# Pathways To Philosophy: Seven Years On

*Geoffrey Klempner*

**I**

In the Summer of 1995 Pathways was a few notes jotted down on scraps of paper. I took my first students in the Autumn of that year. The project has come a long way since then. At the last count, there were over 400 Pathways students and former students in 42 countries around the world. I have now begun taking on mentors to help with the teaching load.

None of these 400 or so would make a case study for the purpose of this article. I do not help my students with their personal problems, or even invite them to confide in me. I engage my students in philosophical dialogue. I send them material, they write back to me, and I respond to what they have written. The sole subject for our discussion is the problems of philosophy.

Lacking a suitable alternative, I am putting myself under the microscope. This will be an exercise in self-examination. I will be quoting my own words, posted on web sites or published at different times during the last seven years, because writings one has disseminated constitute hard evidence - of a kind. Evidence, at least, of what I thought fit to publish at the time.

One important source of material is the online philosophical notebook which I maintained on the Glass House Philosopher web site between August 1999 and April 2002:

> I am the philosopher in a glass house. Call it an experiment. I don't suffer from writer's block. I can pour out words till the cows come home. Lately, though, the quality hasn't been terribly high. Perhaps the presence of an audience will help me raise the standard. I have become too proficient in skimming the surface, reacting to the e-mailed letters and essays my students send me, knocking off up to a thousand words an hour of 'philosopher speak'.
> (*Online Notebook*, p. 1, 19th August 1999)

On that first page, I promised myself that 'I will meet up with all my former selves. I will become whole again'. I ended the notebook when there was much work still to do. I was beginning to wilt under the relentless exposure. I feel better for the experience, though some of the pages I find too painful to read, even now. There was a price to pay in other ways. Incautious postings have got me into hot water on more than one occasion. Family, friends, students and colleagues were not always happy about being dragged into the limelight. But at its best, the notebook gave me insights that I am grateful for, as well as recording critical moments in the Pathways story.

**II**

When the Glass House Philosopher was launched, I wrote a slightly mischievous philosophical autobiography for the front page:

> My reading of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as a second year undergraduate was my most important influence, and the turning point of my life. I could never again look at the professors of philosophy with the respect and reverence I had done before. What struck me most forcefully about Pirsig's book was his passionate defence of the Greek Sophists.
>
> With hindsight, I can now see that Pirsig (or, rather, his *alter ego* Phaedrus) had been over-zealous in his attack on Plato and Aristotle. Battling against what he saw as a perniciously one-sided vision, in which the dubious character of the sophist was contrasted with the impeccable virtue of the philosopher, it was easy to fall into the opposite extreme. Then again, there is more to philosophy than seeing every side of the question. That is something Marx saw.
>
> In the long history of philosophy, it is only over a comparatively short period that the universities have been the torch-bearers for philosophy. Most of the great philosophers were not academics. That is surely sufficient grounds to raise a question.
>
> I am one of a new breed. Call us the *Internet Sophists*. Whether more will follow our example, only time will tell. I believe the university departments have had their day. Time has come for a more democratic arrangement. The world wide web offers a paradigm for a radically new approach to teaching and publishing. Whether the universities like it or not, the changes have already begun. If they want to survive, it is time to get on board.
> (*My Philosophical Life*, 1999)

Did I really believe that the university departments of philosophy have 'had their day', or was that just bravado? At Sheffield where the main Pathways web site is based - as it happens, one of the strongest philosophy departments in the UK - such a claim would be regarded as preposterous. Why then, I reply, is there not a single philosopher in the top 100 greatest Britons poll recently conducted by the BBC? No Locke, Berkeley or Hume? No Bertrand Russell? Something is surely amiss, and it is time that academic philosophers woke up.

I have made no secret of the fact that I regard what I do as a business. Despite the apparent evidence to the contrary, I have discovered that philosophy is what a lot of people want. Not everyone, admittedly, but potentially enough to keep a sizeable battalion of Sophists usefully employed.

Even now, those committed to philosophising outside the box may find that statement rather shocking. Philosophy is justified, critics of academic philosophy may say, because of its practical benefits, because philosophers are able to make a real difference to people's everyday lives. With the latter sentiment I agree. If philosophy is something you need, if you can't live without it, or at least live happily, then getting an adequate supply will be important to you. The same can be said, of course, about chocolate, or heroin. (I have never tried heroin, but I know it would be very hard to give up chocolate.)

Philosophy doesn't make you fat. It doesn't wreck your health or force you to steal to feed your habit. In fact, it's really quite good for you, when incorporated into a well balanced life style. I seem to remember that Aristotle said something along similar lines. But enough of the salesmanship.

