

Irvine Welsh

## Two Philosophers

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- 5 It was damn hot for Glasgow, Lou Ornstein thought, as he pulled his sweating body into the Byres Road hostelry. Gus McGlone was already at the bar, chatting to a young woman.
- Gus, how goes it? Ornstein asked, slapping his friend on the shoulder.
- Ah Lou. Very well indeed. And yourself?
- 10 - Great, Ornstein said, noting that McGlone's attention was still very much centred on the young woman. The woman whispered something to McGlone, then flashed Ornstein a searing smile which was all teeth and eyes. It cut through him.
- Professor Ornstein, she began in the Scotch tearoom accent he found so attractive, - at the risk of sounding sycophantic I just wanted to say that your paper on the rational construction of magic was just superb.
- 15 - Why thank you. I shall accept that as a scholarly, rather than sycophantic view, Ornstein smiled. He thought that was quite a self-conscious response, but hell, he was an academic.
- I find your central hypothesis interesting ... the young woman continued, as Ornstein felt a small pellet of resentment crystallise in his breast. This day was about drinking beer, not conducting an involuntary seminar with one of Gus's naive students. Oblivious to his growing unease, the woman
- 20 continued,
- ... tell me, if you don't mind, how do you distinguish between what you call 'unknown science' and what we generally refer to as magic? I do goddamn mind, thought Ornstein. Pretty young women were all the same; completely goddamned self-obsessed. He had had to earn the right to be self-obsessed, to slog his guts out in libraries for years and brown-nose the right people,
- 25 generally assholes who you wouldn't piss upon if they were on fire. Along comes some some nineteen-year-old undergrad destined for at best a lower second honours, who thinks that her opinion counts, that she's important, just because she has a sweet face and a god-given ass. The horrible thing, the worst goddamn thing about it, thought Ornstein, was that she was absolutely right.
- 30 - He can't, McGlone smugly remarked. This intervention by his old adversary was enough to set Ornstein off. Accepting his pint of eighty shilling, he began,
- Don't listen to this old Popperian cynic. These guys are just anti-social science, which means antiscience, and each generation of them get increasingly goddamn juvenile in their analysis. My contention is a fairly standard materialist proposition: so-called unexplained phenomena are
- 35 merely scientific blind-spots. We have to accept the inherently logical concept of further knowledge outside of the human range of what we consciously, and even sub-consciously know. Human history illustrates this; our forefathers would have described the sun, or the internal combustion engine as magic, when they are nothing of the kind. Magic, like ghosts and all that stuff, it's just hocus-pocus bullshit for the ignorant, while unknown science is a phenomena that
- 40 we may or may not be able to observe but cannot yet explain. That does not mean that it is inexplicable; merely that it cannot be explained with due reference to our current body of knowledge. That body of knowledge is constantly expanding; some day we will be able to explain unknown science.
- Don't get him started, Fiona, McGlone smiled,

45 - he'll go on all night.  
- Not if you don't beat me to it. Indoctrinating your students with Popperian orthodoxies.  
- Indoctrination's what the other side do, Lou. We educate, McGlone smiled. The two philosophers laughed at that one, an old quip from their student days. Fiona, the young student, excused herself. She had a lecture to attend. The two philosophers watched her leave the pub.

50 - One of my brightest undergrads, McGlone smirked.  
- Terrific ass, Ornstein nodded. They adjourned to a conspiratorial corner of the pub. Lou took a mouthful of beer.  
- It's great to see you again, Gus. But listen buddy, we gotta enter into a pact. As much as I enjoy coming through to Glasgow to see you, I get a little pissed at us going through the same argument.

55 No matter how much we say we ain't gonna do it, we always go back to the Popper-Kuhn debate. McGlone gave a sombre nod.  
- It's a pain in the arse. It's made our careers, but it seems to overshadow our friendship. You were just in the door and we were at it again. It's always the same. We talk about Mary, Philippa, the kids, then we go back to work, slag off a few people. As the bevvie takes effect, it's back to Popper-Kuhn. Problem is, Lou, we're philosophers. Debate and argument are as natural to us as breathing is to others. This was indeed the case. They had argued with each other over the years; in bars, at conferences and in print in philosophical journals. They had started off as undergraduate students of philosophy at Cambridge University, developing a bond of friendship, based on drinking and womanising; the former usually conducted with more success than the latter. Both men swam

60 against the ideological tide of their country's culture. The Scot Gus McGlone was a supporter of the Conservative Party. He regarded himself as a classical liberal, a descendant of Hume and Ferguson, though he found the classical economists, even Adam Smith, and his latter disciples with philosophical bents like Hayek and Friedman, a little bland. His real hero was Karl Popper, whom he had studied under as a postgraduate student in London. As a follower of Popper's, he was

70 antagonistic to what he saw as the deterministic theories of Marxism and Freudianism and what he considered to be the attendant dogma of their disciples. The American Lou Ornstein, a Chicago-born Jew, was a convinced rationalist, who believed in Marxist dialectical materialism. His interest was science and scientific ideas. He was greatly influenced by the philosopher Thomas Kuhn's concept that the rightness of pure science does not necessarily prevail. If ideas went against the

