

# **Why Philosophy Matters....**

(A talk given to Francis Holland High School Students, Chelsea, London, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013)

I suppose I should begin by addressing the first obvious question, which is, What is Philosophy?

This is not an abstruse question as you might be tempted to think. Philosophy simply consists in posing and seeking to answer the fundamental question of why—almost about everything you may care to think about. Other disciplines are generally defined by being the study of a specific subject: for example, physics is the discipline that is the study of the physical world, chemistry of the attributes and behavior of chemical substances, economics of how markets work, literature of the literary outputs of writers, and so on. It is true that very often you will find that these disciplines might begin by

posing the why questions...for example, why is the force of gravity 32 ft per second square? Or why is the color of the sky blue? Or why did the war erupt in such and such a place? However, you will find in such disciplines that these *why* questions are often responded to or explained by *how* answers, with the fundamental *why* question remaining unexplained. Physicists may tell us how the world began, for instance with a big bang. But they can't tell us why it began. Biologists can tell us how cells decay. But they can't tell us why they are so constituted that they are primed to decay. *Why* questions normally require *because* answers. *How* questions normally have *when* answers: How a war began is different from why it began. We all know too well the relentless (and, to some parents, irritating) pursuit of an answer to a why question that a child sometimes seeks, and for which, maybe, we can't find an answer, or a satisfactory answer. It is this primary query, this fundamental

question, voiced by a child, which philosophy poses and seeks to answer, almost about anything one may care to think about.

You may think that these philosopher-questions have, and can have, no answers, and that therefore the pursuit of the practice of philosophy is pointless. Let me tell you why you would be wrong. There are two lines of defense to make here: first, it is true the questions philosophy poses at any given time may not yield immediate answers; but posing them may in any case lead to posing, and then answering related but as yet un-thought of questions. Famously St. Augustine, reenacting a spiritual experience by St Paul, asked why Man is encumbered with two contrary wills...only to have modern neuroscientists explaining today how different systems in the brain function, often priming us to act in different directions.

But the second line of defense for philosophy here is to point out that, besides being the discipline of the pursuit of fundamental questions, it is likewise the skill and know-how of judging the answers to them, and to other questions. Suppose someone tells you here that it is a good enough reason to believe that human beings are primed to wars and aggression that Einstein himself proclaimed this to be true. As an undergraduate in philosophy you will immediately be able to point out to your interlocutor he has just committed the fallacy of *ad hominem* –that is, to judge the validity of a fact by depending on the person who said it. Einstein was indeed a genius, and it may well be true that human beings are by nature belligerent. But it doesn't follow from the fact he said it that it is true. Or suppose a defendant's lawyer tried to prove his client's innocence by arguing that no evidence whatsoever has been shown to indicate that his client had indeed committed the crime he is accused of. Yet

again the philosophy undergraduate will immediately detect the faulty reasoning here, another example of a classical fallacy to do with the building up of a case on the basis of incomplete knowledge, or of ignorance. The fact no evidence was found does not mean there is no evidence, and the fact he was not proven guilty is not the same as proving he was innocent. To conclude that something does not exist from the fact we have not discovered it, or proved it to exist, is to commit a fallacy of the same type – a powerful argument against an atheist who will claim God does not exist simply based on the fact that no one has produced a demonstrable proof of His existence.

So, does philosophy matter? And why?

Given how I have just explained it, it is surely hard to see how it couldn't matter. Indeed, it is clear that it matters in almost anything and everything, whatever the professions or disciplines one practices or

studies. After all, through it, one seeks to fully understand what one is studying or doing; and with its help, one tries to put up a best-case for the defense or rejection of a hypothesis, be this in micro-biology or in nano-physics, or in any other science or discipline. And why one should do that is partly because one wishes to be as sure as possible about what one claims to know and has to deal with, and more importantly because the universe holds so many secrets, among them being what the number 42 stands for –if you’ve ever read the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. This is the answer to the really important why, the why behind all whys, why does anything exist?