**III**

In September 2001, I was invited to give a presentation at an education technology conference held at University College Dublin. In the abstract which I submitted beforehand, I wrote:

> Pathways was created as a solution to a problem: how can one work in philosophy?
>
> I had no interest in writing for an audience of academic philosophers. Yet I realised I needed an audience for my work. Pathways was launched as a quest to find that audience.
>
> Pathways is unique for several reasons.
>
> It is a world-class distance learning program which has arisen outside university structures. The majority of students who enrol for Pathways have no special desire to gain a qualification, but do so purely for the love of the subject. Many are already highly qualified in other fields.
>
> Pathways was conceived as a one-to-one dialogue between student and mentor, following the Socratic ideal. The form of the program is thus determined by the unique character of philosophy itself.
>
> Pathways tuition is designed to be labour intensive, at a time when universities have been looking to distance learning and computer technology as a way of increasing the throughput of students per lecturer hour. Yet Pathways is entirely self-financing, receiving no grant aid of any kind...
>
> The hub of Pathways is the Pathways web site, and its ancillary sites. It is through the Pathways web site that students from five continents...have enrolled on the Pathways programmes. The web site is not just a marketing tool. The many hundreds of pages add value to the experience of being a Pathways student.
>
> In terms of my initial goal, I have succeeded. I have found a way of working in philosophy which I love and would never give up. Now I am looking for more philosophers to join me.
> (*Pathways: the Leading Philosophy Open Learning Programme on the World Wide Web: Abstract*, 2001)

After I had submitted the piece, one colleague wryly commented that my question, 'How can one work in philosophy?' could easily be misinterpreted as meaning, 'How can one obtain employment as a philosopher?' rather than the question I had intended, 'How can one *do philosophy*?' No matter. On the day, my audience were left in no doubt. As I explained:

> Since the Middle ages and before philosophers had produced masses, volumes of letters. Some of the most precious documents we possess about the Modern philosophers such and Descartes and Leibniz are the letters they wrote. To all and sundry. People who were asking them about their philosophy. Students they took on, or people who were working in other fields.
>
> And I had this...crazy idea that when I wrote to my students - incidentally, writing to students isn't anything like what you imagine in a course. When a student sent me a piece of work I would write an 800-1000 word letter in reply, and in the beginning I was taking up to three hours to do it. Multiply that by 20 and that's just one student! - I had this idea that if at some future date

> someone was going to collect my works, I wouldn't be embarrassed to see the letter, amongst those works. So that every letter that I wrote was an attempt to do philosophy in an honest a way as I could.
> (*Pathways: the Leading Philosophy Open Learning Programme on the World Wide Web: Video Highlights,* 2001)

My letters - I have lost count of the number, somewhere between two and three thousand - were where I have been doing the bulk of my philosophising over the last seven years. But this was not the only work I was talking about in my abstract. The Glass House Philosopher takes up the story:

> In a precious idle moment, I was doodling on a piece of paper in different coloured inks, writing down the names of all the books I planned to write. Pipe dreams. It was the Summer of 1995. *Naive Metaphysics* had appeared the previous December. That was originally intended to be *the* book. It wasn't. It raised too many questions that I could not answer. But having a book out made things possible...
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> What to do? Approach publishers? I couldn't write like that, cloistered away. The happy accident that led to my first book - finding a group of six people, all beginners to philosophy, who were prepared to come to my own home to hear each chapter - was not going to happen again. Where would I find my audience?
> (*Online Notebook*, p. 110, 24th July 2001)

The idea came to start up a correspondence school of philosophy.

> Borrowing from the title of one of A.N. Whitehead's books I described my course as an 'Adventure of Ideas'. Just like the travel brochures for adventure holidays, there would be a choice of exotic locations. On my scrap of paper, I had written the titles for six books:
>
> The Possible World Machine
> Searching for the Soul
> The First Philosophers
> Language and the World
> Reason, Values and Conduct
> The Ultimate Nature of Things
>
> ...That was it, then. Six books, six programmes, six Pathways to Philosophy. Each program would be fifteen units, each unit five, maybe six thousand words. The figures seemed daunting, but I'd written a doctoral thesis and a book. You just make a start and keep going until you've finished. At least, that's the theory.
> (Ibid..)

Now came 'the part that still amazes me':

> The sensible, logical thing to do would have been to write the six programmes, then advertise for students. But I knew myself too well. I could never do that. I could not write without someone to write for. So I took the plunge and placed a postage stamp sized advert in the London *Sunday Times*.
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> ...In the information pack, I listed four programmes as being currently available. In truth, I had only written unit one of each program. The plan was to write new units as and when the demand arose. The postage stamp advert brought around thirty requests for information packs, and out of the thirty, three plucky students enrolled for a program. Now I had my work cut out.
>
> The early Pathways students had an enormous impact on the development of the Pathways programmes. Their insistent questions and objections forced me to continually review my plans from one unit to the next. Each unit seemed like a contribution to an on-going dialogue.
> (*Ibid.)*

The ninety units were written between July 1995 and December 1997.

