

or duty based approach, say to endanger, have a duty to protect nature and the cons times a utilitarian approach considering the other times a land owners' right line. In the case of flag burning, liberals stress the right to free speech while conservatives make care-based arguments around those who sacrificed for the flag in battle. But when it comes to foreign aid, it's liberals who make the care-based appeals while conservatives make the rights based "it's my money, not the government's" argument.

The small-minded cynic would say that both sides are just picking and choosing which system fits their pre-existing biases. Hint: don't listen to small-minded cynics. Liberals and conservatives here are doing exactly what they should be doing. We do use all of these tools in evaluating right and wrong and in some cases one overrides the others and in other cases not. How do we decide which trumps which others when?

That's where open-minded conversation comes in. That's where we need to turn to Stephen Colbert as our model. This is where we need individually and as a culture to see ourselves as Formidable Opponents. It's only through passionate discourse, allowing ourselves to develop our conflicting intuitions and supporting both sides with the strongest arguments that we begin to honestly open our minds to the possibility of progress.

Most of the time our five components to moral rightness all point in the same direction, but in the hard questions, they do not. They oppose each other and we have to decide which system is the one to obey. Our intuitions will simultaneously be pulled in different directions and it's only through good faith and open-minded conversation that we can hope to come to a rational decision. This means we have to wrestle with ourselves. Take both sides. Argue authentically with yourself. Don't worry about changing your mind. It doesn't show a lack of character to be swayed by a reasonable argument you didn't buy at first. It's a sign of intellectual maturity.

Fear not the flip-flop. We need the moral doubt.

Torosyan, R. (2009). Things that make you go "what?" Colbert as anti-critical thinker. In Schiller, A. A. (Ed.), *The Colbert Report and Philosophy: I am philosophy (and so can you!)*. Chicago: Open Court Press: 29-49.

## 3

## Things that Make You Go "What?"

ROBEN TOROSYAN

One thing that's so cool about *The Colbert Report* is that you can learn to think critically simply by watching it. As Colbert said of his audience in his first episode,

You're not the elites. You're not the country club crowd. I know for a fact that my country club would never let you in. But you get it. And you come from a long line of 'it-getters'. You're the folks who say, 'something's got to be done'. Well, you're doing something right now. You're watching TV.<sup>1</sup>

Yet watching Colbert really can amount to doing something constructive. The show is so fascinating partly because Colbert's character regularly exudes the very *opposite* of seven critical thinking attitudes:

- **inquisitive**
- **open-minded**
- **truthseeking**
- **systematic**
- **analytical**
- **judicious**
- **confident in reasoning<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Episode 1001, originally aired October 17th, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See American Philosophical Association, *Critical Thinking: A Statement of*

According to the American Philosophical Association (APA), these seven action-dispositions define critical thinking. By contrast, Colbert's cocky character shows repeatedly how to fail at living, as Socrates recommended, "an examined life." In fact, Colbert shows it so well that an astute viewer can deduce how to think critically precisely by *not* using the Colbert character's manipulations of language and logic—and by catching such abuses whether committed by others, or by ourselves.

### To Avoid Begging the Question, Don't Ask Questions!

#### *Inquisitive:*

- *curious with regard to a wide range of issues*
- *concern to become and remain well-informed*

Colbert often chafes at being asked to imagine beyond what his experience and intuition present at face value. He gets frustrated with theoretical physicist Lisa Randall, for instance:

What do you mean—like there are other *dimensions*? Extra? This, obviously, this . . . this makes my brain break. What's that mean? Why would you study this? What purpose does it serve to think about things that we cannot see or touch?<sup>3</sup>

With his indignation, Colbert not only assumes that only sensory data count, but betrays an attitude of utter discomfort with being curious about anything not already obvious. When we get truly curious, by contrast, we move *towards* the things we don't understand, trying to find out more.

But to Colbert, nothing demands more sympathy than a mind forced to become informed. He highlights a caption from pundit

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*Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction.* "The Delphi Report," Committee on Pre-College Philosophy. (ERIC Doc. No. ED 315 423). 1990. The APA also described six cognitive skills, such as interpretation, evaluation and inference. I'll draw freely on the dispositions, attitudes, and skills in italicized sub-headings.

<sup>3</sup> Episode 4022, originally aired February 12th, 2008.

Neil Cavuto's news show that reads, "Students forced to watch *An Inconvenient Truth* or fail," then comments about one complaining student named "Barry":

At a 'college', Barry was forced to think something that he didn't already think . . . Of course he's bitter: he's enrolled in a class where the professor thinks he knows more about the subject than the students. The last time I checked, that is the definition of elitism. . . . That's why all colleges should be forced to advertise every element of their curriculum—so students are guaranteed that when they leave college they'll be exactly the same as when they went in. *That*, folks, is what I believe college is for. You take these young unformed lumps of clay, *leave* them unformed lumps, then fire them in the kiln of unchallenged thought so they become rigid and never move again.<sup>4</sup>

By describing Barry as forced to think something he didn't already think, Colbert satirizes the assumption that people should never have to confront their preconceptions. Labeling knowledge and learning as "elitism," he avoids the attitude of trying to stay informed.

