

The Friendship of Lapsus and Suada

Conversations and Conversions in
Philosophy

Michael Picard

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Also By Michael Picard

Philosophy A to Z

Contrariwise

Dedicated to the real people who talked with me or helped me to make the original radio series before the invasion of fictional characters transmuted it. I know I have removed your words from their original context and placed them in this literary one, and sometimes not even your own words. But I have tried to be true to you, and say now that all significant changes have been made for narrative reasons, never to impugn, belittle, refute or misrepresent you. May my characters ever serve your interests, not you theirs or mine!

“larvatus prodeo” Masked I go forward. René Descartes

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Where We Begin

Lapsus and the Library

Scene: Morning. Lapsus walking in a grove near a forest campus.

Lapsus: I had a dream. It didn't make any sense. That's ok too. I never try to interpret my dreams. That would be like imposing a surtax on my brain. My mind is already impoverished, and one shouldn't tax the poor! In the dream I was told that everything I know is a matter of assumption. I know so little that that should hardly have come as a surprise; but it did somehow. I mean, sure, some things seem pretty obvious, more a matter of plain observation than outright assumption. But who is observing what for what purpose? What line divides the obvious from the oblivious? These were things in the dream I didn't know, and so found myself asking. Come to consider it – I still don't know!

The point in the dream was that even the obvious is an assumption. It only seems truer, now that I have woken up. This everyday world we actually share mostly passes as obvious, as taken for granted assumptions. We become oblivious. We see what we think we see, whether we do or not! Like that, all observation is based on assumption. Concepts, values and theories underlie the everyday world as I experience it; like blinders on a horse, they let us see the road ahead all the better for cutting off what we could see. Somehow I awoke from the dream knowing more about the world.

Observation is not isolated from assumption. Now, when one or more observation leads us to make an inference, even a good inference, – what is that but precisely to use observations as assumptions, as premises or steps in reasoning? If observation is

blindered, how can inference fail to be? How shall I know, if, as I suppose may be, all science is riddled with assumptions only more or less supported? The advance of reason itself is an advance of ever more daring assumptions that survive ever more stringent efforts at disproof. Our reality itself as we portray it to ourselves (and how else have we it?) is held up by the activity of our own presuming minds, even as my mind holds up my own dreams. At least that is how it seemed in my dream.

I was dreaming about reasoning; that is odd enough. But then by some kind of dream logic, I was led to ask a question, which I would not want to have to generalize. Just then, at the peak moment of the dream, I realized that there is no difference between dreaming I am asking a question and asking a question. If I dream I think an answer, then sure, I think that answer; but I may be deluded. The answer may not be true, for it is only me thinking so in a dream. But when I dream I ask a question, I really do pose that question. There is no delusion: the question is actually posed, even though I am only dreaming. The dreamt thought may be false, the dreamt scenario an illusion; but the dreamt question opens an authentic gap in the mind, no less than the waking question does. In the realm of inquiry, there is no essential difference between dream and reality. I woke up laughing.

I'm still laughing, but none the wiser. I haven't been able to learn the least thing from it.

I am a positive blockhead, uncarved the way my mother left me. That's why I can never interpret dreams. It's a more general problem, you see. *I can't see my way clear to anything.* I am the tragic consequence of the law that wonder trumps truth.

What's this? Is it a trove or a store? No. It is a museum of the dead. Or is it? Goodness, I can't make it out. Let me enter. Yes, it's a library.

Lapsus stepped inside and immediately contracted the library disease of needing to read more from having

read some; of learning by question only, and never by answers, also called being a sieve; of never having read enough and always having to read more, which feeds but enlarges the original need; of suffering from a mouth that grows as it eats; of looking up words to define words to define words to define – endlessly senselessly onwards, every bit the fool for having not quite begun.