**IV**

Apart from letter writing, a regular chunk of my time is now taken up with the 'Ask a Philosopher' service on the Pathways web site. The last completed 20th page of Questions and Answers ran to over 60,000 words. Every two weeks I post between ten and twenty thousand words submitted by our panel of philosophy teachers and graduates. In the early days, I answered all the questions myself, but soon found myself out of my depth coping with the sheer volume of requests.

The *Philosophy Pathways* newsletter appears every two weeks and is sent out to over 700 addresses all over the world. I have been fortunate to receive some outstanding articles in recent months, including papers by Richard Schain in the USA, Dmitry Olshansky in the Russian Federation, Hubertus Fremerey in Germany and Daoud Khashaba in Egypt.

Occasionally, I get asked to write articles myself. One of the most interesting recent assignments was an essay on the philosophy of time travel to accompany a new edition of David Gerrold's 70s sci-fi classic *The Man Who Folded Himself* (Benbella Books, June 2003, forthcoming). Researching and writing the article was a joyful

experience. I have always been a fan of science fiction. For six weeks, I lived and breathed the physics and metaphysics of time.

**V**

But there is trouble in Paradise. Earlier this month, I was rocked to receive the following e-mail from a Pathways inquirer:

> Thank you for returning my e-mail. At last I have been able to get through to someone about this subject. I am not taking the piss here, I am dead serious. You do a lot of shitty work, messing around writing websites, trying to get some kind of organisation going. Has anyone really read your book? Am I being e-gnorant here? What good did all that work get you in the end?

I wrote back, 'Thanks for the reality check.' And it certainly was. I am still getting over the after shock. I think of the massive amount of time I have devoted to building up and promoting the Pathways web sites - which now run to millions of words, a maze of hypertext strung across the Internet. Every minute, hour, day, month that I have spent developing the web sites is a minute, hour, day, month when I have not been doing philosophy. Years of my life. What was the point, after all?

Everyone who tries to do commerce successfully on the Internet knows what I am talking about. How difficult it is to achieve and maintain good search engine rankings. The endless time spent checking on how well your site is doing by comparison with its competitors. The agonising over every detail of every web page to maximise the 'conversion rate' of visitors to customers.

It didn't start like that. Back in 1997 when the first Pathways web site was launched, I saw the World Wide Web as a fantastic new medium in which to work, a powerful spur to creativity. What I didn't appreciate was the extent to which as a web communicator you are controlled by your audience - assuming, of course, that you do want to communicate, and not sink into complete obscurity:

> I have heard it said that the internet is the home of hype and immodest ambitions. For every web site that is growing and thriving, there is a ghost town of sites half-built, frozen in disuse. Down any cyber street you will find monuments to personal vanity, comic and grotesque, relics of enthusiasms that flared briefly then burned themselves out, get-rich-quick schemes that rapidly went bust. Anyone with half an hour to spare can learn how to make their pipe dream a cyber 'reality'.
>
> (*The International Society for Philosophers*, 2002)

At the end of the day, I have to balance the books. Running a business is what it is, and not another thing. In my online notebook, I put a brave face on it:

> To keep Pathways to Philosophy on the road, I have to do a lot of jobs besides philosophy. Web designer, public relations officer, businessman. I don't resent the time away from my 'books'. On the contrary, I relish the challenge...
>
> On my bookshelves, I have Mark H. McCormack *What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School* and Eric G. Flamholz and Yvonne Randle *The Inner Game of Management*. I like to dip in. I read them as philosophy books, because that's what they are. The 'bottom line' is that business is about *people:* whether you are keeping a team together, or maintaining working relationships with partners and clients, or persuading potential clients that you have the solution to their needs.
>
> Dealing with people is a problem of communication: how to put over your point persuasively and effectively; seeing things from the other person's perspective; learning how to *listen* when the other person has something important to say. Sure, there are management courses that teach those things. But we are talking about something more fundamental. It's not enough to learn a handful of techniques or rules of thumb. Philosophers see through that, just as Socrates saw through the 'How to win your law suit' instruction manuals peddled by the run of the mill sophists who couldn't hack it when it came to philosophy.
> (*Online Notebook*, p. 106, 10th June 2001)

What was I trying to say? That the skills of the philosopher can be useful in business? Or that philosophy can make you a successful businessman? At any rate, my enthusiastic paean to the cash value of philosophical skills is a novel take on the story of Thales:

> For when they reproached him because of his poverty, as though philosophy were no use, it is said that, having observed through his study of the heavenly bodies that there would be a large olive crop, he raised a little capital while it was still winter, and paid deposits on all the olive presses in Miletus and Chios, hiring them cheaply because no one bid against him. When the appropriate time came there was a sudden rush of requests for the presses; he then hired them out on his own terms and so made a large profit, thus demonstrating that it is easy for philosophers to be rich, if they wish, but that it is not in this that they are interested.
> (Kirk, Raven and Schofield, 1983, p. 80)

Of course, philosophers like to flatter themselves that they can turn their great intellects to any practical task - including, if circumstances should so require, the task of making money. I wonder if that is really true. On closer inspection, Thales' tale is a story of insider knowledge rather than business acumen. I find myself in reluctant agreement with the common perception, that the philosopher is the very last person you would expect, or wish to be out for a profit.

