

Look Both Ways Before Crossing the Street Using the Dialectic Method in Everyday Life

By

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When I first started going to college almost 35 years ago I already thought I knew everything that mattered. It's not that I was a know-it-all or a high academic achiever, because I was neither. But I was a fundamentalist Christian and, as such, was led to believe that, at 19 years old, I had the answers to all the perennial questions of life figured out. How do you know? *Because the Bible tells me so.* What is truth? *The Word of God.* How did we get here? *God created us.* Why is there evil in the world? *Because Man sinned.* What is the meaning of life? *Being Saved by believing in Jesus.* What am I supposed to do with my life? *Help save others by getting them to accept Jesus as their lord and savior too.*

So, I went to college not expecting to learn anything of significance, thinking, instead, that everything I thought I knew would be reinforced. Given that I enrolled in the Bible Department at a Southern Baptist College deep in the Heart of Texas, you might expect that was true. Fortunately, there were other factors on my side. Firstly, I had not been born into a churchgoing family nor grown up in the Bible Belt. For most my life, identifying as a Christian was not crucial to being in relationship with my family or my community. I didn't need to believe to belong. In fact, when I first became a Born Again Christian as a teenager, I was initially embarrassed to let others know about it, fearing they'd poke fun of me. But, before long, I was toting a Bible, wore a "Jesus is Lord" belt buckle, and had a depiction of Christ ironed onto the back of my hoodie. Still, I'd only been a Christian five years when I started college, an identity that hadn't become deeply engrained, nor the only one I'd ever known, nor one I felt necessary for being accepted by my community.

Secondly, in 1983 the Southern Baptist Convention of Churches, the largest Protestant Denomination in the country, was not as conservative as it is today because the Fundamentalist takeover of the Convention, which wasn't complete until around 1990, hadn't yet happened; and, since Howard Payne University was a Liberal Arts College, all my professors encouraged their students to think for themselves and used the critical method in their instruction—including what they taught about the Bible and religion. So, I might have been in a Christian culture in a conservative part of the country, studying the Bible at a Southern Baptist university, but my *a priori* Christian beliefs were challenged, not reinforced by my studies.

Finally, the greatest factor in awakening from my religion induced stupor was three Southern Baptist Ministers who also happened to be brilliant professors, Dr. Randall Bush, Dr. Clyde Majors, and Dr. Wallace Roark. Dr. Bush, who was an Oxford graduate and the youngest of my professors, was extremely scholarly, and, during my first semester, taught me a concept that has become central to my way of thinking—bipolarity. In short, bipolarity is the philosophical notion that truth exists in a state of flux between two extremes, or poles. We become polarized from each when we cling to one extreme as if it were the only truth, but

bipolar truth requires us to think within the gray areas. It's little different than the meaning of the Taoist Yin/Yang symbol.

Dr. Majors, who was, perhaps the most traditional of these scholars, used to offer a towel to any student who said the Bible is literally true, so they could mop up, as he put it, "the living waters gushing out of their bellies," a reference to John 7:38.¹ Dr. Majors, who considered me one of his adopted sons, taught me Epistemology, the study of knowledge, about how we know, through which I learned we don't know and can't know. He taught me to face the reality that absolute certainty is out of the question and there is always room for doubt.

As much as I came to love and admire these two men, the man who has most shaped my mind and thinking, more than anyone else by far, is Dr. Wallace Roark, my philosophy professor. I learned a lot from Dr. Roark during my undergraduate education, but, more than anything else, he shaped the way my brain works and influenced the processes through which I continue to think. 35 years later, I recall little of his instruction, but *how* I think, not *what* I think, I attribute directly to this great teacher. He called this way of thinking the *Dialectic*, which he summarized by citing the Greek words, *men* and *de*, which, together, mean something like, "on the one hand... but on the other hand." The philosopher Mortimer Adler, founder of *Great Books of the Western World* and the Great Books Foundation, considered *men* and *de* to be Greek Civilization's most important contribution to the western world. "When we think of all of Greek culture, sculpture, and philosophy, and drama," Dr. Roark says, "we might wonder what Adler was thinking when he made such an audacious claim. Why would he say *one the one hand/but on the other hand* is the greatest contribution of the Greeks? Because it is a concise expression of the most powerful thinking tool known to [humankind]..."²

Although the Dialectic Method has a long philosophical history and development, Dr. Roark summarizes it well with three simple propositions;

- No statement is ever complete.
- There's always more to be said.
- I might be wrong.