75 current paradigm, they would be rejected by vested interests. Such ideas, while perhaps scientific 'truths', rarely become recognised as such until the pressure for change becomes unbearable. This, Ornstein felt, was in tune with his political belief in the need for revolutionary social change. Ornstein and McGlone had had parallel careers, working together in London and then in Edinburgh and Glasgow respectively. McGlone had advanced to a professorial chair about eight months

80 before Ornstein. This irked the American, who considered his friend's elevation had been the result of the political fashionability of his ideas under the Thatcher paradigm. Ornstein contented himself with noting he had a greater publication track record. The natural political antagonism of the two men was centred around a famous debate between Kuhn and Popper. Popper, who had established himself as a great philosopher by attacking the approaches of the intellectual

85 nineteenth-century giants Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, and what he saw as the partisanship associated with their ideologies, was less than temperate when he himself had his views of scientific progression attacked by Thomas Kuhn, in his seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Yet one thing was agreed on by both Ornstein and McGlone: the argument, which was their bread and butter, always spilled over from the professional into the personal. They tried

90 all sorts of ways to break this pattern, but nothing could prevent this energy-sapping subject from reemerging. On a couple of occasions, the friends, exasperated and drunk, had almost come to blows.

- I wish we could find some way to keep it to the journals and conferences and out of our shitfaced sessions, Lou mused.

95 - Yeah, but how? We've tried everything. I've tried using your arguments, you've tried using mine; we've agreed to say nothing but it inevitably resurfaces. What can we do?

- I think I know a way out of this cul-de-sac, Gus, Lou gave a coy look.

- What are you suggesting?

- Independent arbitration.

100 - Come on, Lou. No philosopher, no member of our peers could satisfy us as to their independence of mind. They would have formed a prior view on the issue.

- I'm not suggesting a peer. I'm suggesting we find someone in the street, or better still, a pub, and advance our propositions, and let them decide which is the superior argument.

- Ridiculous!

105 - Hold on, Gus, hear me out. I'm not suggesting for one minute that we let go of our academic standpoints on the basis of one informed opinion. That would be ludicrous.

- What are you suggesting?

- I'm suggesting that we have to split the professional from the personal. Let's remove the argument from our social context by letting another party judge the relative merits of our

110 propositions from that social, pub point of view. It will prove nothing academically, but at least it will let us see whose argument is the most user-friendly for the average man in the street.

- Mmmm ... I suppose that way we can accept that our various arguments have strengths and weaknesses with the lay person ...

- Exactly. What we are doing is subjecting those ideas to the real world where they are not

115 discussed, the world of our drinking. What we are agreeing to is giving the victor's ideas sovereignty in the pub context.

- This is nonsense, Lou, but it's interesting nonsense and good sport. I accept your challenge, not because it will validate anything, but because it will hold the loser to shutting up about the scientific logic debate. They shook hands firmly. Ornstein then took McGlone onto the

120 underground at Hillhead station.

- Too many student and intelligentsia types around here, Gus. The last thing I wanna do is get into some discussion with some squeaky undergrad fuck. We need a better laboratory for this little experiment. Gus McGlone was somewhat uneasy when they alighted at Govan. Despite the Glasgow wide-boy persona he cultivated, he was in fact from Newton Mearns and had led quite a

125 closeted life. It was easy to con the impressionable bourgeois who filled the University staff-rooms that he was the genuine article. In somewhere like Govan, it was another matter. Lou strode purposefully down the street. There was a feel to the place, a mixture of the traditional and the new, and the huge gap sites reminded him of the Jewish-Irish neighbourhood he'd grown up in on Chicago's North Side. Gus McGlone sauntered behind him, trying to affect a casualness he didn't

130 feel. Ornstein stopped an old woman in the street.

- Pardon me, ma'am, can you tell us where the nearest pub is? The small woman dropped her shopping bag, turned around and pointed across the road.

- Yir right here, son.

- Brechin's Bar! Excellent, Lou enthused.

