The Subject
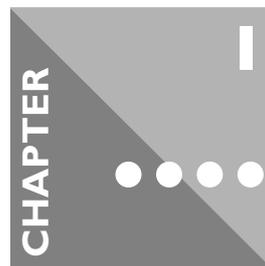
Key issues

▶ What is philosophy? How can we learn to philosophize?

▶ How can it teach us to be more effective thinkers; not just uncritical recyclers of the opinions of others, but people who can think for ourselves?

▶ Why do we search for ultimate answers? Why is it important to find the non-arbitrary explanation of things; the highest principles behind all things?

▶ If philosophical questions involve answers about the way things *had* to be, that they could not have been otherwise, how different is this from other forms of enquiry?

▶ Why should we learn to question all those assumptions we take for granted about the fundamental issues that shape our lives: about our knowledge of the world, ourselves and our relations with others?

▶ If we should, why stop there? Should we not question the very idea that philosophy is or can be the search for such foundations, perhaps even doubting whether they are there in the first place?

▶ Why are these questions even more relevant today?

Contents

■ 1. What is philosophy?

At the start of each year, as my mind turns to a new batch of students about to start their first course in philosophy, the same question comes to mind: 'What am I to say to them when they ask me "What is philosophy?"' And each year I try to answer with the same wide-eyed excitement I first felt as an undergraduate: 'This is a subject like no other that you have studied. You are about to embark on the most exciting experience of your academic lives. This will be a genuine voyage of discovery for all of us, me included. Together we will discover things that we have not seen or thought about before.'

This may seem wide-eyed and innocent, but it is the sort of excitement that drew most of us to philosophy in the first place. Like no other subject it places you at the centre of learning. We begin with the assertion that there are no right answers. You will see things from your own perspective that I have never seen before, as I will see things you have never seen. Both of our contributions are important and valuable. Of course it would be foolish to deny there are *some* right

answers, but the key to this subject is not to recognize them as such. From the moment you do, the search for truth is ended, and in this subject the process, the search, is more important than the product. The twentieth-century British philosopher Bertrand Russell once said, 'To teach how to live without certainty and yet without being paralysed by hesitation is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can do for those who study it.' Unlike any other subject, then, philosophy asks you to accept doubt and uncertainty, and search beyond the narrow confines of accepted opinion. You are left free to make your own contributions and reveal your own insights.

These are the key ingredients of a genuine voyage of discovery. It is not an exaggeration to say that it is driven by the same insatiable search for answers that drove Columbus to set sail for the New World and the first astronauts to risk their lives. Philosophy shares the same sense of wonder and passion for the ultimate answers to things. Another British philosopher, A. N. Whitehead, once described philosophy as 'the product of wonder'. It is that persistent questioning of all those things we take for granted. Accepting nothing on trust, the philosopher asks what makes our assumptions rationally defensible. Even though we may think there is no need to question them, and even though our conclusions may make us uncomfortable, this is an unyielding quest to go beyond what we know and take for granted.

Stand anywhere on the Earth's surface, look up at the sky and everything you see will be moving – the stars, the moon, the sun – everything that is except the thing you're standing on, the Earth. All the evidence and all common sense should convince us that the Earth is the centre of the universe and everything else revolves around it. To doubt this should seem like the ravings of a madman. Yet this is exactly what Galileo and Copernicus did, despite the derision of all those who appealed to common sense and threatened them with prosecution to force them back into line. Indeed, so dangerous were these thoughts to the Catholic Church that Galileo was eventually forced to recant his beliefs in 1633 under the threat of excommunication.

Philosophy involves the same nagging doubt about all those assumptions we take for granted about the fundamental issues that shape our lives: about our knowledge of the world, ourselves and our relations with others. For example, we regularly use concepts like knowledge, truth, freedom, equality and authority, but rarely do we question what we mean by them. Yet they may contain implicit assumptions about us and the world which, unknown to us, shape and direct our views about life. And once we have examined them we may find we no longer want to retain these views.

Our understanding of the world around us depends upon concepts like 'knowledge' and 'truth'. When we say we 'know' something, this can mean different things, different forms of knowledge, about which we can have serious doubts. If we say we believe in God, what sort of evidence would we need to justify such a claim? We are accustomed to believe the word of scientists, but on what grounds do we base this trust? Indeed, it's worth asking whether we can, in fact, have genuine knowledge at all about anything beyond ourselves. We can be certain of our own existence, but can we be equally certain that anything else exists?

