1. An introduction to Western philosophy

This is the first of seven essays written to accompany a short course. I describe these essays as "pedagogic" to distinguish them from my "commentaries". They are pedagogic in the sense that they are intended to give students a basic understanding of the most important contributions to Western philosophy. To make them succinct and digestable, they are deliberately limited to 5,000 words,

Although ideas are relayed with minimal interpretation, the selection of themes and contributions is mine. I hope some of the connections may be interesting to people already familiar with the subject. In addition, I have extracted some of my own thoughts into the form of accompanying commentaries.

I begin with the obvious questions, what is philosophy and what is meant by "Western"? After a brief overview of the subject, including its relationship to religion, I will highlight what I think is a crucial distinction between *studying* and *doing* philosophy. Finally, I end, as the best philosophy often does, with more questions. What I describe as the big three questions of Western philosophy will be addressed, each in two parts, in the following six essays.

What is philosophy?

Philosophy is often misunderstood. To understand it, and understand why it is often misunderstood, we have to start simple. There are 2 meanings of "philosophy" in the English language. One occurs when people say "my philosophy is ….". This means their way of thinking about and doing something. For example, a taxi driver might say "I get people from A to B as fast as possible. That's my philosophy", a sports coach might say "Fitness first, that's my philosophy", etc.

The other meaning of "Philosophy" is what happens in the Philosophy Departments of Universities, or is written in Philosophy books. (you might say this is Philosophy with a big "P"). This is the academic subject of Philosophy.

Both these meanings originate from, and in my opinion are inferior to, the original meaning of the word. The ancient Greek words "philo" and "sophia" mean "love" and "knowledge", respectively. So the original Greek word "philosophy" meant the love of knowledge.

In my view, an object of love has to be something valued for its own sake. Emotions are immediate and reactive and the emotional reaction we call love is irreducible, that is to say, it is not *for* any other purpose. All the relationships we call love have this irreducibility. For example, I might think that my car is important to me because I need it for my job, in which case it is functional and I don't love it. I might, however, get very attached to it, meaning that its function becomes irrelevant to its value. Some people really do say that they "love" their cars.

If I seek knowledge to gain a practical skill, to further my career, to show off, to win a quiz or to get a certificate, this is not philosophy. For philosophy, knowledge must be an unequivocal end-in-itself. That is what love means.

So the two current and common meanings of "philosophy" are "a way of thinking about and doing something" and the academic subject of Philosophy taught in Universities. How did the English language end up with this curious homonym?

The most likely explanation is that early philosophy, the love of knowledge, became associated with a way of life. After all, doesn't love imply the kind of devotion that can occupy one's life? From this

the word became used for parts of life, that is to say, ways of doing things. Meanwhile, the pursuit of knowledge separated out into the practical (this is the original meaning of "science") and the non-practical. Philosophy (with a big "P") became the word used for the latter.

This simple analysis of the usage of the word "philosophy" in English helps us understand why philosophy is often misunderstood. Consider any other subject of study, Geography for example. The object of Geography is the position and form of things on the earth's surface. So any knowledge that is about this object counts as part of Geography. Hence there can be University Departments, professors, researchers, courses, books, etc., all devoted to the accumulation of knowledge about the position and form of things on the earth's surface.

Now consider philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. What is its object? By definition it can't have one. Philosophy is defined by its motivation, not its object. It's object could be anything. If I want to know about the earth's surface for the purpose of mining, population management, transport, or even so that I can teach it to others, then I am doing Geography *not* philosophy. If I want to know about the earth's surface for nothing but the pleasure of knowing, then I am doing philosophy (*and* Geography).

The organisation of subjects of study by their object is why we have the disciplines we are familiar with: Astronomy, Mathematics, Chemistry, Geography, Psychology, Sociology, etc.. Notice that they all have different styles and conventions, but they are all defined by their object of study. Philosophy, being defined in a different way, becomes a kind of repository for everything that doesn't belong in any other category.

Because in practice, there *are* University Philosophy Departments, professors, researchers, courses, books, etc., it appears on the surface to be a subject just like the others. This is how the misunderstanding arises. It looks like something you can be trained to do, but this is not how it works. Training to acquire skills can be useful to respond to a feeling, but you can't train to acquire a feeling.

I've also heard people say that philosophy is an art. This is also, I think, a misunderstanding. There can be artistry in the expression of ideas, but expression must follow an idea as an act follows its motivation. Whatever you think art is, it is not a feeling. To call philosophy an art is as absurd as imagining that inspiration is something you can do with a paintbrush or hunger is something you can do with a knife.

