

Thinking for a Better Life

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Among the greatest impediments to learning is prejudice. One would think that such a platitude would be obvious and would be taken seriously by academics. It is of no terrible surprise to those experienced in the academic world, however, to encounter philosophical prejudice. And, the most dangerous kind is that which is tacit. By and large, the prejudice I have in mind here is indeed unspoken. It pertains to what is considered philosophy. For after all, that which is not philosophy, on one's view, is not rightly the matter of study of proper philosophers. The prejudice that so commonly and subtly plagues academia involves the dismissal of different ways of thinking from the mainstream. These different ways are deemed unphilosophical, and are thus dismissed without justification. Of all the disciplines in which this sort of behavior is detrimental, I believe philosophy is the most deeply affected. Since this problem derives from the ways in which people tacitly or explicitly conceive of philosophy, I hope to offer an alternative conception of the field, driven by the classical American pragmatic tradition, that serves to alleviate our current troubles.

Any field of study introduces itself by setting its scope. Introductory textbooks commonly define their subject matter and others with a brief statement in the early pages. Patrick Hurley, for instance, defines logic as the “organized body of knowledge, or science, that evaluates arguments.”¹ Immediately, therefore, Hurley's study of logic is presented as a science, in contrast to non-sciences. Some might argue against conceiving of logic as a science, however, since to do science in the first place requires the use of logic. The first chapters of most introductory textbooks begin with an equally problematic foundation. All too infrequently do we pay attention to the guiding sense that we assume in setting a study's scope. Differences of fundamental definitions push some psychologists to study the mysterious and invisible depths of our minds, and others to investigate the observable behavioral traits alone as having scientific validity. In other words, the very decision of what is to be studied can clearly play a major role in the limitations of a field's objectivity. To be clear, by objectivity, I mean only the sense in which a process performed with certain equivalent conditions will produce the same sort of result for any observer. Given the great incompatibilities between their ideologies, psychoanalysis and behavioral psychology exemplify this problem. As we examine this difficulty of conceptualizing disciplines, the problem grows.

One might call this issue a philosophical problem. How can we undertake any study without in some way “stacking the deck” – i.e. deciding or evaluating in advance what sorts of questions or problems there are to be solved and consequently the scope of answers that will be taken as acceptable? Perhaps, then, the problem is best approached by those who study philosophy. For nearly any field, at least theoretically, there could develop a study of the philosophical problems with which it wrestles. In fact, there does not seem to be any particular limit to the sorts of philosophy one could study. But, this apparent virtue of philosophy leaves undetermined what the scope of philosophy would be. At this point, we arrive at a true challenge. For with nearly every philosopher, we find yet another way of looking at his or her task. Indeed, when one seeks a quick explanation for another philosopher's deficiencies, the easiest answer is to say “that's not

¹ Hurley, Patrick J. *A Concise Introduction to Logic*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth / Thomson Learning, 2003.

philosophy.” I hope to approach this problem from a perspective that addresses this persisting form of prejudice. I will frame philosophy as a name we ascribe to a variety of lived experiences, rather than as an abstract idea to which the definitions offered by some are said to be closer than others. Furthermore, these lived experiences we undergo and call philosophical, can be approached with the goal of improving one’s life. The generality of this latter goal is important, since it avoids committing to particular and assuming ends. While one might approach studies by following some sort of a call or curiosity, following these motivations or not, why else study than for the improvement of life, on the assumption that the value of knowledge is found in its uses? There are clearly better and worse ways to make a bicycle. Square tires just won’t do. In this analogy, we see the minimal way in which a value judgment can be made without ascribing necessary assumptions, such as that we all must ride.

The framework from which I intend to address the present problem grows out of the American philosophical tradition. To analyze *philosophical* beliefs, one clearly needs a theory of belief itself. This is precisely where American philosophers such as Peirce, James, Dewey, Santayana and others will help, and where other areas of philosophy are lacking. But, it is not my intention to sketch out the history of the American philosophical tradition. Nor is it my aim to offer up another definition of philosophy. Instead, I hope to show how one can employ the sorts of beliefs that originate with these American thinkers to the problem of conceptualizing philosophy. Furthermore, the perspective one derives from American philosophy is not so callous as to call questions unphilosophical. The concreteness of American philosophy focuses on the curiosities that bear a certain amount of fruit in our everyday lives. We shall return to these later on in the paper. For now, I’d like to offer a way of conceptualizing philosophy that aims to be neither exclusive, nor unfounded.

We often forget that words are names. Think of our first experiences - when we point and utter sounds, we are naming things. So too with philosophy. Although it is all the rage for academics to conspire to undercut the validity of writings and thoughts they dislike or fail to understand, the charge that certain questions are not philosophical is often groundless. Just like petty social groupings, which exclude people who are “different,” contemporary philosophy is littered with academics who consider it unthinkable to read, let alone study, certain philosophers. I believe this development has come from a forgetfulness of the origin of ideas in naming. Philosophy is the name we give to something. And, depending on who is speaking, the thing named can vary a great deal.

