

How Philosophy Has Shaped How I Think

By

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I had no idea what the word *philosophy* even meant before taking *Introduction to Philosophy* as a requirement for my undergraduate degree. I had no inkling what a valuable part of my life it would become. But over the past 45 years since then philosophy has not only become the means through which I process my thoughts and experiences, it is also what has most shaped who I have become and am still becoming. This doesn't mean I can quote most philosophers or even explain their basic ideas. I can't. Philosophy isn't about explaining the ideas of others, but about how to best process our own. It's not about memorizing proverbs and anecdotes to live by, but about making wise decisions of our own. That's what philosophy means, from the Greek word φιλοσοφία, translated as the "love of wisdom." And wisdom isn't knowledge; it's understanding how to best apply what we know to our lives.

I was enrolled in the Bible Department at Howard Payne University at the time, a Southern Baptist liberal arts college, and went there feeling certain that I already had the best and wisest ideas already figured out. But just a few weeks into the course I realized I couldn't know anything for certain, not even of the ground beneath my feet. *Epistemology*—the study of knowing—is a major area of philosophy that shows us we can't know anything for certain. It's quite simple. There are relatively few avenues to knowledge—reason, sensation, experience, authority, intuition, and faith—all of which can be shown to be faulty at times.

Philosophy, thus, makes us dubious about everything. As a young college student who believed I would only have the truth I already knew confirmed, learning that I couldn't be sure of anything was a shock! But if *Introduction to Philosophy I* introduced all those annoying questions, I mistakenly reasoned that *Introduction to Philosophy II* would provide all the answers. So even though it wasn't a prerequisite, I elected to take *Intro II*, expecting to learn how to know what is true and real with certainty.

Midway through the semester, while learning about Plato's *Idealism*, I thought I had finally figured it out. Upon bumping into my philosophy professor, Dr. Wallace Roark, in the hallway, I seized the opportunity to put my assumption to the test. I told him what I understood about Plato's ideas, to which he nodded approvingly and repeatedly said, "Yes," "Yes," "Yes." I felt waves of reassurance and relief and finally concluded my brief lecture by asking, "So, that's how we know the truth?" Dr. Roark appeared dumbfounded, as if he was struggling to find the right response. "No!" he finally uttered, and that was it.

I was as surprised by his response as he apparently was by my question. During the few nanoseconds that followed, I tried to process what had just happened. "No! No? How can it be 'no'? If it's not through *Idealism*, how do we know anything for certain?" I thought all of this and more

during the immediate and devastating aftermath of Roark's bewildering repudiation. Most importantly, I came to the sudden realization that there would be no answer. That's why Dr. Roark was so flabbergasted, because he had no idea how best to respond to my assumption there would be—to my need for the certainty he understood would never come. That was the moment I got my answer; that there would be no answer—ever! That was also a moment that changed my life.

It was, for a while, a difficult and depressing realization. Although I was far from suicidal, like any good philosopher, or budding philosopher in my case, I began questioning the meaning of life itself. Looking back, I can describe what followed as a period of existential angst because I was looking ahead to a life without understanding or meaning. None of my friends thought as deeply about such matters as me, so I didn't have anyone to talk seriously with about what I was going through, although I often tried. One day, while attempting to talk philosophy with my friend Marty Gray—a business student—I decried, "Without meaning, what's the point of living?"

"That's true," he grinned. "But what's the point of dying?" He didn't realize how profoundly his smart-alecky statement impacted me. It was another key realization in my early philosophical journey that enabled me to immediately trade my dark existential angst with an optimistic view of life. "He's right; I might not know the truth," I thought. "But if living and dying are equally as meaningless, I might as well live. At least living is something that I can enjoy." In other words, even if life has no grander purpose, I can experience and enjoy it.

And what I seemed to enjoy most was searching for understanding. So, I decided to major in philosophy and, for a while, was the only philosophy major at the small university. About a year after my philosophical journey began, another shift occurred. I realized, rather than detracting from life and meaning, that living in a state of doubt made life far more enjoyable than my false feelings of certainty ever had. Being certain makes life dull and boring. But the uncertainty turns it into an endless adventure by opening us up to mystery, wonder, curiosity, and discovery. And that's what philosophy very quickly turned me into, a lifelong learner who is always seeking to understand more, and who is always growing and changing and becoming in the process.