**VI**

In March 2002, I resigned as Director of Studies of the Philosophical Society of England, a post which I had held since 1996, and formed the breakaway International Society for Philosophers. The schism was the result of a clash of views about how the Philosophical Society Associate and Fellowship Diplomas should be administered. I was accused of profiteering at the expense of the Society and risking its hard won reputation. The split was one of the biggest upsets in the Society's 89 year history.

Now those same awards are offered instead by the International Society for Philosophers, somewhat lighter in substance, perhaps, given the short time that the new organisation has been in existence. The two Societies have agreed to work in partnership, which I hope in time will prove to be more than a mere marriage of convenience. On the smart new ISFP web site (designed, this time, by one of my students) I describe the new society as a 'sister organisation to the Philosophical Society of England'.

In my Glass House notebook, I offered my analysis of what had gone wrong with the relationship between the Philosophical Society and Pathways:

> The success of Pathways has been bought at the price of apathy and stagnation in the Society. No-one could compete with Pathways, and, besides, why bother? The new members continued to pour in. Wasn't that proof that Pathways was good for the Society? But it was a deceptive mirage. The truth is that Pathways has been holding the Society back. As one of my students wryly commented, 'Pathways has become a very big tail on a very small dog'.
>
> I do not think that anything can be achieved by attempting to patch up the dispute. The main sticking point is that I believe I should have full executive power to make decisions regarding the development of my distance learning programmes, without having to consult the Philosophical Society. But this is nonsense, so long as the seal of the Philosophical Society appears on the Diploma certificates.
> (*Online Notebook*, p. 133, 28th February 2002)

Although in my view the accusations made against me were unjustified, I discovered something about myself as a result of this incident. I did not realise before how ruthless I was prepared to be when Pathways was threatened. History will record that I broke away even as moves were afoot to find a solution acceptable to both sides. I knew there could be no compromise. Certain individuals have not yet forgiven me for what I did. Yet I still feel that I was the more injured party.

**VII**

Pathways has completed one seven-year cycle. I hope that it will last another seven years. I worry that I will wake up one morning to discover that I have become a cynical entrepreneur. The danger would be greatest if I actually succeeded in making my fortune.

I would like to work productively as a philosopher again. My mind boggles at the thought of sifting through millions of words of letters and web site postings for nuggets of philosophical insight that might be scattered there. I would like to write a book - the old-fashioned way. No audience to applaud or jeer my efforts. Just myself and my thoughts. What chance is there of that, I wonder?

Sometimes I get asked why I chose philosophy. More often, people ask me why they should choose philosophy. I don't have an answer readily prepared. It all depends on who is asking the question.

You can philosophise for sheer enjoyment. Or because you want to change the world. Or to develop and hone your mental powers. Or out of insatiable, childlike curiosity. Or because your very life depends upon it. I have had the privilege to have known students - a few exceptional, but all of them interesting - who have exemplified each of these goals and ideals. And I understood perfectly where they were coming from, because I could see a little bit of me in there too. The joys of philosophy are, or have become, for me the joys of dialogue. If and when I escape back into my solitude, I shall take all of this with me. Whatever may happen in the future, Pathways has changed my life forever.

One of my favourite old films is the 50s Launder and Gilliat comedy 'Geordie' about a frail Scottish lad who is transformed by a body-building correspondence course

into an Olympic hammer thrower. The most poignant scene is when 'wee Geordie' meets his mentor Henry Sampson for the first time on the eve of the competition. One of my regrets is that I have had the chance to meet so few of my correspondence students face to face. Perhaps one day we shall have a great get together. Wouldn't that be grand!

This has been a great adventure. But it is not over yet. I have risked myself, and despite setbacks I am still in the game. I still have a healthy appetite for more.

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Geoffrey Klempner (G.Klempner@sheffield.ac.uk) gained his D.Phil from Oxford University (*The Metaphysics of Meaning* 1982) after graduating with First Class Honours from Birkbeck College London. In 1994, he published *Naive Metaphysics* (Avebury Series in Philosophy) based on lectures given to evening classes run by the Workers Educational Association in Sheffield where he continues to work as a part-time tutor.