And yet even here, where we might think certainty about ourselves is easy to find, we can still have serious doubts about how we understand ourselves. We all ask ourselves whether we are doing the right thing, not just morally, but in terms of our personal goals. We might find ourselves pursuing fame, wealth, power or just pleasure, but when we stand back from our lives, we are bound to ask whether these are worth pursuing for their own sake, or whether they are worthless as goals, perhaps even dangerous. There may be other things of much more lasting significance and more deeply fulfilling. For our own happiness and fulfilment it's necessary to discover what these might be. As the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, says, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.'

But then even closer to home, what are we doing when we think about these things and come to our decisions? On what are they based and are we free to think what we will? Thinking, feeling, intending, believing, these are all part of our everyday experiences. But how do we understand these mental processes? Are they the product of a disembodied will, which we cannot locate within the physical body, or are they the results of physical changes in the brain, just blind biochemical responses? After all, we accept without any dismay that many people are increasingly using mind-altering drugs to influence their moods and govern their mental lives.

The same can be said about all those things that govern our relations with others: the political and

moral issues that shape our daily lives. How should we conduct our moral lives? And how much power should governments have to restrict our rights and freedoms? Here most of us are more than willing to concede that there is almost endless room for doubt and difference of opinion.

For example, we might claim that democracy is the ideal form of government, or that we should always keep promises, or that we should never lie. But what sort of claims are these? Can we find an objective basis for political and moral judgements of this type, or are they all just a matter of individual opinion? If they are just a matter of opinion, is there any reason to prefer one opinion to another, or is it just a question of what the majority prefers, or perhaps even just a matter of taste?

■ 2. The relevance of philosophy

Nevertheless, despite their significance for the fundamental issues in our lives, we can still ask why these intriguing questions should be relevant to us *now*. What makes them any more relevant today than they were, say, 400 years ago, when modern philosophy began? The simple answer is that we all search for order, meaning and value in our lives: in our understanding of ourselves as individuals, of the world in which we live, and of our relations with others. We want our experience of life to make some sense, when all too often it appears fragmented and pointless. And most, if not all, of us find experience without sense intolerable. Psychologists and sociologists are frequently telling us that the rise in suicides among the young, the increased use of hallucinogenic drugs, and increased medication for depression are all signs of a growing sense of malaise, of alienation from a world that a growing number of us no longer have ways of understanding.

In pre-modern times, when societies were shaped, if not controlled, by their religious beliefs and the churches in which they worshipped, meaning and value was easy to find. Every daily activity was suffused in religious significance, from buying bread to planting crops. But since the seventeenth century, when the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment freed the individual from dependence upon the authority of the Bible and ancient texts, we have been dependent upon our unaided reason to uncover what we believe is the truth about ourselves, the world around us and our relations with others.

But this type of freedom comes at a price. The individualism born in the seventeenth century migrated from a dependence upon individual reason to uncover scientific truths, to our economic life in the nineteenth century with the triumph of *laissez-faire* capitalism, and to our political lives in the twentieth century with liberal democracy and universal suffrage. In the process it has laid waste to many of the traditional social mechanisms for creating meaning and value in our lives.

Indeed the achievements of the twentieth century were in many ways unique in marking the triumph of our attempts to create the means whereby each one of us can isolate ourselves within our own personal territory. Unlike the people of previous centuries, we acquired the capacity to draw tighter personal cordons around ourselves. With videos and television it is now no longer necessary to go beyond the home for entertainment and information. Most of us in the Western world spend at least four hours a day watching television. Within the family this process of individualization has gone even further, with children possessing their own televisions and video recorders in their own rooms, where they spend hours apart from the family under the influence of fantasies created by producers whose only concerns are sales and profits.

But even outside the home, where we're forced to confront other people on the streets or on public transport, the personal cordon can be maintained with technology, like the personal music player, that acts as a badge of privacy warning off all those who dare to intrude. And then there are even larger numbers of us who are happy to retreat from the real world into the safer confines of virtual relations on the Internet. As each generation passes we seem to be retreating further and further into the privacy and security of our own lives, spending more of our time passively observing the world through a screen.

