

## Loving wisdom

Most people aren't quite sure what philosophy is. Sometimes they think it is a kind of broad vision of what people believe – especially people from far-way cultures and times. So philosophers might study what Hindus believe, and ancient Greeks, and so on. Or people might think philosophy is somehow connected to psychology – *somehow*, though nobody seems to know just how. More often than not, people are convinced that philosophy is something really brainy and confusing, and they're also pretty sure it's mostly irrelevant to everyday life.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. In fact, philosophy should be surprisingly familiar to most folks. Ordinary people – I mean, people other than college professors – do philosophy all the time. They are doing philosophy when they are trying to decide about a change of career, and they do it when they are trying to figure out how to raise their children. They do philosophy when they try to explain to someone else why they are so moved by some movie or book, and they do it when they pray. And when crisis comes into a life, and a person is thrown into perplexity about what life is all about, or why it is that everything in life seems to be going wrong, then they are doing philosophy in a very big and important way.

When people ask me what philosophy is, I tell them that it's the attempt to figure out what's important. It could be in a large sense, as when we ask, "What should my life be about? How should I live? What should I put first?" Or it could be a bit more narrow, as when we ask, "Is it better for me to forgive this person, or to cut off all relations to them?" Or it could be very ordinary, as when we ask, "What's the lesson

we're supposed to draw from this book (or movie, or Bible lesson, or play, etc.)?" In each of these circumstances, we try to adopt the right perspective, the one which gives us a clear view of what goal we should be driving toward and what details we can safely ignore. And we do this routinely, when we are making important decisions throughout the day or when we are trying to orient our lives in the right direction.

So we do philosophy when we are called to figure out what's important. The knowledge of what's important is *wisdom*, and if you have wisdom you are a *sage*. If you aren't wise, but you are trying to become wise, then you are a *lover* of wisdom; and that's what "philosophy" literally meant, in ancient Greek: the love of wisdom.

This makes philosophy sound intimidating right away, for who among us is so conceited as to say that he or she is wise? But don't lose track of the "love" part: a philosopher is just someone who is *trying* to gain wisdom, and they may not think they have much of it yet. Indeed, the great grandfather of western philosophy, Socrates, claimed that he had no wisdom at all, except in one respect: he *knew* that he didn't have any wisdom, which put him one step ahead of all those folks who *think* they are wise when really they are not. Socrates thought he could provide ancient Athens with a great service by going around and questioning folks and helping them to realize for themselves that they really weren't as wise as they thought themselves to be. "Hmm," some of them might have said. "You have shown me something, Socrates. Before I talked with you, I thought I knew all about what's important in life. Now I see I was deceiving myself." And then Socrates and this person would start to try to work together and figure out what is important. Of course, not all of the people he talked to were willing to be this honest with themselves. Such are the plush comforts of self-delusion!

Many of us have encountered a Socrates-type person, or a Socrates-type situation, which forces us to take seriously the idea that – well, maybe we’re not as smart as we thought. Perhaps we are sure that our boss’s idea is foolish and doomed to fail – and then (darn it!) the idea turns out to work after all. Or we are sure that a certain type of person (a liberal, a fundamentalist, an environmentalist, a real estate developer) is sure to be immoral or stupid or weird or stubborn, and we meet one and find that we were just wrong. Or we are sure that we have life all figured out, and suddenly disaster rains down upon us and everyone hates us. We can call such an episode a *Socratic reproach*: it’s an experience that tells us we have been traveling down the wrong road, and we need to turn back and reconsider. (Socrates himself said he had a voice in his head that told him sometimes “no” or “don’t”; the little voice never told him what he should be doing, but just that he was making a mistake and needed to do something different.)

This is, for better or worse, a pretty common episode in life. We’re always revising our assumptions – maybe big ones, maybe little ones – and being asked to change our minds. (Or that *should* be happening; a mind that won’t change is seriously defective!) When we are in the middle of changing our minds, giving up some old assumptions in favor of some new ones, we are in need of some *wisdom*, some perspective that will help us see what attitude we should adopt as our own. And so we seek out wisdom – in conversation with friends, or through prayer, or by reading, or just by thinking – and we are doing philosophy.

Maybe this doesn’t seem to fit with other beliefs you have about philosophy. Haven’t there been philosophers who have claimed that time isn’t real, that this world is an illusion, that we have souls, that we don’t have souls? Haven’t some claimed that all

our choices are determined by our brain cells, that human history is the unfolding of a Spirit, that life will endlessly repeat itself? Yes, philosophers have said all these things. But each philosopher has made these claims in the course of trying to figure out for themselves what life is all about, and what's important, and what is really true. Each of them has been responding to some kind of Socratic reproach – typically, they each recognized at some point that what they'd learned from others couldn't possibly be true, and they set out to figure out the truth for themselves. Many of the great philosophers felt they needed to pull up the old views from the roots and create completely new visions of reality. But what made their new views *philosophical* – as opposed to being new scientific theories, or fantastic fiction – was that the views are built around a fundamental claim about what is important in human experience. Whether consciously or not, each philosopher decided that *this* is what human life is all about – knowledge, or justice, or freedom, or bravery – and they each constructed a vision of the world that serves as a shrine to that decision.

