



WHEN PHILOSOPHERS PHILOSOPHIZE



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Abstract

Realizing that misconceptions about the nature of what someone desires to study can hinder the person's ability to make progress, this article, 'When Philosophers Philosophize' will seek to respond to the following misconceptions: (1)that the value of philosophy is not practical; (2) that philosophers rarely, if ever, concur with each other, and can never present irrefutable arguments in support of their theses; (3) closely connected to the misconception that philosophers seldom agree among themselves is the claim that there is hardly any progress in philosophy; (4)the last misconception I wish to evaluate is that philosophizing is subjective – a matter of personal opinion. Employing the analytic method, I will argue that as a critical and rational inquiry into the ideas in which people

live by, philosophy has always been the springboard of ideas that shape human history. It transforms society in the course of socio-economic, political and cultural evolution. However, of recent, it is not so much that we overtly deny this fact – we are always getting snippets of wisdom here and there –but we simply don't have the right institutions set up to promulgate wisdom coherently in the world. In this our age of information and an abundance of the tools of pleasure, it is time we desired to learn anew from those who knew how little they knew. Philosophizing can be an antidote to our vanity, inculcating humility and curiosity. It can prevent us from being satisfied with spoon-fed oversimplified ideas about our world. It can make us yearn restlessly for clearer and deeper answers about reality and about ourselves. I opine that seeking begins only when there is something to be sought.

Keywords: Rational, Philosophy, Wisdom, Humility, Curiosity, Philosophizing, Misconception, Argument, Analytic.

Introduction

When philosophers philosophize, they are seeking ways to reveal the truth about the various phases of life and everything connected with it and to reveal the fulfillment of the purpose for each stage of life and expressing the way for the realization of these are relevant in a way, so as to obtain the best

compromise of all that we encounter. The aim of the article is to explicate what I mean by 'philosophizing' and to point out ways in which a philosopher can undertake this venture. I will first of all present an overview of what makes a philosopher, so that we can understand better what it means to philosophize. The idea is to analyze how philosophizing makes philosophers think outside the box, and why sometimes philosophy sometimes wrongly conceived. At the end we shall discover what philosopher does to those who philosophize. Sharon Lebell argues that the “main task of philosophy is to respond to the cry of the soul; to make sense of and thereby free ourselves from the hold of our griefs and fears”.¹ My simple task in this article is present an overview of what it means to philosophize, given that not much work has been done recently. I hope that at the end my contribution would be to present an argument for a form of applied philosophizing where philosophy assumes the role of a dialogue partner with an independent voice.

There comes a time in every human life where we experience certain realities in which the foundations of what we believe, have faith in, and hold dear, are challenged and shaken up. Of course, these are moments, experiences, of 'existential disruption'.²

¹ Sharon Lebell, *Art of Living: The Classical Manual of Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness*, London: HarperCollins, 2007, p. 23.

² This is a point in philosophy that leads us to a set of core existential and conceptual enigmas – an enigma is a puzzle or riddle, a conceptual problem. When investigated deeply enough and articulated in a systematic and clear manner, and when placed within basic categories or “types” of enigmas, we eventually get what we call “the fields of philosophy.”

As we go through these experiences of deep puzzlement, the everyday life-world and every life-tasks are intermitted; because staying there for some time and decide to dwell in this existential space that is revealed to us, we can open up ourselves to “the philosophical experience.” The driver of ideas that has always shaped human history has been philosophy. It transforms society in the course of socio-economic, political and cultural evolution, as a critical, rational inquiry into the ideas people live by. It is an experience of taking a step back from both ourselves and our life-world, to let ourselves experience wonder, to plunge into the deep end of the psyche and explore The Enduring Questions: What does this all mean? What is the world made of? What holds the world up? Why is there something, rather than nothing at all? What is real? Who am I? why are things this way, and some other way? What is the end of everything? What can we really know about everything? How should we think about moral right and wrong? Is there moral truth? Is this it? This life, what is it? And death? How should we approach death? Or generally, how should we live? These questions make us realize that philosophy is an inquiry about “knowing why”. Therefore, we become 'philosophical' in such situations; because we become contemplative, reflective and are filled with wonder; the mundane aspects of life, the minutiae of tying shoes, charging a mobile phone, waiting for a car to warm, all these “fade away”, and something that make the humans unique (or as philosophers would add

“noble”) is revealed to us –the fact that we are creatures who become puzzled, who doubt, and who ask why – we are as well solution seeking creatures, who seek to resolve our puzzlement and cope with mystery and uncertainty.

