

Book Review

The Gibraltar Dialogues: A Philosophy for the Space Age by John Blackmore (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980). 239 pages.

Reviewed by William B. Allen*

Man makes himself and never is anything but the creature making himself. This is a premise which one may choose to question (as I surely would). Nevertheless, I believe that it is the single critical and unqualified premise of *The Gibraltar Dialogues*. I intend by raising it here, therefore, to discuss Dr. Blackmore's book in the manner of a consideration of that premise. Yet, at the very beginning, it is preferable to note the immense value of the dialogues in a broader context.

Modern science, its spirit of mastery, emerged partly out of frustration with the puerile search for a true Janus-cord, an actual means of resolving heterogeneity into homogeneity without mediating qualifications. Its spirit, for a time, was the mistaken spirit of lassitude with the idea that to reduce nature to its principles was the same thing as to render nature non-problematic. The spirit of modern science aimed to build on a realistic, cold-blooded view of the human situation and the natural world. The universe did not require to be hospitable to man. He could look out for himself, so long as the universe was regular. The spirit of mastery originally confronted a problematic if impotent nature, at least where man was concerned.

Just as modern science was frustrated by the spirit of antiquity, Dr. Blackmore seems frustrated by the spirit of modern science. That it jettisoned the idea that something might be right by nature—a right not made by man, individuals or society—does not trouble him. The problem is that the spirit of modern science could not resist turning its powerful tools against itself, as it has turned them against every natural realm; it abandoned not just natural right but right itself. And what is left? History, or less. The spirit of modern science so qualifies every prospect of homogeneity in the universe as to raise heterogeneity to a principle.

The Gibraltar Dialogues, then, offer to restore hope, to restore a spirit of happy achievement—a pulling it all back together. The book must be praised for its clear depiction of the stereotyped but too true characters of contemporary philosophical postures. It must also be praised for suggesting a new foundation of modern education, tutored by the spirit of antiquity if dedicated to the future. Jiro, the hero, provides a special invention by means of which we gain access to this possibility; that is volition. Before examining it, however, we must also note that Blackmore's education schema has merit independent of its place within the drama. He retains the emphasis on action or practice which characterizes the ancient spirit, but he simultaneously subjects it to systematic methods of ultimate justification the very rigor of which lays a foundation for the priority of philosophy. In short, he outlines an education in which nothing is given and nothing is permitted short of full clarity but which nevertheless intends to be grounds for action. As an ideal it could lead to an understanding of an alternative for our world.

To consider Jiro's scheme of education within the context of the drama means really to deal with his attempt to define philosophy and its ultimate reliance upon the invention, volition. Volition, of course, is not new. It is an invention in Jiro's hands only because of its employment

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as a tool of philosophical and epistemological distinction. Volitional reference is the device that separates the “space age philosophy” from the lame philosophies of phenomenism, idealism, and versions of realism. Its power? It permits reference to what is neither “empirical nor conscious.” It is, in fact, the chief instrument for ferreting out “our most basic assumptions,” the true work of philosophy—first order philosophy—for Jiro.

We will return to the philosophical question in a moment. It must be noted, however, that volition is an invention in another sense. Precisely because, for Jiro, philosophy is a guide for action, volition retains its traditional reference to doing—the act of will. It is, in fact, the status of volition as the source of thinking *and* doing which is critical. Thus, Jiro’s “volition” is also the foundation for a new approximation to “right”—acting on “our best understanding.” Properly tutored, man may marshal his volition as the basis of ultimate purpose and informed guidance for action. In this sense, volition is a faculty beyond thinking or intellect and appetite. It is in that sense an invention (Jiro never confuses it with soul or spirit)—a transconscious state of mind, an undefined function—which organizes the mind for action (cf. pages 217-220 especially).

Having established this much, we are prepared to consider the important premise of *The Gibraltar Dialogues*: man makes himself. I do not mean to seem reductionist by focusing on this. I think that this approach is not reductionist. It is legitimated by the poet himself, in the voice of his principle character:

“Jiro: . . . Have you forgotten *the qualifications* I put on ultimate purpose? Let me remind you of some. Do I know what it is? No. Are my approximations infallible? No. Would I force them on anyone? No. Do I believe in censorship? No. . . .”

