, actually. It must be pointed out that the way you write dialogues is by reasoning by yourself not with others. You don't take actual conversations and polish them a little as I think your erstwhile e-publisher Geoffrey Klempner
supposed. Your point of departure is the quotes we submit and from then on it's mostly you.

**Ram:** That's not entirely my fault. I would like greater participation but I don't always get it. I certainly didn't get it with Kedar, who said he wanted to do philosophy but we always fought because he wanted to establish his positions and discredit mine if they disagreed with his, whereas I wanted to explore all the possibilities, all the different consistencies.

In fact, most people who I've invited to 'dialogue' are under the intimidating impression that they have to come prepared to debate and perhaps because that intimidates them, I don't always get the level of participation I want. Perhaps that was also true with Kedar, the arguments we had being due to a misunderstanding or to us being at 'cross-purposes' in our approach to philosophy, me regarding the purpose of philosophy as a kind of beautiful interaction while he regarding it as akin to planting, as it were, the stamp of truth--truth as he perceived it--on conquered territory.

Anyway argumentative debate is the furthest thing from my mind: I want to hear what people have to say about the things I'm interested in, their reasons for their beliefs and even how my perception of their characters has shaped their beliefs. I should say my perception of their characters is influenced by everything from their quote selection, their words in these informal pre-writing conversations, even their body language. It's all part of a consistent picture, though I must confess I have in the past occasionally depicted people differently from how they are in real life, at least when it's flattering to them to do so.

So you could say, I reason with others, but only to the extent they can be reasoned with. No that sounds too argumentative...what did I want to say?

**Gita:** No, I get you, Ram. In fact, even in the case of Plato, it's an open question how much the dialogues were based on actual conversations, how much reasoning there was with the mathematician Theaetetus in Plato's *Theaetetus* dialogue for example. And even in the case Socrates, isn't it commonly thought that, while no doubt an inspiring figure, in the dialogues he is generally a mouthpiece for Plato's own views?

So perhaps we, like Drona's statue for Ekalavya in the Mahabharata, may be inspiring figures of a sort but you're the one with the job to get it on paper. But don't worry: as the 'apple for the teacher'--the gurudakshina--I, unlike Drona in the Mahabharata, won't demand your right thumb; I'll settle for a role in your dialogue.
Ram: Oh don't belittle yourself...'the statues speak', so to speak. With body language, they even move movingly, ha, ha.

Abhay: Speaking of body language...I did want to make a point about the opening line of your poem earlier, namely 'To die a log or to live life large and logical'. Acting like a 'log' connotes for me poor body language, while good body language is I feel critical for open, lively dialogue. So perhaps by breaking the word dialogue into die-a-log, you’ve turned it into its opposite. Similarly, the phrase, 'live life large and logical' sounds a bit odd since to be confined to writing strictly logical treatises seems to me to be a bit too confining--not at all living life large. I don't know what you make of that or is it just supposed to be a line in a cute poem, not to be taken too seriously?

Ram: Interesting point. I hadn't thought of that. I guess my tendency--perhaps my flaw, perhaps my virtue--is to be inclusive, to include both logs and those who live life large in dialogues and in poetry, though I think today, we've excluded the extremes and struck a happy medium...

(There's a pause in the dialogue during which Ram's fidgety body language seems to convey an uncomfortableness with the flaws in his poem.)

Gita: Ooh I know how to put a serious undertone to your first line, though I'm not sure you meant it that way when you wrote it. It could be a male-female thing as discussed in your Aesthetics dialogue which I must confess I read before coming as a sort of introduction to Abhay whom I had not met before today.

Abhay: As I read the prison dialogue to get introduced to you Gita...Sorry, what were you saying?

Gita: Each horn of the dilemma in your first line, like the yin-yang, yearns for its opposite: logs might not want to be always so wooden and go against the grain if you will...may want to catch fire from the spark of good conversation though it may consume them; and people who live large may occasionally like the control of logic and maybe other types of control besides.

Abhay: Hmm...more than just male/female, it sounds positively like sex, in that each participant even when satisfied with his or her own 'satisfaction' is nevertheless curious about the other's grass, is it greener, etc.

Ram: Oh I know how to fix the poem. Change 'To die a log or to live life large and logical' to 'To die a log or to live life large yet logical'. Does that work?

Gita: Oh (pointing to the phone Ram is still holding up, if a bit absently), aren't we neglecting Supratim?
Supratim (from the phone): Oh no--I'm quite enjoying listening to the interaction. It's just that being on the phone makes it hard to jump in. Must be because of the body language point just made, namely its absence in both directions for me. That and, as I'm new to this format, I thought it appropriate to defer to the veterans.

Gita: No go on, Supratim. We'll be all ears. What do you think of the 'to dialogue or to treatise' question? From Ram's pre-dialogue description of you as a frequent contributor to scholarly journals, I thought you'd come down on the 'to treatise' side. But in view of the quotes you've selected, I'm not so sure...

Supratim: Very perceptive Gita! Since quoting from Ram's poem seems to be the trend, I'll start by recalling two other lines from the poem, specifically:

"Questions we utter in many voices

Or is it just one horn of the tried and true dilemma, the excluded middle?"

