

# CROSS-PURPOSES



**John O'Loughlin**

# **CROSS-PURPOSES**

Or

## **THE ADULTERY CLUB**

Or

## **ROLLING AT THE BALL**

By

**John O'Loughlin**

Of Centretruths Digital Media

CDM Prose

This edition of *Cross-Purposes* first published 2011 and republished with revisions 2022 by Centretruths Digital Media

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ISBN: 978-1-4466-4118-7

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## CHAPTER ONE

With a look of pained scepticism on an otherwise quite straightforward face, Stephen Jacobs, friend and only guest that evening of fellow writer James Kelly, said: "I can hardly agree with you that Plato was a realist.

After all, he considered the Ideas to be of primary importance and the objects, insofar as they had any reality at all, to be merely secondary.

Unlike his great pupil Aristotle, he didn't put the Ideas *in* the objects but kept them separate, thereby emphasizing their superior nature. So how can a man who considers the Ideas superior to the diverse components of the material world, which are deemed to be merely imperfect copies of the originals, possibly be a realist?" He leant back in Kelly's armchair with a less sceptical expression on his clean-shaven face and fumbled in the left pocket of his dark-green jacket for some cigarettes. Without giving Kelly a chance to respond, he proceeded to ram home his point with the aid of a cigarette, the idea of which, he ventured to suggest, would have been more real to Plato than the damned cigarette itself. "Fortunately, cigarettes hadn't been invented in the fourth-century B.C.," he went on, "so no-one would have been granted an opportunity to question the superiority of the Idea on their account."

"Yes, but the point is that, for Plato, the Idea was external to himself, it was something which had a kind of life of its own," countered Kelly with an air bordering on supercilious defiance. "The Idea wasn't something that he extrapolated from reality but, rather, something he believed he had discovered in the external world, where it had a prior existence to him."

"Really?" exclaimed Jacobs as he lit the cigarette in his hand with the aid of a glossy lighter and returned the no-less glossy packet of *Gauloise Longues* to its customary pocket. "That's almost too funny for words, old chap. I mean, what's an idea if not something related to one's mind, to the faculty of thought? Can you imagine the idea of a wheel floating about in space with more reality to it than the wheel of a car or a motorbike?" He deeply inhaled some tobacco from his cigarette, as though intending to throw up a dense smoke-screen between himself and the idea of a wheel hovering somewhere in the immediate vicinity. "But even if the Idea was external to himself," he continued, having exhaled the incipient

smokescreen in the general direction of Kelly's armchair, "even if that was the case, he'd still be an idealist for attributing more reality to the Idea than to the material object derived from it; for attributing more reality to the idea of a wheel than to the wheel itself!"

"Perhaps he would," conceded Kelly, who was almost choking in the detestable smoke his guest had unconcernedly bombarded him with, "but he'd still be less of an Idealist than, say, William of Occam, the fifteenth-century philosopher who placed the Ideas firmly in the mind instead of in the external world, like Plato, or in the mind of God, like Plotinus. You might call him an idealistic realist, if you like."

"Or a realistic idealist," suggested Jacobs, before flicking some ash which had fallen on his lap onto the carpet and then proceeding to rub it in with the heel of his right shoe without the slightest show of embarrassment or remorse. "But he was quite mistaken to consider the Ideas external to himself, and, in my opinion, equally mistaken to consider them superior in reality to the objects around him. If Aristotle wasn't entirely right to put the Ideas into the objects themselves, he at least showed more common sense than his early mentor where the claims of Idealism were concerned. His was a more realistic touch."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," murmured Kelly, who looked as though he had just been defeated by Alexander the Great and was about to be executed for political treachery.