135 - It's Breekins Bar, not Bretchins, Gus corrected Lou.  
 - As in Brechin City, right? Brechin City two, Forfar one, yeah?  
 - Yeah.  
 - So the guys that drink in here must root for Brechin City.  
 - I think not, Gus said, as two men in blue scarves exited from the bar. There was a big game on  
 140 today at Ibrox; Rangers versus Celtic. Even McGlone, who had little interest in football, knew that.  
 They went in. The formica-topped island bar was busy, with some groups of men watching TV,  
 others playing dominoes. There were only two women in the place. One was a barmaid of  
 indeterminate middle age, the other a slavering old drunkard. A group of young men in blue  
 scarves were singing a song about something that their father wore, which Lou couldn't quite  
 145 make out.  
 - Is that a Scottish football song? he asked Gus.  
 - Something like that, Gus remarked uneasily as he procured two pints. They found a seat beside  
 two old guys who were playing dominoes.  
 - Awright boeys? one of the old men smiled.  
 150 -Yeah, sure thing, buddy, Ornstein nodded.  
 - You're no fae roond here, the old guy laughed, and they struck up a conversation. One of the old  
 domino players was particularly talkative, and seemed to have a view on everything. The two  
 philosophers gave each other a sly nod: this was their man. They started to spell out their  
 respective arguments. The two old guys considered the points.  
 155 - It's like the boey here sais, one opined,  
 - thir's mair tae this world thin we know about.  
 - S'only names bit, the other one said.  
 - Magic, science, whit the fuck's the difference? S'only names we gie thum! The debate raged on,  
 and became increasingly passionate as more drink was consumed. The two philosophers felt a  
 160 little drunk, and grew very antagonistic towards each other. They had scarcely realised that the  
 argument had attracted several spectators, young men decked in blue, red and white, who had  
 surrounded their table. However, the atmosphere began to get tense as the younger men got  
 more drunk and charged up with the prospect of the football match. One bloated youth in a blue  
 football strip intervened in the discussion. He carried a distinct air of menace which unnerved the  
 165 philosophers.  
 - See yous cunts? Yous come doon here fill ah aw yir shite, treat ma da's auld mate, auld Tommy  
 thair, like a fuckin monkey.  
 - The boey's awright, the boey's awright, auld Tommy said, but he was speaking to himself, in a  
 soft drunken mantra.  
 170 - It wasn't like that, McGlone said shakily.  
 - You! Shut it! The fat youth sneered.  
 - Yous come doon here wi yir silly wee arguments, n yis still canny agree. Thir's only wahn way tae  
 settle this argument: yous two in a squerr go ootside.  
 - Ridiculous, McGlone said, worried at the changing vibes. Ornstein shrugged. He realised that part  
 175 of him had wanted to punch McGlone's smug face for ages. There had been a girl, at Magdalen  
 College. McGlone had known how he felt about her but he still ... goddamn his ass ... The fat youth  
 took Ornstein's shrug as a signal of acquiescence.  
 - Squerr goes it is then!

180 - But ... McGlone was pulled to his feet. He and Ornstein were taken to an empty carpark at the back of a shopping centre. The youths in blue formed a ring around the two philosophers. McGlone was about to speak, to appeal for rational and civilised behaviour, but to his shock saw the Professor of Metaphysics from the University of Edinburgh bearing down on him. Ornstein struck the first blow, a solid jab to McGlone's chin.

185 - Come on, asshole! he snarled, taking up a boxing stance. McGlone felt a surge of rage and swung at his friend, and soon the two philosophers were tearing into each other, urged on by the swelling ranks of the Ibrox enclosure mob. Ornstein gained the upper hand quickly. The telling blow was a powerful punch to the classical liberal's stomach, causing him to double over. Ornstein then hit the Glasgow professor on the side of the jaw. Gus McGlone staggered back from the blow, losing his footing. His head hit the paving-stones with a hollow crack so jarring you felt that

190 outright death would be preferable to the messy range of possibilities which lay just to this side of it. The Chicago materialist, urged on by the crowd, put the boot into the prostrate classical liberal. Lou Ornstein stood back and examined the gasping, bloodied figure of McGlone. Far from feeling shame, Ornstein had never felt better. He was basking so thoroughly in his triumph, it took him a while to recognise the dispersal of the crowd and the appearance of a police van. As Gus McGlone rose unsteadily to his feet and tried to get his bearings, he was unceremoniously bundled into a meatwagon. The two philosophers were locked up in separate cells. The duty sergeant was going through his routine of asking each brawling set of prisoners who the Billy and who the Tim was. If the handshake is right he will let the Billy go and slap the Tim around a bit. That way everybody's

195 happy. The Billy gets to feel superior and delude himself that being a non-churchgoing 'protestant' is somehow important; the Tim gets to feel persecuted and indulge his paranoia about masonic conspiracies; the sergeant gets to slap the Tim around.

200 - Whit fit ye kick wi, mate? Duty Sergeant Fotheringham asked McGlone.

- I don't kick with any. I am Professor Angus McGlone, John Pulanzo Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. Fotheringham shook his head. Another bampot turfed out the

205 nuthouse under this community care bullshit.

- Aye, of course ye are son, he said encouragingly,

- n ye know who ah am?

- No ... McGlone said unsteadily.

- Ah'm David Attenborough. N ah'm used tae dealin wi fuckin animals. Animals like you that

210 terrorise the public ...

- You stupid bloody fool. You don't know who I am! I could get you into serious trouble. I sit on several government committees and I number ... McGlone never got to finish the sentence. He was silenced by another digging blow to his stomach and taken to the cells where he was detained before being charged with breach of the peace. Lou Ornstein, who was on his best behaviour with the police, and whose story was believed due to his accent, emerged from the station without

215 being charged. He made his way to the underground. He had never known that he could fight, and had learned something about himself. A small youth came up to him.

- Ah saw you fightin this eftirnin, big man. Ye were magic, so ye wir.

- No, Ornstein replied,

220 - I was unknown science.

(1994)