Ask a philosopher!

The 'Ask a Philosopher' service was launched on the world wide web in 1999.

The following questions and answers are selected from the Ask a Philosopher *pages on the Pathways to Philosophy web site. The questions were submitted between August 1999 and January 2001.*

I would like to thank Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr. for originally asking me to collect my answers together in book form. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank all past and present members of the Ask a Philosopher for their many fine contributions to the answers pages.

Last but not least, thank you to the all the people who have submitted questions that have puzzled and inspired us.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Daye asked:

How does one take the infinite truths that they learn and encapsulate them into instant truths that people can read and understand? How can one take something that they found profound and a universal truth and help others to realize that too?

Your question is about teaching and also about philosophy. The philosopher who has thought about this question more than any other is Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations.* But one could also cite the example of Descartes' *Meditations.*

Let's say that you have discovered a profound and universal truth and you write it down. That is not enough, because the reader needs to be persuaded of its truth. Well, suppose you give the argument, would that be enough? In philosophy, the answer would in many cases be, No. The reader can follow the logic of an argument and still fail to grasp the meaning of its conclusion. Something more needs to be done.

A good teacher can achieve more than can ever be achieved by the written page. In the process of dialogue one engages with an individual, and each individual's needs are different. The process by which you came to appreciate those truths is one you can repeat with others, and so understanding is passed on, not all at once, but in gradual stages.

What is remarkable about philosophical education, however, is how much we all have in common. Descartes conceived his great work, Meditations on First Philosophy from a heuristic standpoint. By adopting the very personal style of a series of private meditations, Descartes invites the reader to do the same. The reader is encouraged to look within themself, and find what Descartes finds there.

Wittgenstein, in the *PhilosophicalInvestigations*, invites the reader to participate in a form of therapy. At every stage, he gives voice to the reader's doubts and worries. So you find a number of voices, besides Wittgenstein's own. Some times, it is not always easy to tell whether it is Wittgenstein speaking. Unlike Descartes, Wittgenstein never tells the reader where this is all leading. The process is completed when the reader has successfully battled with their illusions, when they are no longer tempted towards false theories of the nature of consciousness and the self.

My practical aims as a teacher are perhaps more modest than your question implies. I don't expect all my students to agree with me. It is enough that they learn to see the question. I do not see that as in any sense a failure. There is no philosophical truth that is so true that one cannot conceive how an intelligent person could be incapable of believing it.

NATURE AND USE OF PHILOSOPHY

Yamilette asked:

What is special about philosophy that distinguishes it from other intellectual endeavours like mathematics, science and history?

Some people have claimed that philosophy is a purely abstract field that is of no help in dealing with practical everyday problems. Based on your characterization of philosophy, what are your views about this?

What definition of philosophy, or characterization of its aims, methods or subject matter would encompass all the questions and answers raised on these pages? I doubt whether any would.

There are branches of mathematics, notably set theory and foundational studies, as well as intuitionist mathematics and logic, that have a strong philosophical component. The same is true of quantum mechanics and cosmology in physics. In history, the philosophical question of the nature of historical causation, or the criteria for evaluating a historical explanation are issues that historians themselves discuss and do not merely brush to one side as 'the concern of philosophers'.

We philosophers love to be useful. Philosophers sit on committees debating euthanasia and genetic research. They inspire politicians to write their speeches and election manifestos. But I believe the search for a justification of philosophy in terms of its usefulness ultimately leads to a dead end.

It is a great thing when philosophical puzzlement propels the investigator – the mathematician, or the physicist, or the historian – into aspects of their subject that they had not previously explored, into new approaches and new ways of thinking. For one whose vocation lies elsewhere, the questions of philosophy can be an inspiration, its methods a powerful tool of discovery.

For one whose vocation is to be a philosopher, the sole and complete justification for philosophy is a sense of wonder that pursues questions for their own sake, for no other reason than because one feels gripped by them. For those that need it, the question of justification is irrelevant; for those that do not, the question has no answer.

Kanokwan asked:

I can't separate the thinking of philosophers from that of psychologists. So I want to know, What is the difference between Philosophy and Psychology? Why should we study philosophy?

The best way to illustrate the difference between philosophy and psychology would be with a parable. After making the first Mars landing, a group of Earth astronauts encounter some Martians. Unfortunately, the minds of Martians work so differently from the minds of humans that despite many months of painstaking effort, only very slow progress is made translating Martian language into a human language. Martian psychology is so radically different from human psychology.

Yet there are areas where Martians and Humans can converse relatively easily. Martian and human scientists can compare views about the ultimate structure of matter. Martian and human mathematicians can talk about advances in set theory. Martian and human philosophers have no difficulty discussing the pros and cons of the philosophical theory of mind-body dualism.

Up until the present century, it was taken for granted that a full education would include the study of philosophy. Philosophers broadly agreed with Aristotle who defined man as the 'rational animal'. Aristotle believed that to live the best life it was necessary that we should exercise our mental faculties to their fullest extent, and to employ them for the best purposes. Philosophy was the subject that fulfilled these demands better than any other human activity.

Nowadays, however, philosophers seem to have scaled down their expectations. Philosophy has become just another branch of academic study. I think that this is a pity. Present day philosophers have lost the sense of how vitally important philosophy is for *living well.*

Cicely Francis asked:

How would you compare and contrast philosophy and religion, and also philosophy and science?

One of the ways of approaching the question what philosophy is, is to explain what philosophy is not. Philosophy is not religion. Philosophy is not science.

The two statements I have just made about philosophy do more than simply narrow down the field of possibilities concerning what philosophy is, or might be. It is one of the features that essentially belong to the activity of the philosophy that one labours under the intermittent or constant temptation towards seeing philosophy as a kind of religion, or, alternatively, as a kind of science.

In the opening paragraphs of my paper, 'Can Philosophy be Taught?' (http://www.philosophypathways.comguide/teach.html) I talk about the temptation to 'make a God out of philosophy'. In my paper, I called that a 'foolish mistake' and offered the throw away remark, 'I sincerely hope it's not one I've ever been tempted to make'. But that is untrue. I have been tempted. Otherwise, how would I know what I was talking about?

Worship, and a conception of what is holy, are the core of religion. (I don't necessarily mean worship of a personal God, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition.) Religious practices, like prayer and meditation, are designed to open ourselves up to experiencing, or receiving, that which is immeasurably higher than us, that which is what we are not.

Philosophy, or the greatest philosophical or metaphysical systems, are merely a product of human endeavour. To worship what we ourselves have made is idolatry.

Nor is philosophy science. Once again, you can't really understand what that means if you have not, at some time, wished that philosophy could be made 'scientific'. To qualify as a science, an inquiry does not need to be based on

observing or collecting facts, or putting forward empirically testable hypotheses. Mathematics is a science. But philosophy is not mathematics. Even Plato, who famously put above the doors of his Academy, 'Let no-one who has not studied mathematics enter here' knew this. Even, I believe, Descartes, despite his well-advertised attempt in the *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations* to apply the 'geometrical method' to philosophy.

In philosophy, there are no fixed starting points. No philosophical term of any consequence has ever been successfully defined. One is constantly striving to understand the significance of the things that the on-going dialectic obliges, or tempts us, to say. We never quite know where we are. That is why the illusion of a 'scientific' philosophy appears so tempting.

Brooke asked:

Please help me answer this question: Identify and expound upon what effects Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have had on our lives within the past 50 years.

You haven't asked for much!

You have obviously been given this as an essay question. I can only guess at what sort of answer your instructor was expecting.

Take away Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and you take away the starting point of 2,500 years of Western philosophy. Imagine a possible world where philosophy met a dead end and the early speculations of the Presocratic philosophers were buried and forgotten. Or imagine a possible world where philosophy started out on an altogether different basis from the Socratic method, or the theories of Plato and Aristotle.

One can imagine these things in the abstract, the problem is that, as a working philosopher, it is simply impossible to subtract the influence on one's whole way of thinking that these historical facts represent, or imagine how one might have thought differently. Philosophers are always trying to think differently, trying to break out of the confines of starting points and assumptions. The difficulty is that one can never know how far one has succeeded, in the face of the suspicion that, given the historical point that we have actually started from, there may be ways of thinking that are impossible for us to comprehend.

Or you could be asking how important the influence of 2,500 years of Western philosophy has been in the West over the last 50 years. Undoubtedly, philosophical views are deeply ingrained in our culture. It is also true that over the last 150 years the increasing confinement of philosophical activity within the academic departments of universities has led to a situation where philosophy, as a branch of human inquiry, has had decreasing influence on our lives. Not so very long ago, a person who had not studied philosophy was considered uneducated. How little that is true today.

STUDYING PHILOSOPHY

Kelly asked:

My name is Kelly and I am 15 years old. I am very interested in philosophy and would like to learn more about it. I don't do very well in basic school subjects because I am always thinking about philosophical topics. I don't know any of the terms or anything, I just know I have a philosophical mind. I have been thinking about how everything goes back to infinity, and I don't know what that is called? I think about how if there is one God, then who made him, and who made him....and so on, it all comes down to infinite measures. And how we are all so stupid, and we only have the ability to imagine and think about so much. And I also have this obsession with time, I mean what is it? Does it even exist or is it a system. I don't think our minds have the capability of even imagining these answers, but still, the questions are on my mind all the time. I know you're probably thinking, 'What an idiot' but I really am interested in learning about this stuff, and anything would help. Thank you.

When I was fifteen my all-consuming passion was Chemistry, and all I knew about philosophy was that it had something to do with 'old men in beards'. But I did think of myself as an atheist (I don't now) and got into lots of scraps because of that. It was good practice for philosophy.

The traditional ideas of theology provide a good starting point for thinking about metaphysics, which is what your questions are really about. There is the contrast between the infinitude of God, the creator, and the finitude of his creation,including creatures like ourselves. Then there is the contrast between the way things appear to finite beings who are dependent on perception as the source of all their knowledge, and the way things are in reality, or in themselves – or maybe for God.

Time figures prominently in both kinds of questions. You are right that we oscillate between the idea of a time stretching endlessly into the past and endlessly into the future, and the idea of a universe that came into existence at some time in the past, and will cease to exist at some time in the future. Things necessarily appear to us as occupying a position in space and time, yet in reality, from God's eternal standpoint, time is like the pages in a book or the tracks on a CD.

One of the philosophers who thought most deeply about these issues was Immanuel Kant, in his book The *Critique of Pure Reason* ('Kritik der Reinen Vernuft'), first published in 1781. Although it is one of the most difficult philosophy books you're ever likely to see, it won't hurt you just to pick it up. Have a look at the Preface and Introduction. Check out the index and list of contents. See what you can learn about Kant from doing a bit of detective work.

Kant argued that we can have no knowledge of 'things in themselves', and that there is no way to prove the existence of God. Gathering knowledge is an unending process, so in that sense space and time have no finite boundaries. But the infinity is potential, not actual. The concept of the universe as a totality is one that Kant thinks is too big for our minds to grasp. He tried to show that there were limits to what human beings can discover through the use of reason. His purpose, he said, was to deny the possibility of rational knowledge – about God, about the way things are in themselves – to make room for faith.

There are lots of good introductions to philosophy. (Some are listed in the Pathways Introductory Book List on the Pathways web site, at http://www.philosophypathways.compathways/pak5.html .) It is important, though, if you don't want to kill your enthusiasm for philosophy, to look at some original texts, like Plato, Berkeley, Descartes, Russell, Wittgenstein. Better to get a taste for the real thing than rely on watered-down versions.

Thank you for sharing your questions with me. I hope that your philosophical journey proves to be a joyful one.

Kanokwan asked:

Maybe I must take the course for Philosophy in the University...so I need some suggestions. How can I learn Philosophy with happiness and make the point so very good?

The first piece of advice I would give is to look very carefully at the Department of Philosophy at the University where you hope to study before accepting the offer of a place. Pay them a visit, or, better still, several visits. Who is going to teach you? Are the lecturers and professors enthusiasts, or do they regard teaching as a necessary chore, and students as a mere inconvenience?

How can you learn philosophy with happiness? So few students even think to ask that question. Their only concern seems to be with success and doing well. Would you still be prepared to carry on even if you did badly, and found yourself at the bottom of the class? The rewards of studying philosophy are not reserved for the high flyers. However, in order to reap those rewards you need to adopt an attitude of humility. In the face of the perennial problems of philosophy we are all ignorant and stupid. Some are slightly less so, that is all.

Take your time, don't bite off more than you can chew. There is no point in toiling away for some possibly future reward, if you can't enjoy what you are doing here and now, in the present. The great moments of illumination will come when they come. But meanwhile every moment contains the possibility for enlightenment if you look for it. Enjoy the journey, because in philosophy you really can't say whether you will ever reach a destination.

Read about the lives of the great philosophers, and gain inspiration from them. Read, not to idolise, nor simply to appropriate ideas for your own use, but to bring the words on the page to life. Every text you pick up is an invitation to dialogue. The greatest joy in reading the classics of philosophy is the feeling of entering into a dialogue that transcends time and space. The great philosophers live on in their works, and that is where we can meet them whenever we choose.

Understandably, you also want to 'make the point so very good' – you want to get good marks for your essays, make a big impression in seminars and discussions. To do that, you need to overcome the fear of failure. Sometimes, the only way to learn is from our mistakes. You must not be afraid to look a fool. That means not getting sucked into to a way of thinking where everyone is in competition with you, where you either win or lose. Let others compete if they want to. Show that your only concern is understanding and learning more, that for you truth is more

important than being perceived to be right. That will make the best impression of all.

Robyn asked:

How much does a typical academic philosopher read in a typical week and how long should this take him? e.g. how many papers etc.? Or put another way, how long should one spend on a piece of written philosophy for practical purposes (say an imminent essay or seminar)?

I am lost in a labyrinth of papers, articles and books and wonder how people cope with such a huge literature.

The way to cope with the labyrinth of articles and books is to step lightly. Dip in. Read enough to get the gist of what the author is saying and move on. Use the time that you save to concentrate on the book or the article that deserves your close attention. Usually, in writing an essay or preparing for a seminar, it is possible to narrow the list down to one or two important pieces.

You have to unlearn the habit of automatically treating authors of philosophical texts with respect. Be bloody minded. If you are not convinced that the piece is worth spending time on after the first or second page, the author has missed their chance.

Lecturers love to write long book lists. It's a way of showing you all the hard work they have done on your behalf. Often, though, the thing you should really be reading is not in the book list but in the current issue of Mind or the Philosophical Review. Once again, healthy disrespect is the order of the day. Trust your judgement in rifling through the journals, or scouring the selves of the book shop or library.

As regards time, I remember Freddie Ayer in an interview once saying that he found it impossible to do more than four hours concentrated work in philosophy in one day. I would set an absolute upper limit on philosophical reading of two hours. You'll be surprised what you can do in that time, if you concentrate your efforts. Look after your eyes, they have to last you a lifetime.

PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT

Stephen asked:

What is the primary goal of the philosopher, and to what extent is a mastery of the art of argumentation indispensable as a means to the end of attaining that goal?

Philosophers love argument. I don't just mean that they love arguing. I mean that philosophers are in love with the Platonic idea of argument. Plato invented a special name for it, dialectic.

Yet Plato, most famously in the *Republic*, also talked about the importance of philosophic vision. The ultimate aim of philosophy is to seek an undistorted vision of intelligible reality, made possible by the light of 'the Good'.

Plato's view implies that goodness is somehow part of the structure of ultimate reality. That's a hard position to defend. It might still be the primary goal of the philosopher to seek out The Good, however, even if there were no certainty of success.

I can't speak for Plato, I can only speak for myself. I cannot say with any confidence what the primary, or ultimate goal of philosophy is, or might be. I only know that I find certain questions gripping. I also hold certain tentative views. And because holding a view implies that one believes – however heavily one qualifies that belief – in a 'truth', part of my essential activity as a philosopher is seeking to persuade other philosophers of that truth. This is the purpose of the 'art of argumentation'.

The English metaphysician F.H. Bradley wrote in the Preface to his great treatise *Appearance and Reality* in 1893:

> **Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct, but to find these reasons is no less an instinct.**

I have strong sympathy with Bradley's view, even though it might seem to be less true of philosophy in general, than the particular aspect of philosophical inquiry known as metaphysics. Yet no-one wishes to be deceived by fallacious reasoning. So it becomes a kind of goal in itself to sharpen and hone ones powers of reasoning. We do so even when all light is shut out and we cannot see what views are ultimately worth attacking or defending. Sadly, many contemporary philosophers find themselves in this predicament.

Jen asked:

I have a question about philosophy. My question is "Are philosophical questions about reality, or our ideas of reality?" This question boggles my mind. If you can please help me, I would greatly appreciate that.

You are right, the question you have asked is mind boggling.

There is a philosophical tradition going back to Locke and Hume according to which the sole purpose of philosophy is to analyse concepts or 'ideas'. In his *Essay on Human Understanding* Locke describes the philosopher as an 'underlabourer sweeping away the rubbish that lies in the path of knowledge'. In the closing paragraph of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume presents a devastating dilemma – which has come to be known as 'Hume's Fork' – which says that the only knowledge we can attain comes either from experience or from logical or mathematical deduction. If we find that a book contains neither of these things we should 'Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion'.

The idea of conceptual analysis is the dominant paradigm today, though by and large philosophers now prefer to talk of 'theories'. There is room for a kind of 'metaphysics' too, but what this entails is largely the logical analysis of concepts like 'truth', 'existence', 'time', 'essence', 'necessity'. It is not the kind of rationalist metaphysical theory that Hume set out to attack.

In these terms, there is room for lively debate whether the analyses produced are a response to 'questions about reality' or only about 'our ideas of reality'. I would say both. For example, a question about the nature of causation is about the world of causes and effects, and also about our concept of a 'cause'. By coming up with a workable analysis of the concept of causation, analytical philosophers would say that they have discovered something we didn't know before about the world.

Or, alternatively, if you are interested in metaphysical systems of the past you can analyse the 'ideas of reality' proposed by Spinoza, Berkeley, Kant or Leibniz. Then you can say, Yes, if one agrees to certain premisses, say, about the nature of "space" or "experience" or "substance", then certain conclusions follow.'

The deeper question is whether there might be something left over when all the logical analysis is done, as I think there is. My interest in metaphysics is neither analytical nor historical. I share the faith of the metaphysician that there are truths to discover about the ultimate nature of things. This isn't the place to try to persuade you. However, I would point out that the end of metaphysics has been advertised many times, and each time has proved to be a false alarm.

Ignace asked:

How do you see the relationship between mathematics and philosophy ? If anyone is searching for answers, hasn't he got more chances to find them in proofs in maths than in philosophy ? What makes the study of existing, unproved theories in philosophy more worthwhile than exact sciences?

I see philosophy as studying history more than actually trying to achieve something. There is a relationship between them, but I think by merely studying history, this doesn't give any answers.

One philosopher who would agree with you that philosophy is concerned with 'studying history' – although perhaps not quite in the way that you mean – is R.G. Collingwood. In his *Autobiography* (1939) and *Essay on Metaphysics* (1940) Collingwood develops a view of the core activity of philosophy as the study of the 'absolute presuppositions' of different historical periods. Insofar as the fundamental questions of philosophy have an answer, that answer consists in a description of the different standpoints from which the universe and our place in it has been conceived at different times, rather than a search for the one correct or true standpoint.

While I find that Collingwood's account of truth in terms of seeking an 'answer to a question' is a valuable reminder that explanations – say, the explanations offered by the historian, or the philosopher – are relative to interest, that truth depends at least partly on what you are looking for, his historicist view of the nature of philosophy seems unnecessarily defeatist. If Collingwood were right, then we are merely deceiving ourselves when look for answers to the philosophical questions that grip us. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer. All we are doing is investigating the presuppositions of our beliefs, rather than setting out, if necessary, to change those beliefs if they fail to correspond with reality.

