

Perspective

A newsletter for widening your point of view

2007

Issue 9



Richard Bach, in his book *Illusions*, states a handy aphorism: **Perspective – use it or lose it.** This periodical shares amongst recreation and tourism management professionals, such as yourself, several tools and concepts which will help exercise your perspective. This issue considers how we think, and whether we should do it before it's too late.

Perspective is distributed by **Rob Greenaway & Associates** as a service to the recreation and tourism industries.

I'm right. You're not

Not wanting to be mistaken for a New Age hippie means that I occasionally hide the covers of some books when on public transport – such as A.C. Grayling's *What is Good?*¹ The subtitle reads, *The Search for the Best Way to Live.* I'd like to think that we're into fine-tuning rather than searching. Appropriately, Grayling – professor of philosophy at University of London – aims at extracting some pragmatic precepts from a few thousand years of debate and diatribe about ethics and morals, rather than promoting some faddist's psychological cure-all.

Grayling reckons Socrates was right: the best life is the considered life. "To the question 'What is good?', then, the answer can only be: 'The considered life – free, creative, informed and chosen, a life of achievement and fulfilment, of pleasure and understanding, of love and friendship; in short the best human life in a human world, humanely lived'."

I suspect part of that statement (the 'informed' bit) is the motivation behind a recent article by Grayling on contrarianism – unconstructive wrangling in the media.² Grayling considers that the tradition of public debate in Britain is being undermined by the media deliberately seeking, "oppositional points of view in order to sell more newspapers".

Contrarianism is disputation for the sake of disputation, and exists in contrast to – although it is the offspring of – 'dialectic'. Dialectic is one of Plato's children and is the theoretically constructive process of challenge and debate that might occur in our courts and in Parliament, often with an independent party making the final recommendation. Contrarianism sees polemic (controversy) as the means *and* the end. Grayling defines it using another term from Plato's stable – 'eristic', from the Greek for 'strife'.

How do you tell the difference between eristic and dialectic? It's tricky. It *is* correct for the media to verify almost any statement of fact or opinion – that's their job. But is it their role to keep digging until they find some crazy polemicist and represent their opinion in equal weight to agreed facts? It *is* important that minority voices be heard – corporate PR can subsume that little squeak of reason. But is it the media's role to afford so much attention to the extremist that their view becomes received wisdom by those who wish that reality just isn't so?



The eristic seeks the hubbub of debate. The dialectician seeks to resolve the conflict between opposing theories.

Childhood vaccinations. Climate change. Fluoride. GE. Domestic electricity supply contracts. Pies in schools.

Grayling is not optimistic: "The aim of eristic is nothing other than itself – it exists just for the sake of the wrangle and the strife. Given that the aim of dialectic is truth or better understanding, it is at best a scandal and at worst a tragedy that the former is so often substituted for the latter. But that is how it is, and will doubtless remain so until better days dawn."

In which case, may I suggest a minor modification to Grayling's answer to the question 'What is good?': "The considered life – free, creative, informed, chosen and sceptical...." ❖

I am Right – You are Wrong

Edward de Bono would probably be appalled that anyone would claim that dialectic was the salve of eristic. In his rather frustrating book (it's just a big collection of paragraphs) on the benefits of 'water logic', de Bono considers that the Greeks and their dialectic approach ('rock logic') have done a good job of getting us to where we are now, but it's time to move on. In fact, if we don't, there's going to be trouble. (Basically, more of what's happening now.)³

De Bono equates the 'habit' of dialectic to his terms, 'argument' and 'clash':

"The kindest thing that can be said about argument is that it is a motivated exploration of a subject." But argument is limited in value: "There is the adversarial posture and the role-playing.... There is polarization and a win/lose substitution for exploration. Almost the entire time is taken up on attack and defence rather than on the creative construction of alternatives. Win/lose implies staying within the starting positions, while creative design involves designing new positions that can offer real values to both sides."

De Bono's 'clash' is probably the same as Grayling's eristic – the black and white of politics (left/right), religion (good/evil), Marxism (capital/labour), war (terrorist/freedom fighter) and most media stoushes.

¹ Grayling, A.C. 2003. *What is Good?* Phoenix

² Grayling, A.C. 2007. *I'm right. You're not.* THES, 20 April 2007

³ de Bono, E. 1990. *I am Right – You are Wrong.* Penguin

Rather than argument, de Bono prefers 'exploration', and in various books he suggests tools for facilitating this approach – lateral thinking being his most famous.

His concept of 'water logic' relies on our replacing judgements based on right and wrong, with, for example, the concepts of 'fit' and 'flow'. Does this fit the circumstances? Is the terrain suitable for flow to take place in this direction? 'Rock logic' is our old friend dialectic, with spurs.

