

Pathways to Philosophy

PROGRAM A: INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

The Possible World Machine: Unit One

Introduction

THERE is a recognized tradition of philosophers using fiction as a medium for conveying their ideas and theories. Plato wrote dialogues in which he portrayed his teacher, Socrates, examining the philosophical beliefs of the citizens of Athens, seeking out their views on questions concerning whose answers he claimed – with some degree of irony – to ‘know nothing’. It was in the process of ‘dialectic’, Plato believed, in the conflict set up between opposing philosophical views on such questions as the nature of justice, or knowledge, or courage, or Being, that the art and science of philosophy lay. His dialogues represented, in a quasi-fictional form, inquiries into fundamental problems that still concern us today, as well as providing classic examples for other thinkers and students to follow. They were also meant to work effectively on a dramatic level, and it is indeed likely that many were performed before a public audience.

As well as providing the opportunity to examine philosophical issues in the form of dialogue, fiction also serves as a means for raising questions and testing theories, by placing characters in a practical predicament which requires not only them but also us, the readers, to confront philosophical problems. Perhaps the most famous example in recent times is Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel, *La Nausée*, in which the central character, Roquetin, comes face to face with the agonizing question of the freedom of the individual to act in defiance of all one’s previous goals and aspirations: what has come to be known as the ‘existential predicament’. The reader comes to share Roquetin’s sense of solitude, and also feel the disquiet and even terror at the prospect of

what the making of perhaps just one radically 'free' choice would mean in one's life. More than that, however, we are brought to question on a philosophical level just what it means for a human being to have the freedom to choose to do one thing rather than another.

In contrast with the case of Sartre, many, indeed the majority of writers who have produced fiction with a philosophical dimension would not regard themselves as philosophers. It is arguable that all serious fiction, in raising issues of fundamental human concern, has aspects that are relevant to philosophy; just as we in our everyday lives may on occasion be brought to face such questions ourselves. In the present century, however, there has been an explosion in a literary form that proves particularly effective in stimulating philosophical inquiry; and that is science fiction. Often, there is no pretence of literary sophistication. The aim is rather to stimulate in the most direct way the reader's wonder and amazement at possible worlds that might conceivably correspond to the future of our own world, or worlds that might, but for an accident of history, have been our world. The better examples of such writing prove particularly effective in encouraging the beginner to think about philosophy.

What, then, is a possible world? Even the most mundane piece of fiction describes a possible world: it is the way things might have been, or might yet be. There are in fact two notions of 'possibility' in play here. When we speculate about the unknown past, or look forward to an unknown future, we are interested in things that for all we know might have been the case, or with things that as far as we are able to predict now might yet come to be the case. Taking into account what I know now, or, at least, what I take myself to 'know' (that is one question that will concern us), it is *not* possible, in this sense, that I am now in Kuala Lumpur, or that Sheffield is the capital of Great Britain. Yet, in another sense, it *is* possible that I might have been writing these words seated in my hotel room in Kuala Lumpur – had I won the National Lottery and decided to go on that round-the-world trip I have always promised myself! Sheffield might have been the capital of Great Britain, had the history of the British Isles been radically different from the way it actually was. In some other possible world, I *am* in Kuala Lumpur, Sheffield *is* the capital of Great Britain.

It is not in these relatively mundane alternative worlds that philosophers are interested, however. They are concerned, rather, with possibilities that bring our very concepts, the limits of human thinking, into question. Again and again, throughout this course, we shall encounter worlds that in many cases seem quite like our own and yet for one reason or another appear to lie beyond the range of what we are able to conceive of as possible, or else rest on the very borderline of possibility. The reader will be invited to consider what one would think about a certain issue if such-and-such a state of affairs were to come about. – Suppose, for example, that the very next moment you were to wake up on a laboratory bench, with wires attached to your scalp, gazing up at a white-coated scientist who told you that the ‘life’ you thought had been yours up to that moment in time was all a dream: how would you establish the truth? Suppose someone found a way to accurately predict every human action: what would become of our so-called free will? Suppose human beings acquired the capacity to split like amoebas, with each of the two resulting persons possessing all the physical and mental attributes of the original, and that this process happened to your own body: which of the resulting pair of identical ‘yous’ would *you* be?

