

**Rap Session with Peter G. Osorio**  
**The 23<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the**  
**Society for Descriptive Psychology**  
**2001**

**"What are you doing these days?"**

**Ralph Wechsler:** ... and a round of applause in recognition of the special effort he took to be here on this occasion. [Applause] Let's turn it over to the master.

**Ossorio:** The first question: How many people can understand and hear me in the room? How many cannot? You may find that my diction suffers from time to time. If it gets too much, just raise your hand and I'll know that I'm not enunciating.

Now, these questions fall into three -- two -- groups...

Let me give you a bit of history. About 3 or 4 months ago I said to myself, "Hey. I've got time now. You know, I can see the end of this whole moving business and when we're through, I'm going to have time to do some writing." And ensuing: "What do I want...do I want to continue?" Because I was writing *The Behavior of Persons* -- a rewrite -- that was the latest thing. And I said "Nah, I don't want to continue that. It's too much like doing the same thing all over again."

So let me pick a couple of incidents that in effect got me on the way to saying, "I want to do something different if there is something different."

The first was -- call it a hospice for priests.

**Audience:** Sorry?

**Ossorio:** A hospice for priests. It was run by virtue of the way you'd expect a hospice to run, except that I particularly characterize it as these were priests who were going there. What I found there was a strong tendency. That is: "Before I die, I want the answer to this question." That was in everybody's mind there. "Before I die, I want the answer. I've spent my whole life asking. Now I want to know what's a real answer."

That sort of thing was probably 100%. One hundred percent of the priests in there had this kind of question. You know I listened for a while to the various questions and I said, "Huh. Let's take this at face value. If they're asking the questions and no answer comes out, maybe there *is* no answer."

What would be the implications of there being no answer? Well, what you have is a formal system. You can ask one question of almost any formal system that you can't answer. If you look at the thing you're about to mention, you can say "Can you ask this question in this formal system?" If you don't, what then? If you do ask the question, one of the next things is "What's the answer?"

I diagnosed the group that was there as suffering from this -- what do you call it -- pattern. They had the questions, perfectly good questions, to which there was no answer.

Now keep in mind when I say there was no answer, I don't mean that we didn't *know* the answer. I mean that there *was* no answer.

My example to get them out of that place was "Suppose you ask yourself 'What's the biggest number that is possible?'"

**Audience:** What?

**Ossorio:** "What's the biggest number?" You find all of the things that you can do with numbers, and lo and behold, none of them are the answer to this question. No matter what else you can do with numbers, you'll never answer this question.

So it makes some sense to say, "Maybe they weren't just asking the hard questions.

Maybe they weren't asking questions at all but thought they were." If so, that fits the old model of therapy where a person comes in with some kind of perplexity. You help him get it straight and he goes on with his life. Well, this looked like a good candidate for that. To be attuned to that I suspect is the source [of wanting to do something different], but actually there were quite a few sources over a period of 4-5 years. I wasn't satisfied just to answer that particular clinical question.

So, as is my wont when I come across this real sticky wicket, I turn to Wittgenstein. What I found out what I was reading was the early Wittgenstein, where he wasn't answering any philosophical questions.

He said, "Hey folks, look. There are some questions about people I would like to ask. Every one of them makes sense." There were six of them. He said, "What can we do to answer them?" And from that beginning he gives answers to the questions. These arise all over philosophy -- the questions and the answers and the traps and so forth.... But his early writing was not at all obscure or anything like that.

**Audience:** [request to adjust microphone]

**Ossorio:** There were these six questions, and really there's nothing magical about them. He could have put three questions instead of six. He could have put in three of the same. So it's not that there was something about these questions.

Anyhow, that was one leg. Another leg is the idea that -- I don't know where I got it -- the world consists of the physical apparatus, physical things; mental things, which are usually just people basically; and the system or language that these guys use to describe everything, to bring it all together. And I said, "Well, hmmm. That offers a special scope to keep me busy for awhile." I said, "That's the direction I'll develop Descriptive Psychology in."