Likewise in the West we demand as our right private access to those things we believe are essential to our lives: our own living space and forms of transport. Indeed in his book, *The Private Future* (1974), Martin Pawley points out that the equal distribution of population throughout the dwellings in any developed country would give every individual his own private room and still leave hundreds of thousands of rooms unused. A similar distribution in, say, Pakistan would result in

each room holding nine people. In some developed countries, notably the United States, the entire population could be accommodated in private cars, none of them full. In India the same distribution would result in more than one hundred persons crowding around each car.

So, if we cannot get meaning and value from our contact with others or through religious authorities, or even through meaningful work in a mechanized society, where do we find it? The answer for most of us is in the worship of materialism, of possessions. We are what we own. We are the products of a new consciousness industry, buying not just goods, but identities. In the language of consumerism objects take on a magical significance. We buy cars, not only because they are a means of transport, but, perhaps more important, because they say something about us to the outside world. They are the advertising hoardings on which we etch our identities for those who look on. It leaves you wondering what might be the epitaph of our age, compared with the more noble achievements of previous ages, like the towering Gothic cathedrals of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the great engineering triumphs of the nineteenth century. As T. S. Eliot suggests in his poem 'The Rock', it might be something far more prosaic, like the asphalt road or thousands of lost golf balls.

Although this problem is not unique to the twenty-first century, it is probably more acute for us than it was for previous generations. While we are inclined to believe that technological progress and economic growth are good in themselves, bringing efficiency, prosperity and greater consumption, we are left without any sense that there is a global meaning to our civilization. And, on an individual level, the single-minded pursuit of wealth leaves most of us hollow, without any sense of having a personal meaning to our lives. Indeed, our need for this is probably more urgent today than in previous generations. Modern technology has given Western governments the means to exert their power over any part of the world and, significantly, a much greater capacity for good and evil. Some philosophers are fond of pointing out that technology is an amplifier; that each time we commit ourselves to some technology we are endorsing and reinforcing certain values that are inherent in it. So, we ought to be sure that these are the values that should have lasting significance in our lives.

Moreover, such technological change occurs at a rapid pace, leaving most of us without the time or capacity to think ethically about its effects. The prospect of human cloning confronts us before we have had time to discuss it. GM foods are now part of the food chain, consumed by millions of people, of whom only a small percentage have had the time to discuss it and even fewer who have had any influence over the decision making. The same can be said for stem cell research, organ donations and similar ethical problems. For many who protest, sometimes violently, globalization seems to go ahead at a pace and in search of goals dictated more by multinational companies than by the individuals who will be affected. Our knowledge seems divorced from our values: we have power, but without insight. Our wealth and technology always seem to be outstripping our wisdom.

All of this points to the importance of philosophy and for doing some serious thinking about these issues. Philosophy is this search for order, meaning and value. By thinking the unthinkable and asking the most difficult of questions we can rationally explore these and other fundamental issues. In this way we can form a consistent, systematic and coherent framework of beliefs, values and assumptions, which will help us interpret experience and find some sense in it all.

■ 3. Learning to philosophize

Given this need to create such a framework to negotiate the uncertainty of rapid, bewildering change, just how are we to begin to philosophize? The first thing we must do is to make clear what we're looking for: in other words what are these fundamental issues that we need to examine? What type of questions do philosophers ask that others don't?

Put simply, the questions philosophers ask are fundamental because they concern the principles, assumptions and beliefs that underlie all our other attempts to understand ourselves and the world: psychological, economic, sociological, political and so on. The truth of many other things depends upon our answers to these questions. They may involve questions about the meaning of the ideas and concepts we use, like 'freedom', 'justice' and 'responsibility'. Or they may be concerned about what we base our knowledge on and what we mean when we say that something is 'true'. They involve examining the standards we use when we arrive at judgements we believe to be sound. Other questions concern whether there is any meaning in

life and, if so, how we are to reveal it. We are also concerned about the values we ought to hold and why, particularly in our relations with others.

As you can see, if you look at these questions carefully, they cannot simply be settled by calling upon evidence. They go beyond the findings of empirical science, which proceeds by way of experiment, testing each theory against the evidence. It explains one event, say the spread of influenza, by reference to other events, say, the spread of a new virus or changes in consumption habits that might weaken resistance to it. By contrast, philosophy doesn't confine itself to these secondary or 'contingent' factors (meaning that they might or might not have happened depending on the circumstances). Philosophers are concerned with the first causes that explain all contingent things. So, where scientists finish, philosophers begin. They will ask whether the methods employed in science are reliable; whether our observations of the world can be trusted or if they merely reflect our preconceptions; whether empirical evidence is the best indicator of the truth; indeed, whether the world as a whole is intelligible and, if it is, whether we can ever know it.

