

Myth or reality?

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"Just stand up straight and stop acting like a slob..... Do I slouch and slob and talk like this, like some big, fat, slob?"

It is my belief that understanding the philosophies which underpin our lives is important in encouraging more effective living and I have for some time been looking for a book which I can recommend to others which will give them a brief, clear outline of the thinking of philosophers over the ages. Recently, a friend recommended "A brief history of Philosophy from Socrates to Derrida" by Derek Johnston (2006). The very first chapter caught my interest and encouraged me to bring a number of my thoughts together.

For a long time I have wondered at the way we human beings accept what seems to be in front of us without deeper thought or question. Johnston (2006) reminds us that Plato "wanted to show us that the reality of things is beyond our immediate grasp, but that most humans are content to accept the way things appear at first sight" (p. 19). Plato wanted to show the difference between "the careless acceptance of appearance" and "the deeper enquiry into reality".

Sometimes we know the appearance of something is not its reality and we accept that. For example, anyone who has booked an airline ticket online will know that when a flight is advertised as being £1, it will surely cost at least £60 by the time taxes, airport duties and payment for luggage have been added. It is a myth which is widely known and understood to have a hidden reality.

Sometimes we are not so easily aware of the reality which is hidden from us. For example, clients often say they have been prescribed a 20mg dose of Prozac because their doctor thought that best for them. Most doctors will, quite appropriately, decide on best practice on dosage based on published clinical trial materials. However, because it is my business to know these things, I know that the published clinical trial materials are not always what they may seem. For example, Eli Lilly and Company, the manufacturer of Prozac, only published clinical trial data on the 20mg tablet. An internal memo, dated June 1985, from the chairman and chief executive officer of Eli Lilly confirms the decision to trial 20mg doses only because this was the most economic dose. There was acknowledgement given in a court of law, that trials of 5mg and 10mg doses were dropped in order to protect the sale of 20mg capsules and therefore protect the profit margins from this very popular drug. The lower doses were only trialled subsequent to poor publicity following the court case in USA in 1989 (Cornwell, 1996).

This acceptance of appearance may sometimes be of little consequence. For example, following the political scandal in USA popularly known as "Watergate", we have accepted the suffix "gate" to denote a scandal. So the scandal about Diana, Princess of Wales and James Gilbey was called "Squidgeygate". However, "Watergate" was named such, as much of what happened took place in the Watergate Hotel. So, if we think about it, if the Watergate scandal occurred now it



would need to be called "Watergategate". (I am indebted to Lawrence Edmonds for this playful thought.)

Other examples of accepting the first impressions or appearances may have more far reaching consequences. Remember the quote at the start of this article? "Just stand up straight and stop acting like a slob.... Do I slouch and slob and talk like this , like some big, fat, slob?" This is a quote from Gordon Ramsay on 'Hell's Kitchen', as he shouts at a stockbroker who is trying to be a chef. It is just one of the programmes currently shown on television considered to be harmless entertainment, they are taken only at face value. The popularity of programmes such as 'The Apprentice' and 'Hell's Kitchen', to name just two, ensure their continuation and their repetition anaesthetises us to the way individuals are belittled and berated in front of colleagues and then a large number of viewers worldwide. So, the myth may be that these programmes are harmless. I wonder though how you would feel if those opening words of this article were directed at you at work or at your sports club? I wonder if on deeper reflection a different reality might start to show itself?

What if we were to consider questions like these:

- Why do we find these programmes entertaining?
- Are they different to watching someone being bullied at work? If so why?
- Would we tolerate such treatment ourselves in the workplace? Why not?
- How do we relate the behaviour on such programmes to the increase in workplace bullying in this country?
- Do we really think it is OK to maul people emotionally just because they choose to be there?
- Is it OK for individuals to be treated so badly simply because they are pursuing a high flying job?
- Therefore, if I am in a high flying job should I expect and accept similar treatment?
- Is it OK for some individuals to treat other people so poorly just because they are rich or famous or in a position of power?
- Would we accept this kind of behaviour from our hairdresser or refuse collector?
- If not, what's the difference?
- If our children are watching us enjoying this programme, what does it teach them?
- What is this teaching new or younger professionals?
- How would you feel if our children were treated like this at work?
- Is boardroom or workplace thuggery more acceptable than street thuggery? If so, why?

I could go on, but I am sure you get my point. You see, on deeper reflection and thought the possible impact that programmes such as these may conceivably have on our society becomes clearer. A different possible reality emerges.



Might I suggest that you pause now for a moment and reflect on what you think about what I have said so far.

In suggesting an alternative view to such popular programmes I am aware of Johnston's (2006) warning. He says of Socrates, "his relentless questioning of current assumptions did not always make him popular" (p. 4). So I too may risk ridicule for suggesting a different view, for making an invitation to break the possible myth and see the reality which may lie behind. This kind of questioning and exploration makes some of us feel uncomfortable and is seldom welcomed with open arms, yet it is the ability of human beings to ask these kinds of questions which continues to develop our thinking, our actions and our world.

Working with individuals, teams and organisations over many years has taught me the folly of accepting things or people as they appear at first sight. On an individual level, many times I have met with people who at first seemed confident and self assured, but who after deeper reflection, seem vulnerable, uncertain beings. Organisations too can wear a mask. Some appearing concerned and caring, but on reflection showing a hidden culture of compliance which makes open communication difficult. Others are brusque and slightly brutal in their way of working, below which lies a commitment and concern for the wellbeing of their people.

Questions of deciphering myth or reality are everywhere, from our everyday thoughts and actions right through to the wonders and weirdness of quantum physics. In some instances the difference is obvious, in others not, in some instances the differences are inconsequential, in others possibly not. I want to persevere and encourage you to take a moment and wonder which myths you accept in your work, your family, your society, your world. Is it time to take a look at any of them? To ponder a different reality?

I invite you to ask yourself – when do I accept the surface explanation and when do I seek the deeper reality? How do I know when to seek the difference? If you know about Plato's cave you may ask yourself, am I seeing shadows and mistaking them for the real thing? If you don't know about Plato's cave you might like to look at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_cave which gives a synopsis of the story, or you may read the full text from Plato's book at <http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/platoscave.html>.

All may not be as it seems at first. We may not all be philosophers, but we can all learn self reflection and critical thinking skills, which may help us distinguish some of the myths from the realities. But what do we do when we have begun to realise and understand some of these differences? Now that is quite another question.

References

Cornwell, J. (1996). *The Power to Harm*. London: Penguin Books.

Johnston, D. (2006). *A brief history of Philosophy from Socrates to Derrida*. London: Continuum.