I think philosophy can change our beliefs. You can take a view that is widely held – say, a view about the nature of free will, or consciousness, or truth – and demonstrate that it is logically incoherent. You can start with a truism, or set of truisms, and derive a conclusion that is very far from being truistic. I don't feel the least bit embarrassed in talking about proving things in philosophy.

Admittedly, proving things in philosophy is not like proving things in mathematics. In mathematics, a proof establishes a result, something that can be put in the text books. As Wittgenstein remarks somewhere, mathematicians do not usually 'come to blows' over whether a particular proof in mathematics is valid. (There are notable exceptions: for example the controversy over the nineteenth century mathematician Georg Cantor's proof of the existence of a hierarchy of infinite numbers.)

In philosophy, we are never completely sure of what we mean. Philosophers work with words, they construct arguments – a dialectic – out of words using logic as their guide. The result is – more words. The words suggest, rather than dictate, a certain way of seeing things, a vision. That in turn generates more words, more dialectic, and so the process continues apparently without end. One either has a taste for this kind of activity, or not. You evidently don't!

KNOWLEDGE

Nick asked:

I have and essay to write for my theory of knowledge lesson and I am having some difficulties, so I would like to ask your help for some ideas, or an example. The topic is: Do we have to think scientifically in order to find the truth?

This is an excellent question.

When are we thinking scientifically? You don't have to put on a white coat. We are thinking scientifically whenever we break down a problem into its components; whenever we do a systematic survey of, or search for evidence; whenever we put forward possible solutions or explanations and test them.

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig gives an account – totally convincing to someone like me who has never brought a screwdriver near a car or motorcycle or TV set – that the only reliable way of solving problems with your bike is the scientific way, using reason and logical analysis. Sure, sometimes the problem sorts itself out with a good thump (it works for my TV, anyway). But it's not a reliable way. You can do more harm than good. And even if you do good, you'll never know the truth about that bad connection or loose wire or whatever it was that caused the problem. The second time around, thumping might not work so well.

The way of science increases your chances of finding the truth. It also gives you a more reliable way of checking whether or not the thing you have found really is the truth it purports to be.

As readers of his book will know, Pirsig argues that the scientific approach is not enough if you have the wrong attitudes, if you are not on the Quality track. You

will never be a good mechanic if you ears are deaf to subtle differences in the sound that the engine makes, or if you have no feel for the right force to apply when screwing a nut. However, our question was not about whether thinking scientifically is sufficient on its own, but whether it is necessary. Are there any cases where the best way to get to the truth is to abandon the scientific approach?

You are a teacher who has begun to suspect that a child is being bullied at school. You want to get to 'the truth' of the matter. You can adopt the scientific methods of the detective: Interview all the children concerned, cross check their stories, speak to the parents, look at past school reports. Then you can put forward your 'hypothesis'. But you could still be wrong. In a court of law, the evidence would not be sufficient to secure a conviction. The only reliable method is to secure the confidence of those involved, and get them to talk. In other words, the route to truth is through personal relationship, the meeting of I and thou.

For those who believe that there are truths revealed in religion, it will of course be no surprise that not all truths are revealed by science. What is interesting is the close similarity between the kinds of thing theologians say when they are talking about faith and what I have just said about the I-thou relationship.

The best thing to read on this is Martin Buber *I and Thou*, which along with *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* should be on every introduction to epistemology reading list.

Dexter asked:

What constitutes knowledge?

and Romina asked:

How can we be sure of what we know?

You might think that whatever else knowledge might involve, it has at least got to entail that the person who is said to know that P, is sure that P. How can you be said to know something if you're not sure?

In that case, Romina's question would have to be understood as a rather careless way of expressing the problem of scepticism. What Romina should have said is, How can we be sure that we know what we think we know?

For the moment, I do not want to talk about scepticism. So let's stick with the question whether you can know something even though you're not sure.

First off, it could be argued that there are cases where a person does know something, even though they are not sure. The standard example is the 'nervous schoolboy'. The nervous schoolboy is asked, 'What is the capital of France?' The schoolboy knows that the answer is 'Paris'. After all, he's been on holiday to France and even gone up the Eiffel Tower! Yet when put on the spot by an irascible teacher, all his confidence vanishes, and he cannot bring himself to give an answer.

There is more than one way to analyse this example. Threatened with instant execution, there might be all sorts of questions that you would have answered perfectly confidently, which you now feel not quite sure about. How sure is sure? Would you risk your life to assert that Paris is the capital of France? Isn't there a tiny possibility that Ministers at the latest EU Summit agreed that Lyons should be the capital in return for a subsidy for French beef?

An alternative explanation for failure to be sure of what you "know" is that there are certain states of fear where one's brain is simply paralysed and will not let out the knowledge which is in there. Not just the word 'Paris', but the city of Paris with all its buildings and inhabitants, has temporarily vanished from the fearful schoolboy's mind.

This takes us into the general question of just what does constitute knowledge. The standard account used to be that knowledge is 'justified true belief.' Someone cannot be said to know that P, if it is not true that P. (What we would say instead is that 'They thought they knew.') Or we use scare quotes: I "knew" that this question was not going to take me more than fifteen minutes, but I was wrong! However, not every belief which is true, counts as knowledge. You've got to be able to justify your claim by giving suitable reasons.

As the philosopher Paul Gettier showed in a paper 'Is Knowledge Justified True Belief' which rocked academic philosophy in the 60's, that's still not enough. You can have excellent reasons for believing that P, and your belief that P can be true, but it can still turn out that it was only by a lucky fluke that your belief turned out to be true. For example, I "know" that my next door neighbour Derek is at home because I can see him mowing the lawn. In fact he is mowing the lawn. But what I didn't know is that his long lost twin brother Brian has come to stay for a fortnight, and it could just as easily have been Brian, not Derek, whom I spied through the window.

With the Gettier-type examples, the floodgates are opened. Take anything you could reasonably be said to know. Like the fact that Derek is mowing the lawn. I ask myself, 'Do I know that Derek has not got a twin brother?' If I can't say, 'Yes' then I don't know that Derek is mowing the lawn, even though I can see him clearly. With a bit of ingenuity, you can do the same trick on just about any factual proposition that you take yourself to "know".

Vijaya asked:

Do you think that there is knowledge we should not seek? And if so, why?

There is a popular saying that 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing'. I am mentioning this at the start because I want to exclude this sort of response. That is not a reason for not seeking knowledge in the first place. If I know that the best I am likely to achieve in my knowledge seeking is insufficient to reliably guide my actions, then I should be aware of that fact and proceed with caution. 'A little knowledge' is dangerous only when we falsely estimate its size.

There are in fact two questions to answer: 1. Whether there is any knowledge which, as a matter of prudent self-interest, I should not seek. 2. Whether there is any knowledge which it would be morally wrong for me to seek.

1. Knowledge gives us the power to do things. If my plans rest on false assumptions, they are more likely to be frustrated than if they had been based on knowledge. It would seem to follow from this that knowledge can never be a bad thing for me. The more knowledge I possess, the more power I have to achieve my goals. However, we have to reckon on the psychological effect of certain kinds of knowledge, for example, the knowledge that one has only six months to live. A doctor may judge that it is not in a person's best interests to be told be told the truth about their state of health.

2. A person can be held morally culpable for not making sufficient effort to acquire knowledge of the facts, in cases where their actions have unintended bad consequences for others. It is not an adequate defence to say, for example, 'I didn't know that the brakes of my truck were faulty.' Ethics concerns doing good things, and not doing bad things, and just as in the case of prudent self-interest,knowledge is necessary for successfully carrying out our intentions. However, as before, there seem to be cases where one can reliably predict that the effects of our acquiring certain kinds of knowledge. One example would be the attempt to devise intelligencetests which could be used to determine possible differences between people from different racial groupings. It is a near-certainty that such knowledge would be put to a bad use.

I therefore see no contradiction in asserting the following propositions. Knowledge is prima facie good for the person who seeks it. We have a prima facie moral duty to ensure that we act out of knowledge rather than ignorance. Yet there are cases were, all things considered, knowledge is not good for the person who seeks it. And there are cases were, all things considered, we morally ought not to seek knowledge that is within our means to acquire.

Mike asked:

What is meant by "knowledge is socially constructed"? and how can this change over time?

You can't know something if it isn't true. Whatever else, 'knowledge' might imply, it implies that we take something to be the case, and what we take to be the case is the case, in other words, is true.

But what does it take to make something true? Do truths exist in a timeless reality, waiting for us to discover them? Or are some of the things we call 'truths' merely a product of the way we think, or rather, the way human beings have thought at a particular historical period? Like houses and cities, on this view, the 'truths' that human beings take themselves to know are constructed and, in time, pulled down again.-- Could that be true?

To some extent, what I would say here is the same as I said, below, in my 'second opinion' on R.E. Lee's question about the argument against relativism. But it seems to me that in the 'social construction' theory of knowledge there is more going on than simply the claim that truth is relative to a society, or to a historical period.

First, one has to notice that not all forms of knowledge appear equally suitable candidates for a social constructivist account. It is a plain fact that either Caesar did, or did not, cross the Rubicon (as I remember vaguely from my history lessons at school). On the other hand, the question why he did is a matter for historians to argue over. One of the things that characterize a given society in a given historical period is the way it views its own history. The way certain historical facts are common knowledge, seen to be unquestionably true.

It is when knowledge is implicated in self-understanding that the claim about knowledge being socially constructed appears most tempting. What we are depends partly on what we understand ourselves to be, the way we view where we have come from and where we are going.

Here is an example which I have used before. When Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher notoriously said, 'There is no such thing as Society', her words reflected a reality that had come about because of the prevailing attitude towards social issues that kept the Conservative party in power. Where there had been 'Society', there was no more. This attitude was supported by a certain view of history. A critic of Thatcher would say that it was a distorted view. But it was not wholly false either.

As individuals we tell, and re-tell the story of our own lives in response to changes in our circumstances. We are always striving to create a coherent narrative, to impose our will on the chaos of events. The same thing is true on a social level. Whether you believe in the existence of such a thing as 'Society' with a capital 'S' or don't believe it, whether or not Society is itself one of the things that is 'socially constructed', we are individually and collectively constructors of our own 'truths', our own 'knowledge'.

PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

Jason asked:

Who is the most widely read philosopher? Does this popularity have any correlation with the truthfulness of their ideas?

I think that possibly Plato is the most read philosopher, yet he hated democracy mainly because he was sceptical that the majority know best. Was he right?

As a science student, I was also wondering that because philosophers seem to disagree a lot (which is very important for the subject), how does a philosophy Ph.D. student graduate when the examiners may have very different opinions of the integrity of the thesis? Science papers are less subjective because of the power of experimental data. Therefore is science the only reliable way to understand the world since it seems easier to convince other scientists of theories?

I seem to have millions of original philosophical ideas, please tell me how can I find out if they are good or rubbish? The majority say rubbish.

If Plato was right in thinking that the majority do not always know best, then it does not follow from the fact that Plato is the most popular or most read

philosopher that his ideas are any more true than the ideas of less popular and less read philosophers.

Of course, the reverse doesn't follow either. Just because a philosophy is popular doesn't mean that it can't be true. Sometimes the majority are right.

I am assuming for the sake of discussion that a philosopher is more popular or widely read in proportion to the number of people who believe that his/her ideas are true. That is not always the case either. To give one controversial example, I would think that more people read Nietzsche because of the brilliance of his writing and the provocativeness of his questions than because they believe that he was right in the answers he gave to those questions.

You say that the majority say that your ideas are rubbish. They may be right. Or they may be wrong. The question is, How do you find out either way?

To determine whether or not a philosophical idea is 'true', you don't simply take a vote: "I think it is rubbish", "I think it is brilliant", "I can't make up my mind". You test it out. You argue your case. At the end of the day, you are the one that's got to make the decision. You might succeed in persuading the majority, but one lone voice of criticism succeeds in sparking doubts in your own mind, and you end up abandoning your idea. Or you might find that you are making no headway in persuading others to accept your idea, but none of the others succeed in providing arguments which persuade you to abandon it.

That may not seem much comfort to the philosophy PhD student facing a hostile panel of examiners. I feel sorry for PhD students – and I am sure there are more than a few – who feel that they are obliged tailor their ideas and theories to what they believe the examiners will find agreeable. For that is not the standard for academic success or failure. The standard is not whether a thesis is thought to be true, but whether a case has been made, whether the ideas are sufficiently original, and whether the arguments put forward in support of those ideas are sufficiently strong, to be worthy of debate.

However, the notion of what is or is not 'worthy of debate' raises a more troubling issue. The heart of your question concerns the vivid contrast between a thesis, say, in chemistry or physics, which in arguing its case has to account for the experimental data, and a thesis in philosophy where there are no experimental data. Philosophical ideas which do not fit in with current academic fashions are more vulnerable to being extinguished simply because there is nothing to fall back on.

I don't agree with you that science is 'the only reliable way to understand the world' because I would argue that the difference between the influence of subjective factors in science and their influence in philosophy is only relative, not absolute. It is a crude misunderstanding of the reality of scientific research to suppose that the production of experimental data is, in itself, a proof of objectivity. I suggest you read Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions and Feyerabend's Against Method, to get a flavour of the case against the view that scientific method is a guarantee of 'objective' or 'reliable' knowledge.

MIND AND SOUL

Peto asked:

In your opinion is it necessary that soul should be separate from body?

Let us look at the reasons that might be given why the soul must be necessarily separate from body.

In the *Meditations* Descartes argued that it is possible that I could have all the subjective experiences I am having now, even though an external world of material objects in space does not exist. For it is conceivable that all my subjective experiences are being produced in me by an evil demon who wants to deceive me into thinking that a material world in space exists when it doesn't.

Descartes used this sceptical hypothesis to raise the question of how we can prove anything about the external world. But in the 'Sixth Meditation' he also made a further deduction. He said that if it is conceivable that my subjective experiences can exist even though my body does not exist, then even if my body does exist – even if there is no evil demon but a God who is not a deceiver – then my subjective experiences cannot belong to anything material but must belong to something non-material. In other words, my experiences occur in a non-material soul which is necessarily separate from my body.

What Descartes is saying is that if there are two things, A and B that can be conceived of as existing apart, then they can never be called the 'same thing', even though we never find them apart in the actual world. If my experiences can be conceived of as existing apart from my body or my brain, then experiences can never be the 'same thing' as brain processes, even though in the actual world experiences never occur without brain processes.

What is interesting about this argument is that it does not rely on alleged cases of reincarnation, or out-of-body experiences. It is based on purely logical considerations. But is it valid?

To answer that question would require a long essay. I believe that Descartes' argument does present a serious challenge to materialism. The materialist has got to prove, not only that materialism is true in the actual world, but also that materialism is true in all possible worlds. For if we grant just one possible world where materialism is not true, i.e. a possible world where subjective experiences occur in the absence of any physical processes, then any subject which has those kinds of experiences in the actual world must be regarded as 'necessarily separated from body'.

You asked for my opinion. In my view, materialism can be defended against Descartes' argument. However, the debate does not stop there. According to materialism, a possible world exactly like this one with someone exactly like me in it would necessarily be a possible world in which I myself existed. Yet it does seem that I can conceive that things might have been just the way they are, that there might have been a Dr Klempner writing these words to you now, even though I did not exist. I have not yet come across a satisfactory reply to that argument. But I am also not sure what conclusions, if any, can be deduced from it.

Monique asked:

Can you explain to me how a machine can think?

Machines such as computers can calculate, but calculating is not the same as thinking. A chess computer running a program like Deeper Blue, the program that defeated Kasparov, calculates moves at an amazing speed but it does not think. It does not have beliefs or desires. It is not conscious.

The mathematician Alan Turing once proposed a test which could be used to settle the question whether a computer met the criteria for being an 'artificial intelligence', that is to say, a test which would determine whether the computer was not only able to calculate but also to think, as we do.

The idea of the test is childishly simple. Suppose you log onto a chat line. You have a conversation with an individual who calls themself 'Daniel'. How do you know that Daniel is not a machine programmed with set responses to the words that you type on the screen? If Daniel is able to continue to hold up an intelligent conversation, respond appropriately to whatever questions you asked, then you would conclude that Daniel was capable of thinking. What Turing said was that it is irrelevant whether Daniel is a human being or a machine. A machine that can do what Daniel does is intelligent, is capable of thinking, by definition.

Your question, however, is how it is possible that a machine like 'Daniel', a machine with genuine 'artificial intelligence', could ever exist.

Is that a technical question or a philosophical question?

Daniel's 'brain' is not made of biological tissue but metal, silicon and plastic. But why should biological tissue be the only material that is capable of producing thoughts? On the other hand, perhaps you are just as puzzled (as I am) by the question how a person can think!

Daniel does not have a body, as we have. He sits motionless on a desk. His only action is to spew out words when words are fed in. For me, that is a serious, perhaps fatal objection, which is why I am not finally convinced by the 'Turing test'. I share the view held by a number of researchers in this area that a genuine 'artificial intelligence' would have to possess something analogous to arms and legs, eyes and ears. I would have to be an agent, and not merely a language user.

LOGIC AND LANGUAGE

Johanna asked:

I am a Finnish philosophy student and currently struggling with Charles Peirce. I have been asked to do an essay on the following topic: '"Truth is that which to the community ultimately settles down," Charles Peirce. Analyse and evaluate this claim.'

Mr Peirce was a pragmatist, and that's almost all which I know about him. But how to "add" pragmatism into this statement? Can truth be divided into other categories than this? I've been writing something about subjective and objective truth – should

his statement be interpreted that he meant community to be the one who defines truth or other way round? Or both ways? What about the word 'ultimately'? Somehow I feel it adds the concept of time to be considered as well. Truth is somehow time dependent, it changes and varies, but ultimately we can obtain it? Not? Ultimately – hard concept to define. Can mean infinitely, can it? I would be really grateful for your help.

What is truth? Or, more precisely, what are we saying about a statement, when we say that it is true? Any account of truth has got to start from the followingpair of observations:

1. When you assert a statement, what you mean to convey is that your statement is true. That is the point of a statement, the target that a statement aims at.

2. The term, 'true' is the term which uniquely satisfies the following condition: If the statement, 'Snow is white' is true, then snow is white. If the statement, 'Tony Blair is a Martian' is true, then Tony Blair is a Martian. And so on for every statement, true or false, that you can make.

This might make it seem that truth is a simple and down-to-earth notion, but it isn't. These two observations rapidly lead us into a sceptical quagmire. To assert a statement as true is not the same as asserting that the statement has passed every verification test we can think of, or that everyone believes that it is true, or even that the assumption of its truth leads to joy and contentment for all those who hold it. A statement can satisfy any or all of these conditions and still not be true.

The result is that the simple notion of truth as 'what our assertions aim at' appears to acquire deep and imponderable metaphysical significance. When you assert a statement, when you aim your arrow at the truth target, you can never be absolutely sure whether you have scored a hit or a miss. For practical purposes, we assume the truth of things that pass the required tests, while all the time aware that real truth is 'out there' beyond our reach, outside all human experience.

The pragmatist response to this picture is to deny that a 'truth forever beyond our reach' – transcendent truth – is a truth that anyone could be interested in. What we are interested in is what, in some sense, works for us.

A accepted 'truth' that worked for us up until now might still let us down at a future date. So Pierce brings in the idea of convergence in judgements over time. When you assert something as true, what you are claiming is that, over a sufficiently long period, there will be convergence of judgements amongst members of the community – who have had ample chance to discuss and debate the matter – towards the view that the statement in question does indeed work for those who accept it. The possibility that events will prove us wrong, recedes further into the distance until, for all practical purposes, it disappears altogether.

But it is not enough to make the homely observation that outside of a philosophy classroom, no-one is interested in transcendent 'truth beyond our reach'. The simple observations I made earlier about truth appear to commit us to accepting

the existence of transcendent truth, whether the ordinary person is interested in it or not. And that is sufficient to cause the metaphysical worry.