For a while, however, silence supervened between them, since neither man knew what to say next, nor had they any real desire to continue the conversation along the same paradoxically intellectual lines, each of them at cross-purposes with the other. Although they both professed to being philosophers in preference to anything else, they were obliged to admit to themselves that there were times when the subject of philosophy was virtually anathema to them, times when they would rather have discussed the weather or the results of the latest football matches, tired as they were of dragging their professional lives into their social relationship. It was as though they had to keep reminding themselves of the professional basis of their friendship from fear that it would automatically crumble for want of solid support, since it was philosophy which had brought them together in the first place.

Now that they had come to a pause in their philosophical discussion, however, they suddenly found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to stare the basis of this friendship in the face, which didn't seem as solid a thing as when they had first entered upon it, some four years ago. But it was the thirty-nine-year-old Stephen Jacobs who, with his talkative nature, re-opened the conversation on a note of sympathy for Plato for having had enough sense to think an actual rose superior to a painting of one, even if he hadn't had enough sense to think an actual rose superior to the idea of one. "You might be able to sell a painting of a rose at ten-thousand times the price of an actual rose," he continued, "but even so, the actual rose cannot be improved upon – any more than you can improve upon the beauty of an actual woman with the aid of a canvas, a brush, and a set of oils. It's nature which has the better of art, irrespective of what certain artists might think. Consequently it seems to me that a realistic perspective relating to the value of art will always be found somewhere in between Plato and, say, Wilde, rather than at either extreme. Then one wouldn't have to consider a painting inferior to the Idea it endeavours to portray through the object or, conversely, superior to the object it endeavours to improve upon through the Idea." He flicked some ash from his half-consumed cigarette into the small ashtray which stood conveniently close to-hand and bowed his head, as though to aid himself think about something he desired to keep private.

"Yes, I quite agree with your realistic perspective," admitted Kelly smilingly. "If one could always strike a balance somewhere in-between idealism and realism, one would certainly save oneself a lot of unnecessary deceptions! It seems that we're only just beginning to shake off the idealism of Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, etc., by accepting the external world as something which actually exists as it is in itself rather than wholly dependent upon the shape our minds choose to give it. We appear to have been labouring for too long under the deception that our minds are really quite different from the world around us. Obviously, there has to be a subject/object relationship, but not to the extent of making the object entirely dependent upon the nature of the subject. Even Plato wouldn't have approved of that, insofar as he found the object to be a pale copy of the Idea, which was external to the subject."

"Indeed, eighteenth-century idealism is quite a different proposition from

Platonic Idealism," rejoined Jacobs, raising his head again. "One can hardly expect the minds of Locke, Hume, Berkeley, etc., to be content with re-stating everything Plato thought on the subject, even though there are some similarities here and there. For instance, instead of the Idea we have the *thing-in-itself*, which was of course unknowable but more real, for all that, than the material object associated with it. In both cases, there is something beyond appearances which makes the apparent a relatively inferior phenomenon. The only notable difference is that, in the case of eighteenth-century philosophy, we impose a limitation upon the object through being unable to grasp the *thing-in-itself*, whereas the limitation imposed upon the object in Plato's case is solely a consequence of the object being inferior to the Idea, which, as you correctly said, he considered external to the subject. It transpires, however, that the concept of *thing-in-itself* is just as shaky, these days, as that of the Idea, for which we have no real sympathy." Stubbing out his cigarette in the ashtray, Stephen got up from his armchair and walked over to James Kelly's bookcase, which stood against the longest wall in the room and held merely a few hundred books. He wanted to look up a passage in Hume relating to the unknowability of the *thing-in-itself* but was distracted from this objective by the sight of a book, resting on top of the small bookcase, which his friend had evidently been reading recently. "So you're into Arthur Koestler again," he observed, picking it up and scrutinizing the author's small photograph on the back cover. "*Janus – A Summing Up*, eh?"