If we consider just these principles when we think about things, then we are better thinkers than most. "'On the other hand,' That's the silver bullet," Roark says, "That's all it takes to become a good thinker. It's that simple."³

I'll say more about the Dialectic in a minute, but, first, when I say Dr. Roark helped shape my mind and the way I think with it, I literally mean he helped configure the neurological structure of my brain. Nowadays we know the human brain doesn't fully mature until around age 25 at the earliest, so, between 19 and 23, when I graduated, he, along with some help from Dr. Bush and Dr. Majors, seems to have reconfigured the way my brain had been

¹ "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture says, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water."

² Roark, Wallace, *Think Like an Octopus*, Wasteland Press, Shelbyville, KY, 2010, p. 7.

³ Ibid.

developing. Prior to this, as I mentioned, I was on the road to becoming a lifelong absolutist with a brain that wasn't satisfied until it felt certain. As I have said before, some neurologists are now saying our sense of knowing or certainty is an emotional state, not a rational one, that floods our system with dopamine, a neurotransmitter that signals our nerves to feel pleasure. In short, certainty feels great!

But certainty doesn't feel so great to me anymore, and hasn't since my professors, especially Dr. Roark who kept driving the point home, taught me there's no such thing. It was initially a painful shock to my system, and caused me to feel depression and anxiety as I went through dopamine withdrawal. I've fallen off the wagon a few times over the years, but, for the most part, I've had 35 years of mental sobriety. Actually, I don't think that's true. For, on the other hand, my brain still rewards me for habitual thinking, only instead of rewarding me for habitually being certain, my professors rewired it to reward me for habitually asking questions, for the feeling of *not* knowing. My brain doesn't feel satisfied until I question my answers. Years later, while preparing for the Unitarian Universalist ministry, I had an instructor, a Christian hospital chaplain, who said I see the world pathologically, meaning I always ask, "What's wrong with it." Pathology is the study of "what's wrong," which I do ask a lot, but what I'm really trying to get at is, What's missing? What more needs to be said? Knowing whatever I'm told might be wrong. If that makes me a pathological thinker, then I am guilty as charged. (Though I prefer the term, *critical thinker*—thinking critically.)

This may not be the way our species has evolved to think, given the formation of habits, including habitual thinking, is the basis of evolution (the process that shapes our bodies and determines our behaviors). Sticking with the tried and true, after all, is a great survival strategy most of the time. Even so, the uncertain brain, the brain that cherishes its doubt, is not unheard of. Mystics, philosophers, and scientists, and probably most Unitarian Universalists, demonstrate the same apophatic default, meaning they seek the truth through subtraction, by chipping away at it, like stonemasons seeking something else beneath it all.

Mystics like Meister Eckhart who call God, "Absolute Nothing," and said, "Love God as God is a not-God, a not-mind, a not-person, a not image,"⁴ or the author of the *Tao te Ching* who says, "Mystery within Mystery is the gateway to all understanding;"⁵ or philosophers like Socrates who said, "I am wise because I neither know, nor think that I know," or Bertrand Russell who said, "Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves,"⁶ or scientists, like Richard Feynman who said, "...scientific views end in awe and mystery, lost at the edge in uncertainty..."⁷ or Albert Einstein, who said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. [One] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead." So, there are many among some of our most insightful

⁴ Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000, p.157.

⁵ #1 [my own translation]

⁶ Russell, Bertrand, *The Problem of Philosophy*, (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1912, 1959) p. 161.

⁷ Feynman, Richard, *The Meaning of it All: Thoughts of a Citizen Scientist*, Perseus Books, Reading, MA, 1998.

and inspiring minds who are not only accustomed to not knowing, but for whom not knowing is a way of life, a way, for them, that is uplifting. “The higher [one] climbs, the less one understands,” St. John of the Cross exclaimed. How many people do you know who get high on doubt?