Most of us are full of things that keep us busy and preoccupied every day. Though occasionally we find ourselves drawing back and wondering what it is all about. Plato said that “philosophy begins in wonder”.³ This is because philosophy begins when human persons begin to figure out how to understand the world, not through religion or by accepting authority but through the use of reason. philosophy is the project of dwelling in such existential spaces of deep wonder that is placed before us; it is about how to keep such spaces open; to share the beauty of such places with others; to feed our curiosity, while we fight those forces in the world trying to shut down the questioning. We realize at the end, that philosophy is about being open to deep questioning and deep learning; it is about seeking different and contrasting viewpoints, it is about using critical thinking to select and reject options for belief; it is ultimately about cultivating the art of wonder and the search for wisdom. No matter how little a person acquires formal philosophical knowledge, it is obvious that there are as many definitions of philosophy as there are many philosophers, there are possibly even

³ Bryan Magee, *The Story of Philosophy*, London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2010, p. 6.

more. After over three thousand years of philosophical activity and disagreement, it is not likely that we will arrive at a consensus, and in this article, I do not desire to add more hot air to the volcanic cloud of knowing.

What Makes a Philosopher

Alfred North Whitehead argues that philosophy is a series of footnotes of Plato.⁴ Asking what makes a philosopher is ostensibly such a basic question, however the answer is more complex than it appears initially. If so, what then makes a person a philosopher? And at what point does someone 'become' a philosopher? The Greek etymology of the word 'philosophy' simply means 'love of wisdom', invariably anybody who loves wisdom is a philosopher, and that it. But going through the history and historiography of philosophy and looking at those who have been formally called 'philosopher', what difference is there from the 'everyday' lover of wisdom? Let me take the risk and add a footnote while considering the provocative definition of a philosopher by Plato that appears in the middle of his dialogue 'Theaetetus', though some scholars feel it is a 'digression.' Aside being a footnote to a digression, there is something of great importance that Plato says about what a philosopher is and what philosophy does. Socrates tells the story of Thales of Miletus (c. 624-545 BC), who is

⁴Whitehead Alfred, *Science and Philosophy*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1984, p. 42.

considered the first Western philosopher of whom we have any record, goes that he was staring intently at the stars while walking and he fell into a well.⁵ (And this is the same Thales whose entire philosophy revolves around water ironically). This fable has become a famous anecdote about philosophy, not just in indicating the value of ideas over the material world, but in terms of worldly foolishness, as we see in the story, the Thracian servant girl mocking Thales saying that a person ought to fix his eyes on the earth and not on the skies, because he was eager to know what went on in the sky and was unaware of the things in front of him and at his feet.⁶ The answer to the question of who a philosopher is can be found in this Plato's fable. Its depiction of a servant girl mocking a philosopher gives one possible definition – the philosopher is “a laughing stock, an absent-minded buffoon.”⁷ Socrates adds, “The same jest suffices for all those who engage in philosophy.”⁸ The philosopher appears like a comedian at this point, because whenever he is compelled to talk about the things at his feet, he gives not only the Thracian girl but the entire crowd a belly laugh. The ignorance of the philosopher in current affairs makes him appear stupid or, “gives the impression of plain silliness.”⁹ On many occasions my friends would tell me to stop being philosophical when we have discussions

⁵David Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 76.

⁶David Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus*, p. 79.

⁷Simon Critchley, 'What Is a Philosopher?', in New York Times (May 16, 2010) <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/what-is-a-philosopher/>

⁸Seth Benardete, *Socrates' Second Sailing: On Plato's Republic*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 67.

⁹Simon Critchley, 'What Is a Philosopher?', in New York Times (May 16, 2010).

on politics, economics, theology, and many other topics, whenever I say certain things they are not so comfortable with they would tell me sarcastically to stop being philosophical. Meaning I should speak like a normal human being. At that point I am left with a rather Monty Pythonesque definition of the philosopher: the silly one. The freedom of the philosopher consists in either moving freely from topic to topic or simply spending years returning to the same topic out of perplexity, fascination, and curiosity.¹⁰ As Plato insists that wonder is the feeling of the philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.

