



THINKING BEANS

A YEAR OF CLASSROOM
PHILOSOPHY LESSONS

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VOICES

Topic The voice is not without its paradoxes. Though part of us, it seems to only exist in its departure from us: unless I speak I have no voice, but as soon as I have spoken my voice is gone. It is that piece of ourselves we possess only in its vanishing. And it is that piece of ourselves that can only exist beyond us. It thus dissolves the boundaries between ourselves and the world. And though our bodies may be dwarfed by caverns and halls, our voices can fill them; unlike the body, the voice can expand and shrink at will, from a bellow to a whisper. It carries our thoughts and promises and yet is a substance no firmer than air.

Props None

Action 1 In unison ask the class to repeat a certain word five times, ‘conker’ for instance. Then ask them to sit in silence for 5 seconds.

- *Question 1* Does your voice still exist while you are silent?
 - If it does still exist, where is it?
 - Does it make sense to say that we have a silent voice?
 - Is your voice an ability or an entity?
 - If it does not exist, do you have a different voice every time you speak?

Action 2 OK, this is pretty weird, nevertheless... ask the class to sit with their mouths open while a volunteer (*x*) loudly says a word, ‘gargoyle’ for instance.

- *Question 2* Did *x*’s voice enter your mouth?

- If x 's voice entered your ears, does that mean it also entered your mouth?
- If you swallow while x is talking, are you swallowing her voice?
- If x 's voice entered your mouth, does that mean her words entered it too?

Action 3 Ask a volunteer (x) to loudly say a word, 'defenestrate' for instance. Ask another (y) to stand at the back of the room, and another (z) to stand midway between the other two.

- *Question 3* Who is closest to x 's voice?
 - Is being close to the source of the voice the same as being close to the voice?
 - If x 's voice exists everywhere it can be heard, is everyone who hears it the same distance from it?
 - If x 's voice exists everywhere it can be heard, is there any distance between it and those who can hear it?
 - Is it possible to get closer to x 's voice than x is?
 - Where is x 's voice?

Action 4 Ask the class to imagine a man standing beside a jet engine screaming as loudly as he can. His aim is to try to hear his own voice, but so great is the din he can only hear the sound of the engine.

- *Question 4* Is the man making a sound?
 - If the man is impossible to hear, is he silent?
 - If a sound is impossible to hear, does it exist?
 - If he isn't making a sound, is he even screaming?

Action 5 Show the class this argument –

Your voice is a large part of who you are, and your voice is made of air, so you are largely made of air.

- Question 5 Is this correct?
- If your voice is a part of you, and your voice travels at 343 metres per second (the speed of sound), does that mean you can travel at 343 metres per second?

THOUGHTS

Topic The French philosopher René Descartes was puzzled by the question of what he essentially was, but he eventually came to the conclusion that he was a thinking thing. And though he was satisfied with this answer, arguably all he had done was taken one mystery and replaced it with another, namely, the mystery of what thinking is (this is referred to as *obscurum per obscurius* – explaining the obscure through the more obscure). He may well be a thinking thing, but unless we know what thinking is, how much does this really tell us?

In terms of the location of thoughts, while it may seem natural to say that thoughts are in the brain, the ancient Greek Zeno of Citium argued that since the voice carries thought, thoughts must come from the same place as the voice. And latterly, the English philosopher Peter Hacker has argued that we shouldn't regard thought as residing in any part of us. Thinking is something that people do, not their parts. Though brains may be necessary for thinking, it doesn't follow that thoughts are in the brain. Analogously, though jet engines are necessary for flight, it makes no sense to say that flight is in the engines.

Props None

Action 1 Tell the class they are going to run a few thinking experiments. To start with, ask them to shake their heads.

- *Question 1* When you shake your head are you shaking your thoughts too?
 - Are thoughts inside your head?
 - Do thoughts have a location?
 - Can thoughts move?
 - Can you feel them in any particular place?

- If your thoughts are inside your head,
are your desires there too?

Action 2 If you happen not to be blessed with acrobatic students, ask the class to simply imagine doing a handstand while thinking about something, anything – strawberries, for instance.

- *Question 2* When you are upside down, are your thoughts upside down too?
- Do sleeping bats have upside down dreams?

Action 3 Divide the class in two: ask one half to think about a very large elephant and the other a very tiny mouse.

- *Question 3* Are the thoughts of the elephant half larger than the thoughts of the mouse half?
- Do thoughts have size?
- Do thoughts occupy space?
- Do elephants have larger thoughts than mice?

Action 4 Ask the class to close their eyes and think of a clear blue sky.

- *Question 4* When you think of the sky are your thoughts blue?
- When you think of the clear blue sky,
are you experiencing blue?
- If the thought isn't blue, then how do we know
that we are not thinking of a red sky?
- What is the difference between thinking of
a blue sky and thinking of a red sky?
- If thoughts can have colour, can they have smells too?

Action 5 Brace yourself for a cacophony: ask the class collectively to try to speak faster than they can think.

- *Question 5* Can you speak faster than you can think?
- Can we act without thinking?
- Is talking a kind of thinking?

Action 6 Finally, ask the class to think of anything they wish and then try to focus very carefully on the thought to see what it is made of. Give them a few moments.