I think the 'to dialogue or to treatise' is a false dilemma; it doesn't represent an excluded middle, if by that you mean a tautology like P or ~P; there are other 'voices' that may be uttered.

Ram: Very intriguing. I thought I was covering all the alternative ways of conducting inquiry. Could you elaborate?

Supratim: Certainly. My selected quotes, as Gita observed, point to a third alternative, Yes, the Zen alternative, if you will: the 'uninquiry'.

Abhay: Yes, I see. The Steppenwolf 'quote' does suggest that both dialogue and treatise make the mistake of thinking or reasoning which represents for the author murky, watery depths man is unsuited for. I might put the word quote in quotes, however, because though I've only recently read the book, I can't seem to remember the passage. But it is consistent with another book of Hesse's, namely Siddhartha in which the final path the titular hero settles on, also is one in which all questions, all searches, end or dissolve in the pure experience of ferrying people back and forth across the river.

Supratim: We could just have a quote from Siddhartha, an eminently quotable book...though it's a bit short on dialogue which is the topic at hand. I can just remember Siddhartha's recurring terse line, "I can think, I can wait, I can fast". I guess in his final role as the ferryman, he has struck literally the happy medium, no longer thinking or searching for wisdom as he has throughout the book or practicing the discipline of fasting as during his experience as a Samana, but
waiting patiently, contentedly on people, serving without the tedium one might associate with serving.

Gita: Interesting. And curious isn’t it, how the water metaphor is used for thinking in *Steppenwolf* and for the alternative to thinking, namely just being—or should I say, nothing less than being, as in being in the moment—, in *Siddhartha*. Yet it’s the same author. Maybe the fact that Siddhartha is not in the water where he could drown, but in a boat helping people across the water suggests something?

Supratim: Intriguing. Let me think about that.

Ram: OK. While you do that Supratim, let me just observe this use of water as a metaphor for both thinking and being makes me think of Thales famous utterance at the dawn of philosophy, namely "All is water". Water was no doubt chosen as a first principle because by condensation into earth and rarefaction into air it can be imagined to become all things.

This water theme also seeps its way into contemporary popular philosophy. As my daughter’s favorite philosopher-cum-martial-artist Bruce Lee said, 'Be water!'—though as a martial artist I’m not sure how well his body language was suited to be a philosopher, though for all I know he might’ve been doing a performative utterance or something.

(Mischievous grin slowly turning to pensive look) Hmm, seriously...'Be water!' Grounding ethics in an unstated metaphysics through the use of poetic metaphor, the metaphor being a performance, like in martial arts—this is an interesting consistency in eastern thought that may be worth investigating further, perhaps with my daughter.

Anyway in Western philosophy water is a primary being precisely because of its potential for becoming all things. I hope I’m not being too dense or rarefied, or for that matter ‘waterlogged’.

Supratim: Ha, ha, no, but maybe we can bring both the *Siddhartha* and *Steppenwolf* metaphors together by considering the subject of another book, a nonfiction one, I’ve read: namely, Malcolm Gladwell’s *Blink*. There, the central theme is that experts reach a point where they make decisions quicker, with the decisions being in fact more reliable than deliberate thinking by using a process that can only be described as intuition. What we call intuition is a neural pathway that may’ve originally been formed by years of thinking, but in the expert, the pathway is now hardwired such that the thinking is simply bypassed
and a best conclusion is reached that might've otherwise been lost or become “sicklied over with the pale cast of thought” to quote Hamlet.

**Ram:** Hmm... Plato’s *Theaetetus* dialogue, which Gita mentioned, is the source of what in epistemology is called the ‘JTB’ or justified, true belief definition of knowledge. Following it, I took it as a given that if knowledge is the objective of inquiry, justification or providing reasons in either dialogue or treatise form is unavoidable.

Your Steppenwolf quote, or rather our analysis in light of Hesse’s own *Siddhartha* and Gladwell’s *Blink*, suggests that the best approach to inquiry is to bypass reasoning all together or rather float above it, ford it like the raging river it is through intuition. I’m reluctant to trace this insight to the Steppenwolf quote, however, because it contrasts thinking not just with intuition but with ‘life’. This suggests that thinking should be expunged from life entirely not just those corners of it where we’ve developed intuition. That inquiry itself, not just the reasoning approaches to inquiry, should be bypassed. This is at present more Zen than I can handle.

**Supratim:** Is it really? Why inquire if one already knows everything one needs to live life happily? Or to put another way: is staying within your limits—maryada purushotam Ram in the Sanskrit—, i.e. your limits of what it is possible for you to be inquisitive or acquisitive about, part of your idea of perfection?

**Abhay:** Hmm... is this an inquiry or an inquisition?

**Ram:** No it’s OK. Abhay. It’s the natural question to ask. After all, as my wife and I are fond of saying, ‘It is irresponsible to take on responsibilities beyond what one can be held responsible for’. So indeed why inquire when one already knows everything one needs to live life happily? Or to paraphrase a beer commercial, why ask why?