That is why as a pragmatist one has to make the final step of showing that there is no transcendent truth out there. To be a true pragmatist, in other words, you have to refute realism about truth. And that is no easy task.

Susan asked:

The question I have before me, from a philosophy course is: What is the truth-value of the following statement?

This statement is false.

My instructor thinks we might have fun with this, that it is like a riddle. I don't think this is funny. Could you help me?

The question is funny-peculiar rather than funny-ha ha. There are philosophical jokes, but this isn't one of them. Like all good philosophical paradoxes, it exposes our lack of understanding of a concept. I do, however, agree with your instructor that it is a question you can have a lot of fun with.

One doesn't need to study philosophy to realize that truth is a problem. In 'This statement is false', the problem turns up in a completely unexpected place. The worry posed by this childishly simple paradox has nothing to do with the limits of human knowledge, or the relation between facts and values, or the nature of scientific laws, all questions which cast doubt on our ability to define truth. Yet the doubts it raises are no less potent.

'This statement is false' can't be true and it can't be false. If it's true, then it's false, if it's false then it's true. Either way, you end up contradicting yourself. But it can't be neither true nor false, because that implies contradiction too.

So the task is to find some principled reason why one is not permitted to raise the question whether a statement like 'This statement is false' is true. Suppose we said that a statement was not allowed to refer to itself. That won't do. You can make the statement, 'This statement is in English' which is true, or 'This statement is in French' which is false.

What about, 'This statement is true'? No contradiction there. Yet there is definitely something funny going on. 'This statement is in English' reports a fact. whereas 'This statement is true' doesn't report a fact. Should we say then that a statement can be true only if it reports a fact? That's no good, because we want to say that examples of the laws of logic, like 'If it's raining then it's raining' are true even though they don't report facts.

Still, there is a strong suspicion that the principle we are looking for to rule out the question whether 'This statement is false' is true is also going to rule out the question whether 'This statement is true' is true. And so it goes on. Whatever principle we come up with, it has to be an essential part of a definition of truth, not tacked on as an afterthought.

The logician Alfred Tarski, in his famous paper on the 'Definition of truth in Formalized Languages', thought he had found an acceptable solution, but his complicated theory of an infinite hierarchy of 'meta-languages', each one of which is allowed to refer to statements made in the language below, remains a matter of debate today.

Christan asked:

How should I approach this question taken from an undergraduate paper?

"Can a proper name have a Fregean sense but lack a Millian connotation?"

In his *System of Logic* Mill distinguishes between the denotation and the connotation of a term. If the term is a general term, the denotation is the class of things to which the term applies, like 'all horses' or 'all planets'. Its connotation is its descriptive meaning, i.e. the information that would be deduced by a competent speaker from the fact that something is a 'horse' or a 'planet'. If the term is a name, its denotation is the bearer of the name. But what about it's connotation? Mill claimed that proper names do not have a connotation. Take my name, for example. I am told that 'Geoffrey' originally came from the Latin for 'bringer of peace'. However, it does not follow from the fact that my name is Geoffrey that I am a bringer of peace. A competent speaker could not deduce anything about me from the fact that my name is Geoffrey.

In his paper 'On Sense and Reference', Frege argued that both singular terms and general terms have both a sense and a reference. The sense of a term is the 'mode of presentation' of the reference, or, as some commentators have explained it, the 'route to reference'. Frege's idea is that there can never be such a thing as simply 'knowing' the reference of a term. You know it in a particular way, or from a particular standpoint. To take Frege's example, the planet Venus is known as 'the Morning Star' and also as 'the Evening Star'. At one time, people did not know that the Morning Star is the Evening Star. They did not know that these were two 'modes' in which one and the same heavenly body was 'presented' to them.

For general terms, Frege's 'sense' seems pretty much like Mill's 'connotation'. The same holds for descriptive singular terms such as, 'The Prime Minister' or 'the car parked outside my window'. With proper names it's a different story.

There has been much controversy in recent philosophy of language over the question whether proper names have a Fregean sense. In what follows, I am voicing my own opinions:

Mill did not address himself to the question how a proper name 'gets' its denotation, or what it is for a competent speaker to know that a proper name has the denotation that it has. Frege saw a problem here which Mill did not see. In giving examples of the 'senses' of names, however, Frege always gives descriptions. The trouble is, that whatever you or I know in grasping the correct use of a proper name cannot be analysed in terms of any specific set of descriptions. So it begins to look rather problematic whether there is any such thing as 'the' mode of presentation of the reference which belongs to any given name. The names 'Hesperus' for the Evening Star and 'Phosphorus' for the Morning Star are pretty

rare exceptions. Usually what happens is that a name gains currency, and people get to know about its bearer in lots of different ways.

For Frege's theory to be true, there has to be a standard or canonical way in which a fully competent speaker is presented with the reference of the name. After that, the name gets passed around and lots of people get to hear about the person or thing named even though they are ignorant of its canonical 'route to reference'. Gareth Evans explores this theory in his book The Varieties of Reference.

But I remain sceptical. I accept that there is a story to be told in each case that explains how a given name has the use and the currency that it has. But I don't see that this information could ever be encapsulated into a neat theory of the 'sense' of proper names.

Adam asked:

Do you think it correct, as Scruton suggests in his discussion of Kant (1982), that the "publicity of language guarantees the objectivity of its reference"? Scruton thinks that Wittgenstein's private language argument shares the premises and the conclusion of Kant's transcendental deduction (i.e. Wittgenstein's argument is transcendental in that there can be no knowledge of experience which does not presuppose reference to a public world). The thought seems to be that I know my experience immediately only because I apply to it concepts which gain their sense from public use.

It was Roger Scruton who as a lecturer first introduced me to the Private Language Argument, while I was an undergraduate student at Birkbeck College, London in the early 70's. I thought at the time, and still think that it is a devastating argument.

To see why, consider the familiar idea (which I recall first thinking about when I was 9 or 10) 'How do I know that when we both look up at the sky, the blue in your mind is the same colour as the blue in my mind?' Nagel has a great take on this (in his short OUP book *What Does It All Mean?*). If I could lick your brain while you were eating chocolate, and it tasted of chocolate, that still wouldn't prove that the taste of chocolate is the same for you as it is for me.

'Blue', 'chocolate' have established uses in our shared language. When I talk about 'my incommunicable experience of the way blue is for me' or 'the incommunicable taste that chocolate has for me', on the other hand, what I mean is something that I don't have a name for, something essentially private, incapable of being communicated.

Wittgenstein says, Give your inner something a name. You can do that, can't you?

It turns out that you can't. The reason is that you are the only person who is in a position to say whether the name you have invented for your incommunicable experience is being used correctly or not:

> **One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. and that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'.**

> L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Part I, para 258.

Here's how Wittgenstein proposes to 'get rid of the idea of the private object':

assume that it constantly changes, but that you do not notice the change because your memory constantly deceives you.

ibid. Part II, p. 207.

I can't think of the number of times I've racked my brains trying to imagine the thing Wittgenstein asks us to 'assume', that the inexpressible quality blue has for me constantly changes etc. etc. It took me a long time to realize that it's all wasted effort.

Well, we can argue about that. We can argue about whether Wittgenstein is right in claiming that in order to have meaning, it is necessary that the meaning a term be capable of being communicated to others, that it should have a meaning in our 'public language'. Scruton's claim is that it is sufficient for a term to have what he terms 'objective reference' that it should have a recognized use in a public language. And I think he could be wrong about this.

The fact that people agree, or a capable of reaching agreement doesn't prove anything. We can all agree about something , and still be wrong. Or our seeming agreement can be the result of pure accident. For a term to have genuine, objective meaning, and not merely a name we pass around, thinking we all mean the same thing by it, something more is needed, something to do with the way we are connected with the world: the fact that we do not spend all our lives merely talking to one another but use language for a purpose. This is something the pragmatists clearly saw.

Paulo asked:

I would like to know about Private Language in Wittgenstein, but I also want to make connections with arguments of Quine about translation (the famous Rabbit) and the mind as a Museum. I need this because I am trying to put the things in a comparative table for students. Thanks.

At one place in *Word and Object*, Quine makes a disparaging remark about Wittgenstein's argument against a private language. That it was not in the least bit original, and had all been thought before. I remember reading the remark and thinking that this must have been a kind of blindness on Quine's part. Sure, the philosophers who rejected the idea of a private language before Wittgenstein made the right move. But there is all the difference in the world between rejecting a theory – like the famous incident recorded by Boswell of Dr Johnson kicking a stone in order to refute Berkeleian idealism – because you are convinced by your gut feelings that the theory is wrong, and offering a philosophical argument which shows why the theory is wrong, and uncovers the source of the illusion that tempts us into holding the theory in the first place, which is what Wittgenstein did with his attack on the idea of a private language.

The 'indeterminacy of translation' and the 'inscrutability of reference' are two famous Quinian theses. There is nothing in Wittgenstein that is remotely like the claim that translations from one language to another are underdetermined by all

actual and possible data (indeterminacy thesis), or that it is impossible to determine from the structural features of a given language which objects the singular terms of that language refer to (inscrutability thesis). The closest Quine comes to sounding like Wittgenstein is when characterizes the view he is arguing against as involving the picture of the mind as a Museum, with rows of exhibits each labelled with a different word. That is not a philosophical argument, however. It is mere rhetoric.

According to Wittgenstein's private language argument, there is no knowledge of 'objects' independent of a shared language and its resources for identity and individuation. According to Quine, the objects that exist in the universe are relative to our language. So, by changing our notion of identity, we change the way in which reality is carved up into objects. There is no 'absolute', language independent, list of the objects that 'really' exist. Reference is 'inscrutable'.

So, for example, in Quine's famous case of the rabbit, if you came across a tribe who used a word 'gavagai' which they used whenever we used the term 'rabbit', it would be possible in principle to offer an alternative, equally accurate translation according to which 'gavagai' was a term which referred to a 'rabbit part', or, alternatively, to a temporal 'slice' of a four-dimensional space-time rabbit.

Like Quine, Wittgenstein makes his point using an imaginary scenario. Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a person attempting to coin a word for an experience whose only impact on the world is in the mind of the subject whose experience it is, which cannot be accounted for or defined in terms of any concepts with which we are familiar.

In a similar way, you could pair off Wittgenstein's argument that there will always in theory be more than one way of interpreting the expression of a given linguistic rule, with Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation. According to Quine, however much data you gather, it is conceivable that the sentence you have translated into English has an alternative, incompatible translation which is consistent with that data.

I am prepared to concede that in both cases, Quine and Wittgenstein are talking about the same thing. They are trying to get across the same idea. In my admittedly biased view, however, Quine's dialectical approach fails while Wittgenstein's succeeds.

FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM

Lois asked:

I have been having some thoughts about determinism. Although it is one of many things that probably cannot be proved, I think it is a fascinating idea that we have no free will, but that every 'decision' we make is actually determined by our genes, our psychology, our environment (and possibly some other factors), but that we only think we are making a decision. It certainly would make us all feel less guilty about the choices we have made. I understand that Freud was a determinist or at least wrote something about it. Do you have a source? Also, I would appreciate any other sources you have for this philosophical idea. I am not interested in Biblical or other

religious aspects of it. I am interested in it in a secular way only. Also, what is your own view of determinism?

First, let me apologize for missing the seven-day deadline for your question, which I received a week ago on Friday. I can only plead in mitigation that given the state of my body and brain at the moment and my birth, and the totality of things that have happened to me since that time, it was inevitable that I would miss the deadline by one day.

– What I have just said illustrates one way of understanding the thesis of 'determinism'. The challenge from determinism to our naive belief in 'free will' is very powerful

Here's how I would define 'determinism': If determinism holds, then any possible universe which is indistinguishable from the actual universe at a given time T, is indistinguishable from the actual universe at all other times. Consider, for example, a universe where GK starts off by writing, 'Dear Lois, First, let me apologize…'. Let us assume that determinism holds in that universe, just as I am assuming that it holds in ours, and that the two universes were indistinguishable at the time when GK wrote those words. Then the words GK goes on to write in that universe will be the same as the words GK writes in this universe.

I believe I have a choice in what words to put down, and in a sense I do. No-one is controlling me or pointing a gun at my head. Yet in a sense, there is no possibility, if determinism holds, of my deviating from the tracks that were laid down when the universe first went 'Bang' billions of years ago.

What a terrible prospect! Would it be better for us if the universe was not deterministic? At the present stage of knowledge, no-one can be sure whether it is or not. But suppose it isn't. Let's suppose that in the parallel universe the very next sentence I write after this sentence is different from the sentence I will write in this universe. What accounts for the difference? Nothing at all. I just 'happen' to decide differently. There's no explanation, nothing about the way I was thinking that accounts for the difference. – That's more like the spin of a roulette wheel than a 'free action' that I have responsibility for.

So there's the dilemma: no free will either way.

Freud was interested in a stronger thesis of 'determinism' than the one I have defined here. In his book The Interpretation of Dreams he makes the methodological assumption that every feature of a dream has psychoanalytic significance. Everything that the patient remembers of their dream is a suitable subject matter for psychoanalytic interpretation – including the patient's mistaken belief that the feature 'has no significance'. Determinism as I have defined it could hold even if Freud's view of the significance of dreams was false.

The point is sometimes made in discussions of free will that we are constrained by our genetic inheritance and upbringing. These are merely particular examples taken from the totality of the conditions under which we make decisions and act. Being able to trace the causal influences on a person's actions, however, does make a significant difference to the way we view punishment. It does not follow, however, that it is wrong to punish. Rather, we have to question the way we naively justify punishment, prior to philosophical reflection.

Chris asked:

Does evolutionary psychology imply we have no free will?

Let's not beat about the bush. When people talk of 'evolutionary psychology' they are usually thinking of sex.

Here's an illustrative example. Much fuss was made a while ago of research which claimed that there were sound evolutionary reasons for female infidelity. Up until then, the received view had been that according to the 'selfish gene' principle, the human male had the best chance of propagating his genes if he had intercourse with as many females as possible, while the human female had the greatest stake in maintaining a monogamous relationship, in order to give her children the best chance for survival. The new research appeared to demonstrate that female monogamy is ideally combined with opportunistic couplings with males who are perceived to possess superior genes.

Some people found this shocking. The fact that they were so shocked says a great deal about the continuing hypocrisy of present day sexual attitudes.

The more thoughtful and less sexually biased observer might still find reason for disquietude. We think of a decision to be unfaithful as a pre-eminent example of the exercise of free will. It turns out that the unfaithful wife is responding blindly to the commands of her genes.

Now, it is always open to an opponent of free will to adopt the trumping tactic of claiming that every deliberate human action, insofar as it is the end product of a chain of causes and effects, cannot be described as truly 'free'. There are powerful counter moves against that argument, however. What we are now concerned with is an additional reason for concern, based not on metaphysical dogma, but on empirical research.

I am not convinced!

What are we really saying? Human beings have a nature. We inherit natural predispositions from our genes. That is hardly surprising. It would, if anything, be a far greater cause for concern if it turned out that human psychology is infinitely malleable. That there was no such thing, from the inside, as what it is to be human. Then it would be completely up to us to make of ourselves what we will. What a terrible burden that would impose!

It is truistic that it does not follow from the fact that human beings have a nature, that everything that is 'natural' to us is desirable. Every responsible human parent – as I can testify from personal experience – faces a battle against biological nature. (It was left to Freud to give this homely observation a vicious twist in his late work Civilization and its Discontents.)

In short, to be in possession of a capacity for reason is to be capable of making choices. If we submit to 'nature' then we are acting for a reason, which we may reflect upon and which others may praise or criticize, no less than if we resist.

Jim asked:

If, as many claim, we are not free, where do you suppose we even get the idea of "freedom" from? (I asked a former philosophy teacher this, and he just said he didn't know.)

This is a harder question than it looks. When asked by a philosopher, "What makes you think you have free will?", we are tempted to stage a demonstration: "See? I moved my arm. No-one made me do it. I did it all by myself!"

Let's look at this. First, it's not clear what is meant by 'the idea of freedom'. You could be asking, Why is it that we believe that we have free will? Or you could be asking, Why is it that when we act it appears to us that we have free will? On the face of it, those are two different questions.

When someone makes a claim about the way things appear, one has to ask, How would things appear otherwise? Consider the following thought experiment. Alice is looking at her reflection in the looking glass.

> **"Did you know," we say to Alice, "that there is really another world on the other side of the glass, where everything is topsy-turvy and back to front?"**

> **"No, really? Can I go through?"**

> **"Just try. Push the glass as hard as you can."**

> **"When I push, Alice in the Looking Glass world pushes just as hard against me!"**

> **"Exactly. But have you thought of this. When moved your hand, it was because Looking Glass Alice moved her hand. When you had the thought, 'I'll try to move my hand,' it was because Looking Glass Alice had the thought, 'I'll try to move my hand'."**

> **"I don't believe you! You've got it all wrong! When I move my hand, that causes Alice in the Looking Glass world to move her hand. When I have the thought, 'I'll try to move my hand' that causes Alice in the Looking Glass world to have the thought, 'I'll try to move my hand'...."**

We know what to say to Alice:

> **"How would it appear to you if Looking Glass Alice's actions were the cause of your actions, or if Looking Glass Alice's thoughts were the cause of your thoughts?"**

There is no answer to that, because there is no difference in the appearances. In other words, it does not appear to us that we have free will. But surely, even if it does not appear to us that we have free will, we believe that we have free will?

If I believe that there are fairies at the bottom of my garden, then even if it is part of my belief that the fairies will never appear – let's say that they are invisible fairies – then at any rate I must be able to point to something in the world that would not have been there, had there not been any fairies. (Say, the fairies help with little gardening chores, deftly picking out weeds, protecting the roses from green fly.)

But there is nothing in the world that I can point to, that would be different, depending on whether or not I had free will. That is the force of the classic, Humean dilemma posed by opponents of free will: 'If determinism holds, then your actions are not free because they are determined. If determinism fails to hold, then your actions are not free because they are not determined.' In the light of this, one doesn't know what it would mean to say that we believe that we have free will.

That's not the end of the argument. But I would venture the speculation that if we could give a coherent account of 'where the idea of free will comes from', that would go a long way towards resisting the classical argument against freedom of the will.

Jhenifer asked:

Why is it that when people are asked whether they believe that one's response is either determined or a product of one's own free will the majority will lean on the side of determinism, but when those same people are asked if they believe that one should be held totally responsible for everything one does, the majority leans on the side of agreement? Isn't that contradictory, and what might account for this?

One easy fix to the free will problem, which enjoys continued popularity amongst the more hard headed (and generally clean shaven) analytic philosophers is the view that the attribution of responsibility is fully consistent with the belief that our actions are the product of our physical state at the moment of our birth, and all the things we have experienced and that have happened to us since that time. I chose to respond to your letter today, but my choice was already on the cards – barring an inexplicable lapse in the laws of physics – 49 years ago as I lay bawling in my hospital cot, alongside the couple of dozen or so other infants that had been produced by the baby factory that week. What kind of choice is that? And how can I be praised, or blamed, for making it?

Here's how the answer goes:

Rewarding people for actions which we approve of, or punishing people for actions which we disapprove of has a useful function. But reward and punishment do not always work. The promise of a reward is not going to deter the bank clerk from handing over the money when there is a gun pointed at her head. The threat of punishment sadly does not deter the kleptomaniac. Every human action is the effect of prior causes, but not all causes are the same. Only if the cause of an action is an agent's own choice, unconstrained by factors impeding their ability to make a rational choice, are we justified in calling them 'responsible' for that action, and treating them accordingly.

The best refutation of this picture is F.H. Bradley's example (in *Ethical Studies* 1876, Essay 1) of the master of hounds who gives his dogs a good thrashing before they go out on a hunt, just to show who's boss. If punishment is something that

either works or doesn't work, if it is simply a matter of pressing levers to encourage good behaviour, then there would be nothing wrong in 'punishing' an innocent person if we thought it would cause them to behave in the future in the way we wanted them to behave. – What's missing from this picture is the idea that punishment should only be given to those who deserve it. The problem is that if every action we do is the result of causes going back to our birth, then it seems that no punishment (and no reward either) is ever deserved.