This is not a view of philosophy that all philosophers share. Many have believed that philosophy is like a super science, telling us about levels of reality that are deeper than any ordinary science can see. Or some think philosophy's job is to take what all the various scientists are saying about the world and put it all together into a single, coherent view of the world. But I think it is more and less than these things. Philosophy (as I have said) is about figuring out what is important, and of course when we do this we can only figure out *for ourselves* what is important. Philosophy by its nature is a personal kind of inquiry; philosophers cannot separate what their professional work from what they

believe. And our estimations about what is important will all be grounded in who we are as persons, and the experiences we have had, and the desires we have for our futures.

That is not to say that each philosophy is merely a statement of individual preference. Sometimes, I guess, it finally comes down to that kind of difference: ultimately, Hobbes saw the glass as half-empty, Leibniz saw it as half-full, and that's that. But usually we all have a lot to say to one another, just as we do when we argue over the merits of books or movies or sports teams. "You can't possibly think *Star Wars* is better than *Citizen Kane*!" we say to our friend, because we are ready to point out all sorts of differences between the two that lean in Orson Welles's favor, and we know our friend is sensible enough to appreciate those differences. Maybe there isn't some set fact in the world that makes it true that one movie is better than another. But we know these two movies, and we know our friend, and we can see that something isn't quite right; maybe she is making some kind of mistake in her reflections, or a joke. And so we argue about it, and the argument (at least for a while) has some merit in it; indeed, we might discover a lot about films and one another in the process.

The same goes for philosophy. Suppose you think nothing is more important than knowing the truth, and I say that I would gladly live an illusion so long as I could have good and solid friends. We can argue about this and learn a lot from our argument. One (or both!) of us might end up changing our opinions, or maybe we will both be forced to rethink what we thought was so obviously true. One thing is for sure: if we argue with clear minds and respect for one another, our views will become deeper and better understood by both of us. And that is a further goal of philosophy, to gain a deeper appreciation of what we hold to be important, and why we view it as important.

There's virtually no boundary to what professional philosophers take interest in these days. Some philosophers are professional ethicists, helping doctors or those in the justice system to think through complicated issues and find the most humane solutions. Most other philosophers engage one another in fairly involved abstract debates over a multitude of questions. They might ask, "Does modern science leave any room available for free will?" or "When exactly do we hold someone accountable for his or her actions?" They may wonder whether being moral is a matter of trying to bring about the best consequences for those involved, or whether it is a matter of *doing the right thing*, or *following the right principles*, regardless of what the consequences may be. Some philosophers argue over religion and science, and try to understand whether the two can be brought into harmony with one another. More and more philosophers are taking on the moral questions raised by new technological developments, such as stem-cell research, cloning, genetically-modified foods, and the wealth of information (and misinformation) available to anyone with an internet connection. And others study the history of philosophy, and try to gain a deeper appreciation of the books that provide the foundation for western culture.

In my own experience, what many people find most surprising about philosophers is just how much we love to *argue*. It is not at all uncommon to hear one philosopher tell another, "I think your belief is just *false*, and I'll show you why." This is not something one typically overhears in polite company! But what's surprising is that, despite all their arguing, philosophers hardly ever get mad at each other; on the contrary, they are usually *grateful* to have someone to exchange ideas with, and to find someone who might force them to change their mind about an important issue. The sincerest compliment you can

pay a philosopher is to respect their beliefs enough to think them over and find an objection to them. The best philosophical friends rarely agree!

Even if one does not aspire to become a professional philosopher, philosophy's love of arguments, logic, clarity, and precision make it an excellent training ground for every other kind of intellectual endeavor. Some philosophers have suggested that philosophy is a kind of geography of concepts, a kind of mapping out of how ideas relate to one another. Developing that skill helps a person to gain a thorough understanding of any kind of system, whether it's a computer language or a telecommunications system or a national economy or a system of laws. The details need to be learned, of course, but someone trained in philosophy stands ready to get quickly to the heart of the matter, whatever it is. That's why philosophy is broadly recognized as such a strong degree for further graduate study, whether for a law degree or an MBA or any branch of science.

But more than all that: philosophy, as the love of wisdom, is the intelligent and honest attempt to become, as Aristotle might have put it, a "professional human being," which is a human being who has worked out his or her moral obligations and theoretical beliefs and integrated them into an honorable, well-balanced life. For in the final analysis, none of us wants to have lived a mistake; nobody wants to regret how they have lived. We want to live the best possible life, given who we are and what we face. And that is why we are all interested in wisdom. It is the science of figuring out how to live as a fully human being.