Lapsus: Look here, a dictionary. Let me look up *fool*. What's this? A philosopher! Which one? Is this a definition or a joke? Either way it is reasonably funny. But what a laugh! Is that already what I've become? A laugh and a philosopher? If one dreams a philosophical dream, is one already a philosopher? Or is it so only in one's dream? Listen to my questions? Aren't I a prime fool!

But let me read on. It never hurt a fool to be well read, you know. Not that I am that! Indeed these many books around me are a burden to me; whatever I have not read is like an unfulfilled duty, a profoundly shameful failure, a pang. My ignorance is not bliss, but a blight upon my soul. Yet I wear it lightly like a purple cape, glistening with yellow stars, which I might need to nip from a magician, since I have only this white woven frock to my name. But it can be as purple as our imaginations allow!

And so Lapsus read ever so many books, but never enough, beginning many more than he ever properly started, and fully finishing fewer still, leaving in the end almost nothing as the sum total of all he would ever learn from them. Sometimes he read aloud, sometimes silently; sometimes he mumbled, at other times gesticulated roughly as his eyes glided over the page and the ideas hit him as if with physical force. But in this strange way he persevered, ever ploddingly, ever pausing, ever prevaricating lest he seem to know. And

always there was his merry laughter, which unfailingly seemed to know a little more than himself.

Suada's Warning

Even on that first day of his feverish but impossible quest he was not alone. There were dark soft-lidded eyes behind him in the dark bookstacks, observing him from the gloom of knowledge. Mistrustful of attention, as are all who are so alluring, she attended without reluctance to his urgent but uncomfortable inquiry. These eyes, these ears, dark-haired Suada turned to the slumped gray-beard, who incessantly asked questions of his dictionary, which was of course dumb in its reply. Yet there was some movement here she did not recognize in the repertoire of tricks that trapped her in the perpetual stasis of graduate school. Was there some freedom here from all constraint? But was it not too erratic to represent escape?

From behind him she listened for a long time before she left. But ware ways brought her to the library often, and whenever she saw him muttering alone, she would pull up close behind him and listen. He never saw her and did not know his words were overheard. But one day, he chanced again to pick up his original line of inquiry, and seemed to go far astray, she resisted no longer. She intervened.

Lapsus: If a fool is a philosopher, why, logically, I must look up *philosophy*. What's this? *Love of wisdom*? But what has love to do with this visceral need to know that inwardly cuts me, with my promiscuous reading style, or with my painful curiosity? And how

am I to love what I do not know? Shall a child love a stranger as its mother? Or is it as a lover I should love wisdom? That would be difficult, seeing as we have never met let alone dated. And shouldn't wisdom and I be friends first, or at least on speaking terms, before we venture to speak openly of love? And then just suppose she fell for me. What then? Would she take me home to meet her parents? For how forbidding must be those who nurtured so august a daughter as wisdom. *Why do I suddenly feel so bashful?*

Suada: If it is philosophy you want, you will not find it in a dictionary. (Lapsus, startled, turns.) The philosopher pretends to be master of the dictionary, not its loyal subject. Philosophy could never be confined to an entry in a dictionary. It is not only footnotes to Plato, as a wit once said. Even if one should construct a universal dictionary, which contained every philosophical text ever written as illustration, and listed every methodology and algorithm ever conceived alphabetically, still philosophy would not lie only in such a dictionary, even an infinite one; for philosophy will not confine itself – or even its misdeeds – merely to words. So you read in vain, you blushing old man.

Lapsus: Well, then, let me take in a lecture. I see by your brow you are learned as well as lovely. Won't you, then, please inform me now what philosophy is?

Suada: I would rather advise you to flee to some far corner of this vast house of knowledge, or escape it all together. Don't be fooled by the honeyed allure of philosophy, for this queen bee has a sting that has been known to be fatal. Have you not heard it said? *Philosophical problems can kill you.*

Lapsus: Your concern is touching, even motherly. But it is too late. This old boy has already run headlong into that pitch battle, however futile it may yet prove to be. You may call me a hardy fool, or simply foolhardy, but I hunger to know, and I long to be fed. And I can tell already that you know more than you are saying, and are feigning ignorance as the learned love to do. Don't hold back. I

beseech you. You have a duty to help those in need.