Still, after the motivation comes action. That's why University Departments, Professors, researchers, courses, books, etc., are useful. They provide the space for philosophy to happen. It is important to remember that the mistake is not in the existence of these things, but in seeing their resemblance to others as equivalence. Philosophy is not about *what* you're studying, but *why*.

In short therefore, I will answer the question by settling on a definition that captures the combination of feeling and action: philosophy is the love of knowledge and the active pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

What is meant by "Western"?

It is sometimes said that there are five cradles of civilisation. The oldest three are the so-called Fertile Crescent of the middle east (Egypt and Mesopotamia), India and China. It's not clear whether (and if so, how) they influenced each other. The other two are in the Americas, which at least shows that civilisation can develop independently.

Each of the "Old World" three, began as small city states and developed written laws. Eventually

they used money, wrote histories and built bureaucracies and armies. The evolution of each is the proper subject of history, although a lot can be understood from some simple geography. India is a peninsula, bordered by deserts and barely penetrable mountains to its North. The heart of Chinese civilisation is also separated from the others by vast wildernesses acting as a human and information bottleneck.

The three old world cradles of civilisation are therefore relatively isolated from each other, causing them to develop distinct cultures with distinct philosophical traditions. These traditions are called Western, Indian and Chinese Philosophy, although its also worth mentioning a 4th referred to as "Islamic". This can be seen as a relatively young (only 1½ millennia old) offshoot of the West, which has, geographically speaking, flowed into the gap between the West and India.

It might seem a little incongruous that two of the three are defined by nations (India and China) and one is defined by a direction (West), but geography shows why. The Fertile Crescent is only a small step from the vast fertile lands of Europe, which in turn face the Atlantic, and the whole of the American continents. The first epicentre of modern industry and commerce was North Western Europe, the second was North America. Hence the modern world has carried one philosophical tradition across half the globe. "Western" is really the only way to describe it.

Within any given culture, philosophers usually address the questions raised locally, so they will tend to form traditions. We should think of a philosophical tradition as a kind of historical thread. People are taught certain ideas, they critique, champion or modify those ideas, and teach them to the next generation. Meandering trains of thought roll through time. So when we step back and look at the history of philosophy we see these threads, and how they sometimes get tangled.

What causes traditions to develop are books and schools. What allows them to persist and develop is the continuity of books and schools. It is not surprising then that the breadth and depth of a philosophical tradition is related to social and economic development. Put simply, the more and longer a society has been printing books and building schools, the more likely it is to have a rich and diverse philosophical tradition. This of course, can be inhibited by stifling ideologies and despotic, irrational regimes, but I believe the general rule stands.

Another effect of social and economic development is *post hoc* selection. This occurs because relatively wealthy societies are better able to explore and create a narrative of their own past. If for example, a philosopher digs up some old philosophy that fits the tradition he or she belongs to, they may extend their tradition further into the past. If they dig up something that doesn't fit, they may simply ignore it. For this reason, traditions, or any lines of philosophical thought, may extend back in time, even to times when hardly anyone knew or cared about them.

For these reasons, the three (or four) philosophical traditions have stood out. They have long histories of books and schools, and ideas that have evolved over generations. In modern times, the Western tradition has been carried by social and economic development to the whole world.

Philosophy and religion

While religious people can be philosophers, and philosophers can be religious, this is only akin to saying that poets can be footballers, and footballers can be poets. The activities themselves are fundamentally different and the distinction is twofold.

Firstly, philosophy is the love of knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Actions done in the name of a religion are explicitly in the service of some kind of God or spirit. In the process, religions can explore the deepest corners of the psyche and the universe. Nevertheless, their prior assumption that some kind of higher consciousness exists and invests the world with

meaning, is an intrinsic bias. Religions pursue knowledge to serve or glorify something else, not for its own sake.

Secondly, religion is distinguished from philosophy by supernatural explanation. This is a controversial point that I will elucidate with an example and a definition. Consider what is called the "power of prayer". Some religious people believe that by asking God (in a particular way) he will intervene in the world to their advantage, by for example, curing an illness, giving them a sign or even effecting the roll of a ball on a roulette wheel.

What makes the "power of prayer" a supernatural explanation is not the association with religious beliefs or the ritual of the act, it is not even, strictly speaking, the claim of an effect. What makes it supernatural is the commitment to mystery, that is to say, the implication that the effect has no explicable, natural cause. Hence, supernatural means implying a force in the universe that is not subject to natural causation. Whether it uses the language of mysticism, magic or divinity, religion clearly contrasts with the love of knowledge because it closes off enquiry by putting some phenomena beyond enquiry.