The reason for wanting to move away from classical Descriptive Psychology is that you already had a question, namely "What's there in the world?", and a package that is self-consistent, etc. We worked like hell to try to take some part of that and clarify this part, this part, this part, hoping that eventually it will all be clear. And as you might guess, the particular thing that I would pick if I had to pick my specialty is the understanding of people.

**Audience:** I'm sorry. We can't hear you.

**Ossorio:** The understanding of people, down to teaching, therapy, etc., but basically doing that. And I could continue to do that. Instead I said, "I want to do something *different*." [laughing] I don't want to just continue along the same route because even though we've made progress, Descriptive has not taken over the world yet so there's really work to do.

And I said, "There's surely one lifetime's work. I don't want to spend my time -- remaining time -- adding a little bit." And that's what we do as scientists. We have a piece of the world. We try to validate the picture, and everybody's working on some part of it. And by the way, nobody's working on all of it.

Given these kinds of background, I said "Ah. It looks like maybe there's a place for someone like me." I went back to a thing that I don't know where it came from. It was presented as a self-evident truth. And it is that the world consists of three sorts of things. One is the physical happenings and things. The other is the conscious happenings and things, basically people. The third is the formal systems with which this side, the people side, covers the ground, all the ground.

What that gave me was a kind of a satisfaction that "I know how formal systems work. Ahhhh." This looked like a happy hunting ground for someone like that to get in there. And I said, "Ahh. I'm not ready quite yet." But I was almost there.

**Audience:** The effective range of that microphone is only about 12 inches. If you could get nearer... I really want to hear what you're saying.

**Ossorio:** Okay. I got onto another question which I used with the priests. And that is, "Draw a rectangle and draw various sizes, shapes, and figures in there. Okay, this is the world. This is *all* the concepts we have. Concepts, sub-concepts and sub-concepts, whatever. It's all there. I hope this is some aid to keeping things straight." I said, "Hmmm. If what is at work is a formal system, then there ought to be ways of talking and knowing that come from that."

It led to the questions of "Suppose you took that drawing [below] that I've had with a bunch of crosshatches, each one standing for a concept, and the whole thing standing for the *whole* concept, what could you do then?" Could you sit there and look at it? Or if you move it in any way, you're almost bound to talk nonsense.

**Audience:** You're almost bound to what? I couldn't hear you.

**Ossorio:** You can look at it any way, but you're bound to reach certain kinds of problems. And those two kinds of problems correspond to either normal logical -- I hate to say logical -- conceptual systems, any and all, or they are peculiar to this set of questions.

The question is really "What is there?" *Not* "What is there in the world?" but "What *is* there?" The world that we live in is one of the things. At least it's... This is the nonsense that I was talking about. Rather than say that, we'll say it is not obviously true that there is anything other than that. I'm talking as though I know for a fact that there are others, and in fact, "No."

What we have in the system and in the notion of a formal system is how it works, and

certain holistic similarities, differences, these kinds of things. So I said, "If there *were* other worlds, what would that do for us?" Would you believe? It's another therapeutic maneuver.

**Audience:** It's another?

**Ossorio:** It's another therapeutic maneuver. There are a surprising number of people who look at the world of science and social science and anything else you can think of, and say "Gee. You know, the time is coming we can foresee when we'll know everything."

**Audience:** What?

**Ossorio:** When we'll know everything. That means that there are limits to our lives, to our persons, to our possibilities, because once you've done it all, you've done it all. All you can do is repeat yourself. Surprisingly enough there are a number of successful people who think that way. They've reached a high enough plateau in formal systems, in subject matter, so they get the feeling that they can survey and anticipate where we're going. I must admit that I have a little of that myself [laughing]. I said "What the hell. The only thing that was going to satisfy is a system that has no end."

**Audience:** What? Sorry.

**Ossorio:** A system that had no end.

**Audience:** A headwind?

**Ossorio:** A system that *had no end*, because if it has no end, you are never in the position of being *closer* to the end. It's not a question of foreseeing what it's going to be like when we know everything.

So what is it a question of? That's why the unit is the whole world and why I speak in terms of the A and B world. The A world always seems real, the familiar one that we live in; the B, since we're aiming at an alternative, any one or more alternatives; the question is "What can you say?" I don't know what you can say, but it has sure been heuristic...