Questions like these are about fundamental issues, involving the search for ultimate answers. They are a search for the non-arbitrary explanation of things, the highest principles behind all things. We are rational creatures. We are not content with explanations that depend upon other explanations, and causes of things upon other causes, even though at times this is all we have. We search for the ultimate answer or cause of things. If we are told, 'Well, this is just the way things are!' we are inclined to go on asking 'Why?' until we get to the ultimate reason, where our explanation needs no further explanation.

As we all know, this sort of relentless questioning is most clearly seen in young children. For example, one morning last week as I took my dog for his usual walk I met my neighbours, who were taking their dog and their five-year-old son, Pearson, for a walk. As our dogs frantically chased each other around our legs tangling us up in their leads, Pearson interrogated me. Like many children of his age he asks 'Why?' questions with an unquenchable passion. Never satisfied with my answers, each one was followed by yet another:

'Where have you been, Bryan?' he asks.

'We've been for a walk around the reserve, Pearson,' I answer, already preparing myself for the next question.

'Why have you?'

'Because my dog likes to go out in the morning,' I answer, although I know it is not enough.

With crushing inevitability, he asks, 'Why does he?'

'Because he likes to see all the other dogs,' I respond, knowing that this will not settle it either.

Pearson ploughs on, 'But why does he like to see the other dogs?'

'Because he's very sociable,' I offer, hoping this might do it.

'Why is he?'

'Because all dogs are sociable,' I answer. And so the conversation goes.

Of course, in Pearson's case it was not a serious attempt to reveal an ultimate reason, but if we were in his position asking these questions, more than likely it would be. We set ourselves the task of uncovering the fundamental ground for believing what we believe. It's a search for reasons for things beyond which we cannot go. One explanation for something is more satisfactory if it explains more than the previous explanation: if it encompasses more, if it is more general. In Pearson's case he quickly reaches this point when I make the abstract statement that all dogs are sociable. At this point we are free of the actual circumstances: we have reached the general statement that applies to all dogs. At this level we may be able to discover the ultimate, non-arbitrary reason for things: the most satisfying explanation beyond which we cannot go; beyond which there is no further reason, no further explanation.

One further distinction may help in clarifying the type of question involved in philosophy. While the answers we give in subjects like history and the natural and social sciences are contingent, in that they depend upon the empirical evidence, which could have turned out differently, philosophical questions involve answers about the way things *had* to be: they could not have been otherwise. For example, in history and in the sciences we might find ourselves asking questions like, 'Were the Nazis responsible for setting fire to the Reichstag in 1933?', 'Was the fall in turnout at the last election due to the apathy of the electorate or to a revolt against all the established parties?', or 'Are the causes of global warming to be found in the

increased emissions of carbon dioxide or some other factor?'

By contrast the questions philosophers usually ask are conceptual; they are in search of answers that are necessarily true. That is, their truth is not contingent upon the prevailing circumstances or available evidence, but by virtue of their very nature in all possible worlds. Having said that, of course, we may not always be able to produce answers that are necessarily true; we may just have to settle for answers that at this time are only just probably true. The point is, however, that the type of question we ask is designed to search out necessary truths, even though we may not always be successful and have to settle for something less.

As we will see in the following chapters, we will ask questions like 'What is knowledge?', 'What is truth?', 'Is there a God?', 'What is morally right?', 'What is meant by freedom?' The answers to all these questions do not depend upon particular times and circumstances: they are true in all possible worlds. We are not just asking about the truth of proposition X, but the truth of all propositions. What do we need to make *any* proposition true?

For example, you may ask the question, 'What is knowledge?'. This is not a question about a particular item of knowledge, nor is it asking for a scientific answer about the types of knowledge we possess and the methods we use to gather it. What we are asking is what it is to have knowledge: what distinguishes it from mere belief, a hypothesis or a rumour. What do we mean when we use the word 'knowledge'; what are we looking for that would make something knowledge? If you say that it is a condition of everything we regard as knowledge that it must be true, then this assertion is not just true, but necessarily true: it has to be true of all knowledge. It is not just true as a matter of fact for this or any other item of knowledge, but by definition. The very nature of knowledge dictates it.

