

CAN PHILOSOPHY BE TAUGHT?

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I

WHAT is philosophy? I seem to have spent most of what I laughingly refer to as my 'philosophical career' searching for an answer to that baffling question. What I have found are ancient ruins, some absorbing puzzles, and an awe-inspiring obsession with the fact that I exist. Whichever way you place them, the jig-saw pieces don't quite fit.

Some persons search for God, and find philosophy. Others search for philosophy and find God. And some make the foolish mistake – I sincerely hope it's not one I've ever been tempted to make – of making a God out of philosophy. I am mentioning religion, even though I know it will make some of you feel a little uncomfortable (I promise I won't mention it again) because one theme that seems to emerge is the questing philosopher's *lack* of faith. The knights who sought the Holy Grail were infused with faith. The philosopher demands that everything be reasoned out, made plain. 'How will I know when I've found what I'm looking for', Meno complains to Socrates, 'if I don't even know what it is?'. In Plato's dialogue *Meno*, Socrates makes the young aristocrat Meno look like a buffoon, but to me he sounds like a typical philosopher.

To say that one doesn't know what philosophy is might seem a shocking admission from someone who professes to teach the subject. Those of you who think you know the answer to my question will be ready with your commiseration – or your scorn. When I've finished my talk you can tell me all about it.

On second thoughts, don't bother. I suspect that if someone told me the answer to the question what, or where philosophy is, and it was a beautiful answer, a text book answer, it still wouldn't make any impression on me. The Good Word means nothing in the ears of the ignorant unbeliever. Each of us has got to discover the answer for ourselves.

This talk could be over sooner than I'd anticipated! It looks as though what my paper is shaping up to say is, 'Philosophy can't be taught. The only way you can become a philosopher is by teaching yourself.' I did think that once, but I don't now. In my philosophical youth, I used to imagine that no-one had ever really taught me anything. Everything of consequence that I had learned, I taught myself. – It was not true. I had some excellent teachers, which I am grateful for. I am proud of my early influences. We all go through an ungrateful phase, it's part of growing up.

One needn't quibble over the supposed difference between being a philosopher and being a mere student of philosophy. That's a matter of status in the eyes of the world. Months before I even attended my first undergraduate lecture my mother was telling her friends, 'My son, the philosopher!' I won't say she was wrong.

You can learn to do the activity – do what philosophers do – and do it very well. No-one is arguing with that. Admittedly, it's harder to play the part convincing in a seminar than in your own living room, but that's only a matter of degree. I suspect that

academic departments are full of people who do the subject 'very well', but don't really understand what it is that they are doing, or why.

Let's start with the present. No-one hired me to do the job I do now. I invented my own job description. 'I run my own school of philosophy.' That sounds like bragging. I don't mean it to. 'I advertise for business over the Internet' is closer, though I worry about being put in the same category as purveyors of erotica and get rich quick schemes.

One of the lecturers at Sheffield perceptively remarked, 'So you're a Sophist, then.' Yes, I thought. The Sophists of Ancient Greece were itinerant teachers of oratory and rhetoric, history, poetry, philosophy, as well as all the arts and skills you needed to make you into an all-round man or woman of *arete* – accomplishment, or virtue to give the nearest English translations. Those at the top of their profession earned fame and fortune. (In *The Presocratic Philosophers* [Routledge 1982, p 448] Jonathan Barnes lists the 'outstanding individuals' Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Prodicus, Antiphon, and Thrasymachus.)

As with many a profession, the few at the top charged whopping fees, while many of those further down the ladder struggled – like myself, like Socrates too, by all accounts – to make ends meet. Could it be that Socrates' famed antagonism towards the Sophists was borne of nothing more than professional envy? Banish the thought.

There is one obvious difference between what the Sophists did and *Pathways to Philosophy*. Unlike the Sophists, I very rarely get to meet my students. The postal service being what it was, you could grow old and die doing a distance learning course in Ancient Greece.