You can look for more subtle ways of sorting out suitable cases for praise or punishment. So long as the talk is about selecting from different varieties of 'cause and effect', such moves seem pointless and futile.

The obvious alternative is not much better. If my decision to answer this question today was not determined by my prior states, then it is hard to see why that should deserve praise. To adapt another example from Bradley, say a friend offers to let you use an A-graded essay she wrote two years ago at another College to hand in as your own work. You refuse. She expresses surprise. You respond angrily, 'You should have known me better than that!' Knowing your upright character, she ought to have predicted that you would act in the way that you did.

My response would be to escape this dichotomy altogether by refusing to see the relationship of person to person in cause and effect terms. The human world, the world of persons in relation, is not the world of physics, even though what you and I are ultimately made of is nothing but physical stuff. When we engage with one another as persons we are interacting on an altogether different level, where one talks of reason and justification, right and wrong, freedom and responsibility. To see the world in these terms is part of what it means to be human, to inhabit the human world.

MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Mark asked:

How do I reconcile a belief in certain moral absolutes that are incontrovertible so far as I am concerned (e.g. I will never kill someone, or if I did I would be crippled with guilt) with what experience indicates is a world in which morality is wholly relative (e.g. perhaps in some circumstances it might be necessary to kill innocent Serbs – for the sake of argument – for a greater good i.e. stopping other Serbs killing Kosovans)?

This issue gets particularly wranglesome if one has faith in a particular religion – e.g. Christianity – certain sects of which ultimately deny tolerance to other faiths yet the prevailing moral authority which most of us would describe as a 'good' thing is to extend tolerance to others and, to borrow a well used phrase, 'love thy neighbour as thyself'. Intellectually speaking, how would one fit both moral absolutes and the flexibility of moral belief into a single coherent system which is neither rigidly totalitarian nor anarchically lax?

First, we need to clear away a possible misunderstanding. The view that the right moral action is the one that produces the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' – as argued for in J.S. Mill's book *Utilitarianism* – is an attempt to set up a single objective standard for right and wrong which stands strictly opposed to relativism. Differences of opinion about which action is right can only concern the

factual question of which action will produce the best consequences, measured in terms of human happiness.

Taken to its limit, utilitarianism advocates an extreme form of 'tolerance', where what is added up in the utility calculation is not pleasure or happiness – the measurement of which is open to dispute – but simply the satisfaction of preferences. The 'preference' utilitarian refrains from making any judgement concerning whether the preferences expressed by different individuals are 'good' or 'bad', except insofar as they conflict with the utilitarian principle itself.

I want to say that the utilitarians are right in holding that there is an objective, rational basis for moral conduct but wrong in thinking that it entails a universally applicable formula that can be used to decide every ethical question.

My own view is that the basis for moral conduct resides in the 'authority of the other'. I regard that principle as the one 'moral absolute'. What I mean by that is that the judgements of others concerning their needs and interests have necessary authority over my actions. So moral beliefs are not merely 'subjective'. But claims conflict. People want different things. Most importantly, the claims of some persons have a higher authority for me than others. The claims of my wife and children, for example.

The result is an 'ethics of dialogue' in which we are duty bound to respect the claims of others. The actions that follow, however, depend on a process of negotiation. Not every claim on me has equal strength. It also follows that tolerance has its limits. For example, the abortionist and the anti-abortionist cannot ask for toleration from one another. Yet they are still bound to respect one another's right to exist. That is the precarious balance that has to be struck.

Andrew asked:

Are morals, ethics, something that is hard-wired i.e. a priori? Are we born with a set of basic morals and ethics or are they learned?

There are really two questions here. The first question is whether our capacity for moral judgement is 'hard-wired', i.e. whether we are moral by 'nature' or by 'education'. The second question is whether there is a rational, a priori justification for being moral. To see that these two questions are separate, consider the following two cases:

1. Suppose it were true that morals are hard-wired. It is still open to an individual to raise the question whether it would not be better for them if they could find a way to free themselves of their biological conditioning.

2. Or suppose that there is an a priori philosophical argument that provides a rational basis for moral judgement. Even if our biology makes us naturally immoral, the rational thing to do in the face of that argument is curb our natural instincts and do what morality demands rather than what we naturally want.

Are morals 'hard wired'? Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* gives a convincing demonstration of the untenability of the theory that the survival of human society shows that human beings must have 'evolved' a gene for altruism.

The problem with that theory, as Dawkins points out, is that the basis for the selection of one gene in favour of another is strictly its capacity to confer on the individual a greater chance of surviving to procreate. Groups are not selected, only individuals are.

Thus, if you put a ruthless user amongst a group of simple altruists, the user will survive at their expense. On the other hand, a gene for 'bearing a grudge' or paying someone back in kind if they don't scratch your back when you scratch theirs does have a potential to survive. Amongst one another, the grudgers will behave altruistically. When a ruthless user comes along, they close ranks.

I don't think it follows from this that morals are merely conventional, as Dawkins seems to hold. I would argue that respect for the other is learned as part of a natural process that starts in early infancy. We learn to be moral as we learn language.

The natural dialogue of self and other as played out in the relation between the human infant and its parent or carer is not sufficient, however, to establish an a priori basis for moral judgement. A metaphysical argument is needed.

In my book Naive Metaphysics I try to give the metaphysical argument. I am not going to try to say here whether I think that argument is successful. Intuitively, the idea is that if the other is not 'real' in my eyes, if their needs and interests have no authority for me, then reality itself is not 'real'. A world without moral values would be a world without 'truth' of any kind.

Carla asked:

I would appreciate some help and guidance with this essay question:

"Punishment can never be administered merely as a means of promoting another good, either with regard to the Criminal himself or Civil Society, but must in all cases be imposed because the individual on whom it is inflicted has committed a crime." – Discuss

The quote is from Immanuel Kant, *The Philosophy of Law: An Exposition of the Fundamental Principles of Jurisprudence as the Science of Right.* At the time of writing, there is an on-line version at: Carnegie Mellon School of Computer Science.

Punishment serves a number of legitimate purposes. I am not just talking about institutionalised punishment, written up in the statute books, but also punishment that a parent might mete out to a child, or a schoolteacher to a pupil. Here are the main uses:

> 1. **To deter the wrongdoer from committing a similar offence in the future.**
> 2. **To deter others from committing a similar offence by making an example.**
> 3. **To physically restrict the ability of the offender from repeating the offence.**

4. To alter the offender's behaviour patterns, so that they are less likely to offend in the future.
5. To convey to the offender how strongly we feel about the wrong they have done us.
6. To make up for the injustice committed by the wrongdoer by paying them back.
7. To give the offender the opportunity to atone for their offence.
8. To give the offender the opportunity to rejoin the moral community.

It is important to notice that Kant says that punishment should never merely be used as a means for promoting another good. He is not saying that punishment cannot also be used as such a means. There is a echo here from Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*. I should always treat other persons as 'ends in themselves' and not merely as a 'means to my end'.

Possibly, there may be other motives for punishment which could be added to the above list. One question you have to answer is which of the motives is capable of being used as an acceptable justification for the punishment meted out. Here we come to the question of philosophical theories of punishment. One book you might look at is Ted Honderich *Punishment: The Supposed Justifications* originally published in 1969.

Kant's view would be classified as 'retributivist'. However, retributivism encompasses a number of ideas. The central idea is that of returning the scales of justice to their rightful balance. Opponents of this view of justice see it as merely a cover for the primitive emotion of revenge.

The idea of balancing is crucial in opposing punishments which are more severe than is justified by the nature of the crime. At the time of Charles Dickens, a person could hanged for stealing a loaf of bread. I was shocked to learn that in the State of Utah there was recently a case where a prisoner faced the death penalty for aggravated assault. The biblical concept of 'an eye for an eye' has been much criticized. But at least it sets acceptable limits. By any intuitively acceptable standard of justice, it is unjust to demand a life for an eye.

PRACTICAL ETHICS

Suzanne asked:

Can you tell me whether it is more morally correct and spiritually rewarding to tell your truth even if it hurts another? and is there anything within philosophy that tells about loyalty to particular people and not to others, e.g. is it ever right to tell a lie to protect another?

You're mixing two things up here. One question is whether, or under what circumstances, it is right to tell a lie. The other question is whether moral philosophy can justify partiality to a particular person or persons. If you are faced with a situation where you feel the need to tell a lie to one person in order to

protect another, then you need to answer both questions. Let's deal with them one at a time.

Can lying every be morally justified? There is an excellent book which you should read by Sisella Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* Quartet 1980, in which she musters some powerful arguments against the view that it is all right to lie when it serves a better end. I won't try to summarize her arguments. Instead, I would invite you to consider how you would react to the following statement:

I sometimes tell a lie, when it serves a better end.

If you believe that it's all right to tell a lie when it serves a better end, then surely it must be all right to say what you believe. But nobody but a fool would say this. To admit to lying undermines other people's faith in one's word. Suppose you are known as a morally upright person who would never do wrong knowingly. In order to decide whether or not to believe you, a listener would first have calculate whether, in your judgement, the best ends would be served by telling the truth or a lie. An intolerable situation, don't you agree?

It is never all right to tell a lie, but some times we have to, all the same. You tell the axe-man pursuing his intended victim, 'He went that-a-way.' Very few real life situations are this clear cut. All the same, we sometimes find ourselves facing a dilemma in which it is impossible to do the right thing. Since we have to act, we cannot be blamed for choosing the lesser of two evils. But the fact that you had to make the choice that you made, doesn't make the action you chose 'right'.

Can moral philosophy justify partiality to a person or group of persons? I believe it can. Here, I am strongly in agreement with the line taken by Bernard Williams in his writings (see, for example, his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* 1985). Rights, for example, the right not to be lied to, are non-negotiable, but the claims that other persons make on us depend upon our commitments. These are matters to be negotiated through moral dialogue. There are no human beings who do not 'count', with whom I am not required to engage in moral dialogue, should the appropriate circumstances arise. It does not follow, however, that every person whom I engage in dialogue deserves equal consideration. It is acceptable, for example, under certain circumstances to put one's own family before others.

Interestingly, in both these questions, the question of lying and the question of partiality, the line I have taken is diametrically opposed to the line taken by the utilitarian philosophy of 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. In utilitarianism, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with lying, apart from the bad consequences that would follow if it got around that your word was not to be trusted. On the question of partiality, faced with the life-boat scenario where I can either save my family, or fifty other people, the utilitarian would insist that I leave my family to drown in order to save the others. That is something I do not believe any of us is morally required to do.

What follows from this? If you lie to protect a friend, then you will be doing something wrong. If you are disloyal to your friend, then you will also be doing something wrong. I'm afraid there is no easy answer to this dilemma, you have to decide.

Rocio asked:

I find myself in a philosophical dilemma. The problem is that while I am firmly vegetarian, due to the belief that there is no justification of murder, I still wonder if this argument can lead to ridiculous conclusions. Such as would I not, to commit to my claims, be able to swat a fly, or spray for ants or stomp on a cockroach. I am at a plateau in my thought. Perhaps there is truly no dilemma, if one merely refers to the intention of the agent; in so far as murder is justified. However, how can this justification be sufficed by mere convenience of living conditions. Non-vegetarians would probably think that this is trivial, but I truly think that animal rights have been widely overlooked, save Peter Singer. Some thoughts on this subject would be of great help.

The case for Vegetarianism assumes that we do not need to eat meat to survive. The fact that meat is very tasty and nutritious is not sufficient to justify killing animals for food. However, in a possible world where human beings were physically incapable of surviving without eating meat, killing animals for food might be justified as the lesser of two evils.

Everything therefore turns on the question of 'living conditions'. Even if killing sentient life is wrong in itself, killing pests which threaten human life is justified as the lesser of two evils. On the other hand, the fact that the buzzing of a fly annoys me and prevents me thinking about philosophy is not sufficient to justify swatting the fly. I just have to put up with the noise.

It is true that many people are inconsistent vegetarians. Insects generally get a hard deal, because they are less able to attract our natural sympathy. I would say that the Vegetarian who would swat a fly without a moment's thought is being inconsistent.

But how do you decide which of two alternatives is the 'lesser of two evils'? Singer has argued that in certain circumstances, we ought rationally to save the life of a chimpanzee in preference to that of a human being. Without the aid of some ultimate principle – like the 'Utilitarianism' of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill which Singer relies on – there seems to be no way of deciding hard cases. For if you say, as a matter of principle, 'Humans first', then it does look as if the slightest inconvenience to humans would justify the killing of non-human animals.

In other words, if you do not subscribe to the moral philosophy of Utilitarianism, it is hard to be a consistent, principled vegetarian.

Kathleen asked:

I'm taking a course in philosophy of health care. One of the discussion questions was: In severe pain a patient refused the surgeons' offer to describe to the patient the nature and consequences of the procedure. She said that she trusted his judgement. The surgeon went ahead with the surgery and he gave her a blood transfusion that was necessary to save her life. It turned out that the patient was a Jehovah witness. She now wants to sue the doctor for not asking her consent in the matter, Do you think that she had in fact provided valid, informed consent?

I am assuming that the surgeon did not know that the patient was a Jehovah's Witness. We have to look at this question from two perspectives:

When the surgeon offered to describe the nature and consequences of the procedure, he assumed that the patient's concern was merely about the consequences for their health, or the risks involved in the operation. Had he considered the possibility that the patient might be a Jehovah's Witness, he could not reasonably have taken the patient's refusal of his offer as consent to a blood transfusion, given that he had not called the patient's attention to this matter. On the other hand, if the surgeon did not consider the possibility that the patient might be a Jehovah's Witness, then that might be considered negligence on his part.

Most people are not Jehovah's Witnesses. Therefore, given that the issue of blood transfusions is a very important one for a Jehovah's Witness, the patient ought to have volunteered this information. It is surely incumbent on any Jehovah's Witness going into an operation to request that they should not be given a blood under any circumstances, without waiting to be asked.

If one is looking to apportion blame, I feel that some blame must fall on both sides.

However, the question is 'Did the patient provide valid, informed consent?' The patient did not provide informed consent, because she declined the offer to be informed. It is a patient's right to be told the nature and consequences of an operation. In this case, however, the patient waived that right. It is irrelevant that neither she nor the surgeon had considered the issue of blood transfusions. The only question that will be before the Court is whether the right to be informed can be waived. If it can, the patient does not have a case against the surgeon.

Tony asked:

I am looking at the case of a pregnant Nigerian woman who had recently emigrated to the UK. She was advised that she would need a Caesarean operation. Unfortunately the woman concerned could not comply with this as this was against her religious beliefs and replied supposedly, "If it is the will of Allah that the child lives, so be it. If it is the will of Allah that the child dies, then alas, so be it."

Unfortunately the doctor did not see it this way, and applied under the British Mental Health Act to have the woman declared mentally ill, and so was able to carry out the Caesarean operation against her wishes.

Can you please explain to me how the Court of Appeal, when judging the merits of this woman's case, might have gone about reviewing who had the right to life, or the right to see their beliefs not questioned? But what of providing a voice of advocacy for the unborn child, who unless brought forth via a Caesarean operation would not have come into the world?

There is no denying that a foetus has a moral claim. If it didn't, then there would be nothing wrong with a woman changing her mind about her pregnancy at the last minute, and demanding that the foetus be removed and disposed of.

The foetus has a claim. But it is not a claim that is strong enough to prevent, for example, the emergency destruction a foetus in circumstances where the mother's life is in grave danger, where medical complications prevent the removal of the foetus while it is still alive (rare as such a case might be). Most would agree that the mother has a stronger claim to life than her unborn foetus.

But what about a case where we are balancing the right to life of the foetus, not with the mother's right to life, but with other very important rights, like the right not to be operated upon without her consent?

The first point to make is that, in the present case, there is no question but that the doctor was wrong to have the Nigerian woman 'Sectioned' under the Mental Health Act. He broke the law. The purpose of Section 3 of the Mental Health Act is to put under restraint people who because of mental illness are incapable of looking after their own affairs. To 'Section' a patient, two doctor's signatures are required. The doctors who signed the order to detain the Nigerian woman lied. They declared that the woman was mentally ill, when she wasn't.

The doctor knew he would be breaking the law if he simply had the woman anaesthetised and opened up, without telling her what he was intending to do. Instead, he not only broke the law but abused it.

Sometimes one can be morally justified in breaking the law. So let's put aside that question and consider simply whether it was morally right to operate on the Nigerian woman without her consent, whether the moral claim of the foetus was stronger than that of the mother.

I find that proposition simply incredible. Even if the woman did not have strong religious objections, but merely disliked the idea of being operated on and preferred to take the chance of a normal delivery, there could have been no justification for coercion. Even if the circumstances had been such – which they were not – that we could have said that she was morally wrong to refuse an operation, it was still her decision and no-one else's.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Sheree asked:

Is it possible to legislate morality?

A few years ago, a case came before the British Courts of a group of sado-masochists whose leisure activities included sticking pins and nails through various parts of one another's anatomies. As a result of one of their over-exuberant sessions, one of the group was rushed to hospital requiring an emergency operation.

The members of the group were prosecuted despite the fact that all the acts they did to one another were done with each others' full knowledge and consent, and within the privacy of their own homes. In summing up, the Judge affirmed that it was the proper business of the law to defend accepted moral standards, which these individuals had clearly transgressed. They were found guilty and each given a prison sentence.

The issue of the enforcement of morality was brought to a head in the 60's in the clash between Lord Devlin and H.L.A. Hart. Devlin argued in his book *The Enforcement of Morals* (1965) that in certain cases the law should be used to enforce morals. Hart argued vigorously against Devlin's claim that a society could not hold together unless it was founded on an agreed moral base. Today Hart's arguments seem generally to have prevailed.

It might be claimed that citizens are harmed by the actions of the sado-masochists because the very thought of what the sado-masochists do causes offence. However, as J.S. Mill argued in his famous essay *On Liberty,* the fact that a person is offended by someone's action does not establish that they have been 'harmed'. According to Mill's Principle of Liberty, an adult person should to be allowed to do what they want provided that their action does not cause harm to someone else. The question is whether Mill was right about this.

You ask if it is 'possible' to legislate morality. There are potentially two questions here, first, whether there are any occasions where one ought, other things being equal, to seek to legislate morality, and secondly, whether in fact this can be done in practice. It seems to me that the extra powers that would need to be given to the state to seek out moral lawbreakers would be too high a price to pay. What actually happens in the UK is that we have an inconsistent situation where archaic laws are occasionally enforced.

Today it is extremely hard to identify moral views over which there is reliable consensus. But suppose there were. Suppose that everyone apart from the sado-masochists agreed that the practice of sado-masochism is in itself outrageous and therefore morally wrong. Suppose further that there were no practical obstacles to the enforcement of a law prohibiting sado-masochistic acts. Would the introduction of such a law be justified? – My simple response would be, The fact that the majority assent to a judgement does not make it right. The majority are entitled to feel outraged, but that is all.

David asked:

Having spent the last few days banging my head against a wall, I was wondering if you could save me a major headache by answering the following questions. Is democracy the 'least worst' form of government. And are there limits on the duty of obedience to the state, if so how can these be defined.

Is democracy the 'least worst' form of government? – The question assumes that government is for some purpose or set of purposes, and that the only dimension of assessment of different forms of government is how well, or how badly they accomplish their objectives. However, if a political philosopher were to put forward the argument that democracy is the only acceptable form of government – for example, that our duty of obedience to the state can only hold if the state is ruled by a democratically elected government – then it would not matter if democracy was the worst of all possible arrangements for getting things done.

That is not the only principled argument for democracy. Another argument is that the fundamental assumption of human equality is inconsistent with any form of government other than a democratic one.