Being inquisitive demands exactly that we avoid becoming the rigid and unmoving "lumps of clay" Colbert wishes for, and instead that we actively seek out what we don't know. A risk is that openly questioning everything can lead to a wishy-washy relativism, an "anything goes" lack of foundational beliefs. But it doesn't have to. It's possible to both find things out *and* make decisions, to both *commit* to values and keep *probing* and learning more.

To end the segment (and even end inquiry), Colbert comments, "That's how you get well educated like Barry," and shows a clip of Cavuto interviewing the student:

CAVUTO: What was your grade?

BARRY: Umm, my grade was well. (sic)

COLBERT: See? His grade was "well." Now, he make double-plus-think, *despite* unwell-school. Let's just hope our future generations can do the same.<sup>5</sup>

Besides discrediting the source as uneducated, Colbert's parody refers to Orwellian "doublethink." In the novel *Nineteen Eighty-*

<sup>4</sup> Episode 3066, originally aired May 15th, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Episode 3066, originally aired May 15th, 2007.

Four, the government endlessly reiterates the equivalence of concepts with their denials, in slogans like “War Is Peace” and “Freedom Is Slavery.” What a school says was taught, Cavuto says was “forced.” Colbert lauds the student for his “double-plus-think” in the face of “unwell” schooling because he doesn’t want the student to seek actual information about things like global warming. In effect, Colbert the performer uses Colbert the character as a caveat or warning of how we can let ourselves be controlled by other forces if we don’t keep up a habit of asking questions and seeking out information.

### Giving Everyone the Chance to Agree with You

#### *Open-minded:*

- *regard for divergent world views*
- *flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions*
- *willingness to reconsider and revise views where honest reflection suggests that change is warranted*

When one guest disagrees with him, Colbert replies, “It’s one thing to express your views. It’s another thing for those views to be different than *mine*.”<sup>6</sup> Here Colbert brooks no dissent, embodying the very opposite of the “open-minded” disposition. Colbert suggests instead that others may have a right to free speech, but not the right to differ with him.

As to raising a family, Colbert offers his own parenting tips in *I Am America (And So Can You!)*. He admits that while he mistrusts children, “I respect my opponents” (p. 11). Besides the humor of characterizing kids as “opponents,” an added irony here is that while Colbert often makes surface statements of respect for others, his character’s intention is inevitably to disrespect or show lack of courtesy—to put others in their place as beneath Colbert himself.

This duplicity shows in Tip Number One to parents, to “Set Some Rules.” As Colbert writes, “Don’t worry if a rule makes sense—the important thing is that it’s a rule. Arbitrary rules teach kids discipline: If every rule made sense, they wouldn’t be learning respect for authority, they’d be learning logic” (p. 11). One irony

<sup>6</sup> Episode 2064, originally aired May 15th, 2006.

here is that Colbert has no confidence in reason or patience with making sense of rules, yet critical thinking requires precisely that people understand the reasoning behind agreements.

Worse yet, Colbert has said, “I believe in free speech as much as the next authoritarian.”<sup>7</sup> His chief problem with logic, then, seems to be that it can be used to show how an authority like him may be wrong. Because Colbert *assumes* that an authority is by definition right, logic cannot be right. But by definition authority only involves “the right and power to command” (Webster’s), and may be right or wrong, just or unjust.

For Colbert, however, authority matters more than truth or justice. And Colbert values not just his own authority. He defers to pundits, such as Bill O’Reilly, whom he judges authoritative. The mindset implies that logic should submit to authority, rather than promote, as the APA does, “rational autonomy” and “intellectual freedom” from dictation by any authority.

What’s more, the authority that often matters most to Colbert is his own. When he titles his book *I Am America (And So Can You!)*, he implies at once that he as an individual encompasses all of America’s diversity. But with his subtitle, he suggests that anyone else can claim such authority, just as egotistically as he does. At once, this seems to contradict his belief in himself as ultimate authority—if others can be America, then what does that make him? Colbert might reply, however, that this makes him the one everyone needs most in order to be all that they can be (Army motto intended). In contrast to openness to different perspectives, Colbert suggests you should close your mind as often as possible, except when opening it to the idea that Colbert’s mind is the one that matters most.

But Colbert’s is an equal opportunity closed mind for he values not only his own opinion. He also values the Bible as an exemplar of truth claims, arguing, “it’s the best selling book of all time. . . . The market doesn’t lie.” This statement illustrates the logical fallacy of the *appeal to popularity*, by assuming that what the majority thinks must be right. The problem? The majority could simply be deluded or misinformed.