**Audience:** I has sure been what?

**Audience:** Terrific.

**Ossorio:** It has been *heuristic*. There is something there because if you trace the lineage of that kind of thinking -- unless somebody has answered it already which I doubt very much anybody has, the problem is right there in front of you.

**Audience:** The problem is?

**Ossorio:** Right there in front of you. You talk to a client and you say "He's one of those."

I guess as someone put it, their "breathing room". "I need more breathing room than I have now, because everything is going to be fixed, everything is known, etc." Well, as I say, I have enough of that myself to pick out some of the weak spots. I think I mentioned one. One is "What alternative is there?"

**Audience:** One is?

**Ossorio:** "What alternative is there?" That translated into "What alternative formal system encompasses everything?" And secondly "How do we access anything of the sort?"

Surprisingly enough by definition we don't access anything of the sort. We *can't*. Because if we did, it would belong to our world, not this other world. So that says why there is no straight path, you might say. But there are certain ways of going wrong with it that I've got some sensitivity to, and that's one of them.

However, I said this was a clinical solution. It is in that people who have the problem will generally be satisfied with some variation on this kind of answer.

**Audience:** Will you repeat that?

**Audience:** People who have that problem will be satisfied with some variation on this kind of answer.

**Ossorio:** This is very Wittgensteinian. Once they see that there is no answer, not that they don't *know* the answer, they lose the interest they had in it because they thought that there was an answer. By the way, the guys who have it *know* they have it. Just like the reflective question, guys who have the problem could recognize it very easily.

**Audience:** The guys who have the problem could what?

**Ossorio:** Could recognize it. So here I am on the one hand, trying to divorce myself from clinical stuff, but on the other hand, I have a bunch of ideas which the major applications are clinical. [laughing] I didn't like that particularly and I don't, because that would make it just more of the same.

**Audience:** Huh?

**Audience:** I didn't like that particularly and I don't, because that would really just be more of the same.

**Ossorio:** So what I've come to right now is trying to invent the terminology and the basic concepts and see what comes from pushing them. My intuitions are about two steps ahead. But they're worthless and it could only... There's a limit to how much you can go if they're worthless.

**Audience:** My intuitions are about two steps ahead, but they are?

**Ossorio:** They're worthless.

**Audience:** Worthless if you can only?

**Ossorio:** They are worthless. Period. If they are worthless, then you're limited to how far ahead you can foresee.

**Audience:** There's a limit to [sic] how far ahead you can foresee.

**Ossorio:** You can only go so far pursuing that path. I'm willing to let my intuition come into play whenever it wants to. The unfortunate thing is that it isn't -- what do you call it - - developed enough to lay out in any kind of sensible form. So that's what I'm working on now.

**Audience:** Lay it out in what?

**Ossorio:** Lay it out in sensible form. Because you can only go so far and then you say, "Ahhhh." So what we need... Notice how it comes back to persons need a formal system to describe everything. So I try to arrive at the same sort of thing with respect to a hypothetical other world, which may be *not* hypothetical. Now this is easy to talk nonsense about. In fact nothing is *easier* to talk nonsense about. [laughter] All of the models, including Wittgenstein, that I might have looked for have failed. They have some piece of it, but nobody has *that* piece. Nobody has the temerity to say "I'm talking about the whole *world* and every possibility in it -- every *real* possibility, and all of the different ways of approaching the same thing, all of the different theories that one could have about people, all the different outlooks that one could have about..."

**Audience:** What about literary approaches to different worlds?

**Ossorio:** What about them?

**Audience:** Do they need [inaudible]?

**Ossorio:** No.

**Audience:** People just make up a world... and there's no limit to what you can make up. Is that what you mean by talking nonsense? You can make up anything?

**Ossorio:** Yeah. If you think of any literary world in ours...

**Audience:** What?

**Ossorio:** Any literary world. You say, "That does not make it." Why? Because there's no ... [knocking on table]. There's none of that first stuff in it. [Cf. "The world consists of three sorts of things. One is the physical happenings and things."]