Perhaps I can begin to answer it by considering the second quote you proposed Supratim, namely the mathematician Hamming’s surprising saying that his beliefs are the “final arbiters” of the mathematics he sees pretty much independent of any proof. This Hamming must be quite the Ramanujan since as far as I know only Ramanujan possessed mathematical intuition to such a degree. More likely Hamming may be hamming. Proofs or reasons why are necessary for any inquiry into truth.

**Gita:** No let’s be charitable to Hamming Ram. Godel’s results show that in every axiomatizable system strong enough to contain arithmetic there would be unprovable truths, right? But many mathematicians/logicians have wondered
whether there are any unprovable truths significant or interesting from a mathematical perspective.

For example, Fermat’s theorem was supposed by some to be such an instance but it too was proven a few years back. So ultimately may be the entire set of interesting conjectures Outstanding or yet to come.

So Hamming’s point may be that if a logician using Godel’s recipe comes up with a candidate for mathematical truth—a truth that could be proved in the metalanguage to be unprovable but true in the base language—a mathematician with his ‘nose for mathematical beauty’ should be the final arbiter—indeed of the logician’s metaproof—of whether the cooked-up Godel sentence is in fact a mathematical truth, a truth beautiful enough to be regarded as math instead of some obscurantist code.

**Supratim:** Or man is the decision procedure for the work of any machine.

**Ram:** Say, I like that. Who says mathematicians are nothing but glorified accountants lacking the poet’s fire? But I’m not sure it answers your maryada purushotam question, Supratim.

**Abhay:** I think in all this ‘logico-philosophicus’, or should I say ‘logico-philosopher’s-fuss’, I’ve lost track of Supratim’s original question.

**Supratim:** Uh, the question was why inquire if one already knows everything one needs to live life happily?

**Ram:** I think my short answer to that is because disinterested inquiry is part of what I need to be happy.

**Supratim:** Is that true? And even if so, will it always be true? Though man may be the decision procedure for the work of any machine, man is mortal, his faculties are frail.

**Ram:** So is a machine if only less so.

**Supratim:** So ultimately, though lifespans of both may increase, the machine always proving more durable than the man, the machine will always seek out the man to judge whether its work meets man, the final arbiter’s idea of beauty. And when they meet, for both man and machine, inquiry must give way to a summing up, an exploration of the finite things that have been learned. The enterprise of knowing ends with a ‘Know Thyself’, if I may borrow the title of one of your earliest dialogues.
Abhay: In fact, I’ve read many of your dialogues Ram. I don’t think you inquire anymore but explore artistically the implications of what you’ve already learned. And through dialogues—be they real dialogues, monologues, or silent dialogues, to recall what you said about dialogues percolating in other heads before they’ve begun—, you’ve become somewhat an expert in the poetry of what you’ve learned if not always its deepest implications. Perhaps your childlike uncomfortableness in talking about yourself restrains you from that.

Supratim: Hmm...you make me curious about reading some of the other dialogues Abhay.

I would only add that that childlike simplicity is the art of conversation. And ideally, with participants sort of Gladwellian experts in the art of conversation, dialogue is not inquiry but a kind of intuitive flowering of the participants.

Gita: Wow we’re really getting inspired. I think we’re saying the art of conversation involves, childlike-ly, not revealing too much of either yourself or your subject. In that way, it’s quite different from a stereotypical older person’s self-absorbed rant, on the one hand, and the impersonal objective tone of a treatise on the other. If I too may wax poetic: it’s just like how both in rising or setting, the sun looks best when only partially visible.

Ram: Ah, that’s poetry! I would only add that just as the setting sun can be as beautiful as the morning sun, the self-absorbed rant stereotype of old people may be just that: a stereotype.

Abhay: If I may be more platitudinous amidst all this poetry: the ‘to dialogue or to treatise’ question may be as old as Plato and Aristotle, but as an IT professional, I have to say it continues today in the question of whether to chat or email, whether to perform a task through active programming or canned or passive software. Maybe just as both Aristotle’s Active and Passive Intellects are necessary, the happy medium is what we call interactivity, or man’s dialogue with machines.

Ram: Oh, c’mon! That also is poetical, maybe a modern take on poetry. Now I’d like to try my hand if I may:

The constraint of weaving in actual snippets of conversation, of reflecting accurately participants’ characters through words, body language etc. is not a constraint for me but a delightful stock in trade. I can only hope I’ve used it skillfully, that I’m not being platitudinous, though sometimes I think I am because the world may have already passed me.
In fact, I’ve even wondered whether the etymological root of ‘platitudinous’ is Plato. FYI, it’s not: the root of platitudinous is flatness which hopefully I have not been guilty of.

Anyway, now for my waxing poetical: like imposing a rhyme scheme in poetry or cultivating Japanese bonsai, your words, your characters usually lead me down unexpected yet fruitful paths. Is the result a monologue or a silent dialogue?

I can only wonder as must you all wonder. And who knows, maybe it is the silent dialogue we alluded to, perhaps with our mysterious fifth Participant, who from outside the time-limits of this dialogue, hidden maybe in some fifth dimension, mediates and even contributes…