Suada: Need, you know, is not infrequently impersonated. How sweetly idle desire can dress itself up prettily as need in order to command our attention. Truly, what one needs most one cannot demand; it must be provided freely. And beware that you do not multiply your troubles in seeking to solve them. The need for philosophy is doubly dubious, for philosophy is a fruit of ease and luxury. It occupies itself above all with impractical ideals, inconvenient principles, and innumerable insoluble puzzles with no purchase on what passes before us as the real world. Philosophy is precisely the unnecessary: abstracted from the concrete, immersed in inutility, and given over to speculation for its own sake. Thus it has become busy work for idle minds. What do you want from philosophy?

Lapsus: An idle ideal does sound nice, – as pretty as you are! – prettier even than your speech. And it would please me prettily if you would prattle on about it the whole day. You are so fetching when you rail against philosophy, for I can see your spurned heart and weeping wit through your performance. But you can't scare me away from the useless; I am already akin. As for errors, gaps and hopes, you need only know my name is Lapsus; I am the namesake of slips and false tongues.

Suada: Then we are well met. I am Suada, an impenitent inmate of Plato's Heaven, waiting in vain for the rebirth of graduation after this academic eternity. I am a graduate student, all but done; only a dissertation away from completion of a doctoral degree. With cynical hope I aspire to the great chain of tenure. But you shall yet be persuaded to leave off philosophy, unless you are a lover of desert landscapes and a dry wit.

And why should you discount my warnings, when I am truly thinking of your own good? My low opinion is not my own only, but held up by great and high minds of all ages. One should always look down to philosophy, and bad-mouth it a little; this the wisdom

of ages itself teaches.

Insert **Suada's Tirade**, her case against philosophy

The case against philosophy is made by philosophers themselves. The most ancient critiques have become cherished elements of the lore of philosophy, which is at least this wise: it preserves its own internal self-critique. The first Greek philosopher Thales was gazing at the heavens when he fell into a well. The first philosopher is the first one known to go about with his head in the clouds. Socrates, the greatest of them all and still the most honoured, knew nothing by his own admission. His ignorance is celebrated. Plato too has a reputation for defending objective knowledge, but his writings are riddled with myths, legends and fanciful verisimilitudes. So if it is knowledge you want from philosophers, you might be looking in the wrong place.

There is nothing so absurd that some philosopher has not said it. This is the condemnation of Cicero, among the greatest of Roman philosophers.

The plethora of opinions has not diminished since. Perhaps the ancient philosophers closest to the truth despaired of it; I mean the skeptics, who denounced all opinion and belief, cleaving only to what perception disclosed plainly to one and all alike. The rest was but words, and there was no criterion of truth by which to adjudicate competing beliefs. Have we come any closer today? Find me a rock on which to found the truth philosophy seeks, and I will credit that there could be truth. Till then, I remain with the apparent and frame no hypothesis.

Lapsus affirms his hopeless but incessant quest, more by laughing than by providing the necessary defense.
Section ends thus:

Suada: The aged will not be instructed by the young. You are entitled to your meandering pursuit, your path of knots, and crimped way; neither reason nor I can dissuade you. And just now I cannot even try, for I am due to give a tutorial lecture across campus. I must go.

Lapsus: You go then, as you must, and I will stay here to read. There is every likelihood that we shall meet again, for you seem to dwell in this dusty hall of books, and I am compelled by an unknown need to return. Until then, goodbye.

