Evening of Philosophical Discussion with Captain Highliner and Billy on The Nature of Right

By Derrick R. Webber

It was a stormy evening at the old lighthouse; frothing waves crashed against cold, jagged rocks as its powerful beacon swept the cold air majestically, warning any unwary trawlers that braved the storm. Inside, the lanterns swayed from the gale winds seeping through boarded windows.

Captain Highliner, that wise old trawler salt from Newfoundland, and Billy, his youthful companion and pupil, sat quietly at the wooden kitchen table listening to the blow. The Captain stared alternately at the knarled wood of the window boards and at the limp fishsticks on his plate, floating in globs of ketchup. Supper was over and as the Captain took a thoughtful sip from his cup Little Billy could smell the rum in it and tell he was about to launch into yet another of his seafaring tales. He slumped in his seat.

"Arr, Billy", the Captain began, "I'm not going ta bore ya with another one of my tales tonight". Billy's eyes brightened at the thought.

"Then what will we talk about, Cap'n Highliner", the tot inquired with as eager a tone he could muster, "We always discuss sea tales or fish grinding secrets before I go to bed."

"No, little Billy, I've been teaching you that long enough. A night like this one makes a man think, when he's sheltered in his home and the mother sea's wailing outside, and his mind turns to the philosophical. Tonnight I'll be discussing philosophy, or more specifically, the nature of right and wrong."

The Captain drained his cup and leaned forward, resting his arms on the table, and causing Billy to shrink in his chair again. Little Billy knew full well the power of the Captain's thoughts, his words, but, most of all, his thunderous breath.

"Billy", the Captain began, "ye know that every question concerning well defined matters usually has just one answer, the one that's exactly right. But think, Billy, what about the wrong answers?"

"But Captain", said Billy with little interest, "who cares about wrong answers?"

"Me Son, sometimes the wrong answers can be just as relevent as the right one. If ya went ta school", said the Captain, giving Billy a dark look, "you'd be given tests. I bet you'd care about the wrong answers then".

Little Billy mumbled agreement.

The Mighty seafarer breathed, "Wrong answers are very valuable. They can tell how we formulated the correct response, or can serve as a guide to the questions we should be askin' next. The problem with wrong answers is that they hain't clearly defined. What's wrong is wrong, they say, and make no distinction between those incorrect responses". The Captain leaned back, feeling proud of his impressive discourse.

"Um", said Billy, slouching in his seat, and looked about for an excuse to escape the discussion. Captain Highliner, however, had just gotten warmed up and rose to refill his cup, this time with rye. Billy knew there was no stopping him; so, fearful of his temper when on to a topic, he decided to humour the old man and said, "What do your mean?" When it ain't right, it's wrong. There's no difference between one wrong answer to a question and another".

"Hah", shouted the Captain, plopping down again on his chair, "What about something that's half right, or almost correct? There are differing degrees ta which a thing can be wrong, and what needs be done is for us ta define them. There's already definitions enough fer the 'Right Answer'; we needs an exact science dealing with the errors..."

Billy blinked. There was just no stopping the old boy now.

The Captain raged on, "...there's many a use for wrong answers."

Billy interrupted, "Besides using them to fail navigation school, Captain?", he giggled. He knew far more about the Captain's sorry past than he let on, and the old boy's habit of running aground was one of the reasons he now lived at the lighthouse.

The Captain was in no mood to be toyed with and with a hard tone said, "Don't be too smart, Cod Face. I'm the mentor here, not ye. Remember that I've been trawling for many a year and a star on the TV for many more. You'll have to study a lot more if you want to match wits with me". The wisened old salt ran a cold eye over Billy.

This look, rather than having it's intended effect, sent the youth into a fit of inner glee. Billy liked to get the old boy mad during his discussions. He hoped that one day the Captain would get so angry he'd have a heart attack and die, leaving him with the rights to the monumental Highliner fish processing industry. However, Billy knew this would never really happen. All those years of eating nothing but fish fillets had left the Captain's arteries as clean as could be. At least there was something to be said for the Captain's degenerate way of life. "Sorry", said Billy.

Satisfied that the boy was again attentive, the Captain regained his thoughts. "Now, Billy, my boy", he said, "Can you think of a definition for an exactly wrong answer?"

Billy sighed and took a guess, "The opposite of the right answer?" he quipped.

"WRONG!" roared Captain Highliner, "Exactly wrong is not always the exact opposite. Oh, sure it is with the simple yes and no answers, but what about an answer like 'a cheeseburger', or 'Tuesday'?"

"Or 'blue' or 'yellow'", asked Billy.

"NO!" he said, "Most don't know it, boy, but every colour has an opposite. You can look on a colour wheel and find the opposite of yellow or blue, or green. It's the colour that turns the first one black when you mix it in with it." The Captain loved to impress inferiors with his tidbits of knowledge, and reclined smugly to pull lint balls off his sweater.

"Gee, Captain, if that's true"' exclaimed Billy, "I wasn't aware of that aspect of the light spectrum. I just thought of colour as differing vibrational frequency relationships of electromagnetic radiation. Gosh, you know so much, Captain. I wish we could discuss this all night". Billy excelled in both physics, and lying.

The Captain leaned back and stroked his white beard, not quite sure if Billy was ribbing him again. He decided it'd be best to call it a night. It was late and he wanted to go upstairs and try out his gin.

He said, "Not tonight, little Billy. It's late; past yer bedtime, and I have yet to tend to the light".

Billy put up a meek protest, actually relieved that it was all over. He knew the Captain well and saw the glint in his eye that signalled he wanted his booze. He rose and said, "I hope we can continue. This is such an interesting and undeveloped field. I'd really like to talk about it more". He said this with the secure thought that the Captain wouldn't remember a thing in the morning. He toddled off to his room.

"G'night, little one", called out the Captain after him, "We'll pick this up over breakfast". He waited until Billy had shut his door before going up the tower, where his still and philosophy books waited. As he trundled up the stairs, he thought, "The boy's a bright lad, but I still have to teach him proper respect for his elders. Yes, Billy hasta learn not to buck his superiors."

With that he blew out the latern and entered his 'Thought Room'.

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