Are there limits on the duty of obedience to the state? – This is the classic question of political philosophy. It would be impossible to attempt to answer it here. Roughly, the reasons given fall into two main categories. Either we are morally obliged to obey the state, in which case the question is how far this obligation extends before it is overridden by other, conflicting moral obligations. Or it is in our own best long-term interest, all things considered, to obey the state, in which case the question is under what circumstances one might make the well founded judgement that disobedience was in one's best long-term interests. My own inclination is towards the first, rather than the second strategy.

On the view that our obligation to obey the state is a moral obligation, it would seem to be the case prima facie that there can be other moral obligations which override it. When a moral claim is overridden, that does not imply that the claim itself is invalid. However, the moral obligation to obey the state is itself conditional on certain requirements being fulfilled. Consider the case of the Israeli Mordechai Vanunu, who gave away his country's atomic secrets. It is possible that he simply believed he was responding to an overriding moral imperative. An alternative explanation is that he believed that his government, in secretly stockpiling weapons without a democratic mandate had forfeited its moral claim on his obedience.

Mumtaz asked:

Why does Marx think human alienation can only be overcome in a classless society? What arguments can be used to accept or reject this statement?

To answer your question properly would require a long essay. I will simply try to indicate the main argument as I see it.

The essence of a class society, as it exists now, is tied to the concept of money. In a capitalist society, a person's labour can be bought and sold for profit, just like any other commodity.

From this simple observation, it follows that there will be persons whose labour can be bought and sold, and persons who buy labour which they sell for profit in the form of products which labour has produced.

In the writings of the early Marx, there is justified moral outrage at the terrible conditions under which workers lived. But this was not what Marx meant by the worker being 'alienated'. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx makes the fundamental assumption that the work that a person does is the only adequate expression of their humanity. I believe that this is a view which he held throughout his life. Work is the means by which we express the capacities which are specifically human, the capacities of intelligence, creativity. It is also the basis for the solidarity of society. We do not work alone, but share the tasks that need to be done.

In order for work to be a true expression of our humanity, therefore, we need to inhabit the world we have created by our work. This world is a world of artefacts and also a social world. The two go together.

This state of affairs cannot be reliably achieved under capitalism. In a society where there is a workers' class and a capitalist class, whether or not the worker is able to inhabit the world created by his work depends on how much he can afford. How much he can afford depends on how much his labour is valued in the marketplace. These are factors which lie outside the worker's power.

The key assumption here is marked by the term 'reliably' in the previous paragraph. Marx's criticism of money, or the idea that everything has a universal 'exchange value', is that the laws of the marketplace are independent of man's will. To live in such a society is to live in a state of unfreedom. It is this state of unfreedom which is the basis for the worker's 'alienation' (and also, incidentally, for the 'alienation' of the capitalist).

PHILOSOPHY OF ART AND MUSIC

Jeremy asked:

John Keats wrote in his poem 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.' I believe that beauty is not truth and that this is quite evident in modern society. What are your thoughts on this issue? Are there any philosophical greats who would agree with me?

When Plato called the Sophists 'panderers' and accused them of purveying appearances in place of truth, he was responding to the same fault that you see with modern society. 'Everything is style but no substance,' is a familiar cliche. Iris Murdoch has written a book *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* about Plato's low estimate of art in *The Republic*.

Why can't we value truth for truth's sake, and beauty for beauty's sake? To assume, as Keats apparently did, that the only way to defend aesthetic value is to equate it with truth is to concede the argument to Plato.

In my online notebook page for 16th April I challenge one half of Keats' assertion, focusing on the narrower claim that 'the value of pictorial representation in art is a species of truth'. Possibly, that's what prompted you to ask your question. I won't try to repeat the argument here.

Instead, I shall look at the other, more controversial half of the assertion, that 'truth is beauty'. Is that true?'

I could be clever and say that the fact that Keats' remark is 'beautiful', i.e. poetic, does not make it true. If I wrote, 'Every sentence consisting of eight words is true,' it would be reasonable for you to point out that, even if by its own criterion of truth that sentence is true, I have given you no grounds for believing that criterion to be true.

In science we seek the best explanation for a given phenomenon. What makes a hypothesis win out against all competitors is its elegance and simplicity. These are undoubtedly aesthetic attributes. Does it follow, then, that the most elegant and simple theory is true? It is reasonable to assign the higher degree of probability to the more aesthetically attractive theory, but that is all. Some times the long-shot wins the race. Ugly theories can be true.

I suspect that what I have just written would be judged superficial, and that there is more to Keats' remark. In that case, I wish someone would enlighten me.

Garry asked:

The problem I have concerns the content of intentions.

I am a saxophone player and the music I play is mainly improvised. For an improvisation to be creative, one necessary condition is that I intend the sounds that are produced by pushing down the keys on the instrument. It could be that my intention is just to press a key that I know will produce a merely correct note, i.e. one selected from the right scale, without knowing what sound will be thereby produced, e.g. something like, 'Right I'll play a G now and then an A.' This is a sort of verbal as opposed to musical knowledge which I think is mechanical, mere technical proficiency and not very creative.

The question is, How can I know what my intention is at any particular time during an improvisation? It is tempting to say that intended sounds will be pre-heard internally, a sort of inner aural image. But we can ask the same question of the image, how did I know that was intended etc. and an infinite regress looms. It seems as though this will be a problem for any non verbal intention that is immediately acted on, there is no experiential or qualitative content to it that one can check to determine whether it is merely mechanical. Can you suggest a solution?

This is a fascinating question. First, we need to get clear just where the boundaries of genuine 'creativity' in jazz improvisation are held to lie. One night, you might not feel very inspired, or perhaps the band is not playing particularly well, and you stick to well-trodden paths. You play safe. Still, there is an element of creativity in that you don't simply repeat previous performances note for note. I would argue that for the purposes of our philosophical question, that is all the creativity we need. You are following a familiar sequence of notes and come to a point where there is a choice. You can take direction A or direction B, and without a moment's hesitation you choose A.

I am not sure about your description of the 'merely mechanical' process which you say is not genuinely creative. Your thought seems to be this. The basic requirement for improvisation is that the musician should play notes in the right key. Otherwise, the result sounds awful. This is a rule that a proficient musician can do without thinking about it, without having their mind 'on the job'. And that is where intention comes in. But I don't see how the mechanical process could be described as 'verbal' as opposed to 'musical'. A better way of putting the contrast is that the mechanical process is musical only in the sense of *conforming to music theory*. It lacks a certain *quality of musicality* that you only hear when the player's attention is focused on the music *qua* music. (It is possible to improvise silently, in one's head, so it would not be correct to say that the difference between the mechanical and the creative approach consists in the fact that with the mechanical approach one does not need to actually *hear* the music.)

So we are talking about someone whose mind is on the music, by contrast with someone whose mind is not on the music. The difference has got to be that someone whose mind is on the music is making *aesthetic judgements*. Not, as you

rightly point out, of the sequence of notes pre-rehearsed in one's head, but of the actual performance in progress. So, in a sense, you are looking backwards. Each new note is instantly judged in relation to what has gone before, so that the whole continues to make musical sense. You know how you have to go on. (I am reminded here of what Wittgenstein says in the Philosophical Investigations about language use and 'following a rule'.)

I think this is how one should understand the comparison that is sometimes made between jazz improvisation and abstract expressionism in painting. Consider Jackson Pollock on a good day and on a bad day. On a bad day, he merely splashes paint. On a good day, Pollock's mind is focused on the image coming into being before his eyes. Each change is 'instantly judged in relation to what has gone before'. One very interesting difference is that whereas one can improvise music in one's head, it is not possible to paint an abstract expressionist painting in one's head. In the painting, there is an ingredient that derives from the physical properties of the material that both limits the possibilities available, but also creates opportunities, for example, in the particular way paint dribbles or spatters.

There is an element of deflationism in this account, a charge which I accept. In an important sense, Charlie Parker, or Jackson Pollock, even when they are at their most creative, do not see where they are going. The act of creation is an act of discovery. The music, the unfolding image, make aesthetic demands which the jazz musician, or the abstract expressionist painter have to obey. Intention only reaches forward as far as the next note, the next brush stroke.

MEANING OF LIFE

Stephen asked:

What is the purpose of life and why are we here?

Most analytic philosophers would approach this question by turning it round, and asking, What right do you have to assume that life has a purpose, or that there is any reason why we are here other than blind chance?

That assumes, wrongly in my view, that on a question as important as this one can be satisfied with a purely negative answer. If you can't say beforehand what the purpose of life is, then you can't prove that life has a purpose. If you don't know the reason why we are here, then you can't argue that there must still be reason. However, these sceptical moves do nothing to address the problem. One feels these questions as an urgent demand. To ask, 'What right have I to feel this way?' does nothing to lessen that feeling.

However, there is a more radical way of approaching this question, which we can illustrate with the aid of a thought experiment.

Suppose that there was an answer to the question of the purpose of life and why we are here, and it was in a book in front of you. This is, of course, just what some people believe. The book in which the answer is to be found is the Holy Bible. Or it might be the Koran, or some other sacred text. The trouble with the Bible, or the Koran is that the answer is there only for those who have faith, those who already

know the answer, or feel that they do. I am supposing that the answer in our imaginary book is as clear as day. Anyone who reads the words will be instantly convinced, This is why we are here.

I want to suggest two reasons for doubt, which I find troubling.

We are to assume that life has a definite purpose. Human beings are here for a reason, and you are here for that same reason, or as part of that reason. Moreover, having read the book you now know what that reason is. As I said, it is as clear as day. This is a purpose, a reason, that you must acknowledge irrespective of your own prior interests and projects. The story of the Old Testament prophets, or of Jesus' disciples are vivid illustrations of just what this means in practice.

We see our own projects, the purposes we invent for ourselves, to be limited, we see through them. They don't answer the big question. All that is true. Yet I would argue that the belief that you were chosen to be part of some project that is bigger than you are, a project that doesn't end in the grave as your personal projects will, is not enough to answer that question either, if you are honest about it.

The reason is this. If you knew that someone had a plan for you, it would still be up to you to decide whether or not to go along with that plan. Even if that someone is God. For it surely could not be part of that plan to deny human beings freedom of choice and turn them into puppets. The decision is yours, it must be. With all that you know now, having read the book from cover to cover, the question of the purpose of your life is still a question, your question. And no book, no recipe, however clearly laid out can supply the answer.

That's one reason for doubt. And here's the other:

I have argued that you still have a decision to make. No factual knowledge about the ultimate purpose of life or why we are here can make that decision for you. But could there be such knowledge?

Your question is not simply why we are here but why I am here. When I ask this question myself, I have to consider, not just the possibility of a universe where we didn't exist, but a universe where I didn't exist. To consider this is not just to consider a universe where someone exactly like me didn't exist. In the imaginary book there is a master plan, and someone fitting my exact description is part of that plan. But there is still one fact which that book cannot explain, namely, why I am here. Anything that can be communicated in a book is just words, and all words can speak of is someone like me, someone fitting my exact description. There therefore cannot be a factual answer to the question, Why am I here?

-- This might be considered one way of putting the case for an Existentialist response to your question.

Yeah asked:

If you don't know you're unhappy, are you?

It seems a paradox to say that a person could be unhappy, even though they didn't think that they were unhappy. Surely happiness is a feeling which you know you have, if you have it, and know you don't have if you don't have it.

The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle would not agree with what I have just said. He had a conception of 'happiness' as more than simply a subjective feeling but rather a judgement that we make about the quality of a person's life. A man who is being cheated on by his wife is not 'happy' according to Aristotle's definition, even if he is blissfully unaware of the fact and thinks that he is the happiest man in the world.

We could argue all day about definitions. You might reply that Aristotle is not talking about 'happiness' per se, but something else (the Greek word is 'eudaimonia'). The substantial question is what sort of happiness we should want. Once you accept that the happiness you should want is Aristotle's, rather than the subjective feeling of happiness, then some important consequences follow, which I leave you to work out.

There is another dimension to the problem, however. Since Freud, we have got used to the idea that we are not always aware of how we truly feel. You assert you are happy, and as you utter the words you seem to believe what you say. Yet deep inside there is a gnawing unhappiness which is causing you to 'act out' in various ways, spoiling relationships and hurting people. – Freud said that his objective was to transform a person's neuroses into 'generalized unhappiness'. It sometimes seems as if he thought that everyone ought to be 'unhappy'.

Cuti asked:

Boethius in The Consolation of Philosophy *Book IV, Prose I, wrote: "...the good are always powerful and the evil always weak and futile, that vice never goes unpunished nor virtue unrewarded, that the good prosper and the evil suffer misfortune..." Who has the power, reward, and prosperity – the good or the wicked?*

There is no necessary connection – in this world – between 'the good' and power, nor indeed between 'the evil' and power. Nor is virtue always rewarded or vice always punished.

I fancy Boethius knew this.

There are two responses to this challenge to virtue:

1. The Christian response: In the world to come, all injustices will be put right. The virtuous will be rewarded and the evil punished.

2. The philosophical response: Socrates said, 'It is worse to do wrong than to suffer it.' He meant, better for your soul. This view comes closer to Buddhist philosophy. Virtue gives you inner 'strength'. The vicious are inwardly 'weak'.

My main objection to response 1. is not that the existence of a 'world to come' is doubtful, but rather that it reduces moral virtue to prudent self-interest. I prefer response 2. although I am not altogether happy with the Socratic doctrine of the

'unity of the virtues' which it implies. According to Socrates, it is impossible for an evil man to possess the virtue of courage. That is a difficult claim to defend.

- So what does one say when one looks around at a world where 'the evil' rejoice in their material rewards and prosperity? I say let them have it. The good should by all means do their utmost to pursue power, otherwise evil stands unopposed. It is my sincere belief, however, that the good have a better life.

Laurence asked:

What is the practical effect of Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence? Whether life is a one time performance in eternity or is re-run (that we don't know is a re-run) until the heat death of the universe doesn't seem to make any difference to the conclusion that you had better live life large this time around, because there isn't any rewind button. ER would thus appear to be a metaphysical exclamation point rather than have any independent relevance.

First, what is Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence? The theory was originally held by the Stoics. According to Nietzsche, given a deterministic universe of matter in motion, and sufficient time, sooner or later the material particles will fall into a pattern that has existed before. From that point onwards, determinism entails that the very same events will occur that occurred the previous time around until that configuration is reached again, and so on to infinity.

I seem to recall that there is a fatal flaw in that argument due to Nietzsche's failing to take into account irrational numbers. But I've forgotten how it goes. Perhaps you can work it out for yourself. The important thing is that, even if it is not necessarily the case that the same pattern will ever recur, if it does recur then it will indeed, as Nietzsche says, recur an infinite number of times. – That rules out a 'heat death' for the universe, incidentally.

For Nietzsche, the importance of the idea of eternal recurrence lies in the thought that it will indeed be I that returns. This tapping of the keys to produce these worlds will occur an infinite number of times, each time accompanied by these same thoughts. Would this thought crush you, asks Nietzsche? Or would you affirm it with a joyous, Yes! – I just don't know.

The problem is I don't see any interesting sense in which the GK who will exist the next time around, or the GK who existed the previous time around, or all the other past and future GK's can be me. As you say, it is not as if we have been given a 're-wind' button. When you re-wind a music tape to listen to it again, you are aware of hearing it as a re-run because you remember hearing it before. By hypothesis, none of the GK's have the slightest awareness of the experiences of any of the previous GK's. If they did, they would not be realizing the same configuration that existed before.

The philosopher Timothy Sprigge, who gives an appreciative account of Nietzsche's theory in his excellent Penguin paperback *Theories of Existence*, takes the opposite view from the one I have just expressed. It will be me who will come back into existence when the universe turns around. However, Sprigge doesn't make any attempt to provide an argument for that conclusion, and I seriously doubt whether one could be given.

There is just a tiny seed of doubt in my mind that I may simply have failed to make the imaginative leap required to appreciate the point Nietzsche is making. Really digging down, my only thought is this: In certain moods, I do find something terrifying about the realization that every moment of time as it passes by is gone, never to return. If Nietzsche felt that way too (I don't know of any place where he owns up to this *chronophobic* thought) then I can see how the notion of eternal recurrence might seem a kind of metaphysical comfort.

Crystal asked:

Do we have designated purposes in life? Are you fated to do certain things with your life? Or, do you have full control of your actions throughout life?

In order to tackle this question we first need to do a bit of philosophical analysis. There are three quite different ways in which you could be 'fated to do certain things with your life'.

1. Let's say the Gods on Mount Olympus have decided your 'fate', and there is nothing you can do, nowhere you can turn, to escape your destiny. Perhaps this is the way we should understand the story of Oedipus. The Gods don't need to be able to see into the future. They simply watch you and act accordingly. If you turn left, then whatever it is that you were going to meet up with is on the left. If you had turned right, it would have been on the right, because that is the way the Gods fixed it.

2. There is an all-knowing God, who can see into the future. So He already knows everything that you are going to do with your life. He has always known.

3. Just as there can be truths about what happened in the past or what is happening in the present whether we know these truths or not, so there are truths about what will happen in the future. There needn't be an all-knowing God who knows these truths. It is sufficient that the truths exist as unalterable facts.

- Now the question, whether you have 'full control of your actions throughout life' will be answered differently, depending on whether you are considering the possibility of 1, 2, or 3.

If 1. is correct, then we have very little control over our lives. We are mere puppets in the hands of higher powers, doing their will.

There has been much theological debate about whether as in 2. God's foreknowledge precludes free will. God, in creating the universe, foresaw all you would be and all you would do. So a case could be made for saying that whatever you do with your life is part of God's purpose. You make choices, which are 'free' insofar as no outside influence is brought to bear. So you are 'in control' in that limited sense. However, I don't find that a very happy prospect.

I find 3. the most interesting of all, because it doesn't depend on the belief in God, or Gods. This is the theory of 'philosophical fatalism'. Philosophical fatalism is the inspiration for an argument which has become known as the 'lazy sophism'. See if you can spot the fallacy:

a. Either it is true that I am going to get run over by a truck or it is false.

b. If the statement that I am going to get run over is true, then I will get run over however carefully I cross the road.

c. If the statement that I am going to get run over is false, then I will not get run over even if I walk slowly across the road fifty times without looking.

d. Therefore, there is no point in taking care crossing the road.

GOD

Steve asked:

Is Atheism logically untenable?

Given that it is impossible to prove or disprove the existence of God then is it not untenable and illogical to take an atheistic stance?

Must we keep an open mind about God, even those of us who are sceptical about the grounds for theism?

Let me first give some examples of things I personally do not feel I need to keep an open mind about. You may or may not agree:

– I do not need to keep an open mind about whether it is possible for someone to predict events that will happen in my life by observing the movements of the planets and stars, or reading the lines on my palm.

– I do not need to keep an open mind about the claims of Scientology.

– I do not need to keep an open mind about Hitler's responsibility for the Holocaust.

Isn't it irrational of me to be dogmatic, when there are people who believe in astrology and palmistry, or in Scientology, or in Hitler's innocence? – Just because people believe something – perhaps lots of people – just because the available evidence does not logically rule out the possibility that their belief is true, is not in itself sufficient reason for suspending judgement. My argument is if you allowed that such considerations were sufficient for suspending judgement, "just think what the consequences would be".

As someone who in his youth proudly professed Atheism, I would argue that theistic belief does not (as I once thought) fall into this category. Beliefs about Astrology, Palmistry, Scientology or Hitler are mundane beliefs, concerning things or events in the world. Theism is an attitude, a stance to the world as a totality.

When it comes to the question of the ultimate ground of our existence, we are all profoundly ignorant. All that is left is the practical decision – the existential choice

– whether to live in fear of God. However, existential choice still leaves us with three possibilities: we can choose to embrace theism; we can postpone the choice and profess agnosticism; or we can choose to embrace atheism.

In these terms, I would argue, the atheist option is neither untenable nor illogical. What the atheist has and the agnostic lacks, is something akin to religious faith. For those who find such faith supporting and life enhancing, that is sufficient ground for belief.

Paul asked:

Why is God's existence not looked at as simply illogical?

