Philosophical Practice
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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I'd venture to guess most people know little about philosophy, at least little more than enough to think of old Greek names like Socrates and Plato and … well … that's probably it, while knowing nothing about what either of them actually thought. When I went to college almost forty years ago, I had heard the word *philosophy* but had no inkling what it meant. I only knew I was required to take two semesters of the subject to fulfill the requirements of my Liberal Arts education. Today, even this much has changed as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) has become the cornerstone of public and higher education. Philosophy, along with other disciplines are now considered insignificant and impractical in an outdated industrial model of education that's meant to churn out employees. Along with subjects like literature, history, music, and art, philosophy has been lumped into general humanities departments through which one can get an unemployable degree in general humanities.

For many, a college diploma has become little more than a piece of paper proving a graduate's right to work in an expensive system of modern indentured servitude. Universities have become the company store. Instead of guiding students toward becoming whole human beings by giving equal import to the things that make us human—the humanities—higher education has become a factory for manufacturing certified workers, if they are among the few lucky enough to find a fulltime job that enables them to both make a living and pay back years-worth of student debt. Instead of lifelong learners, higher education is fashioning lifelong debtors.

No wonder Tan Li, one of the most influential young entrepreneurs on the planet, predicts "Four-year colleges may become a thing of the past."[1] This is so, she believes, because Higher Ed can no longer prepare students adequately for the workforce it's now supposed to serve. It gives them general knowledge in a fast-changing world driven by exponentially evolving technologies. So what students learn in college, at least when it comes to STEM, may be obsolete by the time they graduate: "as the economy starts to change at a breakneck pace," Li says, "professionals may need to upskill more quickly and more often throughout their careers. I see the concept of higher education moving away from the traditional teacher-pupil model of learning a subject from the master and shifting toward the facilitation of lifelong learning."[2]

Instead of teaching students what to think, this means they need to learn agility—how to keep learning to adapt in an exponentially changing world. As Li says, "Our educational

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[1] Li, Tan, *The Neurogeneration,* BenBella Books, Dallas, TX, 2020, p. 221.
[2] Ibid.

efforts will be better suited by focusing on complex problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity so we can acquire and implement the skills needed for the Fourth Industrial Revolution."[3] I personally believe industries and businesses should develop their own educational consortiums and curricula, then foot the bill for the precision training of their employees, bypassing the requirement for an college issued credential for new hires. In medicine and law, for example, the specifics are important enough that college graduates have to additionally go to med schools and law schools before they can ever begin practicing in these areas. So I say let these various fields and industries handle their own on-the-job training, which they must already do on the back end by training ill-prepared college graduates to do their jobs, and leave the overly expensive and increasingly useless college credentials out of it.

This way our Universities can refocus on developing well-rounded human beings instead of manufacturing ill-prepared employees and consumers who must start off financially underwater. I say we should extend public education by two years of learning the humanities, including in the areas of problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity," Tan Li recognizes are essential for lifelong learning, but also in literature, history, music, art, and most crucially, in my opinion, philosophy.

Remember, academia was begun by philosophers for the teaching of philosophy: the first Academy being founded in Athens by Plato nearly 2,500 years ago. This gets higher education back to its roots, to guiding individuals toward becoming whole human beings by providing them the qualities of remaining lifelong learners, which makes them better people and better prepared for the changing workforce in the process. The ancient Academy wasn't about getting a degree, but about developing a life worth living. Aristotle studied in Plato's academy for twenty years before starting his own school. Philosophy is a way of living, not a way of *making* a living.

In those days, it was to the philosophers that people turned for counsel and advice, not because they had all the answers, but because they knew what questions to ask. Philosophy isn't an *ology*. It's not like psychology, sociology, anthropology, or neurology, as examples, because it doesn't study what there is to know about anything. As Socrates famously admitted, "I am wise because I neither know, nor think that I know." Or, as Bertrand Russell put it, "In philosophy, what is important is not so much the answers that are given, but rather the questions that are asked."[4]

But if philosophy isn't an *ology*, what is it? How does one learn it if not by studying it? To answer the first question, I'd say, in brief, *philosophy* is a love story. That's what the word means after all, "love of wisdom." It's more about devotion to a way of living than to learning ideas and acquiring knowledge. The kind of wisdom philosophy is devoted to is the chronic

[3] Ibid.
[4] Russell, Bertrand, *Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books Inc., Rathone Books Limited, London, 1960, p. 19.

examination of our own lives, which otherwise, according to Socrates, aren't worth living. It is a devotion to asking questions of ourselves and others, and to understanding and admitting the weaknesses of our own beliefs and ways. It is a devotion to awe and wonder. So, to answer the second question, certainly we can learn about philosophy, and should, by studying its history, its prominent figures, and their ideas, but this is meaningless if philosophy itself isn't put into practice. Philosophy is a way of life, not a field of knowledge. There's no such thing as philosophology (just ask my spellchecker). This is why I care more about what philosophy asks of us than what philosophers say to us. Wisdom isn't about quoting famous dead people or repeating ancient ideas. That's what Google is for.