In his own book, Colbert further lauds the Bible: “The only good book is the Good Book. Come on, the word ‘Good’ is right there in the title” (p. 122). First, Colbert uses a cliché but then rep-

<sup>7</sup> Episode 3109, originally aired August 21st, 2007.

resents it as the actual title of the work. This lets him avoid facing his bias towards the book, and instead imply again that merely saying something is good makes it good. But not just anyone can say so. To Colbert's character, the ultimate justification for his version of the truth is simply that it is *his* truth.

Therefore, while he's no fan of books, Colbert has a reason for why he wrote one himself: "Well, like a lot of other dictators, there is one man's opinion that I value above all others. Mine." He parodies the tendency to seek only whatever would further validate one's own opinions and preconceptions, rather than be open to other views. By contrast, open-mindedness means welcoming contrary perspectives and trying to become comfortable with difference.

### Truthseeking in the No Fact Zone: Helping You Spread the Message of Me

#### *Truthseeking:*

- *honesty in facing one's own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, or egocentric tendencies*
- *distinguishing a main idea from subordinate ideas, without bias*
- *judging the logical strength of arguments*

When Colbert rants about a news item in "The WØRD" a directly opposing idea usually appears in a textbox at the right. By subverting his own character's meaning quite directly, the vehicle usually implies that its opposite claim is true.

Before one installment, "Pencils Down," Colbert attacks a Government Accounting Office (GAO) test for exposing weaknesses at our borders and ports—"It's ruining the curve for everyone."<sup>8</sup> Colbert goes on to call such tests "useless":

**COLBERT:** Now another thing about tests, they disrupt the status quo. When someone fails a test it means they gotta do something. They have to study harder or think of a baby name.

**BULLET:** Or run as an Independent.

<sup>8</sup> Episode 2101, originally aired August 9th, 2006.

**COLBERT:** Exactly.

**BULLET:** Yes.

In a departure from his normal behavior, Colbert here acknowledges the bullet, but only to create his own echo chamber, much as media pundits echo back their own opinions rather than explore facts. He continues:

**COLBERT:** Well folks, I propose a new test. I say we test the testers. So, GAO, now that you've revealed lapses in our national security, you've got to answer the following questions. Question 1: Are you satisfied?

**BULLET:** Kinda scared, actually.

Ironically, Colbert tries to turn tests back on testers much as the bullet turns the intentions of Colbert back on himself.

**COLBERT:** Question 2: True or false: Who the Hell do you think you are?

**BULLET:** True?

Colbert attacks the bullet for speaking the truth. But in addition, this self-reflexive turn illustrates a principle of post-modernity, a period of philosophical fragmentation that arose in the late twentieth century. That principle is that every assertion risks being undermined by its own reasoning, much as the Colbert bullet routinely undermines Colbert the character.

In "deconstruction," the stream of thought associated with the philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), any attempt at meaning is shot through with "différance." On one hand, we understand words only by seeing how they *differ* with other words. On the other hand, every word always *defers* its meaning, as if pointing away, "Don't look at me for a definition! Look at those other words." (Look a word up in the dictionary, and you get only more words, and more definitions.) So the Colbert bullet at once differs with the naïveté of Colbert the character, but at the same time represents the critical opinion of Colbert the performer.

In a related portrayal of the endless egocentricity of political pundits, Colbert repeatedly tries to railroad interviewees into agreeing with him, regardless of the truth. In the segment "Better Know a District," Colbert, referring to representatives who took illegal

monies from disreputable source Jack Abramoff, says to a congressman, "Let's just go ahead and say you took the money so that the rest of my questions make sense."<sup>9</sup> Rather than seek the truth, Colbert forces the answer to fit his presumptions.

Seeing religion as diametrically opposed to science's truth claims, Colbert comes across a journal article entitled "Is There a Paleolimnological Explanation for 'Walking on Water' in the Sea of Galilee?" He is offended by such assertions:

So once again scientists are telling us what *may* have happened. If they had any balls, they'd just say "This is what *did* happen," with or without evidence. That's what the Bible does . . .<sup>10</sup>

Here Colbert complains about relying on facts to assert a claim, preferring to believe what he wishes were the truth, and with certainty rather than probability (which is more accurate), instead of actually finding it out. Ironically, by doing fairly extensive research in order to find such an article in a scholarly scientific journal, Colbert's team actually goes to great lengths to stay informed.

When Colbert's character refuses to look for evidence, let alone respect the value of checking out doubts, he embodies how good it would feel not to have to worry about the truth. Such careful thought bogs Colbert down, leading to his utter disregard for science. Rather than value the scientific method for facing biases, Colbert terms scientists "fanatical" because they "put their blind faith in empirical observation" (*I Am America*, p. 191).

Colbert interviews Janna Levin, a novelist who relies on science:

**COLBERT:** You've written a book, *A Madman Dreams of Turing Machines*. Now this is science. But it's also a novel.

**LEVIN:** Yes.

**COLBERT:** So you admit that most science is fiction.<sup>11</sup>

This all or nothing thinking is technically called the *fallacy of composition*. In this fallacy, rather than pursue any interest in informing yourself, you leap from a fact about a single part to an overgeneralization about the entire whole. Because the science is

<sup>9</sup> Episode 2051, originally aired April 20th, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Episode 2047, originally aired April 17th, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Episode 2110, originally aired August 24th, 2006.

embedded in a work of fiction, Colbert assumes that all of science must be fiction. The error he makes is to blur the science and fiction within the book and then leap to blur science and fiction outside of the book.