Upon graduating from college, I realized there wasn't much demand for philosophers, so I returned to college for a year, this time at a Catholic university in Louisville, Kentucky, to earn a second bachelor's in communications, which led to a sixteen-year career in television news and corporate video production. I was in my late thirties when I earned my Master of Arts in Religious Studies and received my doctorate at age 48. I learned a lot in the process, but these other degrees were mostly credentials. Although I've never worked as a professional philosopher, I consider myself to have graduated from HPU as a philosopher and that is what I have remained ever since.

Metaphysics is another area of philosophy. It focuses on the underlying nature of reality. Plato's philosophy of idealism, for example, is one such explanation—the idea that whatever is real exists

in a realm of perfect forms, of which everything in our physical reality is an imperfect reflection. *Idealism* has broadened since then to include beliefs that reality consists of what some call mind, spirit, and consciousness, and that our physical reality is but an illusion. *Materialism* is almost the opposite of Idealism. It holds that reality is entirely physical, including mind and thought, which are products of the brain. This is closely related to *Empiricism*, which argues that all knowledge of reality derives from our senses; and *Rationalism*, which insists it must also come from reason and logic. There are several other metaphysics I won't mention. Rather, with the exception of Idealism, which I don't accept. I lean toward those philosophical arguments that say reality is physical and independent of what we think, and that we can best comprehend what little we can of it through our physical senses (especially through science), along with reason and logic.

Anyone familiar with my Sunday messages will recognize how this approach to understanding reality has shaped my thinking on almost everything. But the point not to lose is that my approach to metaphysics is the same approach I've taken toward knowledge and truth ever since completing my Introduction to Philosophy classes more than forty years ago. Just as I have learned to question everything others believe and everything I believe is true, I also question everything others believe and everything that I believe is real. When it comes to the nature of reality, I've come to believe it's physical and can best be explored and understood through reason and the senses; but I also realize I could be wrong and, to some extent, probably am. As Dr. Roark frequently said, "No human statement is ever adequate." To me this suggests that even what we might get right isn't entirely right. The same is true of our perceptions of the world, which are, ultimately, subjective interpretations of our experiences.

So, once again, the study of metaphysics hasn't helped me better grasp the nature of reality, but has, instead, caused me to feel more uncertain about my interpretations of it. It has forced me, that is, to further recognize that in order to be honest with myself, I must face the world and everything in it with a large degree of doubt.

Those who know me well and often hear me speak also know how much I value and rely upon *logic*. But those untrained in this branch of philosophy often consider it a device for determining if something is true or not. By shaping an argument into a sound logical form, they assume one can conclude it must be true. Nothing can be further from the truth. Proper logical form only helps us determine if an argument is valid, meaning all the terms are in the proper place and don't violate any rules of logic. Logic is only concerned with proper form, not truth.

Hillary Clinton is the first woman U.S. President.

Bill Clinton is married to Hillary Clinton.

Therefore, Bill Clinton is married to the first woman U.S. President.

This is a perfectly logical argument, but it is obviously untrue because Hillary Clinton is not the first woman U.S. President. Sound arguments built upon true statements can help us feel more confident of our beliefs, but not entirely. Why? Because, as noted, we can't know anything with absolute certainty. Truth is not a logical problem, it is an epistemological problem, which means we must even doubt the conclusions logic leads us to.

Ethics is another branch of philosophy that has been crucial to shaping my mindset and worldview. As many of you know, it is also a subject I frequently return to. In brief, you might recall, there are three approaches to understanding ethics, the difference, that is, between good and evil, or to be more colloquial, between right and wrong. **Rule-based ethics** considers good and evil to be ontological realities that are true in all circumstances and situations, regardless of the outcome. It, therefore, suggests certain rules to always live by no matter what, like, "thy shall not kill," "that shall not lie," and, as we were taught at my Baptist college, "Thy shall always take your hat off indoors." The problem with this ethic is that sometimes strictly following the rules leads to what many of us would consider terrible injustices, like segregation and discrimination.

Outcome-based ethics determines good and evil based upon the consequences of our rules and our actions. If one must steal medicine to save a dying person, they are ethically correct regardless of what the law says. On the other hand, when the ends justify the means, the means can easily become unimportant. The outcomes can, thus, justify all kinds of wrongs.

Value-based ethics, which I favor, is a more balanced approach. Rather than basing right and wrong on either rules or outcomes, it relies on universal principles and values that ought to be adhered to in any situation. Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative is a good example; *Never treat others as a means to an end but always as ends within themselves*. It's not a hard rule but is a principled approach to any situation that allows us to be flexible in how we execute it.

But this isn't about giving an ethics lesson. I offer this brief explanation of the subject to show that philosophy has even taught me to doubt my beliefs about something so essential as knowing the difference between right and wrong.