These two aspects of religion (how they prioritise service over knowledge, and how they close off enquiry) makes them vulnerable to "mind-traps", such as the self-affirming idea. Cultures naturally guide young minds down establised paths. If they can instil the belief, with a bit of fear and salvation and some social sanctions for good measure, that they alone are the source of wisdom, they can put people into a groove it is very difficult to get out of.

Although the definition is clear, the boundary between philosophy and religion is often obscured in practice. In the course of these essays I will mention schools of philosophy that cross the line. When reading then, and whenever you read any philosophy, it is important to hold the distinction in mind. When philosophers drifted into the supernatural, they drift out of philosophy.

Likewise, when schools of philosophy develop rituals, symbols and dogmas, they can be described as "religions" by analogy. This is also a moment to hold the distinction in mind. The love of knowledge requires the effort to distinguish between analogy and identity: between superficial similarities and mind-traps.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that just because philosophy and religion are distinct does not mean that ideas valuable to one cannot come from the other. In the service of God through the glorification of his creation, it is quite possible to discover important truths about the universe.

A brief overview of Western philosophy

Having talked about different traditions it is important to remember that this is all history. In the age of globalisation, philosophy has no need to constrain itself with traditions. We now have books and schools with access to ideas from all of history, from every language and culture. Why then do we bother to talk about Western philosophy? Only because history is an access point. We must start somewhere and this particular, long, deep and extensive tradition seems like a good place to start.

The earliest philosophers of this tradition gathered ideas from the civilisations of the Fertile crescent. They took astronomy and geometry for example, from Egypt and Assyria. They added to and transmitted these ideas around the Greek city states of the Aegean Sea. Then the ideas went further, spreading across the Mediterranean and into Western Europe during the period of the Roman Empire.

In the period that followed, philosophy weakened. Supernatural explanations, particularly from Judaeo-Christian scriptures, became more popular and powerful. Threads of thought from ancient

times however, were never quite broken. They survived in minority circles for a while, like eddies on the edge of a stream, before they caught the current again. The flourishing of the medieval phase is marked by the opening up of new Universities across Europe and their rediscovery of old ideas.

In modern times, the European colonies and Empires, brought the best ideas, old and new, to the whole world. Now the space for thought is greater than ever, greater than the ancient philosophers could dream of. Publications, broadcasting and now the internet mean that more words are written and available to us than to all previous generations put together. Now the traditions are absorbing ideas from each other, leading to the gradual evolution of a global community of thought.

The appendix to this essay is a chart showing 50 important characters in the history of western thought. They are not all recognised as "Philosophers", but an idea associated with them is significant to the story of Western philosophy. I can't claim to be an expert in the work of all 50, so some connections are tenuous, and I'm obviously not an expert in all of those I've left out, so clearly the story is likely to be incomplete. My purpose is to draw out threads I find interesting. The number 50 by the way, has been chosen as a round number and a self-imposed constraint.

Many names have been chosen because they exemplify schools of thought, and so others of that school, whose contribution in other respects may have been great, have been left out. I know from experience that neglecting individual philosophers tends to annoy their fans. This doesn't bother me. Philosophy is no place for idols and vanity.

Above all, the chart is not a roll of honour. It is a schematic representation, that is to say, one way of thinking about what I want to think about. I have selected the people for no other reason than that they fit on the matrix in a way that tells the story I want to tell. A line indicates a significant influence of some kind, an arrow indicates that this takes the form of a significant critique.

How to study philosophy

The most common way to study philosophy is to study philosophers. The people on my big list are a good starting point. In each individual we assume some degree of consistency (or at least acknowledged inconsistency). We assume that they studied and thought extensively, before expressing their ideas. We assume also that they weren't in isolation, so to some extent, their ideas were a product of dialogue. In short, by studying the work of a philosopher you get an idea (or set of ideas) that has stood up to some scrutiny.

A problem with studying philosophy this way is that it can very easily slip into biography. Sometimes a life story can lend context to an idea, often it is irrelevant. More often than not biography is light relief from the effort of trying to grasp ideas, which can sometimes be difficult. It can also give a bit of character to the narrative. We humans can't help being interested in personalities.

However, studying individual philosophers in too much depth blurs the reference points that they could otherwise provide. This happens because in any lifetime it is possible to have opinions about anything and everything. Take a philosopher, Nietzsche for example. He provides a reference point in the history of scepticism. If Nietzsche had other opinions on say, the theatre, the free market, the importance of sleep, or whatever, they are very likely to be irrelevant. If I describe something as "Nietzschean" I want it to refer to his relevant ideas, not anything else he might have said.