How Suada became guide to Lapsus

Suada leaves. For the rest of day Lapsus reads from a great many books on a wide variety of subjects, and returns again early the next morning to resume his pursuit. Occasionally, when he needs to pause to mull over what he had read, or in order to track down another of the endlessly ramifying references, he wanders through the long corridors of bookcases, feeling dwarfed and demeaned by the magnitude of available knowledge, but undaunted and happy nonetheless. One day, late in the afternoon, as he paced through the stacks, he came upon Suada from behind. This time she did not see him, but he overheard her:

Suada: Oy! Oy! How so sad, so shady? What has knowledge brought me? Am I so dismal, impartial and voided as to know only laws, norms, principles, histories and the dust of fact? Study has filled me with habits and dry bits. And see how dry my humor has become! Yet withal I have no thirst, no yearning more to know, no aspiration. I have cultivated and refined my reactivity until now – I react not at all. For me henceforth is there the constant *only*, the static truth and unmoving horizon, a fixed point of inquiry and doubt. Habits of study keep me abreast, but more nor new I seek.

Thus to me the sum of knowledge seems to take on a sad aspect – a shade, a shadow, a darkness – nothing more.

Lapsus: Excuse my ignorance, but aren't you speaking like a fool? Have you learnt nothing in this vast library in all you've read?

Suada: All I've read' indeed! Too little, frankly, I admit, but widely. Deeply too, though none have plumbed the depths. But words now weary me. I have read too much.

Lapsus: You might have read it all and learnt nothing. But your despair even a fool can tell shows you've learned little.

Suada: (angrily) Enough to know when a fool speaks! What do you know to say what I know? Have you some sensible method or are you a guesser like all the rest?

Lapsus: I guess not, dear lady. And I have no method, whether sensible, insensible or nonsensical. That may be why I am so clumsy as to challenge you, when I only want to know. You concede you know much, yet you no longer want to know. I, on the other hand, know nothing, and all I desire is to know. I want knowledge desperately, but it does not seem to stick. You are weary of knowledge and are stuck. You drain into yourself in disingenuous despair, while I leak out of myself in wanton inquiry, seeking to contain some core or constant truth beyond my dizzying perceptions.

Suada: (softer) Then you are a friend and fellow-traveller, and I shall set you straight. My hand will steady your awestruck vertigo. I am accustomed to nausea, and used to desperation. I shall be your pillar and your life raft. Truly, I despair of your search, so I may seem like a bad guide; but you seek truth and no lesser thing, so I will accompany you for your protection, lest you should go astray through lapses or faulty philosophy.

Lapsus: Have you found, that you may guide a seeker?

Suada: Suffice it to say I no longer seek. But I know my way around. I haunt this library with my sorrow and with the ghost of my

inquisitiveness. And I know people on this forest campus, people who know more than I do and who have guided me. I can take you to them. I cannot instruct you, but I can introduce you to others who will. At least they will converse with you. I will guide you, not as a hand that knows, but as a hand that helps.

Lapsus: You are not knowledge, but the means to knowledge? How well named you are! I should be most thankful for a guide or a god, but perhaps an imaginary goddess will do. You are different from me in degree, in kind and in orientation, but I cannot bite this lovely hand if it would feed me. Even the sorrowful gruel you were just dispensing is nourishment to me. The hungry are quieted even by the unpalatable.

Suada: So be it then, but first I must know where you want to go. You are the one seeking, so let me follow *your* nose. Where do you want to go in this vast library? What is the cause of your curiosity? What is your question?

Lapsus: Who am I to question? Except there I go again. Well, then, let that be my question. More briefly: Who am I? Is it suitable?

Suada: (eyebrows raised in ironic disbelief): You want me to help you answer who you are?

Lapsus: But surely there can be no more immediately important question in philosophy. You can't be my guide and not discuss my questions.

Suada: Fine. We'll go with your question and just see where it takes us. Certainly it relieves me from all expectation that I should already know the answer. Besides, the vanity of words to plug that mystery attracts me to your pursuit, and I should like to witness, for amusement if nothing else, your gradual enlightenment. Yes, very well. Let us meet here again tomorrow at this time. You can begin then your converted inquiry into self.

Lapsus: Excellent. See you then.