So what exactly does philosophy ask of us. To answer this, I'd start with the very first question philosophy ever asked: what is real? This question consumes a branch of philosophy called *metaphysics* and was asked by Thales of Miletus nearly 2,600 years ago. It was because of this question that Thales is considered the first official philosopher. This is so because he responded by trying to explain existence in naturalistic rather than supernatural terms for the first time in recorded history. Subsequent philosophers followed his example, which is why the Presocratics, as they are called, were initially referred to as *phusikoi*, meaning "physicists."

Each of them theorized about the *arche* of the *kosmos*, the basis, that is, of everything the exists, the fundamental principle in all things. Thales thought it to be water, since it can exist in solid, liquid, and gaseous states. Although he was wrong, it was a good guess considering the most abundant element in the Universe, it's arche inasmuch as it was the very first element, turns out to be hydrogen, the essential ingredient in water. His pupil, Anaximander thought the arche was *aperion*, which means something like the "infinite" or "unbounded." That may not sound very earthly, but keep in mind Anaximander was also the first to draw a map of the world and through his study of nature was able to predict natural phenomenon like equinoxes, solstices, eclipses and, some say, even earthquakes. He also thought humans came from fish (a precursor of Evolutionary theory), that the Sun is made of pure fire, that rain is cause by the condensation of water, and used math to calculate the sizes of the Sun, Moon, and Earth.

His student, in turn, Anaximenes guessed *aer* (air) was the essence of all things. Pythagoras, who also discovered that the square of an hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides (the Pythagorean Theorem), along with irrational numbers, and the musical intervals of the octave, fifth and fourth, thought the arche was a harmony between light and darkness, the limited and unlimited. Other Presocratics guessed things like fire, or the interaction of motion and change, or a combination of elements, or small atoms that cannot be uncuttable, which is what the word *atomos* means, "indivisible."

So the first step in philosophical practice is to get real, which means turning away from supernatural explanations and toward natural, objective phenomenon in our search for

understanding the world. It means basing our beliefs on tangible evidence. Although we can be certain of little, getting real means basing every leap of faith on our best educated guess, substantiated by empirical facts. Philosophers before Socrates may be lumped into the subservient category of Presocratics but their historical mental leap forward should not be underestimated or underappreciated. Leapfrogging humanity beyond the superstitious thinking of our primitive ancestors into the beginnings of logic, math, and science was an unprecedented gamechanger.

Still, most people back then, like many of us today, didn't care for the tedium of these abstractions and didn't consider them very useful. They cared more about making their way in the world than about what the world is made of. But then Socrates appeared on the scene, about two centuries after Thales, and turned philosophy from its strict emphasis on physics, math, and cosmology into a more inward discipline. "The unexamined life is not worth living," he said. So he examined life, or, more accurately, cross-examined it by asking ceaseless questions through his *dialectic method*. The intention was to keep asking question until arriving upon an answer that was unquestionable, which never arrives. This is the same method Descartes used to conclude the only thing he could be sure of was the existence of his own mind: *Cogito ergo sum*.

That's what an examined life is, continuously questioning what we believe and what others expect us to believe. No wonder Socrates called himself a gadfly, which got him in trouble because he ended up questioning the wrong people and the wrong beliefs. When the authorities asked him how he thought he should be punished, he said, and I paraphrase, "I am a gadfly, sent to you as a gift from the gods. That State is like an overgrown horse that's become too large and lazt to move. So I have been sent to bite it in the ass and stir it to life. You should be careful how you treat me, for I am a gift from the gods and you cannot easily replace me." They had him executed instead. So that's step number two, be a gadfly, question everything, including the authorities and especially your own beliefs.

After Socrates, other pragmatic philosophies emerged in pursuit of the good life. The Athenians, in particular, were having a hard time back then, having first been ravaged by war with Sparta before being overtaken by the Romans. They wanted *eudaimonia*, which means "good spirit," and *ataraxia*, which means "contentment." In short, they wanted to feel happy again, to be of good cheer, of good spirit. This resulted in the emergence of Cynicism (happiness through abstinence and austerity), Epicureanism, also called Hedonism, (happiness through indulgence and pleasure), and Stoicism (happiness through following one's vales, regardless of whether doing so causes pain or pleasure). So that's the third leg of philosophical practice. Strive for the good life.