(The wonderful age of computers and e-mail. You can talk to someone without ever seeing their face or hearing their voice. That's something that would have worried Protagoras, or Socrates. I'll come back to that question later.)

Am I a Sophist? On reflection, there's a second difference, and a rather important one. The Greek Sophists looked upon the efforts of the philosophers from Thales onwards with an attitude of ironic detachment. By the time the Sophists came on the scene, it had become accepted wisdom that philosophy couldn't prove its conclusions, that one speculation about the ultimate nature of the universe was as good as another. Philosophers were ripe for lampooning, as Aristophanes did so brilliantly in his comedy, *Clouds*. What the Sophists took on board were the methods of philosophy, the use of reason and logic to analyse the case for and against. The tools of the philosopher were an ideal weapon in a court of law or the Assembly.

And here we come to the nub of my dispute with my former teacher Roger Scruton. In a vituperative piece in *The Times* a couple of years back (August 11 1997) he attacked the work of philosophical counsellors using all the epithets Socrates had used against his old arch-enemies. Philosophical counsellors pandered to the vanity of their clients, preached the relativist doctrine that the truth was whatever you wanted to believe. The mark of the Sophist, Scruton said – the most damning indictment of all – is accepting money from your client for services rendered.

This makes me smile. Are all the lecturers and professors in philosophy departments up and down the country Sophists, then? Or does the fact that the money paid comes indirectly, and to a considerable part out of the purse of tax payers, somehow sanctify the financial arrangement? I think not. The temple of academia is open for business. The respected dons know how to sniff out where the grant money is coming from like pigs searching for truffles.

Scruton is partly right. The issue is about concern for the truth. It is a bad philosophical counsellor who tells their client only what they want to hear. The Sophists of Ancient Greece had given up on the search for Truth, with a capital 'T'. 'Man is the measure of all things,' said Protagoras. What I believe is true for me, what you believe is true for you, and that's all we can say. The Sophists would have been completely unmoved by my quest for philosophy. That is why, though I am full of admiration for what they did, I cannot call myself a Sophist.

So my question is, what is there to philosophy other than the techniques and methods of philosophy? Or, what amounts to the same thing, what does the teacher of philosophy strive to teach, other than mere proficiency in applying those methods? This is where my story begins.

Before all this started, before *Pathways to Philosophy* was ever conceived, I was teaching evening classes for the Workers' Educational Association, the WEA. It was a hearts and minds exercise. These were people who could just have easily opted for Herbal Remedies or Microwave Cookery, Folk Guitar or Flower Arranging. The need to put bottoms on seats is a powerful incentive. If you fail to attract sufficient numbers, your class folds.

Here then was an excellent incentive for playing the part of the Sophist. I could put on a performance. Spice my lectures up. Perhaps after all I could find a way to smuggle in the philosophy of herbalism or folk music, anything that would hold my students' attention. I gave the idea more than a passing thought, but the fact is I'm no stand-up comedian. If I wanted to hold on to my students, I realised I would have to find another way.

One question that students had repeatedly pestered me with was, 'What is philosophy?' 'Why are you here,' I would respond, 'if you don't know the answer to that already? Microwave Cookery is down the hall!' I told my class that I didn't know how to define philosophy, but that it didn't matter anyway. What we were doing was philosophy. 'What *are* we doing?' one student asked, and there were nods and murmurs of agreement.

Then it dawned on me that it did matter. It mattered very much. I began to wonder why I was here, standing in front of all these people. What good was I doing? What were my students learning from me? Did I have anything to teach them?

I shall now put on record three attempts that I made, three seminal ideas that began with the struggle to resolve this issue in my own mind, and which developed into WEA courses (and later still into three of my six *Pathways* programmes). Right up to the present, they still seem, for all their shortcomings, the best attempt to answer the question. These are the three jig-saw pieces I mentioned at the start of this talk.

