



THE CAT THAT BARKED

Dialogues have a long relationship with thinking. Probably the most famous philosophical dialogues were those written by Plato approximately 2500 years ago, though the genre has been found even earlier with the Sumerian Disputations and the Indian Vedas. Almost all of Plato's philosophical writing was written in this form. The word dialogue comes from the ancient Greek words *dia* ('through' or 'across') and *logos* ('word', 'speech', 'account'). Dialogue is usually understood to mean 'a conversation or discourse held between two or more individuals', but the etymology tells a slightly different, and more interesting story. Dialogue is simply 'through speech'. This can be understood two ways: either 'something that is done through the medium of speech' and including, therefore, those things that characterise speech, or 'a kind of speech that goes through, across (or penetrates) something'.

Understood in these ways a dialogue can perfectly well be held by one person as they think deeply about something. What distinguishes this kind of dialogue from thought or monologue is that, though the dialogue is taking place in the head of one person, it's as if there were two or more people discoursing. Read the French philosopher Rene Descartes' *Meditations* (1641) for an example of this kind of inner dialogue held by just one person. In his dialogue *Theaetetus* Plato (Fourth Century BCE) has the character, Socrates, give this the name 'silent dialogue'.

Writing stories like *The Cat That Barked* is a great way to encourage dialogic thinking in a single individual. Interestingly, I had no idea where this dialogue was going when I began it and the cat's insight, that meowing is different from saying 'meow', was unknown to me at the outset. You could say I became convinced by the argument of the cat as if the cat was outside my head, not inside. Apart from Plato's many and great dialogues, for other well-known examples of writing where one writer wrestles with conflicting ideas using dialogue, see Andrew Marvell's poem 'Dialogue Between The Soul and Body' (Bate 2005), David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religions* (1779) and Berkeley's *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713). Stephen Law uses dialogues very effectively to introduce philosophy to a teenage audience in his books *The Philosophy Files* (2011) and *The Philosophy Gym* (2004). As well as the stories, I have included a dialogue version of *The Cat That Barked* so that it can also be performed in class by willing actors. This story is better read than told (see 'Speaking and lifting from the page' on page 28 to help with your reading performance skills.)

The story

'Woof!' barked the cat.

I know what you're thinking: cats

don't bark. But this one does. In fact, this is a story about a cat that barked: no matter how hard the cat tried, when it opened its mouth to 'meow', out would bark a 'woof'.

So, let me begin again...

This is the story of The Cat That Barked.

'Woof!' barked the cat.

'What?' said the dog.

'Woof!' repeated the cat. 'Obviously,'

the cat continued, 'I mean [spelling] "M.E.O.W." but I can't say that so: woof!'

'Oh, I thought you were going to say something interesting.' Then the dog curled up again to go back to sleep.

'You would say that,' said the cat, 'because I said "woof". Anyway, "M.E.O.W." is just as interesting as "woof".'

'No it's not,' said the dog.

'Yes it is.'

'No it's not!'

The cat sighed, 'Let me put it another way,' he said. "'M.E.O.W." is just as

uninteresting as "woof"'

'What do you mean? "Woof" isn't uninteresting. "Woof" happens to be very

interesting,' said the dog, beginning to get annoyed with the cat. 'Okay. What does it mean then?' said the cat.

Task Question 1: What does 'woof' mean?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ What does 'woof' mean to humans?
- ✓ What does it mean to dogs?
- ✓ Is speaking about meaning even meaningful or relevant when talking about dogs or cats?

- ✔ Do dogs say ‘woof’?
- ✔ Is ‘woof’ part of a language?
- ✔ Do dogs have a language?
- ✔ What is language?

‘Erm. Errr... I don’t know, err... lots of things. There: it means lots of things. And that makes it very interesting. It’s not like normal words that have only one, two or three meanings – at the most. “Woof” can mean anything.’

‘And that,’ said the cat, ‘is precisely why it is uninteresting because if it can mean anything that’s the same as it meaning nothing.’

Task Question 2: Can ‘woof’ mean anything?

Nested Questions:

- ✔ Is meaning ‘anything’ the same as meaning ‘nothing’? • What does the cat mean by this?
- ✔ Could you have a language with just one word?

The dog wasn’t sure how to respond. So he decided just to poke the cat because he was being annoying.

‘Ow!’ said the cat. ‘That hurt!’

‘Don’t be so annoying then,’ said the dog.

Nobody said anything for a while.

Then the dog said, ‘Did you just say “ow”?’

‘Who? Me?’ said the cat.

‘Yes. And did you just say “me”?’ said the dog, more excitably.

‘Yeah, so what?’

‘Well, if you can say “me” and you can say “ow” then you can say “meow”.’

The dog looked at the cat, awaiting a response. The cat looked at the dog silently, but intently. The dog waited.

The cat looked.

Then the cat said, ‘No I can’t.’

‘Why?’

‘Because,’ said the cat, “me” and “ow” are two completely different words

to M.E.O.W. – They mean completely different things: “me” is the first person singular object pronoun and “ow” is... ow!’

‘Yes, but if you can make the sound me and the sound ow then you can put them together to make me-ow. Try it!’

The cat looked at the dog for a few more seconds. The dog looked back waiting. Then the cat put his lips together and went, ‘Mmmm...’ then the dog said, ‘Go on eeeee.’

‘...Eeee...’

‘And then ow,’

‘...Ooowwwa,’ finished the cat.

‘And then all together,’ instructed the dog. ‘Mee-oooww.’

‘There,’ said the dog, ‘you can “meow”.’

Task Question 3: Can the cat meow?

Nested Questions:

- ✔ What is a meow?
- ✔ Is there a difference between a meow and saying ‘meow’? • What do you think the cat will say?

‘I can say “me” and I can say “ow”,’ said the cat, ‘and I can put them together to say “me-ow” but I cannot M.E.O.W.’

The dog looked really puzzled.

‘Because M.E.O.W.ing is different from saying “me-ow”,’ explained the cat, ‘Humans can say “me-ow” but they can’t actually M.E.O.W. It’s like snoring: saying “snoring” is not the same as actually snoring.’

‘Yeah, you’ve got a point,’ said the dog, conceding unexpectedly.

‘Oh. Thanks,’ said the cat, surprised that the dog had conceded. And then the cat said, ‘and may I thank you again?’

'What for?' asked the dog.

'For helping me to say "me-ow". Sort of.' said the cat. 'That's okay,' said the dog, 'what are friends for?!' 'Woof!' said the cat.

'Woof!' said the dog.

Task Question 4: What does 'woof' mean when the cat and dog say it at the end of the story?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ What do you think 'woof' meant at the start of the story when the cat said it?
- ✓ How can you work out the meaning of the woofs if you don't already know what they mean?
- ✓ How important is context for meaning and understanding of meaning?