Eventually, however, he actually asks after the truth:

**COLBERT:** Why is there something, rather than nothing?

**LEVIN:** We actually don't know.

**COLBERT:** Hah, I stumped a theoretical physicist. And all it took was the hardest question in the world. I got a bucket full of them.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than seek understanding, Colbert is disdainful that he could make an intellectual admit ignorance—on the assumption that smart people don't say "I don't know." This illustrates the logical fallacy of an *appeal to ignorance*, where you assume that just because something can't be proven false, it must be true, or in this case, just because something can't be proven true, it must be false. But then Colbert admits it's the hardest question in the world, giving himself credit for stumping his guest. Interestingly, however, when he says there's more where that came from, implying he could further stump anyone, he actually reveals that we're all ignorant and that there are many unanswered questions.

In another instance of an all or nothing dismissal, Colbert attempts to "nail" Australian scientist Tim Flannery, author of *The Weather Makers*:

**COLBERT:** Our president is going to take action on this as soon as all the science is in. That's what he said. Is all the science in, sir? All of it. Simple question: yes or no. Is ALL the science in? ALL of it!

**FLANNERY:** Certainty is a rare thing in this world. You know, we educate our kids with no certain outcome. We buy certain stocks and bonds without a certain outcome. We live in a world of probabilities. And the scientific probabilities are that we are having a big impact on this climate of ours. So I don't think you can wait for certainty. You'll be dead before you can get it.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Episode 2110, originally aired August 24th, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Episode 2073, originally aired June 13th, 2006.

What Colbert's character misses is the fact of "non-allness," a term in general semantics for the idea that one can never know everything about anything. This fact flies in the face of our intuition that science determines "truth." In reality, scientists only ever determine what is "probable." By contrast, Colbert only thinks it's possible to know everything because it's only to himself that he ever looks for the truth. If instead we think critically, we realize that answers are often neither absolutely certain nor totally unknowable, but exist on a continuum, along shades of gray, from highly unlikely to highly likely.

### Systematically Anti-Systematic: He Said, She Said, Enough Said

#### Systematic:

- *alertness to opportunities for critical thinking*
- *routinely justifying reasoning in terms of standards and contextual factors used*

Interviewing Philip Zimbardo, the psychologist behind the classic Stanford prison experiment and author of *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*, Colbert quibbles:

**COLBERT:** How do you know what authority is unjust or not? I mean, you do what people tell you to do who are in power and then you have to *trust* that that's the right thing to do. What else is society based on?

**ZIMBARDO:** It's based on being mindful and doing critical thinking. Because a lot of authority is unjust. A lot of orders are wrong orders.

**COLBERT:** If they were unjust, they wouldn't be authorities.<sup>14</sup>

As usual, Colbert simply assumes his premise is true, rather than arguing to support it. Here, the missing premise is that an authority must by definition be "just," when an authority really only has power. Colbert's abuse of logic is like saying, "I feel the death penalty is wrong. Therefore the death penalty is wrong." The miss-

<sup>14</sup> Episode 4021, originally aired February 11th, 2008.

ing premise is "What I feel is wrong is wrong." That's an assumption. There's no evidence or argument that one morality is true for all or that thinking something wrong necessarily makes it wrong.

The irony is that when Colbert speaks, the unsound premise is often not missing but stated, proudly—no matter how unsound. For instance, in an interview with paleontologist Ted Daeschler, Colbert argues for the value of impulse or "the gut" over reason. Daeschler counters with an evolutionary perspective, and actually integrates Colbert's own "gut" emphasis, only to meet Colbert's refusal to reason:

**DAESCHLER:** When you do learn those facts, it's in your gut. You know evolution happened. But first you have to get it in your head.

**COLBERT:** What you're saying is something actually goes from your head to your gut. Because everything *I* learn goes in my eyes, ears, or mouth straight to my gut. I don't include my head in at all. Because it overthinks it.

**DAESCHLER:** Um, that's your problem.

**COLBERT:** Some say problem, some say superpower. I'm impervious to logic. . . .

**DAESCHLER:** Evolution is a fact of life.

**COLBERT:** But then why do I have to *believe* it?<sup>15</sup>

Rather than be methodical in his thinking, Colbert asserts right off, directly, that he has no respect for such use of logic, portraying himself as an impenetrable warrior rather than a thinking organism. Further, he demonstrates *circular reasoning* or using your assumption to support your assumption. He argues: If my gut feels something, then it must be right. But that's based on the premise that the gut is right because my gut tells me it's right.