Usually, philosophers are referred to as 'thinkers', but that is not an adequate definition of who a philosopher is. A philosopher sees the world in wonder. The philosopher looks for the underlying meaning of things; he desires to comprehend it and codify it into a system of thought. Succeeding in this endeavor, he often feels compelled to share his system with the world, even when he is aware it is likely to be futile. This happens because he loves the world, regardless of the difficulty he faces. What is required is the burning desire to understand things and connect them, as against the popular belief. Meaning that you do not require a doctorate degree, to have taken any philosophical courses, or to have read a single philosophy book. Surely all these can help sharpen your thinking and assist you avoid contradictions, but they

¹⁰Simon Critchley, 'What Is a Philosopher?', in New York Times (May 16, 2010).

do not in themselves make you more or less of a philosopher. Will Durant opines that “... A philosopher.... has...[a] structure of thought unified by a purpose of his own life and for mankind.”¹¹

Aside the elementary definition, no two philosophers are exactly similar. Some are comets: long lived and brilliant like Socrates; others are streaking meteors like Nietzsche, overwhelmed by their romanticism and brilliance. Some of them create systems haphazardly, and others are meticulous beyond belief –compare Nietzsche to Spinoza. There are still others that are cynical, while others are hopeful. At this point it appears to be a function of your personality and how you react to your environment. We have Alain de Botton and Jason Silva, two very different modern-day philosophers. None of them is a “professional philosopher” in the traditional sense (academia), yet they have their critics. In any case, each has striven to take philosophy out of the ivory tower and to make it accessible and relevant to a wider audience. This is something I personally find very commendable. Realizing what it means to be a philosopher, I doubt many people would choose such a fate for themselves or their children, but I am sure it is as unavoidable as fate itself. My suspicion is that some people may be genetically predisposed to be seekers of order, and certain external circumstances can simply

¹¹Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, New York: Pocket Books, 1991, p. 141.

activate these tendencies. This means that shielding yourself or children from such stimuli may work for just awhile, but at the end it is highly impractical in our increasingly globalized world. It is better perhaps to embrace your personality in order to forge a path through life with true conviction and purpose. This is because philosophers today and in history, have promoted being open-minded, intellectually humble, curious and creative in our thinking; they have championed the view that we should not live in fear of “being out of the loop” from what is trending today, and that we should not obsess about what is currently fashionable with the present “in-crowd”; they have searched for wisdom – even though they have rationally disputed certain definitions of it, as expected, - and they have rejected wallowing in intellectual darkness, while promoting the idea that people should practice mindfulness instead of mindlessness.

Thinking Outside the Box

To think critically is being careful with hasty conclusions, making inferences, acknowledging the fact that knowledge is difficult, because a lot of things are hidden, people try to deceive us many times, we are credulous and often inclined to believe things on the basis of poor or incomplete evidence and more importantly because the world is complicated. But considering the fact that philosophy is the love and pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means and moral

discipline as well as the investigation of the nature, causes, or principles of reality, knowledge, or values, based on logical reasoning rather than empirical methods.¹² This suggests thinking outside the box. My questions are, *if we are always advised to think outside the box, what is wrong with what is in the box? and is it wrong to be in the box after all?* The fact is, the world requires dreamers, because when it was first conceived, it is incredibly difficult to figure out if a dream is truly idle or realizable. People are mostly tempted to categorize the philosopher as a kind of 'idle dreamer'. Or as someone who sits in his ivory tower and mull over trifling distinctions and hair-splitting semantics. Obviously, this is the product of a pure ignorant perception of the ends that philosophy seeks to achieve, this is what triggers the conception of philosophy as a discipline that lacks utility and value outside of a mere quest for knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Inasmuch as I cannot contend that philosophy as a discipline produces the sort of definite answers that one could draw from disciplines like mathematics or engineering, this is not a shortcoming in any case. Conversely, in a political, economic, and social sphere based on uncertainty, the obsession with predictability and pragmatism actively reduces the conception of what is possible as well as reduces the value of intellectual imagination, and perhaps most notably, threatens us with the prospect of floating