The first point to make is that it's harder to prove a negative than a positive. It's harder to prove that God doesn't exist, than that he does. When you take into consideration our own feeble-mindedness, which is surely capable of making us judge that something is illogical when it is not, you can see that refuting belief in God's existence is not quite so simple as it might seem.

According to the 'problem of evil', the combination of properties traditionally attributed to God, being all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good, is inconsistent with the existence of natural and moral 'evils' in the world. Being all-powerful, God cannot lack the power to prevent evil. Being all-knowing, he knows whenever evil occurs. Being all-good, he cannot wish evil to occur. But this is not a knock-down argument. Theologians are well versed in strategies for dealing with this problem. I won't say anything more about this, as I have discussed it elsewhere.

But can any existing object be all-anything? I can see a legitimate question here regarding the very idea of an existing thing that possesses any property to an infinite degree.

Consider God's power. Logically, nothing an be more powerful than God. But here's an old objection. Can God make a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it? If God can make a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it, then God's power is limited. Potentially, there exists a stone that God could make but couldn't lift. If God cannot make a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it, then God's power is again limited because there is something he cannot make. Either way, God's power is limited.

I don't think that this is a good objection for the following reason. If one asked, Can God make a perfectly spherical cube? the answer is, legitimately, No. The description 'perfectly spherical cube' is self-contradictory. If you add up all the self-contradictory descriptions you can think of, that's an awful lot of things that God can't make. But let's not get involved in a fight over whether God is obliged to obey the laws of logic. If someone claims that God cannot exist because his existence is illogical, then they are presumably relying on the principle that no object can exist, whose existence conflicts with the laws of logic. If an object cannot exist, then it surely cannot be any meaningful limitation on God's power that he cannot create it.

Given that we have defined God as all-powerful, 'a stone so heavy that God cannot lift it' turns out to be just another example of a self-contradictory description. We

have just established that it is no limitation of God's power that he cannot create objects whose description is self-contradictory. It is therefore consistent to hold both that God is all-powerful, and that he cannot create a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it.

What about God's other putative attributes? I have an objection to the definition of God as 'all knowing'. I'll leave you to consider whether or not you think that it is convincing. Being all knowing, God sees things from every point of view, including yours and mine. He knows what it is like to be you, and he knows what it is like to be me. But it seems to me that I know something God does not, and cannot know. What God knows is only what things are like for someone satisfying my total description. He knows, for example, what it is like to be struggling with this question. But what God cannot know is what it is like for the individual satisfying that total description to be I. From God's point of view, every individual is 'I'. From my point of view, only one is.

Sarah asked:

I have recently started an A-level R.E. course. My essay question is:

"Does the cosmological argument offer substantial proof for God's existence? Can you help me on where to start and the scholars involved?"

Have a look and see what books/readings you can get hold of on the philosophy of religion. The contemporary philosophers Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga are two to look out for.

The most famous criticism of the Cosmological Argument is in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Although you will probably find the text too hard-going at your stage, you might well find that a commentary on Kant – there are many available – will say something useful about Kant's views on the Cosmological Argument.

Stephen Hawking, in his *Brief History of Time*, attempts to outflank the cosmological argument altogether, by questioning the assumption that an infinite series of events going back into the past involves an infinite time. I suspect that he has missed the philosophical point, however. As you will see below, the infinitude of time as such is not really the issue.

What is the cosmological argument? The best way I know to present the argument is with an analogy. Imagine that you are in the middle of an incredibly long spiral staircase, looking at a glass chandelier suspended on a chain. Looking up, you see the chain disappear into the sky. Now, a reasonable question would be, What is holding the chandelier up? If some clever Dick said, 'Well, every link on the chain is held by the preceding link, but the links go on to infinity,' you would not be impressed. That merely puts off the question 'What's holding it up?' indefinitely. To put off a question indefinitely is not the same as answering it.

But that seems to be just what someone is saying, when they argue that every event happens *because* of its preceding cause, and so on to infinity!

If that argument does seem fishy to you, then the alternative seems to be to believe in a 'First Cause'. Either the chain of effects to causes is not infinite,

because God is the first cause in the chain, or the chain of effects to causes is infinite, but the 'cause' of the infinite chain's existing, rather than not existing is outside of time altogether, in God's eternal will.

I have tried to make the Cosmological Argument appear 'substantial'. I don't think it is valid. I do think, however, that it is invalid for interesting reasons.

METAPHYSICS

Yves asked:

Metaphysics can be defined as the science that tries to get to the truth behind things as they appear (Cf. F.H. Bradley's Appearance and Reality). But whatever lies behind appearances must be known by inferences from those appearances. Now in any deduction, it seems there must be both a universal proposition and a particular proposition. The particular proposition would be one taken from the appearances of things.

What would the universal proposition be? And why? It looks like metaphysics is a very problematic science posing as something very certain. In fact, there's hardly anything philosophers differ so much on than metaphysics.

The proposition, 'whatever lies behind appearances must be known by inferences from those appearances' is a fair characterization of scientific knowledge. Typically, the scientist puts forward a hypothesis, in the form of a universal proposition from which statements about 'appearances' – i.e. predicted experimental results – can be derived. If the actual results conflict with the prediction, then the hypothesis is rejected.

The problem with metaphysics is that conflicting metaphysical theories agree in all the experimental predictions that can be derived from them. Whether you are a Berkeleian idealist or a realist, two masses attract one another with a force inversely proportion to the square of their distance.

Here are two strategies that one could adopt in response to this challenge: The first is to seek a purely logical derivation of universal metaphysical propositions that does not require any additional premise concerning empirical appearances. The Presocratic philosopher Parmenides is the first recorded example of an attempt to follow that method, in arguing for his theory of 'the One'. In the 20th century, The metaphysician John McTaggart used this approach in his treatise *The Nature of Existence*.

The second strategy is to seek to uncover an incoherence or 'contradiction' inherent in the world of appearances, or the way in which we think about appearances. The Presocratic Philosopher Zeno sought to undermine belief in change and plurality by showing how our beliefs about the world of appearances lead to insoluble paradoxes. In his treatise *Appearance and Reality* F.H. Bradley argued that appearances are inherently 'self-contradictory', and that therefore there must exist an 'Absolute', where these contradictions are resolved.

These alternatives do not exhaust all the options. A third possibility would be to view 'metaphysics' as involving an investigation into the conceptual framework

which we apply to our familiar world, either with a view to its improvement, or to lay bare aspects that had previously been hidden. In very contrasting ways, Whitehead in *Process and Reality* and Heidegger in *Being and Time* both adopt this general approach. The Oxford philosopher P.F. Strawson in his book *Individuals* (1959) contrasted his own 'descriptive' exploration of our conceptual framework with the 'revisionary' views of metaphysicians such as Berkeley or Whitehead.

I think that all metaphysics can ultimately be is a way of directing our attention to aspects of our world that we had not noticed before. For example, the nature of the subjective viewpoint, or our experience of the passage of time. I am sceptical about the possibility of there being such a thing as a metaphysical 'theory'. Simply to describe what we see when we look at the world in this way is still a tremendously difficult task.

PHILOSOPHY OF DESCARTES

Damian asked:

What is Descartes' view on how humans make errors in judgement and how they can avoid doing so? What are Descartes' two reasons for believing that God is not to blame because humans make errors in judgement? I think it is in Meditation IV. *Please help!*

Descartes raises the question of how errors of judgement are possible in the Fourth Meditation. But the complete answer is only given in the latter part of the Sixth. So you have been looking in the wrong place!

How does the problem arise? The foundation of human knowledge and the refutation of scepticism, according to Descartes, depends upon the existence of a perfect God who is not a deceiver. It is only for this reason that we can have confidence that our perceptions correspond to an external world outside us. It is only for this reason that we can have confidence that our sense of judgement, which includes our sense of what is the best explanation of a given piece of evidence, is a reliable guide to how things really are.

But if all that is true, how is it that human beings make errors in judgement, as they undoubtedly do? Why does God allow us to be deceived? It cannot be malice or lack of power, because God is all-good and all-powerful. Surely, if he'd wanted to, he could have made our power of understanding in such a way that we always made the correct inferences. He could have made our senses in such a way that they always gave accurate information about the world outside us.

True to the style of the *Meditations*, Descartes starts off by considering several responses, then rejecting them as not fully satisfactory. Only God is perfect. I cannot know God's unfathomable purposes, I am only a small part of the whole picture, and so on. You can skip this. It is part of the standard fare that was served up (and still is) in response to the Problem of Evil. The first substantial part of Descartes' answer concerns the will. The second part involves a fascinating discussion of how the human senses operate.

I recently quoted a section from Descartes' discussion of will in my online notebook at The Glass House Philosopher (see Monday 13th March 2000 at

http://users.macunlimited.net/klempner/notebook/page49.html). We exercise our will when we choose what to do, or choose what to believe. Now there is a simple way to avoid errors in judgement: Do not make any judgement unless the object of your judgement is presented so 'clearly and distinctly' that you cannot possibly be in error. This is the famous 'Method of Doubt' which Descartes has been following in his *Meditations.* If human beings stuck to this principle, they would never go wrong.

The problem is – and this is the first part of Descartes' answer – we have to make judgements every day about things which are uncertain. You give it the best shot, only sometimes your best shot misses. Weather forecasters are regularly blamed for making wrong predictions. But they are only giving it their best shot.

Now it would be easy to think that Descartes answer here is complete in itself. We exercise our wills in making a judgement, even though we can't be sure of being right, because practical circumstances force us to. But there's an obvious objection: Why hasn't God, who does not wish us to be deceived, arranged the world in such a way that we can always be certain when we make judgements? Why can't our senses convey 100 per cent reliable knowledge of everything we need to know?

Descartes answer is that if you think about what this entails, you will see that it is impossible, even for a God who is all-powerful and all-good. Descartes first point is illustrated by a child's innocent question, 'Ma, why does the sun look so small when it's really so big?' Ma's answer – if she happens to be a philosopher – is, 'How would the sun have to look in order to look as big as it really is?!'

If you think about how the senses of finite, space-occupying beings would have to operate in any possible world, you will see that it would be impossible for the senses to convey accurate information simply on the basis of the way things seem, without our having to use our understanding and judgement, for example, in calculating the sun's true size from astronomical observations.

Descartes second point involves a fairly detailed description of how human bodies are constructed, although it doesn't depend on contingent facts about human physiology. It would apply equally well to Martians. Our senses operate in accordance to the laws of nature. The link-ups, when they are all set up correctly, function as a reliable source of knowledge. However, the very fact that there is a chain of causes and effects in between an object and our perception which gives rise to knowledge of that object means that it is impossible, without violating the laws of nature, to avoid situations where something goes wrong in the process. For example, the very nerves which reliably tell us when we have hurt our foot, convey the false information to the amputee that he has pain in a foot which is not there.

- It would be interesting to speculate whether Descartes' original and powerful response to the problem of error could be extended to the problem of errors in moral judgement, and thus provide a basis for the solution of the Problem of Evil.

Frank asked:

What is the wax, given, as Descartes says, that it is the same thing before and after it has melted? What faculty, i.e., ability does Descartes use to acquire the knowledge that it is the same wax before and after it has melted?

You are referring to the famous Beeswax passage from Descartes' Second Meditation. Descartes has been describing the essential properties that belong to his 'I':

> **I am a thing which thinks...I am not this assemblage of limbs called the human body; I am not a thin and penetrating air spread through all these members; I am not a wind, a breath of air, a vapour, or anything at all that I can invent or imagine...**

> *Meditations on First Philosophy* F.E. Sutcliffe tr. p. 105

But this thought is difficult to hold onto:

> **I cannot help believing that corporeal objects, whose images are formed by my thoughts, and which come under the senses, are more distinctly known to me than that, I know not what, part of me which does not fall within the grasp of the imagination. ibid. p. 108**

So he conducts an experiment. He places a piece of beeswax near the fire and observes the changes that take place. What is it, he asks, that gives him the confidence, and the right to judge that the same wax is still there, despite the radical alterations in its appearance?

It is the understanding, Descartes argues, and not the imagination which is the source of our knowledge that it is the same wax before and after it has melted. Just as it is the understanding, not the imagination, that reveals what I myself truly am.

The wax is a substance, a thing with qualities. According to this philosophical usage, 'substance' applies not only to kinds of material stuff but also to a table, or a human body. The table is the same table, even after it has been painted white and the legs shortened by six inches. A human body remains the same body, even though, over the passage of time, every living cell is replaced.

A contemporary philosopher would say that our concept of the identity of a material object through space and time, and through changes in outward appearance, is tied to the notion of a sortal concept. The material stuff of the table, before and after it has been chopped up for firewood is the same wood. But it is not the same table, because the table has ceased to exist. The piece of beeswax is the same wax before and after it has melted, even though the cells which the bees made out of the wax have ceased to exist. If the wax is heated to a sufficiently high temperature the wax, too, ceases to exist, and all that remains are the same chemical constituents of the former wax now broken down into carbon and water.

You will find the seminal discussion of identity and spatio-temporal continuity in David Wiggins Sameness and Substance Oxford 1980. The basic idea behind Wiggins' discussion, however, goes back to Aristotle.

A supporter of the view that identity is always identity under a sortal concept would certainly agree with Descartes' claim that perception and imagination are not sufficient for judging that an object, or a stuff, is the same despite changes in outward appearance, if we lack the concept of the thing in question. Note that I said, 'judging that an object...is the same'. The dog that recognizes its former owner, when the owner returns after many years unrecognizable to his former friends, does not judge that its owner has returned, but merely exhibits a finely tuned capacity for recognizing smell, and possibly other perceptual qualities. The dog reacts to the perception.

There are, however, ingredients in Descartes' notion of material substance that a contemporary philosopher would not agree to, notably the idea that the essence of material substance is completely accounted for by the pure geometrical notion of extension. Leibniz criticised Descartes on this point. And Descartes attempt to derive the science of mechanics from his analysis of substance as extension was decisively refuted by Newton.

PHILOSOPHY OF KANT

Sandra asked:

How is Kant's philosophy a synthesis of Rationalism and Empiricism?

Descartes held that we have 'innate ideas' planted in our minds by God. Locke said that all human knowledge comes from experience: the infant's mind at birth is like a blank sheet waiting for knowledge to be written on it – a tabula rasa. The rationalists Spinoza and Leibniz agreed with Descartes, the empiricists Berkeley and Hume agreed with Locke.

So the story goes.

A keen student will be quick to point out that the empiricists couldn't have held that the mind lacked any innate powers. And what is an 'idea', a 'concept' but a power to organize perceptions in a particular way? So what was the dispute really about? and what was Kant's contribution to the debate?

There are just three concepts that we need to think about: the concept of oneself, the concept of things occupying space and the concept of a cause. How are we able, from a barrage of uninterpreted sensations, to identify ourself as the subject or owner of those experiences? How do we succeed in sticking our experiences together to make things that occupy space and persist through time? Where do we get the idea of one thing causing something else to happen?

Kant agreed with the empiricists that there is no rational faculty that enables me to perceive the innate ideas inside my own mind, as Descartes thought he could perceive his own soul and his idea of God. David Hume, in response to Descartes' claim about the soul reported that,

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. Treatise on Human Nature Book I, Part IV, Sec vi.

When philosophers' intuitions clash like this it's the end of the debate. Kant took the side of the empiricists in absolutely rejecting any speculations about what God might have planted in the human mind, that cannot be established by means of a logically compelling proof.

> **...in this kind of investigation it is in no wise permissible to hold opinions. Everything, therefore, which bears any manner of resemblance to an hypothesis is to be treated as contraband; it is not to be put up for sale even at the lowest price, but forthwith confiscated, immediately upon detection.**

> Critique of Pure Reason Preface to First Edition, A xv.

Yet Kant also believed – and this is where he found himself on the side of the rationalists – that if the innate powers of the mind were not specifically targeted on forming a concept of self, identifying things in space and their causal relations, then the infant would never get to first base. It could never succeed in making sense of its experiences.

Kant thought he had found the proof. He called it, rather grandly, his Transcendental Deduction of the Categories. It is the centrepiece of the Critique. – It is also incredibly badly written, obfuscating and repetitious. The essential core of the argument, without which the whole thing falls to pieces, is tacked on as an afterthought in the 'Refutation of Idealism' of the Second Edition.

For what it's worth, this is my interpretation how the argument goes:

> **1. I have experience.**
> **No-one could doubt that, could they?**

> **2. Having experience means my remembering experiences I have had before, along with being aware of the experiences I am having now. You need a moment to think about this, to see why it's true.**

> **3. The two 'I's, and 'my' in the previous statement all refer to the same subject I. Need to think about this too. If the present 'I' seems to remember experiences which someone else had rather than me, then my memory claim is false. Kant calls this feature the 'transcendental unity of apperception'.**

> **4. I have to conceive of myself as being located in a world which my experiences are of, meeting up with objects I have met up with before. Now we are getting to the crux. Note that this isn't yet the world as we know it. You could think of the 'objects' of experience as just strung along in a line, like a melody that can be played forwards or backwards.**

5. Objects which I perceive, then meet up with later, must be conceived as continuing to exist meanwhile. Not true of the melody.

6. Objects which continue to exist must have a place to exist in. This is where the categories of substance and a spatial world come in.

7. If things have changed when I get back to them, there must be a way of knowing whether they really have changed, or whether my memory is wrong. Changes happen in the world predictably, as the result of other changes happening. This is where the category of cause comes in.

So the mere fact that I have experience proves that the concepts of substance and cause can't be constructed out of my experience but must be – innate. An amazing result, don't you think?

Morad asked:

Please tell me, How can we apply the metaphysical concepts in Immanuel Kant's philosophy to quantum mechanics in physics?

In the section on the 'Analogies of Experience' in his book *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant argued that a necessary condition for our having experience of an objective world is that determinism must hold universally.

It is a matter of speculation what Kant would have said if the physics of the day had been quantum mechanics rather than Newtonian mechanics. One possible response would be to say that Kant would have acknowledged his error, and set to work providing a non-determinist metaphysical foundation for quantum mechanics. Commentators on Kant, notably P.F. Strawson in his excellent book The Bounds of Sense have argued that the 'flavour' of Kant's philosophy can be preserved despite the rejection of his claim about determinism. What is required for objective experience, Strawson argues, is merely a world which displays causal regularities, where things generally happen in predictable ways. That is sufficient to provide us with a basis for distinguishing 'genuine' objective experience from subjective hallucinations or dreams.

My own view is that Kant would not be satisfied with this account. I think that he believed, rightly or wrongly, that it is only by virtue of the truth of universal determinism that every statement about the past has a determinate truth value, whether we can ever know the truth value or not. Provided determinism holds, the present state of the universe, according to Newtonian mechanics, retains information that would be sufficient to deduce all that has gone before. That is a powerful idea. Once universal determinism is rejected, past events can disappear from the 'memory' of the universe as if they had never happened.

It is possible that present day physicists or philosophers interested in quantum mechanics might be attracted to Kantian philosophy for a different reason. What I have said about Kant's 'proof' of universal determinism applies to the world of

possible experience, the 'phenomenal' world in space and time. But Kant also believed that there exists an unknowable 'noumenal' world outside of space and time which provides the ultimate ground for the existence of all subjects and objects. It does seem conceivable that in the light of the difficulties facing a 'hidden variables' interpretation of quantum mechanics, some might be tempted to see Kant's unknowable 'noumena' as a possible candidate for the ultimate reality of which quantum effects are the visible appearance. – The sceptic would say that the only thing to recommend such a view is its complete obscurity.

Antonio asked:

Could you explain with an example how Kant understands space and time?

One of the things that sticks in people's minds about Kant's philosophy is the idea that space and time are merely ways in which we perceive the world, the idea that the world in itself is neither in space or in time. It seems almost as if he believes that inside the human mind is something like spectacles, which force us to experience things in the way that we do. The spectacles make things *look* as if they are in space. The spectacles make our experiences *seem* to happen in time.