If Colbert were to consider evolution thoroughly, he would need to do more than simply re-label his opponent's criticism ("Some say problem, some say superpower") and childishly refuse to reason ("I'm impervious to logic"). Instead he would need to appeal to standards such as—in the case of evolution—the scientific method, which insists that findings be reproducible (whether one agrees or not) and that we eliminate inconsistencies between

<sup>15</sup> Episode 2067, originally aired May 18th, 2006.

theory (or what we think) and experiment (or what we observe). What such systematic thinking does is push beyond the impulsivity of “he said, she said” rants to the consistency of disciplined argument or careful observation and analysis.

### Hundred Percent Hypo-Analytical: Don't Like It? Label It!

#### *Analytical:*

- *prudence in suspending, making, or altering judgments*
- *querying evidence*
- *identifying elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions*

To Colbert, an analytic reaction feels more like an allergic reaction: it violates his whole system. Disagreeing with one guest, Colbert taunts him, “You can say no, but I can say yes, and my word has *three* letters” (February 8th, 2007). Avoiding an analytic look at actual reasoning, Colbert tries to quash the dispute by making up criteria for a good argument on the spot—whoever uses the most letters in a one word reply wins.

Such whimsy constitutes the logical fallacy behind *wishful thinking*: One assumes that wishing something so is enough to make it so. Thus when Colbert dislikes hearing out a counterargument, he simply contradicts it, as if saying the opposite were enough to change the reality.

But the example also illustrates how a *red herring* can be used to reframe attention, distracting one from the argument at hand. The absurdity of Colbert's retort directs attention away from reasoning to instead fixate on something as random as letter-count. Such reliance on random criteria fails to provide reasonable support for conclusions, as analytic thinking requires.

In one aside, Colbert says, “I used to hate guys like me. But then I became a guy like me, and now I like guys like me” (January 15th, 2008). Regardless of whether he contradicts himself, that was then, and this is now. What gives Colbert joy is simply the fact that he *has* his own views, as a-historical, inconsistent, and radically oriented to the present as they may be. While being analytical requires prudence in suspending, making, or altering judgments, Colbert's

character instead *delights* in his judgments so much that can even claim to criticize himself (“I used to hate guys like me”), yet avoid taking any distance from his own perspective (“now I like guys like me”).

In leaping to this wild conclusion, Colbert not only does whatever it takes to like himself, but he again uses circular reasoning. His premise is that he hates and likes who he feels like, because he hates and likes who he feels like. To avoid being circular, or begging the question, the premise of one's argument can not rely on the premise itself. He would need a reason for his hating or liking. But in Colbert's world of fallacious logic, one needs no reasons.

To illustrate, in one edition of “The WØRD” entitled “Casualty of War,” Colbert rants:

The one thing we cannot do is leave because then Iraq will explode in more chaos. But we will leave if Americans keep *bearing* about these casualties. So, saying there are *no* casualties is the only way to prevent greater casualties. Therefore Nation, it's not a lie to say fewer Iraqis were killed than were actually killed, because by doing so we're stopping more Iraqis from being killed in the future. Every lie we tell now will become truth then but only if we have the courage not to tell the truth now.<sup>16</sup>

Here Colbert commits the logical fallacy of an *appeal to consequences*. In this error, one assumes that if something leads to a good consequence, then it must be true, even if it's not really true. Colbert argues that by labeling casualties non-existent, we prevent the U.S. from leaving Iraq, and thus avoid chaos. Therefore such a label must be true. But regardless of how we may feel about a consequence like chaos in Iraq, it's still a lie to say there were no casualties if there were.

Colbert also uses this labeling ploy in committing a *reductio ad absurdum*, where one's reasoning ends with a statement that's clearly false. Colbert concludes absurdly that the lie we tell now is a truth, simply because some good things *might* follow—when a lie is still a lie, regardless of what we call it.

In one interview, author Ron Suskind critiques then-Vice President Dick Cheney's “One Percent Doctrine”:

<sup>16</sup> Episode 2156, originally aired December 12th, 2006.

**SUSKIND:** If there's a one percent chance that WMDs have been given to terrorists, [Cheney] says to folks inside the White House, we need to treat it as a certainty. Not in our analysis, but in our response. It's not about evidence. It *fre*s us from the *evidentiary* burdens that, well, have been guiding us for a long time.

**COLBERT:** No offense to the V.P., but isn't that soft on terror? One percent? Shouldn't it be a zero percent doctrine? I mean even if there's *no* chance that someone's a threat to the United States, and they just look at us funny, shouldn't we just [punching his palm] tag 'em? . . . The problem with evidence is that it doesn't always support your opinion. . . . That's what the Vice President was protecting us from. . . . If we waited, we wouldn't have invaded: That's true because it rhymes.<sup>17</sup>

By taking the one percent reasoning to the extreme and implying zero percent is sufficient grounds, Colbert shows how fallacious it is to turn so blind an eye to the weight and burden of evidence, as an analytic mind should. Rather than even attempt to lay out any elements needed for a reasonable conclusion, Colbert again uses random criteria: Suddenly the ability to rhyme makes something more true than evidence or argument ever could.