¹²Bedau Hugo, *Thinking and Writing about Philosophy*, Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996, p. 52.

through the world asleep. Therefore, in order not to fail in our endeavor to make the world a more meaningful place, we must cast aside our prejudiced notion of what is 'practical', continue to ask questions, and embrace the philosopher – the bold, curious, and intellectually alive dreamer.¹³ This way, we will understand the complexity of the world and then revel in it. Not just figure out all the ways in which other people could be wrong. We are all aware of how hard it is to know things and that makes us to generalize from incomplete sets of examples, or from correlations that have multiple explanations, and sometimes we have to trust the word of someone who may or may not be reliable. That is not to say that you can find yourself some perfect sources, or that you can find certainty in any particular direction, but it does mean that you should at least be careful and celebrate the complexity.

When we talk about thinking “in” a box, it means that your thinking is confined in certain ways. Basically, it means that there is a particular set of assumptions that we are making about an approach to a problem and that is limiting. But we have not realized it, otherwise we would not be stuck. The trick with the box therefore is that you won't know what you were in it, until you are out of it. This means our assumptions about the problem are built into the situation. The question then is how do we get unstuck? And the simple

¹³Wassman, R, &Rinsky L.A., *Reading Critically about Philosophy*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999, p. 78.

answer is that you need to prompt yourself with something random, irrational, and unexpected. You essentially have to force yourself to think about the problem in another way, and that is by bringing in unanticipated prompts and unanticipated input. Because if you continue thinking about the problem in the same way, with the same set of assumptions, then you are not likely to come out of them because in the first place, you are not aware of them. What philosophers promote is the idea that we should live as Socrates *puts the examined life*.¹⁴ This implies detaching from social personas and social scripts, and truly thinking for oneself and coming to own one's own thought – and not just repeating and being an echo of the voices of others. To think outside the box is a way to reveal the truth about the various stages of life and everything associated with it and to reveal the fulfilment of the purpose for each stage of the life and to express the way for the realization of these things are in a relevant way, so as to achieve the best compromise of all that we face. A.B. Palma argues that, “A philosopher who has good philosophical sense, or wisdom, in this sense, knows that it is always right to be aware of, and to treat (e.g. talk to) persons as individual persons and never right to classify them under certain rigid labels, whether the labels are psychological, or ideological, or political, or theoretic. People may espouse certain philosophical or other

¹⁴Anthony, C. Grayling, *The History of Philosophy*, London: Penguin Books, 2020, p. 63.

causes; but they are not those causes. People are individual persons, no matter what theories are brewing in their heads”¹⁵ In the end, the beauty of philosophy lies in the fact that it critically examines anything and everything, including itself and its methods.

On the Error of Conceiving the Task of Philosophy

Generally, philosophy means a lot of different things depending on the people you ask. For this reason, a good style is not always considered a virtue in a serious philosophical reflection. Since philosophy is attempting to communicate something through a channel of language, should be as much concerned with style as any of the literary arts. Being of all men the most consistent and serious seekers after truth, it would not be so harsh to suggest that philosophers should be the most assiduous in striving for clarity and fitness of expression. Undoubtedly, great philosophy is not always an easy task. Some philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, write in a way that appears almost perversely obscure. While others like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, adopt an aphoristic style. And the Modern analytic philosophers can present their arguments in a compressed form that places heavy demand on the reader. There is then an ample scope for philosophers to interpret the work of their

¹⁵A. B. Palma, “Philosophizing”, Journal Article in *Philosophy*, Vol. 66, No. 255 (jan., 1991), p. 44.

predecessors, and the interpretations can become classics in their own right. Inasmuch as not all philosophers write obscurely – Hume, Schopenhauer, Russell – there are many who do. There is every likelihood that someone thinks that obscurity is a virtue in philosophy, a mark of a certain kind of greatness, (I am personally skeptical about that). To an extent, every text need interpretation. To figure out what someone means is not simply a matter of decoding his words, rather, speculating about his mental state. Same words could express quite different thoughts, and the reader has to choose between the interpretations. That is not to say that all texts are equally difficult to interpret. Some readings might be more psychologically plausible than others, and a writer can narrow the scope of possible interpretations. But then why should philosophy require more interpretation than other texts? My simple answer is that professionals assume an advanced knowledge of their field, as well as familiarity with conceptual nuances, contemporary references, and cultural norms. For those outside the circle, this background needs to be filled in. When confronting with a work from another time or culture, different scholars might produce different interpretations of the original. But this openness to interpretation is merely an accident of distance. Because the text could have been quite clear to its original readers, and with adequate knowledge we might settle on a definitive interpretation. This does not