But it is hardly for building up a case in nano-physics that one is typically drawn to studying philosophy as a young person, or is initially wooed by it. It is mostly the magnetic force of mystery that first draws you in –the kind of mystery whose own mysteriousness is itself a mystery –you

sense it is a mystery, but you are at a loss as to why it is a mystery, or what it is that is mysterious in the first place.

My own journey into this domain began when I was about your age, or maybe a bit younger, and I took to taking walks with a school friend of mine almost every evening under the bright stars along a quiet stretch of road between his house and mine, and we discussed, untutored and uninitiated, yes, the meaning of life. I don't believe it was clear to us exactly what we were discussing. But there were signposts. God. Creation. The Universe. Time. Past. Future. Us. Do the future, present, and past exist in the same way, or does the future exist in a way that is different from either the present or the past? Indeed, does the future exist at all, yet? And where, on the other hand, does the past exist? Is it over there, somewhere, or is it only in our minds by now? But surely, if the existence of the past and of the future is in doubt, and the present itself

boils down to being simply a passage between these two, there being hardly a moment which has neither passed already, or is about to come, but has not yet come, how sure can we then be of the existence of the present? Is our entire present just the flickering passage of a nano-moment? Are we then just hallucinating when our perception of reality seems to include vast swathes of time –the time just before you entered this room, and the time you fixed for walking home afterwards? Is what we think of as reality just a fantasy? And is time travel then –that captivating hypothesis- totally meaningless? These and similar questions filled our agenda for the evening walks, but what topped the agenda, of course, was always that ultimate question about God, creation, causality and the universe.

Many years later my friend and I ended up teaching at a college back home, where he had become a Chemistry- and I a philosophy professor. We reenacted our

past by putting together a joint paper on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle – the abstruse physics theory that we cannot capture the definition of a nano-particle, for instance that of light, since the minute we focus on it as stationary, its kinetic qualities elude us; and likewise, the minute we focus on its kinetic features, its stationary qualities elude us. The paradox seemed to us to encapsulate our innocent amazement at the world. My own journey in philosophy had first taken me to Oxford, where I met with the writings of the giant figures, from Plato on, who had in fact addressed in a far more systematic manner the questions I had childishly pondered in my youth, and later to Harvard, where I finally did my doctoral thesis on a medieval Persian Muslim philosopher named Ibn Sina –or Avicenna as he was called in the later Latin West. My friend, on the other hand, had meanwhile delved into the natural sciences. But we found ourselves crossing paths again, posing again the same

questions, now possessed with more knowledge to burden our queries with, but also with a humbler attitude. We pondered over the meaning of the claim that the ultimate particles constituting the universe at each moment contained the possibility in themselves of either perishing or enduring, the chances being 50% they would end up one way or the other. A famous physicist at the turn of the last century, named Schrodinger, put this mind-boggling fact to his readers in the form of an example about a cat—a thought-experiment that later came to be called ‘Schrodinger’s cat’. Placed inside a box, there was a fifty percent chance when the box was opened it would be alive, and a fifty percent chance it would be dead. Fine, people said, but does this imply that, in the box, there are two possible worlds, or two parallel world, one in which the cat is alive, and another where it is dead? And how can we understand what this concept of a possible world really means? Do such worlds co-exist temporally? Hard

questions, it is true, but not for that reason unimportant. In fact, such questions have engaged philosophers thinking about God like Avicenna, and like Leibniz, right from the beginning. Our entire universe as they conceived of it, after all, had this quaint quality shared by Schrodinger's cat. How many worlds do we live in? How many possible *us* are there?