Laying irony on irony, Colbert himself made news when U.S. congressmen kept appearing on his show, only to have embarrassing clips of themselves appear on regular news shows. In response, Colbert explained:

I'll *tell* the *Today Show* and *Good Morning America* why congressmen want to come on my show. Because this show *is* the news. Not only is this show "*the news*," evidently it *is* news. It's gotta be news, because you morning shows are the news, and you're doing reports on it. So I guess congressmen come on my show in the hopes that you'll use their appearance on my show on *your show*.<sup>18</sup>

First, Colbert illustrates the trouble with looking only to authorities like the news media to tell you what's valuable or newsworthy. If all you seek is someone else's validation, then you reinforce shows that focus exclusively on giving you that validation.

<sup>17</sup> Episode 2087, originally aired July 13th, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Episode 2093, originally aired July 25th, 2006.

Being analytical would require not just taking statements from authorities at face value, but also asking tough questions of them. Colbert then goes on to say those shows might be right:

**COLBERT:** I could be asking the wrong questions. I asked U.S. congressmen Lynn Westmoreland, who proposed requiring the display of the Ten Commandments in the House and Senate chambers, if he could name the Ten Commandments. What I should have asked him was this—

**NEWSCLIP:** Is it possible that tanning is *addictive*?

**NEWSCLIP:** How long does it take you to grow that thing?

**NEWSCLIP:** Do you really need to wait a half hour after you eat to go swimming?

**COLBERT:** *Mea culpa*.<sup>19</sup>

With his mock resignation, Colbert suggests that he's been bested at asking dumb questions by the regular news shows, whose questions actually make his absurd ones look almost reasonable. The escalation moves further and further away from breaking down arguments, as the typical news shows assume viewers want only questions that ask nothing, and thus demand nothing of your mind. The final irony comes with Colbert's admitting "*Mea culpa*" (Latin for "my fault")—reminding the viewer of how pundits rarely if ever alter their judgments, let alone admit fault.

### Anti-Judicious: Giving You the Chance to See Why You're Wrong

#### *Judicious:*

- *understanding of the opinions of other people*
- *fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning*
- *meta-cognitive self-regulation, or self-conscious monitoring and correcting of one's reasoning*

When a guest wants to retire the penny (Colbert's rejoinder: "Then what am I supposed to use for tipping?"), Colbert banters with him,

<sup>19</sup> Episode 2093, originally aired July 25th, 2006.

"I'll tell you why. You wanna know why? You tell me why and then I'll tell you why you're wrong." Then Colbert smirks and adds under his breath, "I think I should say that at the beginning of *every* interview" (April 9th, 2008). He begins by pretending to seek a fair-minded exchange, inviting the guest to express his opinion. But then Colbert reveals his deeper interest in asserting his own position rather than actually discussing more than one position with any fairness.

A related revelation came when interviewing former presidential candidate George McGovern:

**McGOVERN:** If you will concede that idealists can also be realists, . . .

**COLBERT:** I will not concede anything. You're on the wrong show.<sup>20</sup>

By not even implying but instead boldly admitting he does not make concessions or attempt to acknowledge the views of others, Colbert asserts his desire to avoid appraising his own reasoning. This directly contradicts the habit of being judicious, which asks us to first try and understand opposing views, and even be able to summarize them ourselves, before we disagree with them.

In an edition of "Formidable Opponent," Colbert takes on his own alter-ego, portrayed from an opposing camera angle—one Colbert wears a blue tie and tries to convince the other, wearing a red tie, that U.S. troops should remain in Iraq:

**COLBERT (BLUE):** Building a stable democracy takes time. Let's say you're baking a cake. You like cake, right?

**COLBERT (RED):** Who doesn't?

**COLBERT (BLUE):** Terrorists. They hate it. Because in this case, the cake represents democracy.

**COLBERT (RED):** Mmm, sounds delicious.

**COLBERT (BLUE):** And you have to wait for the cake of a democratic Middle East to rise. If you pull it out of the oven too soon, the cake will fall.

**COLBERT (RED):** Yeah but what if the cake is exploding, and we're caught in a violent sectarian struggle between the flour and the eggs?<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Episode 4032, originally aired March 10th, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Episode 2113, originally aired September 13th, 2006.

As often occurs in the segment, one Colbert (here in red tie) argues sincerely against Colbert's usual pundit character, here weighing the tradeoffs involved in extending U.S. military power in a war that may be worsening security.

**COLBERT (BLUE):** Hey, a bakery is no place for the squeamish. We placed our soldiers in that oven and we have to keep them there 'til the cake is done.