"As a matter of fact I've been rereading it," replied Kelly enthusiastically. For Koestler was pretty much his favourite philosopher these days, and the book in question unquestionably one of the master's finest. "As you may know, Koestler developed a theory of 'holons' – a name he assigns to phenomena which are simultaneously both wholes and parts, the phenomena in question being complete in themselves, and thus wholes, but also dependent upon larger wholes, and thus parts. A phenomenon, be it a material object, an organization of material objects, an event, a psychological process, or whatever, can be an autonomous whole one moment and a dependent part the next, depending on the context. There's no clear-cut division between wholes and parts, particles and wavicles, because there's nothing which is entirely one or the other. For example, we are autonomous wholes to the extent that we are individual human beings, but we're also dependent parts in a larger whole, which is human society.

If we try to live merely as autonomous wholes, divorced from the society to which we belong, we'll soon find ourselves starving to death. And if we try to live merely as dependent parts, as tools of society, we'll probably find ourselves starving to death just as quickly, since we won't be in a position to feed ourselves – *not*, as in the first case, because we haven't earned the money, but simply because we'll have no desire or time to look after ourselves once we *have* earned it."

"Yes, that sounds reasonably plausible," sighed Jacobs while flicking through the book in his hands. "There's a parallel of sorts with Whitehead here, the diverse kinds of phenomena you mention having intimate connections with Whitehead's 'actual entities', which cover more than the merely material aspects of life. He thought the world an 'extensive continuum' of events having 'extensive connections', or overlappings. That doesn't appear too far removed from what you've just explained to me regarding the 'holon', if I've understood you correctly."

"Unfortunately I must confess to a rather scant knowledge of Whitehead's philosophy," said Kelly, blushing slightly, "but I can tell you that Koestler's philosophy is closely related to the philosophies of Parmenides and, perhaps to an even greater extent, of Hegel."

"Oh, in what way?" asked Jacobs who, though no stranger to Koestler himself, had next-to-no knowledge of either philosopher.

"Well, he contends that the combination of parts into a whole is greater than and different from the sum of the parts which form that whole, thereby concurring with both Parmenides and Hegel to the detriment of any behaviourist/reductionist credo," Kelly promptly replied. "And he goes on, like Hegel, to develop a tripartite system of logic as opposed to a purely dualistic one, which leads him to emphasize the 'extensive continuum', if you like, of humour, science, and art. He defines humour as the 'ha-ha!' reaction, science as the 'aha!' reaction, and art as the 'ah ...' reaction, returning to a dualistic framework to ascribe self-assertive tendencies to humour and, at the other end of the spectrum, self-transcending tendencies to art. Science is defined as signifying a subtle combination of the two tendencies, a kind of hybrid coming in-between the two thoroughbreds, as it were. Now anything which has a self-assertive tendency can be identified, in returning to the 'holonic' viewpoint, with the



independent whole, whereas anything with a self-transcending tendency should be identified with the dependent part. So you can see that humour pertains to individualism, whereas the keynote to art is to be found, as earlier affirmed by Schopenhauer, in self-transcendence, in acknowledgement of something greater than oneself. But if one is to take this triad of humour, science, and art seriously, then it should be fairly obvious that, contrary to popular belief, science and art are not opposites but next-door neighbours, so to speak, in a tripartite spectrum beginning with humour, which is therefore the logical antithesis to art. It seems that we've also deceived ourselves for far too long on this matter, as on so many other matters, for that matter."

"So it would appear," mumbled Jacobs, whose face was partly hidden from Kelly by the book he was busily scanning, as though in search of some hidden revelation. "And so Koestler has effectively demonstrated that there's a place for both dualistic *and* tripartite reasoning in the world; that the one needn't necessarily exclude the other?"

"Precisely," confirmed Kelly with some considerable satisfaction. "It's simply a question of knowing when to employ one or the other modes of reasoning, not of castigating that which you foolishly assume to be mistaken. In this respect, Koestler has achieved a greater synthesis than most of his philosophical forebears, who either emphasized triads at the expense of duads, or duads at the expense of triads. Although one could also argue that Koestler has put tripartite thinking on the philosophical map at the expense of dualism, which is no mean achievement, and one, I feel sure, that can only gain greater recognition and credibility as time goes by."