The other big problem with biography is that it can create a kind of emotional bond with a philosopher, out of which awe and authority can grow, hence the (typically posthumous) fan clubs, with the idolatry and vanity I mentioned earlier. This is the greatest danger because deference to authority is the enemy of philosophy. So in short, while there is no harm in a bit of biography (for

context and light relief), it must be measured and strictly relevant.

The alternative to biography is studying philosophy by theme. The most commonly used themes are Knowledge, Ethics, Logic, Consciousness, Religion (or Metaphysics) and Politics. This approach allows us to focus more directly on ideas.

One reason why there are so many themes is that philosophy, being defined by its motivation not its object, tends to be used as a repository for all enquiry whose object is unclear. The question of Consciousness for example, belongs to Psychology. However, while we can measure behaviour, brain chemistry and even cognitions, we can't quite get the same meaningful, measurable grasp of what it means to be conscious. Hence consciousness seems to have broken free of Psychology and attached itself to Philosophy.

Personally, I am more economical with my themes. I would rather not simply list all those questions that other subjects leave unanswered. My approach is schematic and thematic, beginning from the first principle: philosophy is the love of knowledge. What questions flow from this? Before we answer, I think its important to consider the distinction between studying and doing philosophy.

How to philosophise

Some people say that there is such a thing as "philosophical training". I agree that if you study something you will usually get better at it. Studying Philosophy should help you to acquire some habits or disciplines of thought by repetition, but this is not quite the same thing as "training". Unlike other subjects, which are more to do with facts and mechanical skills, philosophy is about questions and creating the space to think about them.

Everyone of us, throughout our lifetimes, accumulates knowledge. We can see this as an expanding landscape of ideas in our minds. When we learn and think, we make new connections between these ideas, hopefully not randomly, but in ways that produce new knowledge (we will deal with the question of what that means later). Think of a network of roads connecting places across an open landscape. Studying the work of philosophers is like following a road to see where it goes.

In contrast, *doing* philosophy (or philosophising) is like extending the roads, or just as often going back to build a junction and a new road. Just as you can drive around on roads forever without ever building new ones, so you can study philosophy a whole lifetime without ever actually doing it.

Einstein once said "It's not that I am so smart, it is that I stay with problems longer." This is the key. What characterises doing philosophy is reaching out and expanding the network, and what characterises the best philosophising is the determination to keep going until you find something special. Philosophising is about time, energy, effort, and above all, motivation. Einstein also said "I have no special talent. I am just passionately curious".

We must start somewhere! The obvious place is with teachers and books. In the 21st century, you might also suggest TV documentaries and websites, but then the question is *which* teachers, books, TV documentaries and websites? Now we are heading for a paradox. How can you know where to look to answer the question of where to look?

This paradox explains why the human urge to enquire sends us down divergent paths. The human world is a mess of religious and culturally specific ways of thinking. The root of this bewildering variety is the fact that to know anything you have to start from somewhere, and the arbitrary nature of this choise makes it prone to mind-traps. Self-affirming tell you that they alone are the source of knowledge. So the first book that convinces you of this is bound to win. It might be the first and only book you ever read.

There is really no way of guaranteeing immunity from self-affirming ideas, but there are some things we can do to minimise our risks. The first thing is to be aware of the danger. If it feels like one source is providing all your answers, its advisable to try another. The second is to pursue knowledge at random. Pick up whatever book interests you, and study the subject until another subject interests you more.

The third thing you can do is to acquire a particular state of mind. You can't really choose to do this in advance, but if, by your random pursuit of knowledge you learn to acquire this state of mind, you will from then on, be relatively immune from self-affirming ideas. I will call this state of mind "open-minded critical reasoning". This, I suppose, is as near as we get to "philosophical training", but we can't really teach this, motivation come first, and the space to ask questions follows.

So we start with whatever resources our culture throws at us, and we approach them with open-minded critical reasoning. For me, the first questions that flow from the love of knowledge can be expressed as the big three: How does the world work? How can I know for sure? and having acquired some knowledge: what should I do?

How does the world work?

This is an active question. It can only be answered by doing something, that is, by examining explanations of real phenomenon. When you do this you will soon appreciate the distinction between natural and supernatural explanations. To do philosophy you must first assume that natural explanations are possible. The pursuit of such explanations is called **natural philosophy**.