**COLBERT (RED):** But if you leave the cake in too long, it'll dry out.

**COLBERT (BLUE):** Well, if it's too dry, we'll just wash it down with milk.

**COLBERT (RED):** Wait, what does the milk represent?

**COLBERT (BLUE):** Ahh [shrugging shoulders], oil?

**COLBERT (RED):** Well, we must not bake a cake over oil. No blood for milk!

**COLBERT (BLUE):** What?

**COLBERT (RED):** I'm sorry, I've lost the metaphor.

At one surface level, the exchange shows how one risks incoherence in any communication if one sticks solely to speaking in metaphors for too long.

Further, though, when questioned about unforeseen consequences of the war, Colbert refuses to weigh the risk of ruining the very reasons we went to war. Rather than correct his own reasoning, Colbert avoids answering the question. To do so, he simply makes up something to suit his metaphor (milk/oil), as if to say that weighing tradeoffs matters less than sounding good.

The exchange then takes a surreal turn:

**COLBERT (RED):** Um, you know, we should probably wrap this up. You sir, are a . . .

**COLBERT (BLUE):** So you admit defeat?

**COLBERT (RED):** No, I'm just getting us out of this.

**COLBERT (BLUE):** Well, the minute you leave I'm gonna claim I won.

**COLBERT (RED):** It's not a tie if I'm the only one left. You should, ah, cut and run along.

**COLBERT (RED):** Make me. [*a gun is raised at red-tied Colbert's face*] Two can play at that game. [*raising his own gun at the other's face*] Get out!

COLBERT (BLUE): [gun in face] I will see you in Hell! [wrapping his mouth around the gun barrel] Go ahead.<sup>22</sup>

Portraying such violent potential, the exchange acts as if to symbolize the way that an argument will always return to one's preconceptions if one never seeks to correct or modify them. However, arguments can risk deadly consequences when people identify with positions personally. All the more reason to be judicious and try to consider counterpoints fairly before leaping to action.

### Under-Confidence in Reason: Once It's Easier Said, then It's Done

#### *Confident in reasoning:*

- *trust in the processes of reasoned inquiry*
- *self-confidence in one's own abilities to reason as opposed to blindly relying on authority*

Colbert often cuts off an interviewee, "Clearly you're uncomfortable with the subject, let's move on." While the guest might simply disagree, Colbert has no confidence in reasoned exchange but only in manipulating discourse. He also relies on authorities blindly, as when he argues, "Isn't the Bush administration's leadership a lot like religion? You just have *faith* that they're gonna do the right thing. . . . There's a *reason* why God put him in office."<sup>23</sup>

In another edition of *Formidable Opponent*, Colbert opines on the controversial issue of embryonic stem cell research. Wearing his red tie he says, "An issue this explosive should only be handled by history's greatest moral philosophers. A Maimonides, a Socrates, a Thomas Aquinas . . .," then the Colbert in blue tie cuts in, "A Stephen Colbert. *This* is *Formidable Opponent*."<sup>24</sup> Placing himself in the canon of ancient and medieval philosophers, Colbert portrays how pundits display over-exuberant confidence, not in reason but in their own authority.

<sup>22</sup> Episode 2113, originally aired September 13th, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Episode 2087, originally aired July 13th, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Episode 2093, originally aired July 25th, 2006.

Thinking critically, by contrast, requires that you develop confidence not in your *self* as an authority but in the self's capacity for *reason*, the possibility that one *can* think issues through without simply resorting to an authority. By contrast, when Colbert gets frustrated by disagreements among authorities and by the nuances of the stem cell debate itself, he retreats:

COLBERT (RED): Wait, wait. . . . This is so complicated.

COLBERT (BLUE): Hey, buddy, it comes down to one simple question. Which is more important to you—a potential cure, or a potential life?

COLBERT (RED): Oh, well if you put it that way, it seems . . . *much* more complicated! God bless it, help me out here!

COLBERT (BLUE): Okay, let me complicate it some more. Human cloning could be *part* of stem cell research. You don't want clones do you?<sup>25</sup>

Blue-tied Colbert assumes that if there's one possible abuse of science, then science should be scrapped. This is tempting precisely because at times it can feel so overwhelming to tackle complex arguments. Arguments beget counterarguments, which beget responses to those counterarguments, and so on. But it's exactly this patience with complexity that you need to develop in order to understand important issues. Shooting from the hip works sometimes. But with life's big decisions, it often helps to hold two or more contrary views in mind at the same time. Mindfulness means noticing the discomfort such internal or external conversations can cause. But instead of retreating, you wait it out and see what you can learn from the experience.

When blue-tied Colbert says "Let's say you're dying," red-tied Colbert replies "Oh no! What's wrong with me?" With his credulous alarm, Colbert shows that fearing complexity makes one gullible. Having *no* faith in reason risks that one avoids questioning authorities, and instead assumes the problem must lie with oneself. Such vulnerability leaves one easily duped. The opposing blue-tied Colbert then responds, "I don't know. But I'm glad I don't have it!" This disdainful disregard betrays the hypocrisy behind appearing to care for life (the potential in a cell), but not actually caring about real people

<sup>25</sup> Episode 2093, originally aired July 25th, 2006.