Stephen Jacobs sceptically nodded his head before saying: "Wasn't Huxley thinking along tripartite lines in *The Human Situation*?" He cast his gaze in the general direction of the Aldous Huxley section of Kelly's meagre bookcase, then went on: "I seem to recall your telling me something about that book a few months ago, though I still haven't got round to reading it yet, despite the fact that it was published some time ago. "Perhaps you'll let me borrow it sometime, James?"

"By all means, take it with you this evening. It's something you ought to have borrowed when I first mentioned it to you, though you seem to have a

marked talent for procrastination where books of that sort are concerned."

"It's an old family weakness, I'm afraid," confessed Jacobs, smiling. "Still, I do get round to reading them eventually, even if I'm not as keen as you on some of the more recent philosophical publications. I suppose I'm more old-fashioned really, and tend, in consequence, to react against them."

"A statement which seems to imply that I'm also old-fashioned, only less so than yourself," deduced Kelly, smiling in turn.

"Well, there may well be a grain of truth in that implication," conceded Jacobs thoughtfully, "though I didn't exactly intend to convey such an impression. I suppose a course in Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy would add more precision to my utterances."

"Provided you could understand his linguistics!" joked Kelly.

There ensued another silence while Jacobs continued to flick through the pages of *Janus – A Summing Up*. However, when his eyes alighted upon the name of Konrad Lorenz, he halted in his flicking tracks and uttered an exclamatory 'Aha!' sound, which was evidently in confirmation of something he had been assuming for some time. "I imagine Koestler got some of the inspiration for his 'haha!' – 'aha!' – 'ah ...' spectrum from Konrad Lorenz," he at length remarked, noting the positive reference to the latter on the page before him.

"What makes you say that?" asked Kelly, feeling slightly puzzled.

"Well, I've recently been rereading Lorenz's *Behind the Mirror*, a work which does, incidentally, have some bearing on what you were saying about Platonic idealism a little while ago," Jacobs replied. "It seems the compromise between idealism and realism you were advocating is the very thing that appeals to Lorenz who, in opposition to the idealistic lopsidedness of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century philosophy, is given to the view that the material world isn't really all that different from the world as we see it, but corresponds to reality as it actually is. Instead of making the world dependent on our particular consciousness of it, as traditional idealism usually does, Lorenz contends that our consciousness corresponds to the world and was evolved in harmony with it, so that what

we see isn't necessarily a distortion of reality but, rather, that reality reflected in our minds. The fact, however, that we're given to assimilating only a fraction of total reality doesn't, of course, invalidate his contention, since what we *do* assimilate as *Homo sapiens* is real enough in itself. It merely corresponds to a different reality than to, say, fish reality, which has nothing whatsoever to do with the assimilation of rain, snow, sunlight, wind, flowers, trees, etc."

"So I was right in thinking that we've finally got round to believing in the reality of the external world!" exclaimed Kelly mockingly. "Though I guess you could say it had to wait for an age of materialism, with its cameras and televisions, to give it due credit as a logical entity. I suppose Christianity was largely responsible for the hold-up by insisting on the superiority of the Otherworld to the detriment of this one. Yet some people would still argue that conceptual subjectivity is intrinsically superior to perceptual objectivity, and that the modern world has simply regressed from the civilized plane to the barbarous one. But isn't Lorenz's contention more a straightforward appeal to materialism than a compromise between realism and idealism?"

"I don't think so," Jacobs replied. "He's simply getting us away from the stupid or, depending on your viewpoint, highly civilized idea that the world would cease to exist if we weren't there to witness it."

"Like, presumably, what Berkeley said?" conjectured Kelly.

"Yes, though he was shrewd enough to point out that it would continue to exist as an idea in the mind of God," confirmed Jacobs. "However, the important thing to remember is that any objective comprehension of things presupposes a subject who comprehends; that there's a subtle interaction between subject and object which inevitably implies a compromise between them. Unlike the earlier-mentioned idealists, however, Lorenz doesn't accept the contention that our minds *distort* external reality. On the contrary, he endorses the correspondence they have to it. That's the difference, and *that*, believe it or not, is an important advance in the history of Western philosophy!"