¹⁶Harvey Gordon, *Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998, p. 109.

resolve the special difficulties presented by some philosophical texts.¹⁶ These difficulties abound possibly because great philosophers operate at a higher intellectual level than the rest of us, packing their works with profound insights, complex ideas and subtle distinctions.

The nature of philosophical enquiry is another explanation. Philosophers do not simply marshal facts – they engage reflectively with a problem, raising questions, teasing out connections, and investigating ideas. At this point, interpreters can respond with their specific questions, connections, and ideas. As a result, great works of philosophy by nature generate different interpretations. But could it be that because interpreters engage with *the problem being discussed* and explore their own ideas about it? Or because they engage with *the problem of what the author meant* and try to come up with hypotheses? Only the former is the mark of good philosophy. A work can be tentative, exploratory and suggestive without being hard to understand. The options canvassed can be set out with precision and clarity.¹⁷ Perhaps obscure writings are more open to reinterpretation. Some people argue that philosophy does not progress as science does. Owing to the fact that philosophical issues are not solved but continually re-explored in new contexts, and each generation returns to great works of the past and

¹⁷Harvey Gordon, *Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students*, p. 112.

reinterprets them for its own period. Therefore, texts that are obscure are more likely to become classics, given that they naturally lend themselves to reinterpretation. On the other hand, unambiguous texts can soon appear sterile and dated. As a person, I am skeptical of the view that philosophy does not progress but, even if we accept it, it does not justify a preoccupation with reinterpretation. If a person is grappling with the same problem as an original writer, it might be useful to study his work, but what is achieved by effectively rewriting it in light of knowledge previously unknown? Why not produce a new work that draws on the old but is not bound by it? Commitment to reinterpretation betrays a misplaced focus on philosophers rather than philosophical problems.¹⁸ But a number of great philosophy is creative in a way that is incompatible with clarity. It does not desire to construct precise theories; rather, it reaches out to unmapped areas of thought, where we do not yet know what techniques to employ, what concepts to use, or even what questions to ask. It is more like art than science, and it makes its own rules. That is not to say that such work is defective by being ambiguous; it is only trying to do something that cannot be done clearly, and the aim is specifically to stimulate various readings.

And again, some philosophers make their works obscure to create some aura of profundity and mystery.

¹⁸Wassman, R. &Rinsky L.A., *Reading Critically about Philosophy*, p. ⁸³.

This calls for interpretation and scholarly attention – special effort is needed to engage with the work, helping to create a cult following among scholars. They make the work harder to challenge, and criticisms can be dismissed as misinterpretations. But writing that is more transparent and clearer can appear less fertile or less exciting, and its errors are easier to figure out. Finally, let us bear in mind that obscurity is a defect and never a virtue, and undue concern with interpretation puts the focus on people rather than problems. I know so well too that it is not easy to write clearly, especially on philosophical themes, and it is risky. Those who write with clarity stand naked before their critics, with all their argumentative blemishes visible; but they are braver, more honest and more respectful of the true aims of intellectual enquiry than those who shroud themselves in obscurity. Philosophy means a lot of different things to different people. Though it is often used generically to mean some sort of meta-discussion, or a discussion connecting to some notion of meaning, usually the meaning of life. This kind of philosophy has some positive renderings. These discussions are mostly happy and light, something like “my philosophy for keeping a clear head”. Traditionally, I don't think this is what philosophy is meant to be. A big chunk of me hates seeing philosophy used that way. Many times, I have searched for engaging philosophical articles on the internet, I only find seemingly unrelated things. And I ask: where has the discussion about fundamental matters gone? Where are the discussions of the core

