

Taboo Dinner Topics: Religion, Politics, & Sex
From Habits to Truth

[I am going to start with a thought experiment, giving an example of how a taboo dinner conversation rather than ramble about philosophers you may or may not have yet read]

Rose, a second-year student at LMU, met a young fellow named John in biology class. They grew close and soon enough began dating. John came from a fairly liberal, non-religious family in the San Fernando Valley while Rose came from a more conservative, devout Catholic family in the Bay area. One weekend Rose decided to invite John to her family's home for dinner. They headed North on the 5, stopped at Harris Ranch for lunch, and listened to the latest Joe Rogan podcast episode.

As they walked through the door, John was excited and nervous to meet the two people who raised the girl that he felt he already loved.

At first, things went smoothly. Rose's mother asked John about himself, and he discussed being a finance major, the president of "SX" fraternity, and how he adored his rescue dog, Snickers.

Rose's mother then asked, "If you intend to marry my daughter, would you convert to Catholicism?" Dumbfounded, John began to stutter. "She told me you aren't very religious. Why is that? Do you believe in God at all?"

Rose stopped her mother, exclaiming, "This is profoundly inappropriate!" Then embarrassed on behalf of her mother, rushed John out the door.

Later, John asked, "Why do you believe in God?" to which Rose replied, "Well, I just know. Through different signs and personal experiences, I believe. I guess I was brought up Catholic as well..." It's silent for a moment. "Why don't you?"

"I never really thought of it much until now, but I guess I didn't really grow up in that kind of environment. My parents never brought me to church."

Even though this is a made-up story, I don't think it sounds too surprising that someone who was baptized in the Catholic Church and attended Catholic school, identifies as a Catholic. Just as it may not be shocking that someone who attended a public high school and had never attended any type of church on Sunday, identifies as agnostic. Of course, something may occur in either of these hypothetical characters' lives that challenges their original beliefs. Rose's brother dies and she begins questioning her faith. John goes

to church with Rose and the priest's sermon is so moving, he sets up biweekly meetings with him, ultimately leading him to convert.

But it may be the case that many of us, in this room, hold beliefs that we have always held—beliefs that are such a complete part of our identity that we latch onto them like habits. Aristotle says, “moral virtue... is the outcome of habit”¹ and while I think there is much to unpack from this idea, I want to argue that we should question our habits... any habits, even the ones we are certain are good and virtuous.

In his book *Anatheism*, Richard Kearney argues one should, at least temporarily, leave behind their faith or non-faith. During their time of departure, one can welcome the Other, meaning one different from them, by expanding their hermeneutic circle. “The hermeneutic circle is a reference to the fact that our existing perspective—social, religious, linguistic, etc.—shapes the way we view the world and, therefore, what we see in the world and what it means to us.” By exposing ourselves to “the Other”, we can be introduced to a different perspective through attending to their culture, religion, political views, way of speaking, and more. I think if we are humble enough, silent enough, and actively listen to “The Other” *charitably*, then we may even be able to *see* the world from a different perspective.

Welcoming “the Other” can occur in various ways and “the Other” can itself include “other human beings”, “other animals”, or even that which seems completely “other”, like a tree or water. For this discussion, let's focus on other human beings since we can communicate with another human across a dinner table.

Practically speaking, in the context of religion, welcoming the Other would mean that the atheist converses with the theist without defending the opposite perspective. Rather they really try to understand alternative beliefs. They attend church, read dogmatic texts, and observe. On the other hand, the more religious person might take a break from attending church, or at least the church she grew up at, exposing herself to alternative beliefs and practices. Or they can read Nietzsche to truly challenge their beliefs.

Regarding politics, the elder family member who worships CNN, decides to switch channels to FOX, or strays away from cable altogether to read various independent news sources, and then calls their younger nephew to have a political discussion with the intention to learn something from them.

¹ N.E. Book II, Ch. 1

The same idea follows with the conversation of sex. Some treat sex more casually while others save themselves for marriage. If we get to know another person with the opposite perspective than our own, then we can understand them better, and even if we do not ultimately “switch sides”, through understanding the Other more, we can empathize with them. At this point, we can choose to love the Other– or choose to reject the Other. Understanding does not necessarily mean tolerating. For instance, we might not choose to tolerate the racist Other or the sexist Other.

More optimistically, if understanding the Other led to loving the Other more often, how different would the world look? How would it look if we chose to love those who look differently, act differently, speak differently, and believe **differently**. I do not believe this would solve all of our problems, but I do believe our problems would become a lot easier to solve as we would understand each other much more.

Most importantly, it is alright to come back to your original beliefs, but as my professor said just last week, “anything we take as certain, deserves scrutiny”. At the bare minimum, we should question our habitual beliefs in hopes of getting closer to the truth.