- *Question 6* Are thoughts made of anything?
- Do thoughts have parts?
- Are thoughts made of words?
- Are thoughts things like eyeballs or actions like looking?
- Are thoughts physical?
- Do thoughts have weight?
- If they are not made of anything, do they even exist?
- Is being made of nothing the same as being nothing?

PURPOSE

Topic Aristotle wrote that when an eye loses its sight it is no longer an eye. This comment invites two conflicting views. On the one hand, that objects are defined by their uses. And on the other, that they are defined by their purposes. According to the first view an object is defined by what it can do, and to the second by what it is for. That is to say, its nature is either changing and contingent or fixed and ingrained.

Props A fork, for illustrative purposes

Action 1 Tell a story of three Chinese explorers who travelled to Italy in the 15th century and encountered a new and unfamiliar object: something the Italians call una forchetta. The three explorers puzzled over what it might be. The first speculated that it was a back scratcher, the second a hairbrush (or ‘dinglehopper’ to aficionados of *The Little Mermaid*), while the third believed it was a tool for eating with.

- *Question 1* Which explorer was right?
 - When it is being used as a hairbrush, does it become a hairbrush?
 - Is it many things or just one thing?
 - Is it always a fork (a thing for eating with) no matter how it is used?
 - If it becomes the thing it is being used as, what is it when it’s not being used?
 - If one of the explorers is using one of the objects as a hairbrush while another explorer is using another one to scratch his back with, are they holding different objects?

Feel free to use different objects in the story. Anything will do. You could even present an uncommon kitchen utensil and ask the class to guess what it might be. The philosophical point you're addressing is whether a thing's nature and identity is determined by how it is used or by something else entirely; the intentions of its maker, for instance. There are implications for both views and the questions below address each. Question 2 is tailored for those who answer that all three explorers were right and that use does determine nature, while Question 3 is for those who believe that the intentions of a thing's maker, the purpose it is made to fulfil, determines its intrinsic nature.

Action 2 Ask for two volunteers to role-play. One child (x) is in the park on all-fours looking for worms (a budding entomologist). The other child is a blind person out for a walk. The blind person becomes tired and wishes to rest. Mistaking the entomologist for a bench, he sits on her.

- *Question 2* Is x a bench?
 - When being used as a bench, does x become a bench?
 - When being used as a bench, is x still a human?
 - Is x both a human and a bench?
 - Can only x tell us what she is?
 - If x consented to being used as a bench, would she then be a bench?

Action 3 Tell the story of a lazy couple who hated washing up. So contemptuous were they of the chore, they decided to have a child just so they could raise it to wash the dishes. Since their surname was Washer, they naturally named the child Dish, and from her earliest years Dish was trained to wash up. That's all she ever did. She stood at the sink scrubbing and wiping. After all, that's what she was made for.

- *Question 3* Is Dish Washer a dish washer?
 - Is Dish Washer the creation of her parents?

- Who is Dish Washer's creator?
- Does Dish Washer have a purpose?
- Do your parents determine your purpose?

PROPERTY

Topic The English philosopher John Locke argued that if you found an apple tree on an uninhabited island and plucked off one of its apples, you would thereby own that apple. By virtue of plucking the fruit it has become ‘mixed’ with your body and your labour and is consequently yours.

This lesson explores the implications of taking an item that someone has already laid claim to and then mixing it with your body in ways more intimate than plucking. It challenges the foundation and crucial presupposition of Locke’s argument, namely, that our body is our property.

Props Unopened bottle of water

Action 1 Invite a volunteer (*x*) to help you perform this little drama: having bought a bottle of water on a sultry day you place it in your jacket pocket and walk through the park. While walking you become absorbed in a difficult philosophical problem and so lose awareness of your surroundings. *x* notices this and seizes the opportunity – she swipes the bottle and flees. (To tease and entertain, make it difficult for *x* by suddenly walking in different directions.)

- *Question 1* Does *x* now own the water?
- If something is in your possession, do you own it?

Action 2 Ask *x* to open the bottle and take a gulp.

- *Question 2* Does *x* now own *this* *pointing to her belly* water?

- If x had broken into a jeweller's and swallowed the diamond rings, would she own them?
- Do we own everything inside us?
- If I still own it, could I sell it?
- If I still own it, would it be OK for me to forcibly try to get it back?

If you fancy getting mythological, you can tie in the story of Cronus who was told by an oracle that he would be murdered by one of his children and so swallowed five of his newborn babies (he eventually threw them back up). Of course, some may be inclined to say that Cronus already owned the babies since they were 'his', but the myth could be modified such that while in the maternity ward he haplessly swallowed the wrong tot.

Action 3 Point out that for those who say she owns the water once it is in her belly, they are presupposing that she is in fact the owner of 'her' belly.

- *Question 3* Does x own *this* *pointing* belly?
 - Did she buy it?
 - Did she make it?
 - Is she responsible for it?
 - Is she in control of it?
 - Do her parents own it?
 - If her mum owns it, does that mean her mum has two bellies?
 - Does God own it?
 - If God owns it, does that mean that when x eats too much jam, God has a sore belly?
 - If we don't own our belly, or our hands for that matter, and if someone were to surgically remove 'our' hands during the night, would that be an act of theft?