**Audience:** What?

**Ossorio:** There is no physics [knocking on table again]. There is nothing physical we can distinguish in contrast to the psychological. So you're going to get a rudimentary sort of system, and I'm not interested in hypothetical worlds that have no room for people.

**Audience:** No room for what?

**Ossorio:** For people. So the whole business of making sense of this set of ideas is -- what? -- formidable, and I don't know anybody who would try it, who would dare try it, and I'm doing it because I can. I have the freedom to do that. So I said, "It's like taking a gulp in your old age."

**Audience:** Some people play golf in their old age. [laughter]

**Ossorio:** Yeah. I'm going to work on this for a little while.

**Audience:** I'm going to work on?

**Ossorio:** This puzzle.

**Audience:** You've got this intuition and hope... You're intuiting some set of things that you...

**Ossorio:** No, everything. [laughing]

**Audience:** Okay. But that it feels nonsensical to reveal it at this point or to clarify it, or it's not in a form yet that you can say...

**Ossorio:** Maybe, maybe not. The thing about the rationality of asking an unanswerable question, you want to hear that. You can say it's nonsense, which it is, but you also have to say it [ ], which it is. When you include everything in the picture, it's a different slant than if you have a formal system that tells you what the possibilities are.

**Audience:** Did you say probabilities or possibilities?

**Ossorio:** Possibilities. So it's a happy hunting ground for new ideas.

**Audience:** What kind of questions were they asking, Pete? You said these guys were asking some kinds of questions that they couldn't get answered. What kind of question?

**Ossorio:** Some version of "Why am I here?" "What am I here to do?" "What is the nature of my true self?" And they all sound alike. So down here with these questions [pointing to the rap session questions] about a third of them have to do with "What are you doing these days?" That's what I'm doing these days. [laughter]

**Audience:** It sure ain't playing golf.

**Audience:** Pete, I have a question.

**Ossorio:** Yeah.

**Audience:** The work that you're going to start doing, will the articulation of the Person Concept be the set of tools that you use to do it?

**Ossorio:** No.

**Audience:** Is it a new more expansive set?

**Ossorio:** It's a more... It's an additional dimension.

**Audience:** What?

**Ossorio:** An additional dimension to *Persons*. If you think about it, what do we do as scientists, as people, in the world? We describe it; we describe the regularities. But we're talking about the same thing.

**Audience:** I didn't quite catch you now because of that darned microphone. Get that away. [laughter]

**Ossorio:** As a scientist, for example, I can look at twenty different theories about anything you can imagine, and that's just more of the same. But what I needed was something that wasn't just another theory.

**Audience:** You need something more? I didn't hear the word you said.

**Ossorio:** *Real*.

**Audience:** Real?

**Ossorio:** *Real*. I'm not thinking of the garden variety formal system. I'm thinking of the formal system that includes *all* formal systems. By the way, it's surprising how little detail you have to know to operate at this level -- conceptual [level]. You don't have to know how many there are to talk about all of them. All you need to know is that we don't have any exceptions

**Audience:** So you're talking about the system of all possible formal systems, an explanation of worlds which are all possible worlds? Is that true? Or is it not the first or the second?

**Ossorio:** No. The first is one of those questions that you want to say a "Yes" to, but



there's a little thing that says "You'll get in trouble with that, son." [laughter]

**Audience:** I think so. It might take the whole weekend.

**Audience:** Are there *any* concepts at all you're going to share a little bit?

**Ossorio:** No. [laughter, applause]

**Audience:** No coming attractions?

**Ossorio:** World, by the way, is your garden variety basic concept. We're talking about worlds. Just that fact does something to you.

**Audience:** Are objects, processes, events, and states of affairs part of that?

**Ossorio:** Yeah, that would include... See, I'm not attempting to deny some of the Descriptive things.

**Audience:** Not deny?

**Ossorio:** Yeah. As I said, it's another dimension.

**Audience:** So within such a larger production, there'll be a place for Descriptive Psychology.

**Ossorio:** Oh, yeah.

**Audience:** And other things as well? Is that right?

**Ossorio:** Yeah.

**Audience:** But when you and I talked about this in June, that sort of blew me away. It was like "Hell, I've spent all my life trying to learn about this, and now you just threw it out the window." [laughter] But you know, I wasn't sure... But then I got the idea of an added dimension. That makes sense.