(an actual human who is dying). Such inconsistency arises from a belief that reason should be used to serve one's own purposes.

Blue-tied Colbert even fakes an attempt to reason both sides of the argument. At first arguing against stem cell research, he shifts to the tradeoffs of *not* doing such research:

COLBERT (BLUE): But, you've gotta stay alive. Who'll provide for your family—Brenda and the fifteen kids?

COLBERT (RED): Oh, little Mary and Stephens one through fourteen.

COLBERT (BLUE): And buddy you didn't save one red cent, nor do you have life insurance.

COLBERT (RED): That gypsy told me I was immortal!

COLBERT (BLUE): No, you're thinking of Dracula.

COLBERT (RED): Well, I guess I'd better do it. Shoot me up.

COLBERT (BLUE): Done [dusting off his hands], you're cured.

COLBERT (RED): Yay!<sup>26</sup>

In a visual and acoustic move typical of the brilliance of Formidable Opponent, red-tied Colbert raises his hand in joy, then blue-tied Colbert, mouth still open, aims his raised hand down to point at the other in accusation—his mouth moving from “Yay” to “Iiironically, one of the embryos used to fix you would have grown up to be a doctor who discovered a cure that didn't need to destroy embryos.” Cleverly, the visual and acoustic medium captures and embodies *physically* the very mindset Colbert's character appears to contradict *intellectually*. The episode displays indirectly how to reason through contrary “takes”—in the sense of both a framing that takes an argument in one direction and a visual take, shot from a particular camera angle.

With a circular return, the exchange closes with red-tied Colbert lamenting, “God, I hate having ethics,” and blue-tied Colbert replying, “Well, maybe someday science will discover a cure for it.” So impatient is Colbert with the complexity of reasoning that he concludes debating ethics is itself akin to a sickness, for which he seeks relief.

Throughout the show, Colbert demonstrates how, ironically, we create greater pain for ourselves in the long run if we avoid the

<sup>26</sup> Episode 2093, originally aired July 25th, 2006.

milder pain of critical thinking in the short run. To live comfortably with the challenges of complexity is a task neither easily said nor done. Yet it's what we need in order to manage the demands of life realistically and thoughtfully.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For their detailed commentary, encouragement, and laughter, I want to thank my friends Chris Worsley of Montréal and Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens of Otterbein College. And for his support of my research agenda in teaching and learning, my deepest thanks go to my supervisor, colleague and friend Larry Miners of Fairfield University.

*Reader* (2001), and has published essays on various topics in social, political, and legal philosophy. Most of the time while watching *The Colbert Report* he's of two minds about whether to laugh or cry.

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**KURT SMITH** earned his BA in Philosophy at UC Irvine, and MA and PhD in Philosophy at Claremont Graduate University. As if this isn't awesome enough, among those who contributed to this volume Smith is the one who looks most like Stephen. In fact, he went as Stephen last Halloween, hooking up with Marilyn Monroe at the annual party. Stephen should learn to look more carefully at the size of hands (and for the presence of Adam's Apples). Stephen should also stop painting a clown-face on his face and entering homes late at night, taking polaroids of himself posed with unsuspecting sleepers. And, he should probably get his story straight about sending that turd to Jon Stewart. Seriously, Stephen, what is your problem? Oh yeah, Smith teaches philosophy at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania (which, for those "looking" for Smith, is not located in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania).

**SOPHIA STONE** is a PhD hopeful in the Philosophy and Literature program at Purdue University. Her specialty is the study of ethics and humor, as you need one to do the other. She received her MA in Philosophy from those funny Catholics at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology. Her thesis, "The Good, The True, and The Funny: Plato and His Philosophy of Humor," passed with honors and was the first of several attempts of her writing about the philosophy of humor which was finally taken seriously. She earned her BA in Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, where she received the Finkeldink Tiddlywink award for Erotic Origami Sculpture.

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or ~~philosophical~~ philosophy and feminist theory to pre-Socratic philosophy and ancient Greek Comedy. As soon as her ward helps her to figure out this "internets" thing, she is going to put an order in for some of Stephen Colbert's "manseed."

**JASON SOUTHWORTH** is an ABD graduate student at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma, and is also an adjunct instructor of philosophy at Fort Hays State University, Hays, Kansas. He has contributed articles to several pop culture and philosophy volumes, including *Batman and Philosophy*, *Heroes and Philosophy*, and *X-Men and Philosophy*. While Jason likes the *Colbert Report* enough to write an article for this volume, he would still like to see Stephen find the time to give us more *Strangers with Candy*.

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As a Canadian, **SAMANTHA WEBB** grew up at a serious disadvantage. She was suspicious of maple syrup, feared bears, disliked hockey, and always had a vague feeling that she was living in Greenland's Mexico. Luckily, she was able to escape over the border fence into the U.S., where she learned how to speak American and love freedom. She now teaches English (or rather American) at the University of Montevallo in Alabama. She is Michael F. Patton Jr.'s Canadian friend.