If that were true, then one might speculate what would happen if we could succeed in removing our spatio-temporal spectacles. According to Kant, however, the very idea that we could see things 'as they are in themselves' is absurd.

What is characteristic about the human situation, or indeed the situation of any finite beings, is that we have to piece together a theory of the world from bits and pieces of evidence based on what is given to us in perception. Kant provides some compelling arguments why our experiences must be structured in certain ways in order to make any sense at all. Time is the 'form' in which experiences come to us, space is the 'form' in which we build up a picture or theory of a world outside our own minds.

In reality, there doesn't have to be any time, in order for human experience to exhibit a time order, there doesn't have to be any space, in order for human beings to interpret their experiences as the perception of objects in space.

Here's an example from science fiction which illustrates Kant's view of space. The film, *The Matrix*, is based on this idea. In the film, computer scientists of the future have succeeded in writing a program which accurately models a spatial world and the people who inhabit it. The program not only describes their movements and speech, but also their experiences and thoughts. The individuals contained in the program are not merely pictures or representations of people, they are people. They perceive a 'real' world of objects in space, and other people moving about and communicating with them. In reality, they, and their world are nothing more than electrical currents going round the circuits of a supercomputer.

This is fantastical. But it is not a lot less fantastical than the idea that one day a supercomputer might be programmed with 'artificial intelligence'.

Kant argued that it is impossible to provide a rational proof of the existence of God. But he does talk of what God would be like, if he existed. God sees the whole of reality by 'intuitive perception'. We have to piece together a picture of the

universe. God sees everything all at once. So God doesn't 'see' the space and time that we see. What he sees is the unknown 'something', the Matrix, which causes us to see things in space and time.

SPACE AND TIME

Jack asked:

I have a 'trick question' that I would actually sincerely like you to comment on, and perhaps change my mind about: 'Where does all the "time" past go to, and where is all the "time" to come stored?

There are two questions you can raise about the past. The first concerns the alleged 'flow' of time, and the difference between past, present and future. Not all contemporary philosophers writing on the nature of time are agreed that the difference between past, present and future marks a real distinction in the nature of things. Hugh Mellor in book *Real Time* (and his recent *Real Time II* – both books are published by Cambridge) argues that time is fully captured by the 'before-and-after' series of historical events. The terms 'past', 'present' and 'future' or the differences between tenses are explained as marking temporal relations between the event of an utterance or assertion and the event described in the assertion.

The seminal text to read is the argument against the reality of time by the metaphysician John McTaggart in *The Nature of Existence* (Cambridge) Vol II Ch 33.

My own view is that the difference between past, present and future is real and not merely apparent, so I am in disagreement with Mellor, and also with McTaggart. I would reject your question, 'Where is time stored?' on the grounds that it presupposes that the past must somehow exist in, or alongside the present.

However, there is a second question one can raise about time which I find equally puzzling. This concerns the nature of past facts, or what it is that makes statements about the past true. Many events pass us by without a trace, or leaving only ambiguous and sketchy evidence from which they could be reconstructed. What makes it true, for example (if it is true) that my car used up more petrol today than it did yesterday, given that I did roughly equal mileage? There is no possible way of knowing, yet we feel that the answer 'must be there' in the past. However, in the absence of God or a recording angel, what would it mean to say that the answer is 'there in the past'?

An important article dealing with this problem is Michael Dummett's 'The Reality of the Past', reprinted in his collection of papers *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Duckworth).

Once again, I do not think that it is helpful to imagine that the past must be stored somewhere, in order to make statements about the past to be true or false.

Cloe asked:

What does it mean to say that time has a direction? Does time, as a matter of fact, have a direction?

I have identified the following: psychological arrow, causal arrow, law of thermodynamics. Concentrating on the causal arrow as possibly fundamental, can you offer me any support or constructive criticism?

That's what I like to see: You have made a start with the problem, and identified the considerations that you think may be relevant!

If one imagines standing outside the whole of time, from the Big Bang up to the present date, all that exists is a series of events, ordered by the relation, 'before-and-after'. These events are like points on a road map, or tracks on a CD, or words in a book. Looking down on the history of the universe one can retrace it's steps from the end of the journey to the beginning. It would be like starting at the last page of the book and reading backwards, or reversing the motor on your CD player. It makes no difference. The same events happen in the same relative order. The only difference is the events that you arbitrarily designate as 'first' and 'last'.

One of the events in the history of the universe was the time when as a schoolboy I accidentally threw a cricket ball through the classroom window. How does this look when played backwards? A cricket ball lying still on the grass jumped into the air in the direction of the broken window. As it did this, pieces of glass lying scattered about also took into the air, and, then, as the ball passed through the window frame into the class room, the glass pieces came together to form a window pane.

One thing you could say about this story is that it seems extremely improbable. But improbable things can sometimes happen. It is extremely improbable, but not impossible, that the molecules composing an area of ground would suddenly 'vibrate' in the same direction at once, giving the ball sufficient impetus to become airborne. And so on. The law of Thermodynamics is all about probabilities. 'You can't pass heat from a cooler to a hotter body' is not entailed by the laws describing the motions of material bodies. There is a finite, though tiny, probability that the reverse could happen on a particular occasion. If you allow this, then you must also allow that there is a still tinier probability that the reverse always happens. If you ignore questions of probability, it is consistent with the laws of nature that the universe is running in the opposite direction from the direction that we think (your 'psychological arrow') that it is.

This is all mind-boggling, isn't it?

But let's press on. What I have just said only makes sense if we have some independent criterion for the direction of time. To say that the universe is really running on the opposite direction from the direction that we think it is running implies that there is a real difference between reading the book, or playing the CD, backwards or forwards. What could that difference be?

This is where causation comes in. In reality, you might claim, it was the cricket ball that acted on the pane of glass, causing it to break. When the ball thumped

down onto the ground, it caused the molecules in the ground to vibrate. The reverse did not in fact happen. The molecules in the ground did not cause the cricket ball to jump up into the air, and so on.

According to the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume's analysis of causation, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, what I have just said has questionable validity. To say that event A caused event B is merely to assert that there is a lawlike constant conjunction between events of type A and events of type B. In other words, statements that describe causes and effects reduce to statements about instances that can be deduced from the laws of nature. But we have just admitted that, so far as the most general physical laws describing the motions of physical bodies are concerned, it is logically possible to reverse the time order in which events occur.

The conclusion is that if you want to use causation as the logical criterion which ultimately determines the direction of time's arrow then you need a richer account of the concept of a 'cause' than the 'covering law' model that Hume's analysis entails.

Over to you.

INFINITY

Mark asked:

When I peer into the night sky, I can perceive infinity...Atoms are building blocks and I visualize an infinite number of building blocks compiling the atom...I draw a line from one to the other and along this line plot an infinite number of points with each point sprouting out into an infinite number of directions. From each sprout et cetera, et cetera. From this I picture my grid of infinity. I don't yet know how to label each point on this grid. If I could label one point I would allocate it as a memory location for all that our earth, galaxies, and knowledge represent. All of the other infinite memory locations are full of unknown infinite amounts of information.

My question is: in view of the above visualization, how can a Philosopher place so much emphasis on an arrangement of words (formed from a finite stockpile of words) allegedly presented by an icon of a past society (let's say Socrates for a start)?

What a picture! I hardly know where to begin. Let us agree that philosophy, and indeed all human knowledge and experience, is something very very small in relation to infinity. The thing is that we, you and I – or the human race – are also very very small in relation to the whole of space or the whole of time. So what is very very small in relation to infinity can still be big for us.

You will probably reply that the fact that the history of philosophy from the Greeks onwards looks big to us is merely an appearance, not reality. But what is the standard of size? Does the Earth, for example, only 'appear' big? How small would the Earth have to appear in order to appear as small as it really is? The answer isn't, 'Very, very small'. There is no answer to that question. And that is the point.

From a finite stock of words, it seems impossible that one could ever form an adequate concept of infinity. The mathematical definition of an 'infinite set' as a set that can be put into a one-to-one correspondence with a proper subset (e.g. pairing up all of the whole numbers with just the even numbers) does not seem to capture the essence of the concept of infinity. That definition merely tells us something about infinity. Some philosophers would conclude that the idea of an actually existing infinite – as opposed to a rule that can be indefinitely re-applied, like counting, 2, 4, 6 etc – is incoherent. It doesn't make sense. It is just a sound that we utter, not knowing what we mean by it. I am not saying that I agree with that hard-headed view. But how confident are you – seeing as you are stuck with having to use words along with the rest of us – that you know what thought you are attempting to express by the words you utter?

Reason and argumentation, the arrangement of words, is important because it is the best we have got. Forget infinity. In relation to the difficulty of the perennial problems of philosophy, the efforts of philosophers seem puny enough. OK, so we can't hope to make giant strides. We can only accomplish a little at a time. But there's urgent work to be done, all the same. Let's get on with it!

IDEALISM

Barbara asked:

Is it things, objects like shrubs, cars and houses, and people that I see out of my window? And an armchair, a computer a pink mug, a white lamp and a dark green plan in my room? Or is all of that just patches of colours? And what makes me think it is just patches of colour? And if it is just patches of colour, what makes me take them for an armchair and a lamp?

This is an excellent question because you have seen beyond the problem, How do I know there's a armchair in front of me? to the deeper issue of why we are tempted to ask that question in the first place.

The argument for the view that when I perceive a chair all I really see are patches of colour was put forward by Descartes in the *Meditations* and was revived in the twentieth century by philosophers defending the sense datum theory of perception, such as H.H. Price. It is know as the Argument from Illusion. It is possible to seem to see a chair, even though there is no chair there, for example, when I am dreaming, or undergoing an hallucination. My subjective experience is exactly the same as if there really were a chair there. Descartes used this point to argue that we cannot prove the existence of an external world, simply on the basis of our experiences. The conclusion of the argument, whether or not one accepts Descartes' sceptical conclusion, is that perceiving a chair involves having chair-shaped sense data, and then interpreting those sense data as the perception of a chair.

The argument from illusion is sometimes combined with an argument based on the scientific account of human perception. Seeing a chair involves a chain of causes and effects, the end product of which are electrical impulses in the brain. So when I see a chair, it is argued, the immediate object of my perception is not the chair, but changes in my brain. The final, dubious step in combining the two arguments is to identify sense data with processes in the brain.

I am not going to try to say what is wrong with these arguments. Because even if I did give a convincing critique, it would not answer your question. I don't think it is plausible to say that whenever you or I are tempted to see the world around us as no longer 'out there' but 'in here', this convoluted reasoning is going through our minds. If it were not for that prior temptation, the reasoning would not appear so convincing.

What is so amazing about the experience of familiar things around us turning into patches of colour, is that nothing actually changes:

> **The very objects themselves seem to dissolve away without a trace; nothing remains of what was supposedly out there. The apple and the table lamp now appear to me as nothing other than images floating in my own mind. As I look round, the same happens to every object I cast my eyes upon. What caused this extraordinary event to occur? My whole world has completely changed; and yet, in a strange way, everything remains the same as before. Nothing flickered or went fuzzy, no visible sign testifies to the dramatic transformation I have just witnessed.**

> Geoffrey Klempner *Naive Metaphysics* Chapter 3.

It is a trick anyone can teach themselves to do. When you do the trick, you don't have to imagine that the objects are anything other than what they are. You don't have to say to yourself, 'These are just sensations in my mind.' All you have to do is see the chair as my chair, the apple as my apple, the table lamp as my table lamp. It is not even the changing into patches of colour that is the important thing. You can mentally divide any object into bits without ceasing to think of it as 'out there'. What happens when I do the trick is that the space which these objects are in ceases to be a space that includes me as just another object in the world and becomes my space, my world. If I were not here, then neither would there be these objects.

Once you have learned the trick, it is difficult to stop doing it. That is the real philosophical challenge.

Bill asked:

What is Anti-Realism? I have various friends who claim to be Anti-Realists, and all disagree with each other. I have heard such expressions as 'Nothing is true unless it is known to be true' and 'there is no mind-independent Reality' spoken as if they are self-evident, whereas I think they are (nearly) self-evidently false. What is going on?

Realists disagree with each other too. On the Realist view of personal identity defended by Chisholm, in the thought experiment of human fission, there is a fact of the matter whether the person who undergoes fission into physically and mentally indistinguishable individuals X and Y will 'be' individual X or 'be' individual Y. Many philosophers who consider themselves 'Realist' would reject that solution to the problem of personal identity, on the grounds that neither we, nor X or Y

themselves, would be able to tell who was the person who had survived, and who was a mere duplicate brought into existence at the moment of fission.

Or consider the nature of time. Some Realists would find the hypothesis of an 'empty time' – a period of time in which no events occur – acceptable, while others would find the hypothesis either unacceptable, or acceptable only on the assumption that one could predict when such periods would happen. Once again, the sticking point is the complete separation between the facts or the truth, and possible knowledge.

'Nothing is true unless it is known to be true' is an extreme form of anti-Realism. I do not know of any philosopher who holds that view. 'There is no mind-independent Reality' sounds like the immaterialist philosophy of Berkeley, according to whom to be is 'to perceive, or be perceived'. What is striking about Berkeley, however, is that the existence of God is an essential component of the theory. The result is as Realist as you can get. Nothing has happened or will ever happen that God doesn't know about. It's all down there in the blueprint or 'archetype' of the universe in God's mind.

What is anti-Realism? Anti-Realism concerns the nature of truth, rather than the nature of objects or existence. Berkeley was a Realist about truth, but believed that 'material objects' were nothing more than 'ideas'. In a series of articles, the Oxford philosopher Michael Dummett argues that verification rather than truth should be the central concept of a theory of meaning that would account for our understanding of the words which we speak. In learning a language, we are exposed to examples of when the obtaining of such-and-such a state of affairs is verified. We readily generalise from this knowledge to notions of 'what it would be' for a given proposition to be true, even though the proposition in question may be unverifiable. But these imaginings have no explanatory function. In Wittgenstein's words, they are like 'wheels that turn, even though no part of the mechanism turns with it'.

Dummett's central claim is that the law of excluded middle, valid on a classical interpretation of logic, cannot be justified by a verification conditions theory of meaning. I suspect he is wrong about this. My own challenge to the Realist would be much more simple and direct. Consider any meaningful proposition for which verification is clearly and unequivocally ruled out. (That's not difficult, there are billions, most of them very uninteresting.) Call it P. Now, the Realist wants to tell me something very important about P. What is it? Is P true? No, of course not. What the Realist wants to say is that P 'has' a truth value. What does that mean? To say that P is 'either true or false' is not to say anything at all. But what more can one add? In searching for more, you will find yourself going round in circles. Is that an adequate argument for Anti-Realism? – I don't know. Perhaps we are wrong in thinking that one needs to 'say' something more here.

Rute asked:

Is idealism the same as anti-realism? If not, What is the difference?

and Alan asked:

I have a question: do you think it is right to try and link realism/ anti-realism about truth to the philosophy of language and theories of meaning? I have been pondering this one for a while. I agree that when you say something is true, you can only mean that words have been used correctly or not. Is this subjectivism or is truth something else?

I would characterize idealism as a theory concerning the nature of existence and anti-realism as a theory concerning the nature of truth. You can hold, or reject, either or both theories, so that there are four possible permutations altogether.

According to Berkeley's idealism, what we term 'material objects' are really ideas existing in the mind of God. To exist is to perceive or to be perceived. The entire universe consists in God – or, rather, God's infinite mind – and the finite 'spirits' that God has created, namely us. To use contemporary language, material objects like this desk or this keyboard, or the hands that I see typing these keys, exist in a 'virtual reality'.

In his paper 'The Reality of the Past' (reprinted in Truth and Other Enigmas) the British philosopher Michael Dummett describes a theory which rejects the view that statements about the past for which there is no effective decision procedure still have a truth value. The claim can be made about any subject matter. The past provides a particularly clear example. As the poet John Donne once wrote, in his 'Song':

> **Go and catch a falling star,**
> **Get with child a mandrake root,**
> **Tell me where all past yeares are,**
> **Or who cleft the Divel's foote...**

Where are past 'facts', if there's no Recording Angel? If you believe that the truth is 'back there' irrespective of whether or not we can ever know about it, then you are a realist.

In these terms, Berkeley was a realist. He believed that the answers to questions about the past exist in God's mind even though we might never come to know those answers. By contrast, Dummett rejects Berkeleian idealism. He embraces the existence of material objects existing apart from the mind and its perceptions.

Much of my doctoral thesis was spent attacking the view that anti-realism is a thesis about the nature of meaning, and not just a thesis about the nature of truth. Talking to philosophers today, it is clear that the penny has still not dropped. There are in fact two claims which Dummett defends:

1. Anti-realism entails a theory of meaning according to which the central concept is not that of truth but verification. The meaning of a statement is not its truth conditions, where truth is understood to be a property which a statement can

possess regardless of our capacity to determine that it has that property. To know the meaning of a statement is simply to know the rules for its correct use.

2. Anti-realism entails the refusal to accept the truth of the Law of Excluded Middle, P or not-P. It follows that the anti-realist must reject Classical logic.

Defenders of anti-realism who reject claim 1. still cling to claim 2. In other words, they still cling to the idea that there has to be some practical upshot of the rejection of realism. There must be something, they believe, that the realist is prepared to say (like 'Either Caesar thought of his father before crossing the Rubicon or he did not') which the anti-realist is not prepared to say.

They are wrong. The anti-realist is perfectly capable of making that statement. The anti-realist merely associates a different picture with the assertion of the excluded middle from the picture which the realist associates with it.

In that respect, anti-realism and Berkeleian idealism are on a par. There is no statement about the world which the idealist makes which the opponent of idealism is not prepared to make, or which the opponent of idealism makes which the idealist is not prepared to make. Idealists don't differ from in their empirical beliefs, or in their commitment to science. They don't differ in their logic. They don't differ in their theory of meaning. Like anti-realists, they differ in their metaphysic.

SOLIPSISM

Cat asked:

I've though about this question loads and I'm really confused: Is it possible that all the world just exists in our heads?

If all the things in the world exist in our heads, and our heads are in the world, then our heads exist in our heads. Now that is really confusing!

I suppose what you mean is, Is it possible that all the world exists in our *minds*, where the existence of a mind does not require the existence of a material object, such as a brain or a skull bone.

The first thing to point out is if I really thought it was possible that there were no material things, and that everything 'external' I see around me is nothing more than a kind of projection of something within my own mind, then I would seriously question whether *you* exist, as a separate subject with a mind. All I know of you are words on this computer screen! But then I might go on to question whether my wife and children exist. Everything I know of them, just as everything I know of you, is based on experiences in my own mind. Our own experiences are all that any of us ultimately has to go on.

Having got that far, there is still more to doubt. All I know of my *past* experiences is what I can remember of them now. So my past experiences might be nothing more than a projection of experiences currently occurring in my mind. I could have come into existence one minute ago with all my apparent 'memories' as they are now, and I would never know.

Even if, armed with a good dose of common sense, all these speculations seem to us highly *improbable* are then still *possible*? Do they make logical sense? Do I have to remind myself every so often that this wide, wonderful world and all the people in it might, just possibly, be nothing more than a momentary bubble of experience that calls itself 'I'? A mere illusion of a 'world' which appeared out of nowhere and will disappear the next moment into the nothingness from whence it came?

So far as nothing is absolutely certain in philosophy, I have to concede – though I don't like it – that what I have just said is possible.

That's not the question we should be asking. The real question is whether it is possible that we might be *persuaded*, by the philosophical argument of a Berkeley, or a Leibniz or a Kant, to embrace one or other version of the theory that what we call 'the physical world' is not real in itself, but rather something woven together out of the strands of experience.

Kant's theory is in some ways the most attractive of the three. He held that *reality* is something apart from the things that appear in our experienced 'worlds'. Berkeley, Leibniz and Kant are all agreed that there cannot be appearances without *something* behind those appearances, their ultimate source. Kant was the only philosopher out of the three to realize that this 'something' would have to be totally outside all human knowledge and experience.