Dr. Roark was usually stoned out of his mind on it. In his book, *Think Like an Octopus*, “on the one hand, but on the other hand, on the other hand, on the other hand...” and so forth, he reminds us that he too had three great teachers who taught him about the Dialectic; Heraclitus, Socrates, and Hegel. The first of these, Heraclitus, the ancient Greek philosopher who famously said, “You can’t step into the same river twice,” introduced western thought to the notion of bipolarity. “Heraclitus stress the unity of opposites,” Dr. Roark says, “He believed that contradiction is the source of everything.”⁸ Recognizing this is key to dialectic thinking, to looking both ways before crossing the street. Again, as Roark says, “We must look both directions—also up and down—before proceeding with life. We must make dialectic thinking our new eye and mind of habit.”⁹

If Heraclitus was Dr. Roark’s Dr. Bush, teaching him about bipolarity, then, perhaps, Socrates was his Dr. Majors, teaching him there is no certainty, that we become wise when we neither know nor think that we know. “He, after all, was the wisest,” Roark says, “in the sense that he was at least aware of his ignorance; at least he did not pretend to understand things.”¹⁰ Think about this humility of mind as compared to Donald Trump who, during his campaign, claimed things like he knows “tax law better than almost anyone,”¹¹ that he knows “renewables better than any human being on Earth,”¹² or, “Nobody knows more about debt. I’m like the king of debt. I love debt,”¹³ and that, “I understand money better than anybody,”¹⁴ that, “nobody knows the [government] system better than I do,”¹⁵ “Nobody knows trade better than me,”¹⁶ and has most recently claimed he knows “everything there is to know about healthcare.”¹⁷ Trump isn’t smart enough to look both ways before crossing the street, because he can’t question his own beliefs, and the problem is he’s taking the whole nation across the busy byway with him. Wouldn’t it be great to have someone with the humility of Socrates leading the way instead?

Roark’s third dialectic mentor, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, is the 18th century philosopher who expressed the Dialectic as the process of thesis, countered by antithesis, resulting in a new synthesis, before the process starts all over again. The great brilliance of Hegel, like Dr. Roark, is in the recognition the Dialectic is a way of life that moves us forward; that, through the process of questioning our assumptions, we can improve our lives and life,

⁸ Roark, *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹¹ 10-3-16

¹² 4-13-16

¹³ 6-20-16

¹⁴ 6-21-16

¹⁵ 7-18-16

¹⁶ 3-3-16

¹⁷ 5-8-17

that we can grow and evolve as individuals and societies. More importantly for Roark is that a Hegelian dialectic requires us to understand that the world isn't black or white, it's black *and* white, that one extreme can't exist without the other, that they are two poles of a unified reality that can't exist without each other. It reminds us, as he puts it, "everything is connected," we live, "in a relational world... We are linked inextricably with each other, with the entire ecosystem."¹⁸

I don't need to go into more than this to explain the dialectic method. It's as simple as just thinking on the other hand, of questioning what you are told and what you believe. Yet, simple as it might be, Roark says, "The only way to become a good thinker is to think dialectically, to make the Dialectic as natural as breathing."¹⁹ So the question isn't about how to think. For the Dialectic is one of the first rules of life, of being wise, and staying safe, like looking both ways before crossing the street, looking on the other hand, *men* and *de*.

The real question is why? Why should we think dialectically? What does it mean to be a good thinker? Well there are lots of reasons that it makes our lives better, but the only one I'll emphasize now goes back to what Dr. Roark says about relationship, about the way it reminds us everything is connected and that we are all related. It was, after all, also Dr. Roark who first introduced me to the notion of a non-personal God, that God is, as he used to say, a Relationship, not a person. It's something that happens between people, and between people and the environment, and between non-human relationships, between animals and their environments, between atoms and molecules, between astral bodies and the gravity that holds them. God isn't a person in the Dialectic, but a relationship, a way of being together that is harmonious and just.

So, "Not only is it in our own best interest to become better thinkers," Roark says, "but we also have a moral obligation to think more clearly in order to make better moral decisions."²⁰ The reason so many bad things happen in our world, he says, is because we don't think things through enough, because, we *just didn't think about that*. "We have a moral and social, as well as prudential, obligation to think about *that*,"²¹ he says. For, the Dialectic is, in the most literal sense, *considerate*. It requires us to not only consider other possibilities, but to be considerate of others, to consider how our decisions will impact them, and impact the world and the environments they live in, and they need in order to live. The Dialectic, looking both ways before we cross the street, thinking on the other hand, doesn't just make us good thinkers, it makes us good neighbors. It makes us good persons. But, on the other hand...

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

²¹ Ibid.