"One would think it crawled along at a snail's pace," said Kelly, who was by this time almost ashamed of being philosophical. "Either that or it has

been pursued almost exclusively by intellectual cranks hitherto!"

"I could hardly agree with *that* remark, James, which I'm sure you don't seriously mean!" exclaimed Jacobs with a show of surprise. "Still, we do have our moments of amusement and exasperation at its expense, I'll grant you. But Konrad Lorenz is a scientist, not a philosopher, and a scientist, moreover, who doesn't think too highly of idealistic philosophers. We can at least be grateful to science for continuing to support our faith in external reality, even though it is becoming progressively weirder with the passing of time."

Having returned the Koestler tome to its resting place on top of the small bookcase, Stephen Jacobs glanced at his wristwatch and informed his friend that he would have to be leaving. He had an appointment with his agent the following morning and consequently wanted to get an early night. Since it was already 10.30pm, he couldn't expect to get to bed much before 11.00. But he had enjoyed Kelly's company, particularly as, due to ill-health, he hadn't seen him for over a month and had been especially looking forward to discussing philosophy again. His other friends were all such natural enemies of metaphysical and kindred speculation that it was a relief to have someone like James with whom to talk once in a while, someone above the common run who would add a little intellectual variety to an otherwise monotonous round of inconsequential chatter. Such, at any rate, was the general impression he endeavoured to convey to his fellow writer before turning on his heels with the Huxley lectures tucked safely under his arm.

"Good luck with your appointment tomorrow," said Kelly, opening the door of his Highgate flat.

"Thanks old chap," Jacobs responded smilingly and, with a gentle wave of his free arm, he was off down the flight of stairs and out, via the communal entrance, into the wet night.

'Oh well,' thought Kelly as he returned to the study and began to survey its heterogeneous contents with an air of dejection, 'I suppose I won't be seeing *him* for some time. Which is probably just as well, considering he resents not being able to show off his philosophical knowledge to me as much as he'd ideally like to, in view of the fact that I'm usually better

informed and even more up-to-date than him. I think he has the impression that he ought to know more about philosophy than me, bearing in mind that he's three years my senior and has been studying it for a couple of years longer. But how hard and how often has he *really* been studying it? And who has he been studying anyway? He thinks he's a philosopher, but he's really a philosophical artist, a man who leans in the direction of philosophy from a sort of literary base. He doesn't have a Ph.D. and is consequently without a chair of philosophy anywhere. But how many genuine philosophers don't have that? Almost every great philosopher on record was a lecturer at one time or another – even Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Though the former resigned his chair and the latter taught philology even after he'd been awarded an honorary Ph.D. by his university. But at least he ended-up with a doctorate, which is more than either Stephen or I have acquired. Still, why should one be ashamed of being a man of letters instead of a bona fide philosopher with no literature to his name because he is sufficiently preoccupied with his university post and the writings which pertain to or supplement it? What's wrong with being a philosophical artist? That's what I'd like to ask Stephen Jacobs, though if I did it would almost certainly humiliate him, even make him take umbrage. For he thinks he's a philosopher. But philosophers don't write literature; they confine themselves to lecturing on and writing about philosophy – assuming, of course, that they hadn't been sacked from their university, like Bertrand Russell, or induced to resign their post, like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, for one reason or another.