The context may seem at first frivolous, but the student soon learns that such seemingly improbable examples serve to raise, in a particularly vivid and effective way, philosophical problems concerning – as in the above examples – the possibility of knowledge, or the apparent conflict between human freedom and physical determinism, or the nature of personal identity. (All these examples will be covered in future course units.) The student will find that the same mental agility needed to conceive soberly of the consequences of such science fiction hypotheses, without balking at their seeming absurdity, is the quality of imagination and logical thought needed by the philosopher. Far from being merely an entertaining game or diversion, inquiries such as these prove to be of fundamental importance in sketching not so much the outer limits, as the very structure of the map of human knowledge.

First Dialogue

'Good morning, Dr Phillips. What'll it be today?'

'Just give me a pack of cough sweets and my paper. Thanks, Marjory!'

'What's up? You're looking a bit depressed.'

'It's my evening class. The first meeting is less than a month away, and I'm stuck with the same old problem: how can I keep my regulars interested, while not putting the new students off by assuming things they know nothing about? I mean, there's only a limited number of ways you can teach Introduction to Philosophy.'

'Are there really? I'm surprised to hear you say that!'

'Well, of course, there are many different problem areas we could tackle. Philosophy is a vast field, after all.'

'Easy to get lost, then?'

'I'm not afraid of that. It's no bad thing for the philosopher to feel lost sometimes. The feeling of not knowing your way about is part of the sense of philosophical wonder, which is one of the most important things I try to instil in my students. Too much guidance setting the problems out with neat and tidy beginnings and endings can sometimes be as bad as too little.'

'So there's no map of the world of philosophy?'

'No, Marjory, and there never will be. All I can offer my students are partial sketches of the landscape.'

'What is the difficulty then? If the subject really is as inexhaustible as you say, then it should be easy to find a new approach.'

'Sure, there's half a dozen different things we could do, each an equally effective way of getting into the subject. That's not what's worrying me. It's just that I feel there ought to be a different way of teaching than simply giving out lectures. Something that will liven things up, excite their imaginations.'

'You surprise me, Dr Phillips. Philosophy being such a serious subject, I mean.'

'That doesn't imply that it has to be dour! Humour, you know, can sometimes be used to make a serious point.'

'I somehow never saw you as a stand-up comedian. That's something I'd love to see!'

'So would I, Marjory. The trouble is, I'd have a hard time finding an

audience capable of seeing the joke! And entertaining philosophy students wouldn't provide much of a living. I haven't got the talent for that, anyway.'

'What can you do, then? What is it you want to say?'

'I suppose the basic idea has to do with imagination and reason. Do you know the play *Hamlet*?'

'I'm not a complete dunce, you know!'

'There's a famous part where Hamlet says to Horatio, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy," or words to that effect. People quote those lines at you when you cast doubt on their cherished beliefs about UFO's or astrology, or suchlike. They mean to imply that rejecting a belief on the grounds of insufficient evidence is somehow proof of one's lack of imagination. But of course it's *they* who are the one's who fail to imagine the catastrophic effects on the fabric of human knowledge if their fantastical speculations were granted the same status as theories that stand or fall by the strict standards of science.'

'I think there might be UFO's. How can you be sure that there aren't?'

"'Might" is the operative word. All sorts of things might be the case, as far as our knowledge goes. But you don't believe something just because it might be so, do you?'

'I suppose not.'

'Well then. In their own way, philosophical theories have to meet just as strict standards as those of science. Only with philosophy, the test is not observation and experiment but reason and logic. A philosophical theory typically makes a claim about what *must* be the case - or, what is the same thing, what is the case in all possible worlds - on pain of a logical contradiction. In a way, you could compare it to arithmetic. However different the world might have been from the way it actually is, two and three would still have made five.'