De Bono has a particularly nice example of where the use of 'fit' and 'flow' would encourage a shop assistant to exchange a faulty kettle even though the customer was in error. He relies on research which indicates that for every dollar spent on customer relations, five dollars are returned in increased sales and customer loyalty. If such flexibility means that the benevolence of the shop is abused, then such problems can be dealt with if they happen, relying on the advanced perception skills of the shop assistant.

The analogy with water and rock logic is that if you place a rock in a glass and tip it, the rock is either all in or all out: "That's not covered by the warranty", says the assistant. If the glass is full of water – you can pour a little out and keep the rest: "This is an issue that we can easily solve in this case", they say.

De Bono warns us about our, "complacency and self-satisfaction with our traditional thinking systems... We are so locked into table-top logic [dialectics] that it has almost become a belief system. We can see the world only in these terms, so that what we see reinforces our way of looking. We are so bemused with the success of our thinking in technical matters that we account for its relative failure in human affairs by saying that these matters are simply intractable owing to the perversity of human nature."

Will traditional philosophy help? "Traditional philosophy ... is just the exploration of the inadequate words we use to describe things we do not understand."

What about bureaucracies? "A bureaucracy comes about when a body of people who have come together for a purpose change that purpose to the perpetuation of the body."

Universities? "Universities do a good job, but the same resources applied in a different way might do a better job."

Advertising? "If advertising were to become really effective, society could no longer tolerate it."

Democracy? "Democracy is an excellent way of ensuring that nothing much gets done.... Changes do take place. They take place in spite of the democratic process and not because of it."

History? "We need to escape from our obsession with history, which mops up too much talent and time."

Pragmatism? Perhaps, yes. "Pragmatism has a bad name because it seems to be the opposite of 'principled', and that is 'unprincipled'.... Pragmatism does not need to mean the absence of principles but can mean a flexible application of principles. Pragmatism can also mean a refusal to be driven into impractical action by rigid principles."

Hence the exchangeable kettle.

De Bono further melds pragmatism and principles: "Principles need feeding. They exist only as we talk about them, believe them, use them and make decisions (even unpopular ones) with them. Against the rigidity and convenience of principles, pragmatism seems to have nothing to offer. We can, however, introduce the concept of 'fit', which is highly circumstance-dependent. An action 'fits' the circumstances or does not."

"Should we be pragmatic enough to be pragmatic and yet to declare that we are following principles?... We have not really explored [pragmatism's] practical application for fear of what it might lead to and for fear of losing our valuable sense of righteousness."

Good luck. ❖

Deadlines

Douglas Adams, author of *The Salmon of Doubt*, is often quoted as saying, "I love deadlines. I like the 'whoosh' noise they make as they go by". Kevin Fong, a physiology lecturer at University College London, takes a more academic approach and introduces the Special Theory of Deadline Relativity,⁴ the First Law of which is: *Your overall productivity is inversely proportional to the length of time before the deadline arises.*

This suggests that there is really no point in being organised. If you start your run too early, you are basically wasting time by working inefficiently. Fong cites 'experts' who believe that, "trying to get stuff completed in a timely fashion actually creates an invisible black hole around your head into which all your professional energy falls, never to be seen again."



Fong cautions, however, about the 'P45 Effect'⁵, which describes, "the steep downward slope in your career trajectory when four or five important unseen deadlines are encountered simultaneously."

Fong does not mention any further Laws of Deadline Relativity. Perhaps he ran out of time? He finally concludes that deadlines are our friends. "Let's face it, without them nothing would ever get done."❖

For Your Interest

Moving to Nelson has been a success. Shifting a family is possibly a fraught thing, but in this case it all worked out. People are very polite about the new house. 'Full of potential', they say. I have had one major epiphany. I and other members of our Global Leisure Group have often written about walkability as a terribly important feature of an activity-friendly environment. But actually living in one – a walkable environment – has made me realise that it is a real luxury – a Big Thing. We were in Nelson for two months before needing to put some petrol in the car. Having schools, kindergartens, shops, parks and fantastic communities all within cooee certainly creates the basis for a civil society. The level of community interaction is remarkably different from fossil fuel options. I'd recommend forgoing views and llamas for a bit of walkability (we've never had llamas).

Consultancy has been focused largely on energy projects – wind and water – and several major and minor subdivisions. The geographical spread runs from Fiordland to North Shore, via the Otago, Canterbury, West Coast, Nelson, Taranaki and Waikato regions. We completed three research projects over the summer season; and a national study into recreation displacement carried out for the Department of Conservation in 2004 (with Gordon Cessford and Jason Leppens) has just been accepted for publication in the *Annals of Leisure Research* (there was no deadline for that output). Overall, and per usual, the work remains fascinating and the people involved, wonderful.

⁴ Fong, K. 2007. *Cosy up to your pal the deadline*. THES, 20 April 2007

⁵ A P45 is a UK tax form providing details of an employee leaving work.