**Audience:** This doesn't undermine the usefulness of Descriptive Psychology. You're talking about an alternative.

**Audience:** Yeah, but there's no alternative to having to learn a whole other set...

**Ossorio:** The thing I wanted to avoid was simply another set of ideas comparable, sort of one on one, so that we could describe a hypothetical something that's just like our world. I wanted something that would encompass worlds that were *not* like our world. Believe me, you're not going to get access to any of that by going and looking. [laughter]

**Audience:** I might be a little concrete for a second. When you're talking about worlds and maybe other kinds of world, would you say that this new production would have more parameters?

**Ossorio:** Probably.

**Audience:** Probably? Bummer. [laughter]

**Audience:** Let me ask you, because I'm confused about something, which is if Descriptive Psychology provides, using ordinary language... Using ordinary language, if Descriptive Psychology gives us access to the whole range of behavioral facts, the question is really, for what you're puzzling out, is ordinary language adequate?

**Ossorio:** Adequate for *what*?

**Audience:** I don't know. I'm trying to get some sense of ...

**Ossorio:** That's a kind of nonsense. That's an example of the kind of nonsense you can get into because you can't answer that question.

**Audience:** In so far as words have their meaning in their relation to a social practice, you're... What limited piece I'm getting of what I think you want, that you're trying to deal with, involves possible social practices, but not social practices that exist within the framework of the world as we know it.

**Ossorio:** I said *a* world. I'm talking about a people world.

**Audience:** But still one could use the language in *a* different world. Maybe.

**Ossorio:** No. There are few things so closely tied into language that it doesn't seem to me frugal to try to separate them. Our language is what we have this thing in. That's why you can't separate the two.

**Audience:** It doesn't seem to be *what* to try to separate them, Pete?

**Ossorio:** Productive. Look. Think of the object that I'm pointing to. [pointing] Think of the word object. Think of the word container. Think of the word [ ]. Any of those would give me a description of that thing there. We can say this in spite of the fact that there's a different language, system, and theory in each of the three places. So adding another theory is not going to do the job at all.

What you need is a way, a language, a *system* for grappling with the whole thing. And I think I've got the mind road to that. But it's easy, very easy to talk nonsense.

**Audience:** To talk what?

**Ossorio:** Nonsense.

**Audience:** Pete, you talked before about seeing some kind of real world kinds of examples. I think that's what you said... [inaudible]

**Ossorio:** Oh. That was an example of something I read that got me focused on this. It was presented as a strong -- well, for our purposes it was presented as true. Somebody actually was there and somebody said these things.

**Audience:** I couldn't hear you.

**Ossorio:** What I presented was the fictitious truth.

**Audience:** The what?

**Ossorio:** The *fictitious* truth. Fictitious in the fact that you don't know any such people. Truth in that there's nothing to keep them from doing that.

The setting was in one of the Indian schools, one of the Indian school districts. And the story line is that they were anticipating -- this was at the beginning of the semester -- they were anticipating for particular children what problems they would have, and they had grouped the children in terms of what problem they had. So that if you had this person who ought to have been able to deal with numbers and couldn't, that would have come up. That was their way of laying out "What are the problems going to be?" "What problems are we going to attack?"

Take this story in that vein -- Something that could have happened, maybe did happen for all I know. Okay. Now there are four teachers there. Each one manages a student and the kind of problems he has.

**Audience:** They're starting to get restless, the natives in the kitchen there. So scooch on in there please. [closer to the microphone]

**Ossorio:** Is this any better?

**Audience:** Yes.

**Ossorio:** Imagine this situation and four teachers.

**Audience:** I'm going to put the brake on here [on the wheelchair Pete was sitting in] so you don't slide off.

**Ossorio:** Okay. [laughter]

**Audience:** Talk about really restricting behavior potential.

**Audience:** While he's increasing ours.

**Ossorio:** Think of these four teachers and that kind of subject matter: what kind of

problem is this kid going to have, does he have now. So one kid comes up for real and the first teacher says, "He's going to have trouble with arithmetic. He just hasn't got a feel for numbers." The second teacher says pretty much the same thing. The third teacher also says the same thing: "I've tried x and y and z, and he's no good at numbers."