What, then, is the foundation of this adaptation of Vaihinger’s “as if” apparatus? Just this: As man makes himself, he might just as well adopt the rule of reason, “his best understanding,” and act as if he were or were going to be something worth making. Within the hard core of a certain but perhaps indifferent universe man is the uncertain being straining to ground himself in eternity.

This is a paradoxical and perhaps ironic result of Jiro’s philosophy. The reason for “as if” is the uncertainty of the universe, an uncertainty modern science broke away from by splintering *scientia* into fragments of understanding and disguising the void under *forms* of certainty. Jiro, on the other hand, deals with the same uncertainty by proposing a new wedding of what was originally only the *supposed* division of understanding into metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology: moral philosophy or ethics, and political philosophy: empiricism, and psychology. But Jiro does not promise the salvation itself. How could he, given the qualifications noted above? What he does ultimately seek is that all should have “the freedom to become overwhelmingly absorbed in long or sustained *spiritual concern* . . . freedom from emotional dependence on everything unworthy, be it personal, social, political, economic, or anything else . . . What is most spiritual? . . . Wonder, curiosity, and the search for truth.” (page 210).

Does one wonder how the search for truth acquires any value in an uncertain universe? Naturally. The end, therefore, is less the truth than the test of truth which, for Jiro, is still the method of science, albeit purged of suicidal tendencies. Like the modern science whose desiccated spirit of positivism Jiro abhors, his own theory proposes a test of public acceptability which alone can justify his efforts. No mountain top philosophy is this. That makes it in reality a political philosophy. And Jiro is a most political man. Still, and again like modern science, he does not concede the power of genuine political decision, holding fast to the faith that agreed

upon methods of scientific appraisal can provide all needed authority (page 203). This but begs the question whether science is compatible with the human good. A science which denies that that is a meaningful question *may* succeed in stifling discussion; it can never advance the cause of truth.

Only consider the traditional case of modern positivism, which has insisted that mathematical expression alone raises a question subject to serious (verifiable or falsifiable, it makes no real difference) response. Kojève captured it fully:

Il n'est pas scientifique d'admettre l'existence du savoir (discursif) *absolu* que la prétendue philosophie non ou pré-scientifique recherchait sous le nom de "sagesse." Quant à la philosophie véritable or scientifique, elle n'est rien d'autre ni de plus que l'affirmation (rigoureusement, c'est à dire scientifiquement or mathématiquement démontrée) que la soi-disant philosophie non scientifique (ou "naïve") est partout et toujours *impossible*, vu qu'elle n'est qu'une recherche ou une quête de quelque chose qui ne se trouve et ne s'acquiert nulle part ni jamais." (page 48 of the "Introduction" to *Essai d'une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne*.)

Jiro, to be sure, opposes this *spirit* of modern science but, and here is the key, continues to rely on the same foundation, at least as far as I can discern. We may better capture the source of Jiro's dilemma—that he needs but does not wish to renounce modern science—if we reformulate that dilemma as a confrontation between the recalcitrant and the orthodox, borrowing the informality or language authorized by the dialogues.

The point is that philosophy understood as mere science is alienated from political life—the true ground of human hope. This may be revealed even in considering the most technical of questions, since only a matter of definition separates the scientific speech from all other (including some true) speech. Presumably, this observation might be mathematized. But I choose not to do so, and I submit that no one can present any compelling reason that I should do so.

Now here is the point. If I fail to make my observation in mathematical terms, what is risked—barring the possibility that I have some specific purpose other than to be understood? Nothing at all, if my risk is meant. As for my auditor, his refusal to accept my observation entails by definition the possibility that he may refuse to believe what, in fact, he ought to have believed. The risk is his alone, not that of the speaker who claims some knowledge. The speaker need not doubt his worth or existence, so long as he does not depend on the "intersubjective transmissibility of knowledge"—the mathematization of observation—to confirm his own grasp of truth. He avoids the ego split—the trap of modern rationalism. What?