Us. I have so far mentioned some of our early signposts, but left out an important one, namely, Us, whether as human beings, or as ourselves in particular. Where are we from all of this? What is the meaning of our lives? That we are different from other living species is obvious. But does this difference somehow make special demands of us? Are we, by virtue of our moral and rational senses, called upon to act in certain ways rather than in others? To seek justice, perhaps? To do good, whether to ourselves or to others? To speak the truth? Are we called upon to live in a special way? Are we ever

justified in killing one another? In dispossessing each other of goods or properties? In any case, why believe we all have a common moral sense? Of if we have it, that we all are called upon to heed it? Wouldn't it do just as well –and even better- if we were never caught doing what our moral beacon tells us not to do? I think anyone wishing deeply to ponder these questions cannot afford not to begin with a study of the life of Socrates, and the writings of Plato. If it is Aristotle, Plato's student and successor in the Athenian Academy, who is credited with the methodic initiation of the study of the sciences, it is to Plato one should turn when one seeks to answer the question of what it really means for a human being to be alive, or to be worthy of the life one has. Famously, it is Socrates who said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Courageous words, for a man who chose to accept the death sentence unjustly given him by his fellow citizens than agree to escape with the help of a loving friend for

whom the mere saving of his life was of the utmost importance.

Fortunately, we are not all faced with the choices Socrates had to face. But, knowingly or not, we live in a world in which moral challenges abound, and to be blind to which would surely not set us apart from a mere beast of burden. Take, for example, the giant electric generation project in the Amazon, to be constructed on the largest water dam ever to be built by man, and slated to do away with countless indigenous populations and cultures in the area: Are big companies, or even big government, morally qualified to take a decision endangering the cultural habitats of these semi-invisible tribes? If you knew the power generated is for the good –not of the tribes themselves- but of mega-consumers further afield, would you feel morally comfortable about supporting this enterprise? And if not, then why? Or take the growing practice by the American government of using drones both as

surveillance as well as striking weapons: Is the moral balance such that it may be better to kill an enemy -a so-called ticking time-bomb- before that enemy even sets out to strike at you? And at which moment precisely is it justified for you to start counting the presumed ticking of that bomb? Can you ever really be sure, before an actual strike, that such and such a person is indeed a potential ticking time-bomb in the first place?

Once again, philosophy may not provide one with the answers. But it certainly encourages us to raise the questions, and to seek to be as precise as possible, both rationally as well as morally, in judging what the answers are. Nowadays the course given by Michael Sandel of Harvard about what you might think is the right thing to do in hypothetical situations where a moral choice is required of you is being taught and studied all over the world: the example begins with a basic scenario where you are in control of the

lever on a junction along the train track. You see the train approaching fast, and will definitely hit five children playing further along the track if you do not quickly switch the lever, sending the train running along the second track. But you see an old man who seems stuck further along this second track, and you know by switching the lever the children will be saved, but the old man will definitely get hit by the train and get killed. What would you do? What do you think would be the right thing to do?

Sandel then builds up yet a more complicated case: what if pushing a man over the bridge would stop the train in its track, preventing the death of the children? What would be the right thing to do here? Would you go ahead and push the man over the railing in order to save the five children? What if it was one child only? What if the man was your own father?

Philosophy, in short, urges us to think, and to get clearer about our own emotions, and motivations. These examples are now being studied by behavioral scientists here in London, at UCL, where subjects are being tested for their reactions in a simulated environment, basically in order to find out more about how we take decisions, and why we take the decisions we take. Important subject, this, even for the non-philosophically minded market researchers.

To conclude: two days ago, I was in Central Park, New York, visiting the zoo with one of my grandchildren. We walked into the tropical section. Next to the red pandas stood an attendant proudly explaining to visitors that the thick bush of bamboo shoots being grown on the other side was specifically planted to feed the pandas, whose sustenance it was, thus ensuring self-sustainability. Out again, we came upon the white bear...said to be the largest predator there is, literally weighing

tons. Looking at the explanatory note hanging on the fence, with a drawing of the bear being shown also eating, my grandson asked why there was a splash of red in the drawing, just where the bear seemed to be partaking of its meal. Being told that it feeds on live seals, the next question was where it got them. And there the answer lay, in a pool of deep water adjoining the bear's habitat, but separated by a gated fence, where the bear's sustenance was being kept!

We left the zoo probably with an unanswered question on my grandson's mind: I will leave the question with you: is it the same growing bamboo shoots to feed the red panda as it is to nurture seals to feed the polar bear? Or does this question lead to more complicated ones?

Thank you

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