From this you can see these are fundamental questions, for which we aim to find ultimate answers. Many philosophers describe the process as one in which we are in search of the 'foundations' of what we know about the world, ourselves and our relations with others. In the process this has generated a range of important theories and systems of thought, all of which we will examine in the chapters that follow; systems of thought like rationalism, empiricism, idealism, realism materialism and pragmatism.

However there is an important group of modern philosophers who challenge the very idea that philosophy is or can be the search for foundations, because, they argue, such foundations are not there in the first place. Loosely described as 'postmodernists', they start from the premise that philosophers cannot be divorced from the cultural context in which they work; a context structured by ideas, ideologies, values, assumptions, methods and aspirations. All of this shapes the way they function, how they go about their work and the goals they set themselves. The search for foundations, then, is inescapably determined by the culture in which it is pursued. Philosophers, they argue, are no different from other thinkers, in that they cannot think outside a frame of reference without at the same time adopting another. The best they can do, therefore, is to pursue a clearer understanding of the culture in which they work: its literature, its history, ethics, politics and so on. And in coming to such an understanding they are, in turn, themselves contributing to its evolution.

This is an important departure from the traditional way in which we see philosophers working. Indeed, it strikes at the fundamental assumptions of modern Western culture. Since the seventeenth century scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, we have assumed there is a single objective reality, and science and reason offer the most effective method of discovering it. In contrast the American philosopher Richard Rorty, in his now-famous book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), declares that 'we will not imagine that there are enduring constraints on what can count as knowledge, since we will see "justification" as a social phenomenon rather than a transaction between "the knowing subject" and "reality".'

So, according to Rorty, our search for foundations is more a search for understanding of the beliefs, values and assumptions of each of our cultures at a particular moment in history. He explains, 'the foundations of knowledge or morality or language or society may be simply apologetics, attempts to externalise a certain contemporary language-game, social practice, or self-image.' Truth, then, is merely 'what your contemporaries let you get away with.' As a result, he concludes 'no area of culture, and no period of history, gets Reality more right than any other.'

In fact, in terms of the search for foundations, he does not believe, as we are accustomed to believe, that truth can be pinned down in objective and rational conditions that must apply to achieve an

Richard Rorty (1931–)

Born in New York and educated at Chicago and Yale, he taught at Wellesley College, Princeton University, the University of Virginia and Stanford University. He has consistently argued against the idea of philosophy as the search for foundations. Indeed he has called for the overthrow of what he has described as the 'spectatorial account of knowledge' which has dominated philosophy since Plato and Aristotle. He holds that no statement is epistemologically more basic than any other and no statement is ever justified finally or absolutely.

So the search for foundations amounts to little more than an attempt to externalize our own contingent prejudices that find their roots in our own culture. Since Descartes invented the mind, traditional philosophy's attempt to uncover timeless foundations has been an 'attempt to escape from history'. Along the same lines he also rejects the idea that sentences or beliefs are true or false in any interesting sense other than being useful or successful in terms of present social practices. In Dewey, Wittgenstein and Heidegger he claims to have found philosophers who have developed, in what he describes as the 'edifying philosophy', alternatives to the search for 'grounding' of the intuitions and customs of the present. His publications include *The Linguistic Turn* (1967), *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989).

accurate representation of reality. Rather, it is merely what it is better in our interests to believe: 'the notion of "accurate representation" is simply an automatic and empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us do what we want to do', he declares. The rest is little more than 'a self-deceptive effort to externalise the normal discourse of the day.' There is no distinction between reason and persuasion, invention and discovery, theory and practice, even between literature and philosophy. They all amount to just one thing: our attempt to present the beliefs, values and assumptions that rule our culture as reality.

Its critics see postmodernism as presenting a very real threat to the achievements of the last 400 years of modern philosophy. As the British philosopher Simon Blackburn points out,

'According to popular fears, they scoff at everything we hold dear, replacing truth, reason, objectivity, knowledge, and scientific method with fashion, rhetoric, power, subjectivity and relativism – thereby summoning our history and politics, literature and art, indeed western civilisation itself, to its doom.'

Despite the exaggeration implied in these doom-laden fears, postmodern philosophers face serious criticisms, as Blackburn suggests. They have been charged with paradox when they say that there is not truth or that truth is relative, because if there is not truth they are in effect inviting you not to believe what they say. And, similarly, when they claim the fact that there are no absolute values justifies our tolerating all values, they are elevating toleration itself into an absolute value.