John asked:

About a month ago, I suddenly started thinking about how completely impossible it is to ever know whether you are the only one who really exists, because one can't go into another's mind to see if they are a conscious being like you are. What if everyone else is just in your imagination or something like that? You can never know! I know this question seems strange, but the problem has been haunting me ever since I thought of it and I would really like an answer. It has really been consuming most of my thoughts during school (I'm 14) especially and is very distracting.

Philosophers call this problem 'solipsism' from the Latin solus ipse the sole self. There's two main kinds of solipsism. The first kind is easier to defeat then the second kind.

The first kind is sometimes known as 'scepticism about other minds'. It is a selective kind of scepticism, in that you don't question whether you are in a world of physical objects in space. That's a given. The problem is that amongst these physical objects are living human bodies that make apparently meaningful movements and utter apparently meaningful sounds. The question is, How do I know that there is anything inside the people I meet, how do I know that I am not the only real person surrounded by perfectly disguised zombies?

I think I have an argument which can be used to defeat that question. It's not quite a knock-out punch, but close. First, we have to set the scene. The person asking this question is a dualist who believes that there are basically two kinds of 'stuff' in the universe, physical stuff and mental stuff. The physical stuff is all around me, but the only mental stuff I have direct knowledge of is my own mind, my own consciousness. I can't be certain whether other human bodies have

mental stuff inside them or not, because the mind is something that can only be directly seen from the inside.

Descartes was a dualist. But he believed that my mental stuff, or rather my soul interacts with my physical body. A human body needs a soul to make it go. Without something 'in control' there would no speech or intelligible action. (He thought that animals didn't have souls.) Now, if that's true, then it provides a simple test for whether another person has a mind.

Today, dualists no longer believe in a soul that interacts with the brain. They hold that processes in the brain are sufficient to account for the noises people utter and the physical movements they make. But those processes also give rise to something inside, as a kind of by-product. Mental stuff is produced by a functioning brain in the way that a factory chimney produces smoke. The problem is that whereas everyone can see the smoke coming out of a factory chimney, I can only see the consciousness being produced by my brain. There's no way of telling whether other people's brains produce mental stuff too.

Here's the tricky part:

Imagine someone exactly like you, in every physical detail. Physically, you and your double couldn't be told apart, even using a microscope. Call him 'Jon'. Jon lives on Twin Earth in a Solar system just like this one on the far side of the Galaxy. The only difference is that Jon's brain merely accounts for his speech and behaviour. Jon's brain does not produce any mental stuff. For Jon, all is darkness within. Jon, in other words, is a perfectly disguised zombie.

But because Jon is exactly like you, and because Jon lives exactly the same life on Twin Earth, Jon has submitted a question to Ask a Philosopher about the problem of solipsism. It seems that Jon is just as troubled by the problem as you are, even though Jon doesn't have a mind! Whatever caused him to ask his question is the same as what caused you to ask your question!

Well, that was the first kind of solipsist. As I said, not a knock-down punch, but a points win. The second kind of solipsist says, How do I know that there's a world at all, outside my own mind? Everything in the universe exists only because I do, it exists for me. If I did not exist, then the universe would not exist either. Other people are merely characters in the story of my world.

That's a far tougher proposition. I give an argument against this metaphysical kind of solipsism in my book *Naive Metaphysics.* It is possible to be a metaphysical solipsist, but at the price of giving up the concept of truth. The trouble is, what do you say against someone who says that they are prepared to pay that price?

EXISTENTIALISM

Thi asked:

What does it mean to have "existential doubts"?

Existentialists do not have 'doubts'. They suffer from psychologically more interesting conditions like anxiety, vertigo, nausea.

Unlike these other, philosophically more subversive concepts, existential doubt does not disclose anything about the nature of ultimate reality, or the ground of our being, or lack of it. Existential doubt is an ubiquitous, cliché-ridden theme of popular culture. Like the bored executive on the thirty-third floor who wakes up one day to the realization that he 'could have been more'. Or the teenager sitting up all night staring at their fish tank. Or...well, I won't bore you.

It is a tragedy when someone who's life is perfectly *all right*, who has no reason to succumb to existential doubts, falls victim to the gnawing worry, 'Why am I doing this? What's the point of it all?' When a person whom we think really ought to feel doubts about their life doesn't, it is a comedy.

Existential doubt is just one particular example of the dialectic of scepticism, doubt and certainty. The point has often been made in discussions of the problem of philosophical scepticism that progress in human knowledge depends upon our willingness to doubt and question, to explore alternatives, to demand justifications. There are also times where doubt is merely pathological. The same pair of alternatives applies to the case of so-called existential doubt.

John asked:

Is Sartre's existentialist ethics possible? ethics without moral principles to follow? What are some arguments that confirm that existential ethics is possible? and those that deny it?

There is a superb critique of Sartre's existentialist ethics in Iris Murdoch's short book *The Sovereignty of Good*. Murdoch argues convincingly that the values, the 'good' we perceive in the world around us, or in the consequences of the possible choices we might make, cannot appear to us as merely the products of our own subjective will. – I think that this is true on the level of phenomenology, as a description of the 'way things must appear' to the agent making moral choices.

When understood in this way, however, as a piece of phenomenology rather than as a metaphysical claim about the values that exist in a non-physical world of Platonic forms, I would argue that Murdoch's claim is not inconsistent with an existentialist approach to ethics.

The strongest argument in favour of an existentialist ethics is simply the impossibility of constructing a moral theory. There is no system of moral principles or rules that can be applied to every possible case. There will always be exceptions. From an existentialist point of view, one might say that there will always be the potential, in any new situation that you face, to discover a reason for going against the pattern of responses that you have made to similar situations in the past. Light dawns. You undergo a radical conversion. You can try formulating a new moral 'rule of thumb' that takes account of your new way of seeing things, but you can never be certain you will not be forced to change your mind again.

What is important in the account I have just given is that one talks of a 'situation', of a 'reason' that one discovers. These features are most appropriately described in terms of the metaphor of vision. I see in the situation facing me what is the

right thing to be done. The fact that it is me, as I am now, doing the seeing, the fact that other people – or indeed my former self – might judge things differently does not need to be mentioned, because it is implicitly understood.

ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY

Royce asked:

What do you think of the status of academic philosophy? Is it relevant? accessible to the rank and file? Do academic philosopher-practitioners work in a highly insular environment detached from the "real world"?

(Note: On occasion, very good books appear in the lay press which tackle difficult subjects and treat the subject matter in digestible understandable terms. . . examples: Ian Hacking and Rorty.)

With the passage of time, I find it harder and harder to understand what makes an academic philosopher tick. As a graduate student at Oxford I thought I knew it all. I was up there. I knew where the action was. I read the latest articles and attended the biggest seminars. We were hounds in pursuit of truth, and truth had nothing to do with disseminating knowledge that the non-academic public can appreciate or make any sense of, still less with practical utility.

The first thing to understand about academic philosophy is that it is a group activity. You can't be an academic philosopher on your own, without students or colleagues. The search for truth is seen as a collective effort of argument and debate rather than the product of the inspiration of isolated individuals.

The second thing to understand about academic philosophy is that it is founded in hard, economic reality. Academic departments of philosophy exist in order to provide employment for philosophy PhD's who want to make a career out of their vocation.

The third thing to understand about academic philosophy is that to keep your job, you must be seen to be producing 'research'. It is not enough to be a good teacher. Research is anything that you can persuade an editor of an academic philosophy journal or book publishing house to publish. Work which you can't get published is so much waste paper.

Academics who have succeeded in getting tenure regularly bleat about the plight of young philosophers who can't find jobs, or who find jobs but can't keep them. In reality, the system is founded on massive waste. The waste of talent of all those who fail to make it to the gravy train, as well as the wasted time and effort devoted to maintaining one's status and place there.

Despite this, the best academic philosophers have produced, and continue to produce work of solid quality. My own bookshelves are lined with books by academic philosophers. To say that the cause of philosophy is not best served by the current, wasteful system is not to deny that good comes out of it.

Is there a better way? I like to think my way is better, but then I would say that, wouldn't I? The Sophists of Ancient Greece suggest an alternative model of how

things might be conducted. The internet provides the forum – the contemporary equivalent of the Athenian marketplace – where, if you have something to say, you say it. You don't have to be admitted to the Academy. There are no editors or faculty boards to please. If others find value in what you have to offer, word gets out.

I don't know if this structureless, potentially anarchic system can ultimately be made to work in the cause of philosophy, or if it will work against it. The experiment has only just begun. Ask me again in a few years time.

PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT

Usman asked:

What is physical fitness?

The traditional aim of Physical Education is to promote the three 'S's: Suppleness, strength and stamina. To these relatively utilitarian physical virtues one might add the aesthetic culture of physique through body-building, and the culture of the mind as well as the body through training in martial arts. All have been pursued in the name of 'physical fitness'.

To talk of 'fitness' immediately begs the question, fitness for what? Chess players as well as philosophers do well to include physical exercise as part of their daily regime. If you are out of shape physically, your mental stamina will suffer. Other vocations – such as fireman or soccer referee, to take two relatively extreme examples – require a rather higher level of physical fitness.

In competitive sport, there is no limit. Paraphrasing the Duchess of Windsor, You can never be too rich or too fit. Yet there are enormous differences between the requirements of different sports. The 400 Pound sumo wrestler would be considered supremely fit for what he is required to do. Sebastian Coe, the famed British middle distance runner of the 80's, reputedly had a heart so enlarged that when resting his heart rate was just six beats a minute. (With a heart as big as that, he would naturally join the Tory party.)

Coe was supremely fit, but as any retired athlete will verify, the added muscle mass requires a continued regime of strenuous exercise or it can become a serious health liability.

The idea of the states of 'fitness' and 'unfitness' as being states of human perfection and its opposite traces back to the Ancient Greeks. The Olympic athletes, gods and heroes celebrated in Greek statues are the closest approach to a visual representation of Plato's Form or Idea of 'Man'. The notion survives with a smattering of scientific respectability in Darwin's theory of evolution: to be physically fit is to attain the ideal physical form that evolution has designed for us. If we could read our genes, we could draw a blueprint of the perfect body that would have been ours if only we had looked after it properly. – But then I am forgetting that some do far better than others in the genetic lottery. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, so the saying goes.

What would the Ancient Greeks have made of the Paraplegic Olympics? Plato and Aristotle would have surely recognised that what we celebrate when we celebrate athletic and sporting achievement is not mere physical perfection or skill but the perfection of the moral qualities of courage and endurance as well as the intellectual qualities of resourcefulness and inspiration.

I would say the same of body-builders, an art unjustly sneered at by the sports mainstream. Over the last few decades, female body building in particular has gone off into the stratosphere, with women achieving physiques once undreamt of, which judged by the Platonic Idea of 'Woman' would be considered a grotesque parody of a human being. Yet surely here the achievement is just as great as with those who attain to the heights of any sporting or athletic activity. To achieve the highest distinction the same mental qualities are required, and it is these that we admire, as much as we admire the superb definition of a person's triceps.

Perfection of body and mind is the ideal. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the martial arts. Bruce Lee, the exponent of Jeet Kune Do – or 'Kung Fu' as it is popularly called – is most widely known for his film roles. Yet it was his genius as a teacher and practitioner of martial arts rather than as an actor that inspired and continues to inspire tens of thousands of men and women to take up the different martial arts disciplines. It is less well known that Lee studied Western as well as Eastern philosophy to a high level. Always suspicious of compartmentalization, Lee sought for wisdom and enlightenment wherever it could be found – in Kant and Hegel as much as in Lao Tzu or Confucius – just as he taught that there is no right way but only your way, the path you have forged through your personal endeavour for self-perfection.

PHILOSOPHY OF RISK

David asked:

With regard to the philosophy of risk, can I be said to be "at risk" if I place no value on my own life? In other words is the concept of suicidal risk taking inconsistent? Linked to this are questions relating to the concept of risk itself. For example, are risks created by the imposition of values upon elements of reality by the intentional mind? Does it seem reasonable to suggest that if there were no values there would be no risks, only potential events or outcomes?

I think that it is a very poor diagnosis of suicidal risk taking to say that the risk taker places no value on their own life. Imagine a world where intelligent creatures evolved with no sense of self-preservation. Perhaps they grow on trees, like fruit, and when an alien dies, a new tree sprouts. Landing on this planet, Captain Kirk and the crew of the Enterprise are shocked to discover that death is treated with casual disinterest. For these aliens, there is no such thing as suicidal risk taking. They recognize risks, certainly, but the risk of death is not among them.

Drag racing, or extreme rock climbing are examples of activities where the price of the thrill, for the participant, is a high degree of risk. The risk itself may indeed be a factor in the enjoyment. However, we can find this factor in its purer form in the game of Russian Roulette. (I am using the familiar name here, although I have no evidence, and no reason to believe, that Russian people have a special predilection for it.) Russian Roulette played with blank bullets would be a very boring activity.

The sole interest lies in the fact that there is a one in six chance that you are going to die.

The Russian Roulette player does not want to die. When the hammer clicks on an empty chamber, the player enjoys the thrill of a narrow escape. Yet, interestingly, so far as I know, there is no variant on the game, where one points the gun at one's knee. Why should that be so? Even if death is something that one does not want, the fear of death has a unique quality that sets it apart from the fear of other things that one does not want.

I agree, therefore, that the concept of a 'risk' only makes sense relative to a background of values, of things we want or do not want. The philosophical question you have raised here is how death differs from other things that we do not want. Epicurus famously argued that the fear of death is not rational, because, 'Where death is, I am not, and where I am, death is not.' Yet surely it was not Epicurus' intention to argue that we should not care whether we live or die.

WHY ARE YOU A PHILOSOPHER?

Eliza asked:

To the person answering our questions:

What if one of those questions shatters your set of beliefs? Can't this happen? May I assume you like losing your 'identity', you have no beliefs? Is it that your beliefs are so fixed they can't be shattered (being so absolute, not questioning, doesn't make you a philosopher). Or do you like shattering your beliefs? (Suicide could be better than this constant self-torture. Is it the self-destructive tendency within? Where does it emerge from?) Or you want to ensure by all means that all philosophic attempts to shatter you fail? (how selfish, struggling to prove you're a tolerant person knowing the truth but forgiving us for your ignorance). What are you anyway?

Sorry. If this seems like an attack, feel free to assume anything for my motives, don't answer me and I'll assume one of the above (after all who'd care what a complete stranger from anywhere in the world thinks?). Well if you have an answer for me, I'm longing to hear it (something about me: I like straight answers and not avoiding the subject!). If I'm in for a serious mind-attack, be my guest...

I have been thinking about this for a week now. Before I start – just so that you feel safe! – I want you to know that I don't go in for 'serious mind attacks'. That belongs to a different universe from the one I inhabit. We are all students of philosophy here. In philosophy, you attack the argument, not the person. (I realize that this will be a novel idea to some people.)

First, some necessary background. How did *Ask a Philosopher* start? Back in July last year, it was just an idea that came to me. I knew that if things didn't go well I could always pull the plug. Now, of course, I can no longer do that. The page is too well established, with questions coming in from all four corners of the globe. I have to stay to face the music. And the questions have been getting harder!

Let's look at some of your options.

What if one of those questions shatters your set of beliefs? Can't this happen? We all have beliefs that we cling to. Even the die-hard atheist or nihilist. There is a children's joke which goes, 'I'm glad I don't like spinach, because if I did, I'd eat it – and it tastes disgusting!' The atheist can't bear the thought that their resolve to disbelieve might weaken. The theist can't bear the thought that their faith might falter. The two cases are parallel. When it comes to foundational beliefs, beliefs that shape, and give sense to our lives, we are all in the same predicament. However carefully you build your boat, there is no absolute guarantee that it cannot be capsized.

Giving up one's previously held beliefs can be an occasion for joy, or sorrow. Perhaps you will be surprised to learn that there are one-time atheists, who reluctantly embrace theism with sorrow and foreboding, just as there are one-time theists who embrace atheism with joy and a sense of liberation.

May I assume you like losing your 'identity', you have no beliefs? Philosophers love to play Devil's Advocate These pages provide the perfect opportunity for me to do so. If you ask me to argue the case for mind-body dualism, I will argue the case for mind-body dualism. If you ask me to argue the case for materialism, I will argue the case for materialism. This is not sophistry. Investigating arguments, looking for flaws, looking for ways in which they might be strengthened against objections, is a way of gaining philosophical understanding. A philosopher doesn't always have to be defending their own views.

One of the greatest joys in studying philosophy is submerging oneself in the works of a great philosopher. It is the advice I give serious students who want to deepen their grasp of the subject. Choose one philosopher and study their major works. For a while one loses one's own identity. But at some point you have to come up for air, or suffocate. It is philosophical understanding that one is after, not someone to follow.

Do you like shattering your beliefs? Or you want to ensure by all means that all philosophic attempts to shatter you fail? How can I get across the idea that these are not alternatives? Let's say I have a theory. It doesn't matter about what. A considerable investment of time and mental energy was involved in coming to that theory. Perhaps years of my life. So, naturally, I want to protect my investment. Objections are welcomed because they give the opportunity, in refuting them, to demonstrate the strength of the theory.

Suppose one of these objections convinces me? That can always happen. I lose my investment, I am wiped out. But in its place I have something more precious. I have hold of the truth (as I now believe, but this qualification is redundant because it goes without saying!) instead of falsehood. That is a net gain, not a loss.

What are you anyway? I do philosophy. This is an example of what I do. I do not know of any other people doing philosophy who have thought of doing it this way, in a Glass House, but I have, and it works for me. Read the *Glass House* notebook (http://users.macunlimited.net/klempner/current.html), read these pages and draw your own conclusions.

Plamen asked:

What is it that makes you a Philosopher?

Select from: - *Education*
                - *Predisposition*
                - *Sorrows of the world*
                - *The other's ignorance*
                - *Fear of death*
                - *Wesenschau*
                - *Failed in science/music*
                - *Cannot stop talking*

Let me go through your suggestions, one by one:

Education From the ages of 13 to 18 I attended a prominent public school in Hampstead, North London, where I succeeded in gaining what was regarded as sufficient for university entrance without ever once hearing the word 'philosophy'. My physics Master, who was a member of the Christian Union, once asked the science sixth form whether any of us had ever wondered about the relevance of our studies to Life with a capital 'L'. That provoked an animated discussion which lasted at least five minutes. Over thirty years on, there is still a lamentable lack of awareness of the subject in British secondary education.

Predisposition You might think that to make a success out of a career in philosophy you've got to like it, and also be good at it. Neither of these things is true. There are philosophers who, judging by their work, hate the very idea of philosophy, and others who are no good at the subject but have managed to convince their colleagues and students that they are. I would prefer to be assigned the second category rather than the first.

Sorrows of the world No.

The other's ignorance Maybe.

Fear of death The first time I realized that I was afraid of death was when my mother died of lung cancer in 1991, nineteen years after I first became interested in philosophy. Prior to that time, I don't know what I really thought. Death wasn't on the horizon. Now, it's very much an issue to be reckoned with. I once wrote, 'My subjective world can never die, can never cease to continue, for with every new moment it is as if it had never existed, and will continue no longer than that very moment' (Naive Metaphysics 1994, p. 120). Knowing that the fear of death is irrational does not stop me fearing it.

Wesenschau In my mini German dictionary, I found 'wesen' and 'schau', and I am still none the wiser about the meaning of their combination. Can anyone help me?

Failed in science/ music It is true that if I had not failed in science, I would have become a Chemist. My brief career as a bar musician never showed any real promise. Had I not given up when I did, I would have grown a very large beer belly.

Cannot stop talking Others may think that this is true. I know that I prefer silence to the sound of my own voice.

73

NOTE

The above text contains extracts from the first nine sets of Questions and Answers on the *Ask a Philosopher* pages, on the Pathways web site. All the answers are my own.

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– Enjoy!

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