It is entirely the speaker's option to express his observation in mathematics or words (e.g., Plato's *Timaeus*). In either case the *expression* will be understood (presupposing its rejection as non-scientific by this hearer), and it may or may not be the speaker's concern whether it is accepted. Insofar as he feels it must be accepted before he can think or know himself to have said something, the validation of his worth or existence depends on his hearer. The so-called ego is split apart from being. The scientist, that is, the being, which clearly is, cannot be conscious that it is, and certainly not in the only meaningful sense, that it is as it ought to be. The two senses comprise the so-called ego.

No scientist, mathematically speaking, can be sure of his worth or existence as such except insofar as it is confirmed by others (whether in truth or in error). It is not, then, an accident

that no man *qua* scientist can maintain his every thought and action in a scientific manner: whether for positivism, whether for Jiro. That is radical ego separation. That is to be totally without consciousness of being. Neither is it surprising that there are so many positivists and so few existentialists. Radical ego separation is the logical conclusion of positivism. Few are capable of thinking so well as to achieve radical ego separation. For most it is the very inability to become existentialist that permits the notion that an ego split in some areas has even the appearance of value or utility.

That is the spirit of modern morality. Such men maintain their doctrine only because they cannot wholly practice it. They are incapable of thinking beyond it. They choose only because they cannot not choose. Their choice is not rational choice, Jiro, it is rationalism, determinism. Rationalism is existentialism pulled up short, in-determinism abandoned half-way. It is not rational.

It is a mistake to consider the important question to be, how best to represent nature. The important question is how best to represent man. He, then, who refuses to accept an observation about man merely because it is not mathematized rationally runs the unreasonable risk of never believing what he ought perhaps to believe because true. The observer as such runs no risk at all, save that of not convincing his auditor—which really is no risk unless his aim is to convince. But such an aim has no compelling rational status; for purposes of mere persuasion truth, in itself, is not necessary.

The necessity to represent man as the being capable of and requiring to be persuaded by reason cannot be generated by hypothetical reasoning. This accounts for the peculiar status of political philosophy as the mother of knowledges. Establishing the relevance of truth is ever a derivative phenomenon, dependent upon political authorization. The problem, then, is to know politics, while all the time being subject to it. Every other truth is subsequent to this. It seems to me that philosophy in the space age must encounter precisely the identical conditions of philosophy in the prior age.

Consider, then, the way we look upon politics. We take it as problematic—some of us from the habit of thinking that way, others from the habit of not thinking. Rarely, a man might actually understand politics as problematic; that is, might fully understand and convey the nature of politics. When we commonly try to understand the non-problematic, the intrinsic or the necessary, we shortly discover—when looking at man—how politics shades everything, including the apparently non-problematic (procreation, or the activity or the DNA molecule is another good example).

Then we say that we must understand these things in political terms, because politics deals with them (When does life begin?). But this is an error. This is to see politics grafted onto or shading a world of otherwise simple and clear verities. According to Aristotle, that which is simple and clear (what occurs without the necessity of choice or decision) is precisely the non-political, the necessary in the sense of will happen because it must happen. There is also a sense of the necessary which ought to happen but may not happen. Hence, procreation may be necessary in the first sense, while a certain kind of procreation (let us say that kind associated with eugenics) may be necessary in the second sense. Only the latter is political—a result of deliberation, reasoning and choice with respect to the good and the bad. The choice may well affect what appears a wholly non-political impulse. What it truly affects is the end. That is the difference between the base and the noble. Politics rationalizes the irrational.