philosophical areas? I feel sad to see the use of philosophy so divorced from its roots, so unmoored from history. One thing I have come to notice is that people are indeed interested in philosophical debates, unfortunately philosophy as a tradition or an establishment, has left the average person out of such debates. Professional philosophy has an enormous negative perception and for good reason. Philosophers have adopted language which alienates 'lay persons'; language which demands more than a dictionary to understand, and language that obscures its meaning unless a person has read the entire encyclopedia of philosophy. I won't be sincere if I do not give an example. With apologies to the fans of Immanuel Kant, his work is so obscure, though full of useful insight. For this reason, Schopenhauer says: "Because of his style which was obscure, Kant was understood properly by just a few. And it seems successful philosophers after Kant have devoted themselves to writing still more unintelligently than Kant. This was bound to succeed!"¹⁹ Since then philosophy has become that obscure writing, which is utterly incomprehensible but allegedly focuses on the deep features of the world, things too deep for words. Should it be so?

¹⁹Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, London: Penguin Classics, 1973, p. 68.

Beyond The Box: What Does Philosophy do to Philosophers

Philosophizing has an indirect benefit in that it helps develop skills in problem-solving, in analyzing concepts, in formulating clear definitions, and in asking leading questions. To answer those who think philosophy has no practical value, philosophizing contributes to a person's capacity to avoid making questionable assumptions, to trace the outcome of a claim, and to look at a problem from a new and surprising point of view. Philosophizing improves communication skills, because it teaches one how to write and speak more carefully and cogently. Granted that a number of philosophical questions are still under debate does not imply that philosophers 'continually' disagree with each other. Contemporary philosophers are in total agreement regarding many methods and principles of logic – the study of how to discern between correct and incorrect reasoning. The error that philosophers rarely, if ever, agree with each other springs from the fact that philosophers tend to be more concerned with issues about which there is hardly any general agreement. Rather than concerning themselves with areas of consensus, philosophers direct their attention to areas where there is disagreement. This problem is perhaps unlikely to change, because one of the challenges of philosophy is the study of areas of discord. The misconception that there has been no progress in philosophy rests on two

mistaken presuppositions: (1) that disagreement among philosophers means that the right answer has not been found –meaning, disagreement is a sign of no progress, and (2) that philosophical progress only occurs when a question is answered. The first presupposition is wrong. Many people think that the truth value of an answer is determined by the number of those who support it. Meaning that the popularity or widespread acceptance of an answer is taken as an index of its truth, and on the other hand, a lack of acceptance is construed as an index of the falsity of the answer. An example of this kind of argument is the popular but false belief in the Middle Ages that the earth was the center of the universe. Therefore, agreement does not entail the veracity of an answer. Conversely, when there is disagreement it does not mean that truths have not been discovered; residual disagreement does not entail that there is no new insights obtained. To think that progress only occurs when a question is answered is also mistaken. Because one can make progress when discovering the inadequacy of certain answers. Socrates held that wisdom is learning to recognize ignorance, including one's own. He is convinced that helping others realize the errors in their arguments was beneficial because it puts them on the path toward knowledge. When answers to a question are discovered to be inadequate, the discovery forms progress, even if the initial question has not been answered sufficiently. To think that philosophizing is subjective is founded on a

mistaken assumption. The fact that someone cannot solve philosophical problems with absolute certainty, it is not to mean that the choice between two rival theories is subjective. Every theory, be it religious, political, scientific, or philosophical, is essentially underdetermined by evidence, therefore, it is improbable that one theory 'wins out' completely over all its contenders. At the end, philosophizing spurs you to construct cogent arguments and to evaluate the arguments of others critically.

A friend asked me: “you are a priest, why did you choose to be a philosopher?” My answer was, 'philosophy is basically about amplifying knowledge, which for me is the basic attribute by which humanity is defined'. A number of contemporary philosophers are grappling with political and social problems just the way Plato, John Locke, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau did. People are understandably confused about what philosophy actually is. Looking from afar, it appears weird, irrelevant, boring and yet also – just a little – intriguing. Even though it is difficult to pinpoint what is the actual interest. We have seen what a philosopher is. But some questions remain: What does a philosopher do? And why is he needed? Fortunately, the answer is already found in what philosophy itself means. Etymologically philosophy means love of or devotion to wisdom.²⁰ Therefore, philosophers are people devoted

²⁰Canterbury Classics (Firm), *Ancient Greek Philosophers*, San Diego: Canterbury Classics, 2018, p. viii.