'Rubbish! Suppose in some other world the number we call "five" was called "six". Then two and three would have made six! Admit it, I've got you there!'

'Ouch! You're confusing numbers with the names of numbers.'

'Oh, sorry. But what on earth are the things that the names of numbers name, then? I thought numbers were just marks on paper, after all.'

'I agree that what you've just raised is a fascinating question, but let's not get into that now.'

'You always say that!'

'Look, the question I want to stick to now concerns the subject matter of philosophy as such. Just what are philosophical theories about?'

'Well, all the times you've come in here you've never succeeded in explaining it to me.'

'I realize that! I've begun to think now that it's actually a mistake to try to state, in general, what philosophical theories are "about". That would be like a cut-and-dried definition of philosophy. The more clear-cut it became, the more the definition itself would look just like one more philosophical theory, that you could take or leave.'

'So what about imagination, then?'

'I'm coming to that. If you had a set of given assumptions and all you had to do was discover what followed logically from them, you would not need to use your powers of imagination the way philosophers do. The thing about philosophy is that there are no fixed starting points. That looks like a license for making up anything you like, but it isn't.'

'Oh yes?'

'What I mean is that it's as if we've always been used to seeing things fit together in a certain way, and then we discover something that doesn't fit. We need imagination to get out of that kind of fix, yet more often than not it's imagination that got us into the fix in the first place. We discover possibilities by picturing them in our imagination, and those possibilities seem to show that the way we interpret the world as it actually is doesn't add up...'

'What a load of nonsense! What you're saying sounds like the joke explanation of cricket given to a foreigner. You know, the one that goes, "There are two sides, and one side is in and the other side is out. The side that's in stays in until everyone is out, and then the other side goes in," and so on. I'm sorry, Doc, but I just don't know what you mean by "things" not "adding up".'

'You have to know what the particular philosophical questions are.'

'I don't know what to say. It seems to me that you've got to do something to make the questions themselves come alive. If I was a student, I'd want to see not just abstract discussions of this problem or that, but human characters caught up in situations which forced them to confront philosophical problems.'

'You mean I should try using fiction?'

'Why not? Go on, give it a try! What have you got to lose?'

'I'm not sure my students would get the point.'

'Give them some credit! Anyway, you said you wanted to stimulate their sense of wonder, didn't you? Better still, why not try science fiction? I've got shelves of paperbacks I could lend you. My husband is mad about the stuff. Read a few and see what you make of it. Is that a deal?'

'It's a deal!'

The Possible World Machine

For weeks, I had been pestering my friend the Professor to let me look round his secret laboratory. I'd never have known about it but for a casual remark dropped in the pub about an experiment he was working on 'at home'. Since then, I had hardly been able to contain my curiosity. Yet now, as I huddled on the doorstep in the rain, I was beginning to have second thoughts. Why all the secrecy? I began to glance anxiously towards my car. Before I could turn round, however, a single note chimed and a wizened face appeared at a tiny 3-D screen in the centre of the door, like a goblin popping out from a cuckoo-clock.

'You're early! Well, you'd better come in.'

Inside, the building was larger than an aircraft hangar, and full of strange machinery whose purpose I couldn't begin to figure out. How could all this fit into a small cottage? The old man saw the question forming on my lips.

'As you crossed the threshold, you were shrunk to a tenth of your normal size.'

'Where's the rest of me then?' I replied, gingerly feeling the top of my head. The old man guffawed.

As I looked round, one contraption with crystal rods and coils of shiny yellow wire jogged my memory of a story I had read long ago.

'A time machine!', I exclaimed.

'That's nothing,' replied the Professor. 'I was making those when I was still at school. No, this little beauty will take you to any possible world of your choice.'

I tried to take in what he had said, but it made no sense. 'What is a "possible world"?'

'You know perfectly well!', the Professor replied impatiently. 'Have you never had thoughts about the way things might have been, if the circumstances had been different, or what might have happened if you had chosen to do something other than what you actually did? Well, for every possibility you can think of, and many, many more beyond your feeble imagination, there is a world, a whole universe where that is the way things actually are. Take a simple case. Suppose you had not come here today...'