II

Ancient ruins

My first idea came about like this. The reason it is so difficult to capture the essence of philosophy, I thought, is that Western Culture is the product of philosophy. Philosophy is everywhere and we are all philosophers. Through lack of proper training, we naturally tend to be rather bad philosophers. That's a well-worn justification for studying the subject I've fallen back on many a time! However, as I, and some of my

students too had begun to suspect, the formula answer begs the question. Might there not have been any philosophy? What would things have been like if there had been no philosophy? Might we not have been better off after all?

The obvious answer is to look at how philosophy first came about. There was a time when there was no philosophy. Then someone came along and invented it. That's the picture you get when you study the first Greek philosophers, called the 'Presocratics' because they came before Socrates.

It was Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Xenophanes and Pythagoras, Parmenides, Zeno and Melissus, Empedocles and Anaxagoras, Democritus and Leucippus who gave us the concepts, 'logic', 'theory', and most importantly of all, 'Being'. In a nutshell: the philosopher uses reason and logic to construct theories about the nature of Being. Maybe you're not very moved by that bare-bones account. It was the finer details, the details I uncovered when I began to investigate the fragments and testimonia of the Presocratics that blew my mind, and I hoped would blow my students minds.

The thrill of the discovery that we possess in our own minds, in our capacity to reason, the key to unlock the mystery of the universe, the mystery of Being, is something I cannot convey to those who haven't experienced it. One has to make the discovery for oneself. We think we already know what theorising is, or what it is to reason, and that's the big obstacle. These notions have become corrupted and soiled through over-use. Worst of all – as Heidegger notoriously lamented – the Being of the universe has sunk back into the obscurity from which the Presocratics first rescued it. The triumph of science has been the ruin of metaphysics.

What is it to investigate Being? In insisting on the relevance of this question I am taking a stand. When I first looked at the Presocratics, I was already sold on the idea that the core activity of philosophy is metaphysics, or the study of 'Being *qua* Being', to use Aristotle's formula. The question of the why and wherefore of philosophy was, for me, the why and wherefore of metaphysics. That's not an answer. Its a specification of the form that any acceptable answer should take. What it's really saying is, 'Philosophy has its own unique subject matter. It is not just a useful critical tool for evaluating other areas of knowledge or human activity.'

The subject matter of philosophy is Being. What is that? My students were most amused by the thought that the Being of things might be water, or air, or fire, or the odd and even numbers. They were perplexed by Zeno's paradoxes concerning the infinity of Being, aghast at the thought that everything in the universe, space, time and themselves included, might disappear into the dark homogeneity of Parmenides' One Being. In short, the classes were a success. I put bottoms on seats, and kept them there. But I don't think my students ever perceived the underlying point.

I have my own theory about Being. I'll spare you the details. I am not even sure that the theory is true. It might be. True or not, though, one theory about Being is not an answer to the question what it is, what it means to theorise about Being. To use the language of Socrates in the *Meno*, to give an example of X is not to give a definition of X. Until we have our definition, we are not even sure what to make of the example, or even whether its a good example.

I'll going to leave things at that rather unsatisfactory point. It's time to get on to the second piece of the jig-saw.

Assorted puzzles

'We are all philosophers'. That doesn't sound quite as convincing when translated as, 'We all have views about Being.' Do we? Do you? Wouldn't it be nearer the mark to say that most person's lives are not touched by the question of Being in any way, shape or form? It is as if the Presocratics had never existed.

In the gloom of such scepticism, another seminal idea was born, just in time to rescue me for another round of WEA classes. My mistake, I now decided, had been to look for the wood, when all we're really interested in are the trees. Forget about defining philosophy, or giving 'necessary and sufficient conditions', to use the philosopher's jargon. You can define a thing – if you really need to define it – simply by giving examples, and adding, 'That kind of thing'.

There was no need to speculate about history or our cultural roots. The fact is that there are philosophical problems. Philosophers have given them names, like 'Freedom of the will', 'Knowledge and scepticism', 'The reality of time', 'The relation between mind and body'. You can only name what belongs to a common understanding, something you and I can share. As I had known all along, the same problems that gripped me were capable of gripping others, just as I had first studied those problems by reading the works of philosophers who were gripped by them.

