

Philosophy From a Distance

*'How did Pathways get started? Where did you get the idea from?' are questions that I am frequently asked. Like many projects that end up consuming virtually all of one's time and energy, Pathways began as just a passing idea. The following article originally appeared in **The Philosopher**, Vol LXXXV No 1, Spring 1997.*



BROWSING through a second-hand shop a couple of years ago, I came across a complete Charles Atlas course dating from the 50's. It was poignant to imagine the recipient in his living room, tensing and stretching through those

lonely weeks and months, dreaming all the while of newsprint images of men posing as Greek statues, and bullies with sand kicked in their faces.

Following a distance learning programme in philosophy might seem like the intellectual equivalent of the Charles Atlas course. However, there is one vital difference. Instead of slavishly rehearsing exercises, you stretch your mind through an extended process of dialogue. You learn to think and argue with someone who can argue back. Above all, philosophy is about the meeting of two minds in the pursuit of truth, the Socratic art and science of dialectic.

The idea of starting a correspondence school of philosophy first came to me as I shuffled through the yellowing sheets with their blurred sketches of arms, legs and torsos. How would you do it? What would you call it? I pictured paths through a forest with travellers and their guides converging on a central clearing. Anyway, the name seemed right. Pathways to Philosophy.

Give the student a choice of half a dozen self-contained, book length programmes. Divide each programme up into, say, fifteen units to be posted at fortnightly intervals. Be prepared to respond at length to your students' notes and queries, the thoughtful and the bizarre, sending back detailed annotations with each essay. Make sure to designate times when you will be there at the other end of a telephone line in case a student needs a bit of extra support, or gets stuck, or just wants a sounding board. These are the basic ingredients you need for a correspondence school of philosophy. And one more thing. You will have to write – or find – around half a million words of original course materials.

What kind of person joins a distance learning programme in philosophy? Or, more to the point, what kind of person ought to join? Any seven-stone weakling can develop muscles given time, but to learn philosophy you need a genuine appetite for the subject. If you are simply tired of losing arguments and want to win some for a change, then you would benefit more from assertiveness counselling. If you want to dazzle your friends and enemies with your argumentative and rhetorical skills, then a legal training will serve your needs nicely. But if you have a taste for high altitudes; if you are *not* looking for an idea, or a person, to follow; if you value honesty above certainty, and freedom of thought above all else, then – possibly – a Pathway to Philosophy may be just the thing you are seeking.

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