He stared at me intently, eyebrows raised, waiting for the penny to drop. I saw myself in my mind's eye watching football on TV, sipping a can of beer, surrounded by the half-chewed remains of a cheese and pickle sandwich.

'You mean there's an actual universe where I'm at home now in my flat?'

'Yes.'

'Eating a cheese and pickle sandwich?'

'Eating a caviar sandwich, if you like.'

The idea appealed to me. 'How could I afford that?'

'Your Grandmother left you some money in her will. Or maybe in that world caviar is as cheap as peanut butter, who cares?' The Professor was getting excited. 'But those are trivialities!' Just think of the possibilities. Suppose there had never been a Second World War. Suppose the wheel had never been invented. Suppose humans had evolved from birds. Suppose...'

The old man jabbered on, but I had ceased to listen. My head was spinning. Finally, I managed to gather my thoughts. 'Where *are* all these possible worlds, then?'

The Professor was silent for a moment, then smiled. 'A good question. I suppose you'd expect me to say far off in space, or in the distant past or future. Well, they're not. Every possible world is in its own "space" and "time", and not related either spatially or temporally to the space and time of our universe.'

'How could I visit another possible world if it's not in our space?'

'That's difficult to explain. All I can tell you is that once you're there you'll

travel around like a ghost. You can experience the things that go on, even take the point of view of the person who would have been you in that possible world. But *you*, the actual you talking to me now, won't be able to do a thing.'

But now a different question occurred to me. 'What about the possible worlds in which I never existed at all?'

'Yes, there are many worlds in which you do not exist, far more indeed than the number of worlds in which you do exist. Just think what a fantastic coincidence it is that a particular sperm fertilised a particular egg and made the embryo that grew into you, or that your parents ever met, or that they ever existed!'

This troubled me greatly, though I wasn't exactly sure why. I decided to change tack. 'You said there are possible worlds I could never imagine. What is it that determines whether a world is possible? How different could the universe be from the way it actually is? What I mean is, what are the limits of possibility?'

'You should know better than to ask me that!', the Professor snapped. 'I'm a scientist, not a philosopher. I can only tell you about what I have been able to discover on the basis of observing real facts. Even if one were to live a million lifetimes, one could only hope to visit a tiny fraction of the possible worlds that exist.'

I was going to ask just how long one would have to live to have time to visit them all, but I stopped myself. The question about the limits of possibility wasn't a scientific question. It was a question for philosophers. But what is philosophy?

By now, the Professor had switched on the machine. The crystal rods began to glow with an eerie blue light. 'Do you want to try it out? Where would you like to go first?'

But my mind was racing ahead. I thought about all the questions I had always puzzled over, questions which no-one I'd ever met had been able to help me answer. One could fill one's head with all kinds of strange and wonderful experiences and still be totally ignorant. Are all possible worlds in a 'time' and 'space'? Why can't there be worlds where there is no time, or where all that exists is conscious experience? Why is it that I find this person, myself, in this actual world, out of all the worlds I might have found myself in? What's so special about it? How do I even know which possible world I'm

in? For example, how do I know that this world isn't one of the possible worlds where all that exists is my own dream? Come to think of it, even supposing that there was to be a person exactly like me in a world exactly like this, why did that person have to be me? Travelling around in the Professor's machine could never tell me what I wanted to know. True, there are possibilities one can't imagine. But it is also true that we imagine things that aren't actually possible, things that seem to make sense but are logically absurd. One could travel for ever between possible worlds and never find out which one's don't exist!

'I'm not interested in your machine,' I told the old man. 'I'm going to use my own mind instead.'

Second Dialogue

'See this book?'

'That's David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, isn't it, Derek?

'That's right! I'd like to read something to you. I think the class would find it quite relevant to what we talked about today.'

'Fire away.'

'The quotation is from Section 12, Part III. This is what Hume says: "If we take in our hand any volume, of divinity or school metaphysics for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion." What do you say to that?'