The conflict between these two sets of ideas will feature throughout this book as we examine each successive theme. Like all the other problems you will be presented with, you will have to decide for yourself where you stand on this.

■ 4. The method of philosophy

Nevertheless, despite the implications of this, when we study philosophy we are not simply tracking the footsteps of those who have gone before. This is your own voyage of discovery too. As the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, and we ourselves have already discovered, 'Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.' It is a method, involving thinking skills, that lifts us above the simple and uncreative activity of merely reproducing the ideas of others, so that we are able to search for and discover answers for ourselves. In this lies, perhaps, its greatest value.

For some this comes as a shock, but for most it is a welcome liberation from the enthralment to facts that characterizes so much of our education. The problem is that we all grow up believing that education is largely about knowing things; that clever people just know a great deal. Each subject we study we assume has its own authorities, the teacher and the texts, and our role is just to sit quietly and patiently, learn the facts, memorise them, and then recall them on demand in examinations in order to trade them successfully for marks.

But by learning in this way we only exercise and develop a limited range of our intellectual abilities: the lower cognitive skills. It is often said that most

of us use less than 10 per cent of our mind's potential. In other words, the most that we set ourselves to do is to understand what someone else is arguing and to recall it accurately on demand. These are important thinking skills, but that's not all there is to learning. Indeed, in learning this way, the most important part is left out: the ability to think. What's more, you have no opportunity to introduce and use your own ideas: they are seen as irrelevant and unimportant. So you don't experience the excitement of discovering something for yourself, some insight that is genuinely and uniquely yours. This may not be something you have experienced before in learning, but it is an essential part, a daily experience, in philosophy.

Although this is not a story that derives from philosophy, it is the sort of experience you should be having as you wrestle with your own ideas. To make sure it does happen try recording your insights and how your ideas develop in your own intellectual journal. In 1953 Francis Crick and James Watson together discovered the 'double helix', the structure of DNA, for which they were later awarded the Nobel Prize. In his account of his work with Crick, Watson explains how this unpredictable, inspirational thinker would suddenly be consumed by an idea that had been long fermenting in his mind. One day on a train journey to Oxford, Watson describes how Crick suddenly saw a key part of the solution:

> Soon something appeared to make sense, and he began scribbling on the vacant back sheet of a manuscript he had been reading. By then I could not understand what Francis was up to and reverted to *The Times* for amusement. Within a few minutes, however, Francis made me lose all interest in the outside world. ... Quickly he began to draw more diagrams to show me how simple the problem was. Though the mathematics eluded me, the crux of the matter was not difficult to follow.

By the end of the hour-and-a-half journey, he explains, it was clear what they had to do.

As this example illustrates, decent thinking is a continuous, cumulative affair that goes on outside the classroom in your mind, your journal and your notebooks, producing sparks of inspiration and insights that are genuinely yours. This is philosophy, as it is any subject that involves genuine, serious thinking. We all see things from our own unique perspective, so we can all learn from one another. I'm convinced that I learn as much from my students as they do from me. Each time I examine a philosophical text or theme with a new group they help me to see things I have never seen before, because they see it with fresh eyes from a different perspective. You do have an important contribution to make. And this is the exciting opportunity that philosophy offers you.

Nonetheless, it does mean abandoning the easy, comfortable assumption that learning is just about accumulating facts. As we found out earlier, you cannot use your own ideas or develop the higher cognitive skills, like analysis, synthesis, criticism, evaluation and discussion, if all you are concerned about is to gather the facts and recall them. The German theologian Paul Tillich described the problem well when he said, 'The passion for truth is silenced by answers which have the weight of undisputed authority.' If you have a 'fact' there is nothing more to discuss, nothing to say, except to clarify details when they aren't clear. But you don't learn to think like a historian or a scientist by learning, respectively, historical and scientific facts. To learn to think involves suspending your judgement and accepting that there are doubts that need to be addressed. Only in this way can you develop the thinking skills that are so important to philosophy - the skills to analyse, synthesise, discuss, criticize, evaluate and use evidence.

And, of course, this is when learning gets interesting, because your own ideas count for something. You may think you know what a concept means; after all you have probably used it all your life. But now suspend your judgement and ask yourself, 'But what do we *really* mean by it?', and you are on your way to becoming a philosopher. Like a scientist testing a theory, you will have to think up your own borderline examples of its use to test the concept at its limits. This will allow you to see more clearly the assumptions you usually make when you use it, and reveal the interrelations it has with other ideas. In the process you will uncover the issues that are at the heart of the philosophical problem in which the concept plays a central role. This is an exciting process, but it means you must, as Russell says, learn to suspend your judgement and yet still function in a state of doubt.