When we do natural philosophy, we see that some knowledge of the world seems to be easily accessible, while some is not. I can know about the weather for example, because it falls on my head, but the stars stay in the sky and seem distant and mysterious. For ancient people, explaining the stars was highly speculative. Now we have radio telescopes, spectroscopy, and many other accumulated techniques. The progress of technology gradually makes the inaccessible accessible.

Still, there are some questions that will always remain beyond us simply because we can't imagine how physical data could answer them. For example, Is the universe infinite? Is matter infinitely divisible? How can we understand the probability of our coming into existence? These kinds of questions seem to be beyond physical explanation. They are called "metaphysical".

At this point there is a tendency to lapse back into supernatural explanations. A lot of metaphysics seems to go this way. However, if we remain true to the love of knowledge we must avoid this. It is possible to think about these questions while sticking to the idea of a physical, explicable universe. For that reason, I include metaphysics as part of natural philosophy.

How can I know for sure?

It should go without saying that the love of knowledge must ask what knowledge actually is. I have found that common definitions tend to be circular: to know something is to have knowledge of it, and knowledge is the sum of things we know. In my view, circular definitions suggest that the thing is indefinable, that is to say, it is reducible only to a feeling.

Let's think about a feeling. Consider my feeling, for example, that the ground beneath my feet exists. This doesn't feel like something I would describe as a "belief". Because I feel certain I would say that I "know" it exists. So knowledge is connected to certainty. However, some people believe in faeries, and no matter how certain they claim to be, I would not say that they "know" they exist. What counts as "knowledge" therefore, must be certainty of a truth *from my point of view*. This is

only to be expected because feelings are ultimately personal.

Thinking about beliefs, and exploring what does or doesn't count as truth, is called **epistemology**, from Greek, meaning the study of knowledge. It includes the search for certainty. Some people are satisfied with what they believe. Some are happy with the ground beneath their feet, while others are happy with faeries. Philosophers however, seek knowledge, which is more than belief. It is a personal, and real, feeling. That is why we need certainty.

What should I do?

Finally, there remains the questions of what philosophers should actually do. This may sound irrelevant, given how much I have gone on about love, but it is a question worth asking for the following reason: the knowledge we acquire is likely to include knowledge of what our actions are for. Whatever we choose to do in the world (or even if we make the positive choice to do nothing) this knowledge is implicated. In simple terms, knowledge and actions are inseparable.

Consider this example: in front of me is an animal. Should I set it free, walk away, or should I kill and eat it? The answer depends on what you think life is for, both yours and the animals. Perhaps its a question of right and wrong, or simple practicality. Being alive in the world forces questions like this upon us all the time. We can't escape them (even choosing not to answer them is a choice).

Such questions are typically regarded as belonging to "moral philosophy", or more succinctly, **ethics**. I will use the latter phrase and interpret it in is broadest possible sense (taking some liberties). I am using it to include what all of our actions are for, not only this or that action, but action in general. In other words, what is the meaning of life?

Conclusion

Earlier I mentioned six commonly cited themes in Philosophy: Knowledge, Ethics, Logic, Consciousness, Religion (or Metaphysics) and Politics. My schema, starting from the unifying principle of the love of knowledge, has produced three themes from three questions. Look at how these relate to the common themes, and you can break them down further.

What I have called "natural philosophy" includes the study of science, things beyond the reach of science (metaphysics) and particular beliefs about those things (religion). It may also include physical phenomena that appear to defy scientific explanation (consciousness). What I have called "epistemology" is the study of knowledge, but it could include the study of any system of ideas that claims to produce knowledge (logic). Finally, what I have called "ethics" is about how you live, and could apply to individual relationships or how we organise societies (politics).

In conclusion, I have defined philosophy as the love of knowledge and the active pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. I have defined the western tradition as a useful object of study, but noted also that to *study* and to *do* philosophy are distinct. Finally, in the form of three big questions, I have outlined one way to do philosophy.

March 2017
John Gandy

References

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Appendix

Thales

Parmenides

Protagoras

Pythagoras

Zeno

Heraclitus

Socrates

Plato

Diogenes

Epicurus

Zeno of Cypria

Aristotle

Seneca

Augustine

Thomas Aquinas

Machiavelli

Bacon

Galileo

Locke

Hobbes

Montaigne

Descartes

Berkeley

Spinoza

Roussseau

Hume

Reid

Kant

Schopenhauer

Bentham

Hegel

J.S Mill

Kierkegaard

Marx

Nietzsche

Husserl

Freud

Pierce

James

Popper

Heideggar

Russell

Quine

Sartre

Wittgenstein

Ayer

Camus

Kripke

Arendt

Strawson