'You know, I'm not in favour of burning books.'

'That's not funny!'

'Sorry. I agree with you that Hume's "fork", as it has come to be known, is

one of the most serious challenges to philosophy.'

'Hume isn't questioning the activity of philosophy as such. He was a philosopher, and one of the greatest. His challenge is to metaphysics.'

'It amounts to the same thing, in my view. Take away metaphysics and you take the heart out of philosophy.'

'So you say!'

'I don't expect you to accept my authority. I just want to lay out the arguments. I've explained how philosophy, in the form of metaphysics, aims to go beyond the mere definition of words, beyond the clarification of our beliefs, in its relentless search for necessary truths concerning the nature of reality. Like arithmetic, these truths would hold in all possible worlds. But unlike arithmetic, they would convey substantial information about reality: for example, that every event necessarily has a cause, or that God exists. Now I'm not saying that the supporters of metaphysics are right about either of these particular cases. All I am saying is that we have to consider each question on its merits.'

'You still have to reply to Hume's challenge.'

'I don't see why I have to. What I am refusing to do is answer Hume's challenge in the general terms in which it's stated. Hume asks, in effect, How can there be a *third alternative* between statements of contingent fact that are the province of science, and statements whose truth is fixed simply by the meanings of their component words, or else by rules of logic or calculation. All I am prepared to say is that I just don't know, but I'm going to have a jolly good look! – Yes, Gloria?'

'I just want to say that I think Hume is wrong. There are lots of alternatives to the one's he considers.'

'Name two!'

'Well, Derek, for a start there's an example in the story about the possible world machine. The sceptic asks, "How do I know that the world which I seem to experience is real and not just my own dream?" An answer to the sceptic, a proof that a world external to one's own mind really does exist, would be a truth of metaphysics.'

'What you're saying is that you think that metaphysics can prove that there is no possible world in which all that exists is your own conscious experience. That's despite the fact that we all agree that it is possible to imagine that such a world is the world that actually exists! How could you

ever hope to prove, purely by reason and logic, that such a world is not the world that actually exists?’

‘I’m not saying I can prove it, Derek. I only said that if such a thing could be proved that would be a truth of metaphysics.’

‘If all the world was apple pie, and all the sea was ink, and all the trees were bread and cheese – perhaps that would be one of your precious truths of metaphysics!’

‘Well, really! I don’t have to put up with this!’

‘Look, both of you. The subject we’re concerned with is far too important to allow the argument to turn into a slanging match. I agree with both of you, in a way. Derek is right that merely giving examples that would meet Hume’s challenge, if they could be made to work, isn’t to actually meet the challenge. It’s not enough to say what would be a truth of metaphysics, if only one could prove it. What Hume wants is the proof, and nothing less than the proof. But equally, I don’t see how one can foreclose the possibility, as Hume seems to do, that philosophers will, by diligent searching, find the needed arguments. In fact, if you look in the philosophical journals today, you will find many examples of arguments which purport to establish truths of metaphysics. What I am saying is that those arguments have to be assessed on their individual merits. – Patrick, did you have a point?’

‘Yes I do, but I’m not sure that it’s relevant to the discussion we’ve been having.’

‘Try me!’

‘What I’ve been worried about is these possible worlds themselves. What are they? Where are they? You talk of them as if they’re really solid and real, like the tables and chairs in this room. Somehow, that makes me feel very queasy.’

‘Suppose I did claim that possible worlds were real, why would that be a problem?’

‘Of course that’s a problem! The existence of “real” possible worlds out there somewhere is a perfect example of the kind of metaphysical proposition Hume rejects!’

‘You’ve had your say, Derek, give Patrick a chance.’

‘I guess it comes down to this. My worry – I don’t know exactly how to put it but – saying that possible worlds are each as solid and real as this one just seems a very extravagant claim to make. It’s one thing to say that we

think about possible worlds in our imagination. Sure, when you think about a possible table or a possible chair you are thinking about a possible solid table or solid chair. But still, the possibilities one thinks about have no existence outside the mind. They're not really *out there*, so to speak. To exist, to be real, is just to be part of the actual world, this world we all live in. To think of how things might have been different is to think about something unreal, something that has no existence apart from our thinking or talking about it.'