to wisdom. Though the word 'wisdom' sounds abstract, it is not mysterious. To be wise then means trying to live and die well, living as good a life as possible within the troubled conditions of existence. Because the goal of wisdom is fulfilment. Some could say 'happiness' but 'happiness' can be misleading, because it suggests continuous chirpiness and joy, whereas 'fulfilment' appears more compatible with a lot of pain and suffering, which every decent life by necessity possess. Invariably, a philosopher or 'a person devoted to wisdom' is someone who strives for systematic expertise at working out how to discover individual or collective fulfilment. In their search for wisdom, philosophers have developed a very specific skill set. Over the centuries, they have become experts in many of the general, large things that make people not very wise. These are some of the issues:

- A. Despair in asking what is really important: Most of us have these questions in mind at some point: What is the meaning of life? What should I do at work? Where is the society taking us to? What is love? – these questions mostly come in the middle of the night – but we are scared to provide answers to them. Many times, they take the status of jokes in many social circles: and we get shy of expressing them – except for a short while in adolescence – for fear of being thought pretentious and getting nowhere. But these questions matter deeply because only with

sound answers to them can we direct our energies meaningfully. Philosophy makes philosopher unafraid of the big questions. Over the years, they have asked the biggest questions. They have come to realize that these questions can always be broken down into more manageable chunks and the only really pretentious thing is to think that a person is regularly raising naïve-sounding questions.

- B. The errors of public opinion: Commonly known as 'common sense' –is sensible and reasonable in diverse occasions. It is what you hear very often from the people you mingle with, most times we assume they are true, we take them in without thinking about them. The media pumps them out in great measure every day. In many cases however, common sense is also full of daftness, error and the most lamentable prejudice. Philosophy gets us to subject every form of common sense to reason. It asks us to think for ourselves, to be more dependent. Is it really true what people say about love, about money, about children, about travel, and about work? What philosophers are interested in is whether an idea is logical – rather than simply assuming it must be right because it is long-established and popular.
- C. Our mental confusion plays its role too: Most times, we do not know what goes on in our minds. We know for instance that we really like a

particular genre of music. However, we do not exactly know why? Or someone we meet is very annoying, but we cannot figure out what is the real issue. Or sometimes we lose our temper but cannot be sure what we are so cross about. We do not have total insights into our own satisfactions and dislikes. At this point we need to examine our own minds. Philosophy commits itself to self-knowledge – and its central precept, as Socrates succinctly summarizes: *Know yourself*.²¹

- D. We are not sure of our source of happiness: We work so hard everyday to be happy, but many times we take the very wrong route. We overrate the power of some things to improve our lives – and we underrate some others. In our consumer society, we make the wrong choices because, because we are guided by false glamour, we keep on imagining that traveling to certain destinations, or car, or smartphone will make a bigger difference than it can. At the same time, we underestimate the contribution of other things –like taking a walk, tidying your room, having fruitful conversation or going to bed early – which may have little prestige but can contribute deeply to the character of existence. For this reason, philosophers seek to be wise by getting more precise about the

²¹Bryan Magee, *The Story of Philosophy*, p. 23.

activities and attitudes that can really help us live better.

- E. Thwarted emotions: By our nature we are emotional, though regularly we forget this uncomfortable reality. Oftentimes certain emotions – anger, envy or resentment – lead us into serious danger. Philosophers teach us to think about our emotions, instead of just having them. By understanding and analyzing our feelings, we can learn to see how emotions impact on our behavior in unexpected, counterintuitive and sometimes dangerous ways.
- F. Fright and lack of perspective: Frequently in life, we tend to lose sense of what really matters and what does not. As the expressions goes – we are constantly 'losing perspective'. That is exactly what philosophers are good at keeping a hold of. The Stoic philosopher Zeno, on receiving the news that he had lost his entire belongings in a shipwreck, simply said: *'Fortune commands me to be a less encumbered philosopher.'*²² Such statements have made the very concept 'philosophical' synonymous to calm, long-term thinking and strength-of-mind and definitely perspective.