Nevertheless, even though it draws upon your own ideas and insights, it doesn't mean that just *any* answer to a problem is satisfactory; it's not just a matter of opinion. Opinions may be a point of

departure; they often are. But they have to result in the right answers: those that a rational person can accept as reasonable and defensible after careful thought. In this lies the method of philosophy.

In the next three chapters we will see what this method is exactly. When we consider a philosophical problem, indeed any problem, our first step is very often to gather the evidence from which we can devise a hypothesis or theory to solve the problem. But before we do this we must be sure that we have asked the best question, the one, that is, that gets at the heart of the problem and will allow us to answer it directly. To do this we must be sure that we understand the implications of the key terms, the concepts we are using.

We are concerned here with the logical analysis of language, the meaning of the words and concepts we use. Some philosophers argue that this is the main task of philosophy, indeed, its only legitimate function: to expose the confusion in our use of language that lies beneath the contradictions in our thinking. But, although this is centrally important and is often the point at which we discover the solutions to problems, it is not all there is to devising a solution. This involves both analysis and synthesis. Not only must we suspend our judgement and analyse the meaning and implications of the terms we often take for granted, we must also synthesise arguments and evidence to devise a possible solution to the problem.

Once we have this possible solution as our theory we need to test it. In the second step, therefore, our aim is to test for their validity the arguments, which make up our theory. We must be sure that our arguments are consistent, that there is no error in our reasoning. However, the validity of an argument is only concerned with its form, not its content. So, while an argument might be valid, in that it is quite consistent and makes no logical error, it still might be untrue, because its assumptions, its premises, are untrue. This leads us to the third step.

In this our concern is to test our arguments for their truth. It involves not just checking to see that our assumptions are correct, but, equally important, checking that our theory adequately answers the problem. Beyond this we must also look at the consequences of our theory. In particular we must check to see if it is consistent with other theories we might advance to answer other problems that are connected with this problem. Our aim is to create a coherent and systematic view of the whole. Each of the theories answering the problems we believe are important must create a coherent and consistent system of ideas.

<div style="background:#cccccc">

So, to summarize:

</div>

1. Hypothesizing – designing a solution:

1.1 Asking the best question

1.2 Designing the best solution

1.3 Analysing the key concepts

2. Testing for validity – is our argument consistent? – are there any logical errors in our reasoning?

3. Testing for truth:

3.1 Are the assumptions correct?

3.2 Are the arguments true?

3.3 Is the theory adequate to answer the problem?

3.4 The consequences of our theory – does it make a coherent system of ideas?

■ 5. Conclusion

It should be clear from this that the study of philosophy brings to those who learn its method not just the excitement of genuine discovery, but benefits in the development of their minds that are not easily found elsewhere. It is sometimes said of philosophy that it detaches your mind from the real world: that it is concerned with speculative ideas that have no practical value. This may be true of some philosophers, but not of philosophy. Learning its method alone enlarges your view of the world and of yourself, liberating you from the fragile prejudices that your understanding may be built upon.

Learn well and you will likely become a more effective thinker, not just absorbing and reproducing facts uncritically. You will take less for granted, particularly the pronouncements of those we take to be authorities. You will be less willing to follow the crowd and be more prepared to doubt what seems obvious to everyone else. But, by the same

token, your own beliefs will come in for the same critical scrutiny: you will be less willing to accept the ambiguities and confusions that lie at the heart of your thinking. In this way you are likely to become more aware of the limits as well as the justifications of your beliefs.

But still, this doesn't mean that you will become an inveterate sceptic unwilling to embrace any belief. Indeed, in many respects it's quite the reverse. Your thinking will not only have more depth, but more breadth. While you will be more likely to pursue your own ideas more deeply, freeing them from unexamined assumptions, implications and ambiguities, you are also likely to have a more open mind. You will develop the intellectual strength to tolerate and understand views different from your own. Not for nothing do parents often say to me that their offspring is not just more thoughtful, creative and inventive, but is, quite simply, just a nicer person.

■ Recommended reading

Blackburn, S. *Think* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Emmet, E. R. *Learning to Philosophize* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

Nagel, Thomas. *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Warburton, N. *Philosophy: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 1992).