There are a couple other branches of philosophy I've not paid much attention to, Aesthetics—the nature of beauty and art—and Political philosophy—the study of justice and governance. Beauty, as the saying goes, is in the eye of the beholder and politics, well, the word says it all. It seems pretty clear that we ought to acknowledge the subjective and dubious nature of our personal beliefs about art and politics, at least as much as we should in the areas of truth, reality, reason, and ethics.

Thus, as I have indicated all along, philosophy has not shaped my mind by filling it with knowledge, but at every turn by filling it with doubt; not a melancholy or cynical kind of doubt, but

with the kind that leads to a life of wonder and curiosity. Freudian psychologist Theodor Reik wrote that “The capacity to doubt, and in particular the ability to endure doubt for a long time, is one of the rarest things on this planet.”¹ And social psychologist Erich Fromm said similarly, “The compulsive quest for certainty is not the expression of genuine faith but is rooted in the need to conquer the unbearable doubt.”² But the philosopher’s experience of doubt is different than it is for most. For us, the capacity to doubt is neither rare nor unbearable. It is not only the first step of philosophizing, but it becomes the lens through which we view the world and ourselves and is the primary means by which we live and love our lives.

Professional philosophers may select a particular branch of philosophy to specialize in, or a particular philosopher to become experts on, but their specialties and expertise is not what makes them philosophers; It is their capacity to doubt for a very, very long time—throughout their lives—and to not only bear it, but to cherish the ability and opportunity to do so. Such a life is filled with a deeper kind of understanding than the false sense of certainty, so many others crave, can offer, and also fills our moments in this world with unceasing curiosity and wonder.

In this way, philosophers are akin to those apophatic mystics who arrive at understanding by continuously letting go of what they think they know. They have learned to feel most at home when living in the mist and mystery of life. Yet they are not ignorant people. They are always searching for the truth. This search is what makes life worth living for both philosophers and mystics. But both are also a little disappointed should they stumble upon a potential answer. What fun is there in that? No bother, whatever the answer might be, surely it is worthy of doubt, and the chase begins again.

The difference is that mystics mostly seek knowledge about God, yet realize, as the Kabbalah says, “With every increase in the negations regarding God you come nearer to the apprehension of God.”³ St. Denis said, “The most divine knowledge of God is that which is known by not-knowing.”⁴ And St. John of the Cross said, “The soul travels to God not knowing, rather than knowing.”⁵ Philosophers realize the same is so of knowledge itself. As philosopher James Carse puts it, “Knowing that we don’t know is not only a higher ignorance, it is the basis for all our hope.”⁶

As a result of all this doubt, philosophers are also naturally humble about their ideas. They are often eager to share what they believe might be true, along with *why* they believe it might be so, but they will not defend their ideas with the intolerance of ordinary souls who often defensively cling to their poorly substantiated beliefs with ferocity. Philosophers are seldom in the mood to waste much time trying to convince others they are right. After all, they already know they might be wrong. They are willing to share their ideas with those interested, but are just as willing to remain silent or to walk away. Philosophy is about the pursuit of even greater understanding, not about being right.

So that is how philosophy has shaped how I think and, more importantly, how I live my life. It has conditioned me to live, including when making difficult choices and while judging the choices of others, in a chronic state of doubt and uncertainty. It has conditioned me to experience uncertainty with optimism, joy, wonder, and sometimes awe. And it keeps me humble.

Perhaps you are among those who have tried to study philosophy, only to soon find your eyelids drooping and your bored mind struggling to understand what the hell you just read—three times! If we think of philosophy as no more than a very large collection of very complicated to very wacky ideas, then it does quickly become too much for us. But if we come to see it as a way to process whatever we read or think or experience, then it becomes far more interesting and, from my perspective, incredibly valuable for any of us. Philosophy isn't knowledge, it's practice. So transform your doubts into awe and wonder. Replace your false certainties with real humility. And may your search for truth and understanding never be complete so that you may enjoy a long and happy life. For, as a great philosopher once said, "Life may have no meaning, but what's the point of dying?"

¹ Reik, Theodor, *Dogma as Compulsion*, (Greenwood Press Publishers, Westport, CT, 1951, 1975) p. 161.

² Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965., p. 96

³ Matt, Daniel C., *The Essential Kabbalah*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1995, p. 7.

^{4 7} Johnston, William, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing & The Book of Privy Counseling*, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1973, 1996, p. 127.

^{5 8} deNicolas, Antonio T., *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989 p. 232.

⁶ Carse, James, P., *Breakfast at the Victory*, (Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1994) p. 185.