Admittedly, Stephen writes philosophy or, at any rate, something approximating to it. But he can't earn his living from that; he has to write literature as well. So, in a sense, he's probably ashamed of having to compromise himself against his deepest intellectual predilections.... If he was genuinely a philosophical artist, on the other hand, that sort of thing wouldn't particularly bother him. He'd be nicely poised between literature and philosophy, glad to take refuge in the one whenever the other became either too oppressive or too restrictive. But because he secretly yearns to be a philosopher, and has little taste for literature, he finds the idea of being a philosophical artist beneath him. Yet he's neither a genuine philosopher – much less an artist-philosopher/philosopher-artist – nor a genuine artist. He's a total misfit. A failed philosopher and a bogus artist! That's the way I see him anyway, and that's the way I believe he is, even though he'd be the last person to admit it. For if there's one thing he's a genuine master of, it's the art of self-deception! Of that, there can be no

doubt!"

By now James Kelly was beginning to feel slightly more pleased with himself than he had done all evening. He was taking revenge on Jacobs for all the humiliations the latter had wittingly or unwittingly inflicted upon him throughout the course of the evening by means of this barrage of analytical thought, which he aimed at his colleague's professional integrity with the express purpose of smashing it to bits, if only in his perverse imagination, and thereby firmly establishing his unquestionable intellectual superiority over the man.... Not that Jacobs was a permanent thorn in his side. On the contrary, he could think of plenty of people who would have created a less favourable impression on him. But, all the same, he knew that their friendship wasn't particularly sincere, that it didn't run very deep. For one thing, their temperaments weren't entirely congruous, Jacobs being no less critical and moody than he was easy-going and optimistic, while, for another, they wrote quite different books and lived in quite separate worlds. Naturally, they did their best to pretend that these worlds weren't all that far apart whenever they were in each other's company. Nevertheless, there were times – as had occurred more than once this very evening – when the effort of maintaining mutual regard proved too much for them and an embarrassing silence interposed itself between their respective pretences. Needless to say, such occurrences were by no means unheard of in human relationships; there were always contradictory or even antipathetic elements endeavouring to undermine the basis of even the most solid friendship. Even so, there was a limit to how many of these elements one could be expected to tolerate before things became too burdensome and one was accordingly obliged to sever ties. Fortunately, however, things weren't quite that bad between them at present, though that wasn't to say they couldn't have been a lot better!

'As for me,' Kelly continued to reflect, as he sat down in the armchair recently occupied by his guest, 'I have the advantage of being at one with my vocation of philosophical artist, of being an intellectual hybrid simply because, on the one hand, I don't want to be exclusively an artist and, on the other hand, I've no desire to establish myself as an academic philosopher, a man with a Ph.D. and lecturing post at some university who is thereby enabled to write uncommercial treatises in his spare time. Admittedly, one could also be a philosopher *without* such qualifications if, by good fortune, one had been endowed with a sufficiently large private

income to enable one to exclusively dedicate oneself to the writing of aphorisms, monologues, dialogues, etc. But the vast majority of philosophers aren't so fortunate, with the inevitable consequence that the money they make from teaching philosophy enables them to continue writing it. Yet I have no desire to teach philosophy and, even if I were wealthy, I doubt very much that I would want to confine myself exclusively to writing it either, since I value the creative potentials of literature too highly. And, conversely, I value thought too highly to be content with limiting it to a literary guise and diluting it in the interests of plot, characterization, description, etc. Besides, you can never get to the ...'

His digital watch suddenly bleeping 11.00pm broke the train of his thought and induced him to take cognizance of the time. He decided he would go to bed early himself, since he had no desire to subjectively exert his brain any longer. If the habit got out-of-hand, as it threatened to on occasion, he might not find either the time or the inclination to write at all. After all, there was quite a difference between being a thinker and being a writer! And, by a similar token, there was quite a difference between inviting a moody creep like Stephen Jacobs over for a Sunday-evening chat and being invited to dinner by a charming man like Douglas Searle, who wasn't a writer at all but a successful publish

er with a penchant for the arts. Mr and Mrs Searle would certainly make life more interesting for him than ever Jacobs could! Besides, there would be some other guests there who, like himself, were bound to relish the Searles' hospitality to artists.

'June the nineteenth,' he muttered to himself a moment before the curtain of sleep drew across his waking consciousness and plunged him from thoughts about his ,,,