Conclusion

here are philosophers who argue that the function of philosophy is to analyze the foundations and presuppositions underlying other disciplines. Another group insist that philosophy is to integrate scientific knowledge with that of other fields of study to achieve some form of consistent and coherent perspective. There are still others who believe that the function of philosophy is to examine the principles and rules of language, and to unravel the problems and misconceptions that have resulted from the misuse language. Whatever definition philosophers give to philosophy, philosophy does not begin in certainty, but in doubt; it does not start in judgments, but in questions. It highlights intellectual autonomy, because it appeals to a person's ability to discover what is true and what is right through personal thinking and experiences. A student after lectures one day said to me: "I don't think there is any reason to study philosophy!" It is true and apparent that a number of philosophical questions are esoteric and don't seem to have practical value. For instance, there are philosophers who are so interested in whether abstract objects like numbers, concepts, and propositions exist independent of human reasoning. In other words, they ask whether abstract objects would exist if there were no human beings to think about them. In history, philosophers have challenged the arguments of their

predecessors. And they have not only disagreed about many of the answers given to philosophical questions, they have also often been unable to have some consensus among themselves about the nature of philosophy. Today, philosophers still argue about some of the same questions that the ancient Greeks battled with – what is truth, and how can it be distinguished from falsehood? How do we rationally settle moral disagreements? If the answers to such questions are still objects of philosophical debates, I can relate to why the student thought there is no reason to student philosophy or that there has been no progress in philosophy. A good number of philosophy students think that for a person's commitment to a certain belief to be rationally justified, that belief must be indubitable; it must be supported by a conclusive and compelling argument. In any case, it appears that most of the solutions to philosophical problems can be both supported and criticized with good arguments. Hence, to select a particular theory, from the viewpoint of rational justification, is subjective. Beliefs of a person are generally not superior or inferior to the beliefs of another person; everyone just has solutions to a particular problem he or she faces.

From my experience in the field of philosophy, I have realized that the greatest temptation of present-day philosophers is the quest for relevance, instead of reflecting on what is relevant. The historiography of philosophy is largely made up of endeavors over the

years to address ways where we have been unwise. The crux of studying philosophy is to absorb the many lessons from history and put them to work daily. The idea is not simply to know what this or that philosopher has said, rather, the task is to exercise wisdom at an individual and societal level. The wisdom of philosophy is – in modern times – mostly delivered in the form of books and articles. While these great works have been published, they continue to be unknown by the general public. Perhaps because they have been scared off by the perception of philosophy as an obtuse and inane ramblings. But in the past, philosophers sat in market squares and discussed their ideas with shopkeepers or went into government offices and palaces to give advice. I hope that in this article I have shown that philosophy can be comprehensible. Let us bear in mind that philosophy is not a profession and so to be a philosopher is not to have a profession called philosophy. To be a philosopher is to be an authentic human being. This means being the author of one's own life, thinking, creativity, generativity and responsibility. Therefore, we should not corrupt philosophy by turning it into a specialized field or a particular profession. This is because philosophers normally speak and write simply and potently. They do not confuse complexity or obscurity with true profundity nor do they confuse clever re-wordings, re-phrasings, neologies, or jargons with real originality or insight. If you write as a philosopher and intelligent lay people do not understand your text, then you have

failed not only in your communication but also in your thinking. If they become confused, it simply means you are confused yourself. If these same people find your thought complex or obscure, it is because you have complicated and obfuscated your thought unnecessarily. As a philosopher, to be truly profound and not merely a maze of thoughts, you must offer up your accumulated confusions on the altar of intelligence occasionally. This is not a betrayal of the quality of thought rather it is to connect your thought with the very reason for thinking and the ultimate reason for being a philosopher. Luckily, if you are a true and good philosopher you will remain great even when hindered by eccentricities of style: it is your influence on the quality of people's life that is to be deplored.

I will sum up with Bertrand Russell's exhortation:

“... Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and

becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.”²³

As we deal with different philosophical problems, we shall come to realize that there is no indubitable solution to some of these challenges. At times absolute certainty may be realized and a problem is resolved, other times this may no be the case. For this reason, rather than asking whether a particular theory is theory is true, maybe we should be interested in the rational quality of the arguments supporting the theory. To 'solve' philosophical issues is not usually a question of finding a unique answer to the problems, but to develop the best arguments for accepting or rejecting various ways of answering these issues.

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