History was of little or no importance because the problems were *perennial*. One didn't have to inquire about where they came from. It wasn't relevant to their solution. If I am genuinely worried about scepticism, or the mind-body problem, I'm not going to be impressed by someone telling me, 'You are only worrying about that problem because so-and-so thought of it first.'

But how do you present the problems so that people will be gripped by them? The standard text books didn't do a very good job, I felt. So I had the idea of writing science fiction stories. I called them 'thought experiments'. (The idea had been tried before, in a book by Miller and Smith called *Thought Probes* [Prentice Hall], which used the work of famous science fiction writers such as Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, Roger Zelazny and Frederik Pohl.) The stories were fun to write, and provided a perfect launch pad for the discussion of the problems of philosophy. My audience was soon hooked. (My weekly talks became the basis for the Pathways programme *The Possible World Machine*.)

Towards the end of the course, the first cracks began to appear in the brightly coloured fresco. It had never been intended as a deceptive facade. We knew there were bricks underneath, but that was something we had chosen not to look into. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, my efforts to focus attention on the surface, some of the class members began to voice their anxiety. 'Why are we gripped by these problems? What is it about the human mind, or reason, that trips us up in this way?' I'd set out with the intention of deliberately turning my back on that sort of question. Now the question returned to ambush me.

I don't know of any works in the history of philosophy that come as close as Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* to attempting to answer the question where the perennial problems come from. According to Kant, the nature of reason leads it to attempt to overstep its finite limits. According to Wittgenstein, we fall into confusion because we misunderstand the logic of our own language. In the end, however, both explanations are unsatisfactory. One would be more impressed if the diagnoses offered of our philosophical ills led to a permanent cure, which evidently they have not.

I can imagine you saying at this point rather impatiently, 'Look, if you've found the problems of philosophy, you've found philosophy. What are you worrying about?' My reply is that it's not enough just to be gripped by the problems. The anxiety about *why* we are gripped points to something. Even if Kant and Wittgenstein failed to hit the nail on the head, that doesn't mean there isn't something there, at the centre of it all. – I still had no idea what that 'something' might be.

The trail had once more grown cold. I put the second jig-saw piece in my pocket and moved on.

I exist, therefore...what?

What was the underlying theme running through all of this? I was attempting to recapture the *beginners'mind*. That was the real purpose, it now seemed to me, of returning to the dawn of philosophy, and the point also of presenting science fiction stories with little or no philosophical background, so that the problems could speak for themselves. I was doing this for my students, and also for myself. I wanted to be a beginner again, like them.

If you're looking for an example of a radical beginning for philosophy, Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* is the one obvious choice. I had avoided it, partly because it is so obvious. As philosophy texts go, it is also pretty hard going for beginners. Anyway, I wasn't going to try to persuade my class to go away and study a *book*. My voice would have been drowned in storms of protest.

This is how the idea of *Searching for the Soul* came about. Together, my class and I would search for a radical beginning to philosophical inquiry inside our own minds.

In Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, Socrates describes how in his youth he was captivated by the speculations of the early philosophers concerning the nature of the universe around us. Then he came to realize that man himself, far from being just another of the multitude of things to be found in the world, was in fact the central problem, and the only reason for doing philosophy in the first place.

Descartes, and I, were doing more, however, than simply retracing the steps of Socrates. The focus of Socrates' concern was moral and political. My interest was metaphysical. 'Descartes and I! I didn't actually go so far as to put a picture of Descartes on my desk, but he did become a kind of imaginary mentor. It is said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. I didn't want just to understand Descartes, I wanted to *be* him.

To cut to the chase, my class and I together pursued the soul through all the labyrinthine complexities of the mind-body problem – eventually leaving Descartes and his theory of an 'immaterial soul substance' far behind – and the further we pursued it, the more philosophical problems that we had studied were dragged up in its wake. Knowledge and scepticism, freedom of the will, personal identity, other minds, the reality of time, the foundations of morals – the familiar list, in fact.