Socrates taught Plato, an idealist who founded *idealism*, who taught Aristotle, one of the most accomplished philosophers of all time, a tutor of Alexander the Great, and who gifted humanity with formal logic, among much else. But logic is a natural development of the

philosophical foundation set by Thales, for it's all about making inferences based on evidence. Logic isn't so much about the conclusions we draw, but about the soundness of our reasons for accepting those conclusions. Too few of us ever study logic, yet most of us think our beliefs are perfectly reasonable. This is so because we explain our emotional response with narrative. We justify them, that is, with verbal explanations, making up "reasons" for whatever we're feeling. But this is rationalizing, not reasoning. Reasoning, which I use synonymously with logic, requires us to step back from our emotions, from what we want to be true, and objectively consider tangible evidence with sound thinking.

Erich Fromm said, "Rationalizations are essentially lacking this quality of discovering and uncovering; they only confirm the emotional prejudice existing in oneself."[5] So one way to help determine if we are being objective and reasonable, or just rationalizing our emotions and delusions, is to consider if our thinking leads us to discover something new or different or even in opposition to what we thought before. You don't have to learn formal logic to do that much. Nor do you have to learn logic to imitate Socrates by chronically asking "why?" That's essentially what logic does: it questions the reasons for what we believe and are asked to believe. So just get back to being like a child before you heard, "Stop asking so many damned questions," once too often, and start doing what comes natural again: Be reasonable by asking, "Why?"

Finally, we come to *ethics*, from the Greek word meaning, "character." Ethics is different from morals, which refers to specific norms and rules. Ethic refers to character, which means being reliable in our behavior. Not that any of us is ever perfect, but we should strive to observe our values in every circumstance, regardless of the impact upon our lives. It means not simply going along with the crowd or doing what is most expedient at the moment. It's hard. It takes practice, including lots of trial and error. It takes the development of character.

Ethics is generally divided into two types, ends based and means based. We're all taught the ends never justify the means, but not weighing the consequences of our ethical actions is to act without compassion and can lead to a lot of terrible injustices. Sometimes we have to break the rules to do what's right. That's the basic ethical dilemma in every moral decision we make, "Should I do the right thing or the best thing?" Do I follow the rules without fail, or should I look at the relative consequences of my decisions? We each have to figure this out for ourselves, but having character—something consistent, though not unyielding at our core—is an important part of being ethical.

This, then, is what philosophy asks of us: *To get real, question everything, find happiness, be reasonable, and act right*. These are pretty good rules for living: get real, question everything, find happiness, be reasonable, and act right. But, alas, few of us today even know what philosophy means, let alone ever learned how to start putting it into practice. This is so,

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[5] Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, (Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965) p. 219.

getting back to the problem of higher education, because modern philosophy, which founded higher education, has chosen to isolate itself within Academia, the very institution that has now regulated it to homogenized humanities departments where it's stored with other nostalgias thought to serve no practical purpose. As philosopher Lou Marinoff writes in his book, *Philosophical Practice*:

> By the late 20th century, philosophy had all but ceased to be a mode of active engagement with oneself and the world—as it was in antiquity and throughout the ages—and had become too frequently a drab and deficient mind-game, with no apparent purpose other than to grapple with concepts about concepts about concepts, ad nauseum if not ad infinitum. Instead of attracting students, it repelled them. University administrators began to downsize philosophy departments and merge them with two other endangered academic species: classics and religious studies.[6]

Maybe its demise in Academia can be a good thing if philosophy returns to the streets and ordinary people begin to rediscover its value and start putting it into practice. Not everyone is a philosopher, but most can put philosophy into practice by simply giving a little consideration to the questions it asks of life. What do I believe is that nature of reality? How do I determine what I believe to be true? How do I know the difference between right and wrong? What is my life's purpose? What makes me happy? These questions seem so basic and essential, yet how many of us have pondered them with intention, let alone written down our own mediations about them? That's a good starting point for your philosophical practice: Meditate on these questions, and follow each of your responses with the additional question, "Why?" *Why* do I believe it is the nature of reality? *Why* do I determine truth this way? *Why* do I believe this is the difference between right and wrong? … And so on. And as you go about your life, remember to get real, question everything, find happiness, be reasonable, and act right.

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[6] Marinoff, Lou, *Philosophical Practice*, Academic Press, San Diego, CA, 2002, p. 4.