And you're the fourth. What the fourth says is: "Well, talk to his mother. Talk to his mother for facts about what happened and talk to the village wise man for what it's all about." The idea was that unlike the other three, the kid was using his usual formal system...

Oh, I goofed it up. The fourth one was this woman who said "Talk to his chief because that looks to me like the sin of Quait. [change tape] What he did was that. That's what's going on with him."

When you look at that question, it begins to hit you how different a person could be. How different a person who described by the fourth teacher and by the first three teachers -- You would never suspect it was the same person.

The question is "Which is he really?" [blank on tape] ... anything really because there isn't anything really. [laughter]

**Audience:** I didn't hear that.

**Ossorio:** There isn't anything really the case in *this* case because there isn't really a case in *any* case.

**Audience:**[inaudible] Really.

**Ossorio:** I guess I should introduce a concept or a word which stands for "the truth of the matter."

**Audience:** Say that again.

**Ossorio:** The truth of the matter.

**Audience:** No, the whole sentence.

**Ossorio:**I should introduce a word...

**Audience:** A what?

**Ossorio:**I should introduce a *word* that simply means "the truth of the matter", and then I can say "There was no truth-of-the-matter". It isn't that he was wrong or she was right. It's their way of doing it. If you don't preserve that openness, you run into problems pretty fast. So that gives you nothing that the... The argument in facts says "There is no there there."

**Audience:**There is no there?

**Ossorio:** No. There's no particulars that are not a product of our conceptual system and

our living in the world that we do. There is no truth-of-the-matter. There's no grand truth from which you can give theories. There just is no truth at all. You start from scratch. Well, that's what we do. When we invent a culture, somebody was starting from scratch.

**Audience:** So is this a matter of inventing a B world?

**Ossorio:** What?

**Audience:** Is this a matter of inventing a B world?

**Ossorio:**No. You know you can't do that.

**Audience:** Huh?

**Ossorio:** You know you can't do that.

**Audience:** I do?

**Ossorio:** By definition. If you could envision it, who'd be interested? Anyhow, when you think of the difference in what these people thought was going on, what would you...? My issue of the phrase is that they've got different collections of social practices. And there's no way for somebody to talk to the other if you don't recognize it. This culture, this set of practices, is so different from this set that there are limits to what you can say about it. In this case, I say there is no truth-of-the-matter. Bring that back to the original thing that a world consists of three parts: physical, mental, and description.

**Audience:** Am I understanding that the new production you're working on will do justice to the fact not only that there is no truth, but that there are questions that cannot be answered?

**Ossorio:** [nodding]

**Audience:** Cool.

**Ossorio:** Wait a while, wait a while. [laughter] It's too strong.

**Audience:** I'm sorry?

**Ossorio:** I would not say that there is no truth.

**Audience:** You would not say there is no truth?

**Ossorio:** There's all kind of truth. Look. This is a box of Kleenex [holding up the box]. It's *true*.

**Audience:** *It is true.*

**Ossorio:** Hell, yes. There are all kinds of things that we know are true, that we can demonstrate are true. It's just that the scope of those is limited. And that's the point, that there is that limitation.

**Audience:** And that's appealing to be able to address that in some way, perhaps systematically, the fact that there is that set of facts about the world?

**Ossorio:** Yeah, except that you don't have the system.

**Audience:** What?

**Ossorio:** You don't have the system.

**Audience:** I don't.

**Ossorio:** Remember that behavior and consciousness is on par with the physical things. They're simply different parts of the world. What ties them together is the language, the formal system.

**Audience:** What ties them together please?

**Ossorio:** The language. So right now I'm betwixt and between trying to consolidate some of these ideas so as to go over them and make sure they are consistent, etc. And plunging on ahead while knowing that I may have to scrap the whole -- large things -- if I later discover an error.

**Audience:** What?

**Ossorio:** If I later discover an error. I've done that before too. [laughter] I think that's enough for the question "What are you up to today?"

© 2001 Peter G. Ossorio