We were finally looking at the bricks behind the fresco, and 'I exist' was written on every brick. I told you I wasn't going to talk about my theory, and I'm not going to. Let's just say that the fact that I exist, the Being of *my* subjective point of view on the universe, emerges as not so much the ultimate starting point as the ultimate *sticking* point, the one stubborn fact that cannot be fitted in to a Presocratic, or Aristotelian,

account of the Being of the Universe 'as such'. As I had stated in the Preface to my book *Naive Metaphysics*, 'The world is and will always remain something absolutely other than I.'

But that's going back all the way to where I first started. In relation to my quest for the essence of philosophy my book was old hat. No mere 'theory', however finely wrought, could ever be a satisfactory answer to my question. I'd known that from the start.

What did my students learn? What did I learn? I had discovered three pieces of a jig saw. There might be other pieces, I don't know. If the pieces didn't exactly fit, at least one could say roughly where they were supposed to go. Philosophy starts with radical wonderment about the Being of the universe; it starts with the problems of philosophy; it starts with the self. Whichever base you take as your launching point, you will eventually cover all three.

III

So what? What does that prove?

It's all history now. Along came *Pathways* and my life changed forever. I still have my WEA classes. This term, we are studying Roger Scruton's *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy*.

It's been three years since I last had a genuinely new philosophical idea. I am too busy now playing the role of the mentor, the philosophical critic, to have much time to do any philosophy for myself. Yet in this fallow period, I have discovered something. If not an answer, it is a reason for hope.

Philosophy, I have discovered, is all about dialogue, the dialogue that seeks to build a bridge between one subjectivity, one 'I exist' and another. In the paper I gave at the 1998 Shap Conference, entitled 'The Ethics of Dialogue', I talked about the possibility of human dialogue as the central question of moral philosophy. Yet there is something more that I am only now beginning to discern, something that the very attempt to teach philosophy at a distance has made apparent. What so amazes me is the very fact that wherever my students happen to be in the globe, we are able to *meet*.

You can do philosophy in solitude, as Descartes amply demonstrated. You can carry on a lively dialogue with yourself. Yet in soliloquy one vital ingredient of the philosophical enterprise is missing. For all our best attempts to communicate, philosophical *vision* is always something essentially idiosyncratic, peculiar to each and every individual. Perhaps because philosophy is so much a struggle with language, or against language, you always seem to *see* more than you can *say*.

In philosophical dialogue, we can never get completely clear about our disagreements and differences, because we never get to the point of being about to state what precisely it is that each of us believes, or the difference between our respective standpoints. There is always more, in the background, that one struggles to articulate. Yet in the search for a meeting point, something new is created that is neither yours or mine – something neither of us could have created by our own unaided efforts – the dialogue itself as it takes on an independent life of its own.

The gap between what each of us sees and what we can say acquires a special significance when one of us is the teacher, the other the pupil. In the teaching dialogue, the pupil is, through trial and error, and the oft repeated retracing of steps, brought by degrees into a community of fellow inquirers founded upon dialogue. The process can be likened to one of initiation. It is the initiation into the *tradition* of philosophy. I would argue that teaching is the life blood of the philosophical tradition, in a way that is unique amongst all forms of human knowledge and inquiry.

Within the broad tradition that traces back to the Presocratics, the dialogue between so-called 'schools of thought' is no less relevant than the dialogue between individuals. One notable example is the way, in the mid-60's, analytic philosophers would travel to the Continent to teach their counterparts about analytical philosophy, while Continental philosophers would travel to Britain and the USA to teach English-speaking philosophers about existentialism and phenomenology. In the early days, the misunderstandings were comic. Thirty years on, talk of different 'traditions' sounds somewhat old-fashioned. The dialogue has moved on.

What is new in all this? What is there to get so excited about? Whitehead famously commented that the history of philosophy is nothing but a series of 'footnotes to Plato'. In emphasising the centrality of dialogue I am not saying anything new. To allude one last time to Plato's very useful dialogue *Meno*, our new discovery is merely the recollection of something we knew all along.