'Well I think I can prove that possible worlds are real.'

'Go on, Lucy!'

'All right. Anything we talk about has to be real in some sense or else we couldn't talk about it. Agreed? For example, Sherlock Holmes is a real character of fiction. He exists in the pages, so to speak, of the books Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle wrote. Now, possible worlds don't have to be "real" in the way this actual world is real, if you see what I mean, any more than fictional characters are supposed to be actual living people. But these other worlds do have the kind of reality that applies to things of that sort, I mean, the kinds of things that we think about as being possible rather than actual. There's nothing more to say!'

'Yes there is. You haven't explained to Dr Phillips how possible worlds can be anything more than just creations of our own minds. Sure, everything is what it is, in its own way. Fictional characters are fictional. Possible worlds are possible. And I suppose numbers are numerical and minds are mental. But the philosophical question is, In *what way* are numbers or minds or possible worlds "real"? Do numbers exist outside our minds or are they just marks on paper? Are minds themselves something distinct from matter, or are they just very complex physical structures? And the same with possible worlds. Are they just something manufactured out of the stuff of our own imaginations or are they something more?'

'And I suppose you'd say, Patrick, that an argument against the reality of possible worlds is that supposing them to be mere creations of our minds explains everything we want to say about them?'

'I think so.'

'Well, I don't!'

'Yes, Brenda?'

'Look, are we all agreed that when we say things about possible worlds, that is, when we talk about what might have happened if such-and-such had

happened, we intend to say something true? Dr Phillips?

'Sure.'

'And, similarly, don't we sometimes make the claim that certain things or situations are, in themselves, possible or impossible, and intend such claims to be true?'

'OK. So what?'

'I don't see where this is going.'

'It's very simple, Derek. What we can or cannot imagine, or what we think about possible worlds, is not what *makes* those worlds real. Because we can be wrong. Our thoughts about possible worlds are true or false depending on something – whatever it is – that is somehow independent of those thoughts. What makes possible worlds real, in other words, can't simply be our thinking about them. Our minds discover something that has a reality independent of our minds.'

'Then there really is a possible world made of apple pie!'

'Why not?'

'Who baked it, then?'

'Well, if an apple-pie world might have existed in the place of our world, then it would presumably would have had to have been baked by someone.'

'Or maybe God might simply have chosen to create an apple-pie world instead of the world He actually chose to create? Who knows, He might have been feeling hungry!'

'I'm not going to reply to that, Derek.'

'I think we'd better finish now, before the discussion degenerates any further! I'd just like to leave you with a thought about what bothers me most about possible worlds. It's something that none of you have mentioned, and yet it seems the most worrying of all. We all know that awful, terrible things have happened to human beings – deprivation, war, torture – right throughout the history of the world, and still continue to happen now. For all the joy of human existence there is also an immensity of human suffering. Just to think about all the actual human misery that we can do nothing about is a burden we all have to bear. Yet if possible worlds really exist, with individuals as solid and real as ourselves, then there must exist worlds immeasurably worse than our own. The burden of contemplating that possibility I, for one, find just too much to face. It's just unthinkable that all that infinite horror really exists.'

'That's not a philosophical argument. That's just an expression of your own personal feelings.'

'I know, Derek.'

'I thought we were supposed to be doing philosophy.'

'We are. But maybe there comes a point where rational argument just no longer seems to be to the point. The philosopher F.H. Bradley once wrote, "Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct, but to find these reasons is no less an instinct." I think anyone who shared the feelings I have described would, at the end of the day, simply refuse to accept any argument for the reality of possible worlds, however plausibly it was set out. You'll see as the weeks go by that this is not the only case where certain philosophical arguments clash with what we believe "on instinct". I'm not saying which in the end is the one we must always follow. It's a problem. I think I'll leave it there for now.'