This does not require that men are equally rational or that each can be brought to live rationally (the life according to reason as his own reason discloses it). It does require that the optimal political order be rational, and that all men might be brought to live rationally in the sense of participating in the rational order by virtue of being trained to the good life. Now, here we can see that those firstly necessary impulses are made yet more necessary by receiving the secondly necessary order that organizes them. Look at it in that unnatural sex for pleasure—granting nature, as it is now seen, as the status of things unaffected by man. If, on the other hand, nature inheres in things, in particular the specific end of specific things, then replacing random procreation (Does procreation intend to produce that best fitted to survive, which is to say, to survive well?) by selective procreation may well be seen as very natural. And the elimination of the random by-product of sexual intercourse (limiting sex to pleasure—the specific by-product) may well be the way of achieving this most natural end. But that is not what we mean by nature today.

All these reflections, Jiro, point to the radical position of the body. It is here, simply, by nature; that is very clear. Politics is necessarily concerned with it. This, too, by nature. But the concern of politics with the body is only secondary; the status or condition of the body affects the human possibility of happiness. Now happiness is sensible only to the soul, and it is the soul that makes the body a particular body rather than just any or everybody. Hence, the soul's sensibility is radically connected with the *condition* of the body (which means the body's sensibilities or impulses), so that the body's condition cannot be allowed to be determined randomly, if it is true that there is some specific condition of the soul that is aimed for. This is easy to understand if we think of the cat eating ground beef (cow) and yet, remaining a cat. It is because there is a soul that aims at a specific condition that this body is not one day a cat, another, a cow, and still another, a fish. We can all agree that politics presupposes some such specific condition, whether we agree with Aristotle that there is a soul or not. Thus, we must also agree that a randomized condition of the body is not only non-political (which it would be), but anti-political, which we cannot permit it to be. Our problem, of course, is that governing the body (as you choose the emotions) is frequently indistinguishable to sight from being governed by the body.

For politics truly to reflect deliberation and decision, then, it must be capable of taking that which is sub-political or non-political or random or non-deliberative or non-chosen and submitting it to the rule of reason. Politics cannot create the impulses or call them into existence, but it can govern them. This is the reason one learns nothing to study the sub-political impulses. It is how they are governed that makes the difference—and the fact that they can be that makes politics possible. Need I say, too, that this alone makes the question of the way in which man represents nature and himself germane? It is here, then, that we see that the study of politics or human affairs differs from the study of all other things (but nonetheless establishes the foundation of all other studies). It is one thing to know that man engages in sexual intercourse; it is quite another to know how he ought to do so and even how he thinks he ought to do so.

The latter puzzle, the principal question and, therefore, the great problem, is the question whether these two studies differ in form as well as in subject. It is a further complication, that all study commences by virtue of politics (and, in a sense, in behalf of politics). So we ask whether, in fact, any knowledge, *qua* knowledge (that is, independent of politics) is at all and if so, whether only in conflict or tension with the realm of opinion—the realm of politics. Our answer to this query will determine the fate of *The Gibraltar Dialogues*.

I could summarize the import of these remarks by reminding the reader that the dialogues

pose no lesser objective for themselves than to establish reason within the temple of unreason. The philosopher-king is no less their recourse than Plato's *Republic*. The problem, too, is the same. The impotence of truth is not merely a malady of the many. The king-philosopher achieved its absolute expression in Marx, the philosopher so much earnest for the truth that he was literally unable to distinguish truth and falsehood, as he could not distinguish thinking and doing. Might not the "transconscious state of mind" err in the same direction?

Philosophers lie—deceive—in order to bring reluctant humans to truths they least wish to know. Philosophers—above all, lying philosophers—are earnest for truth and optimistic about its benefit for mankind. This is already a sufficient indictment of their insufficiency as philosophers. Jiro was not unmindful of Nietzsche. But did he understand that Nietzsche loved truth as much as he? Nietzsche tried valiantly never to lie—always to tell the truth—but finally fell into line behind the lie that the truth could bring humans to an era of superheroes. Make no mistake: This means, in the end, that Nietzsche was an optimist, no less than Jiro. People are not interested in knowing the truth; that has been known, or at least knowable, for a long time now. Nor is there any advantage for human in truth. If one wants to hide this, he need only declare it openly. Man will avoid to see it.

William B. Allen
Harvey Mudd College
Claremont, CA 91711
USA