Although professional philosophy abounds in abstract thinking, we must not forget that abstraction begins from, or out of, concrete life itself. If there is anywhere one can look to find the beginnings of philosophy, it is in children. Children are the most curious beings. They want to learn, to touch, to try, to push, to taste, to bite, to hear, to play. Their excitement hungers for what is new, strange or unknown. Children are the most inquisitive of us all. Although they may assume a great deal when asking their questions, there is no doubt to their curiosity. Who has not experienced the curious child who asks “why?” Most parents can only take so many rounds before they grow weary of the question. Unfortunately, all too often “Because” becomes a common answer to the question, ending the inquiry out of irritation. Questions like “why did Grandma have to die?” can be answered biologically. But questioning why we must suffer at all enters the philosophical realm. Philosophical questions in one sense originate out of the child’s

search for higher purpose. Their parents seem to have answers for why it is so much of their lives are lead the way they are. It is only natural to think originally that parents can explain why things are the way they are more generally. Children finally experience existential amazement when they recognize that their parents would ask the very same questions. In many cases God provides the conceptual terminus. In others, it is wonderment or philosophical curiosity. But even in the first instance, God is questioned, as in the brilliant lived experience of the “problem of evil” we find in the book of Job. What drives us to each of these end points is curiosity. Curiosity, then, must be a fundamental element to philosophy. But, curiosity does not *direct* one’s attention. It is directed by one’s interests; and, it is a mixture of the interests people have along with the content of their environment that determines the objects of their curiosity. So, philosophy is undertaken by the curious, but *about what?* To approach this question, let us look at philosophical perplexities that arise in everyday life.

Why must there be evil for those who do all that they can to live well and respectfully? When we experience pain, why must it hurt so much? If there is sense to life and the universe, including not only the joys we experience, but also the suffering, why can’t *we* understand it? To address such questions, we often offer up abstract principles and beliefs. We come to these, in life, however, *after* we experience pain, suffering, curiosity and worry. Cartesian philosophy, and other efforts at striving for certainty in knowledge, ethics and metaphysics, are not deemed to be unphilosophical by the American philosophers. Rather, the point American philosophers focus on is that these efforts are all undertaken *after* we have had our breakfasts, secured our shelter and provided for our children. This is to say that philosophy is not prior to or more revealing than life. It is part of life. It comes from life and can serve it too.

American pragmatic philosophy avoids the disrespectful claims that other ways of thinking are not philosophical. Instead, it focuses on the many ways in which thinking can impact life for the better. So far my thoughts here may have seemed abstract, so examples will help to bring us back to life.

One example that will be treated here involves the pragmatic elements of our thoughts on death and dying. These concepts are ones that affect us all. What’s more, these phases of life involve not only a clear, biological element, but also a far more *choice-inclusive* element. I borrow this latter phrase, choice-inclusive, from John Lachs, a contemporary philosopher exemplary of the pragmatic value of philosophy. Lachs calls our attention to the great problem we find in medicine’s practice of preserving physical bodies as long as possible. If there is a heart beat, and no indication is available concerning what hospitals are to do about their patient, the body, a shell of its former lived personal self, is preserved indefinitely, often at tremendous expense, and even when the patient might be in insufferable pain. Lachs calls for the rethinking of death as more than a biological occasion. Is death the ceasing of brain function? Heart failure? Or possibly even the end of one’s abilities to enjoy life? Are those in 30 year-long comas living? There are great social costs to believing so. And this is the insight offered by the American philosopher. What are the practical consequences of one belief over another with regard to the question at hand? When we think of the social resources dedicated to preserving long-term coma patients, and on the other hand, the serious lack of funds for public schools in poor areas, Lachs’s point solidifies. What is involved in conceiving of death and dying merely biologically is not merely scientific knowledge. That knowledge is formed and formative of values. Our sense of

life and death which works well practically does not always fit the fringe cases, and in some instances can effect our decisions in a way to set priorities for the expenditure of our limited resources.

Although his example is followed far too little, Lachs's approach to philosophy is both fruitful and inspiring. It offers a style that is sincere, open to new ideas, and honestly cares about the question "what's the value of philosophy?" It is unfortunate that so few philosophers care to answer the question. Lachs explains our greatest and most plentiful resource is in the realm of ideas. Philosophers, therefore, have a great deal to contribute to society. They are not engineers, building a bridge from A to B. Rather, they examine the purposes and values of social decisions and quandaries, opening up the world of possibilities that had yet to be considered. The cliché paradigm of "thinking outside the box," which has now been appropriated by business as the most practical and valuable frames of mind, originated with philosophy. And, this effort must not be forgotten.

To sum up, in my experience, philosophy has been an appropriate name for a great variety of thinking, inquiring, and living. Coming from the American pragmatic background, philosophy is the name for thinking that is interested in improving life. This general understanding of philosophy remains true to the early Greek philosophy of Plato, who undertook to teach about the sort of life worthy of the substantial efforts that living and thinking demand. American pragmatic philosophers are thinkers who focus on how ideas can be of service to social and individual ends, and also which ends are of the greatest utility as well. Often this latter element of American philosophy is forgotten.

From the American perspective, the great debates of philosophy are approached with the question: what practical difference would there be between accepting the truth of either of the options? Furthermore, pragmatists focus on *life* as a starting point, not abstraction. Abstraction is conceived of as a tool for life, not as the proper microscope for the subject matter of reality. If life is not real, what criterion is there for comparison with other possible conceptions of reality? The American perspective does not claim that all philosophy must follow its approach. Rather, the American perspective is one which is fascinated by the question of how we can improve life through the engagement of ideas.

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