

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

Philosophy for the Rest of Us

By Stephen A. Mosca

The study of philosophy requires great concentration and some pretty adroit mental gymnastics. I used to think that this was why philosophers were so serious and dedicated a group. In the last article I read in *The Philosopher's Stone*, the comment was made that a person does not find philosophy, rather it is philosophy that finds them. The implication, so common among the subject matter and discourse distributed in that publication, was that you either get it or you don't; that you care or you don't; that you are an authentic person or you aren't; and a hint of that you are even capable of getting it, or you are not. I took this as blatant snobbery, and would often find myself angered. I, for one, think that I do "get it," that I am an authentic person, and that everyone feels the anguish connected with the doubts of a human existence whether they choose to pursue philosophy as an end unto itself or not. I would write rebuttals, but they were defensive in nature, and I would ultimately commit them to the waste bin. I then decided that motivation is not relevant as to the determination of morality

or goodness. What matters are consequences, and I began to write from this new point of view.

Philosophy is a subject that is very often associated with the love of wisdom and the pursuit of truth. Metaphysics, rationalism, and existentialism would compete in my mind for primacy and lead to a never ending cycle of discovery, doubt, and ultimate frustration. Brilliant thinkers have puzzled over these components for centuries and I realized just how difficult it was to put together a meaningful and succinct philosophical presentation in the space provided by something as space limited as *The Philosopher's Stone*. Every time I tried, I would reach a conclusion that would ultimately leave open the door for refutation, even within my own mind, and no solution would appear on any horizon. Competing claims by various thinkers all crowded together and nudged one or the other out until I understood less in the end than when I had begun. This was where I feel I made an important self discovery worth sharing on these pages. I am not attempting to refute you full time philosophers, but to encapsulate my interpretation of your field so that even we interested but less than erudite folk, who also

think, can participate more easily in the conversation without feeling insignificant. Boiled down, here is the summary of my thoughts and my escape from the wheel:

At mankind's beginnings, there was ignorance, the senses of perception, and the human mind. Early consciousness conceived an imaginative tale, or tales, of creation. Men explained the unexplainable with mystical creations. Man used force against other men and pleaded with nature by incantation, prayers, or bribes (sacrifices).

With the advent of rationality as a guiding epistemology, man claimed that the mystic approach is the province of the savage. Nature cannot be bargained with, only seen as a metaphysical entity, existing independent of man's wishes. Force became seen as a non-effective agent against the minds of men, and in its place persuasion arose. Western intellectual thought from the Renaissance onward refined this mode of thought. Mankind has always been able to stop another from thinking in any number of ways, but is not able to *make* one think; that is the sole province of the individual. It is what compels Plato's prisoner to stand, turn, and venture toward the mouth of the cave, despite

the discomfort associated with doing so.

With rationality man discovered systems of abstract symbols that led to accurate predictive discovery, and called this science. Prior to this system of symbols, thoughts were validated by shared experience of perception among different minds. Science was rational, repeatable, and thought devoid of all mystic and biological elements, such as chemical imbalances that differentiated the perceptions of the one from the shared perceptions of the many. Mystic thought persisted in order to fill those voids that science could not yet fill, and generations of intellectual thinkers became known, in retrospect, not for their whole thought systems, but for the portion of which that was devoted primarily to divorcing the religious, the mystic, from the reasoned. Man continued to refine his abstract and seemingly objective systems of symbols to better define and rearrange the natural elements to his advantage. And progress he did. Things became more concrete. But the gulf left between his rational approach and that of the mystic beliefs became a wider chasm and caused many to choose to live entirely within one belief system or the other. Fence straddling was for the weak and feeble minded. It was uncomfortable and hard to reconcile. In reality, acceptance of both elements may be the sole answer we are able to comprehend as meaningful. Reality, in this case, is the perception that arises between

the event and our perception of it, the now. This is the only reality we can know.

Then, the empiricists supposed that all that man perceived, including his abstract symbols and irrefutable axioms, was only a creation of the mind, made real only because of the mind, itself an entity with no mass or substance that could be identified rationally, and as such was no more "real" in the true sense than anything else. Man had simply become very clever at interpreting the shadows at the far wall of the cave, but still was quite imprisoned. Reality became a symptom of the imagination, and once again man was plunged into uncertainty. Science itself was just another mystic religion, albeit one with immediate practical application. Problem was, as soon as the practical application made life materially better and scarcity was largely removed, specialization, a manifestation of deep abstract investigation, and lack of spiritual fulfillment became more of an everyday concern, isolating people into groups and subgroups until the remoteness among them became destructively apparent. One definition of the quality of life had risen, but another had fallen as a consequence. This is the vision of the existentialist. The concrete was seen once again as uncured cement. A simple analogy may be the person who lives in fear of poverty or death, and so hoards his wealth or refuses to "live" a normal life, to avoid the feared consequence. The result is that they actually

end up living as if they were impoverished, or dead. They are metaphysically wealthy and alive, but existentially poor or dead, all by conscious choice. They have created their reality by use of their minds and nothing more.

Do things exist independent of man's senses? Does it follow that natural laws, things like gravity, inertia, momentum, and black body radiation only exist because we perceive and define them? Did they exist before consciousness arose, and will they exist after it has gone? Is the answer meaningful? On Earth, our most finite and unchanging commodity is time. If our time is spent worrying about the ultimate answers only then do those answers matter in our existence of today. If time were not spent otherwise, then what would be the point of existence at all? Both approaches are required. Should we all share the load, or should we split off into groups with specific missions: philosophy or practical application?

I find that defining philosophy as the love of wisdom is, by definition, incomplete. Philosophy seems dependant of the perpetuation of ignorance to meaningfully exist at all. The love of wisdom is the search for truth and, by necessity, truth relies on the acknowledgement of ignorance. What is wisdom, after all, in the absence of ignorance? Purity? Each defines the other, and in turn defines man's existence by their very existence. If one concludes that the ultimate

answer to these questions about existence are essentially unknowable by humans because of our limited powers of perception and biological limitations, which restrict us to this benign energy level and so this classical definition of time, then one may exit gracefully with no shame and go on to attempt more immediate and pragmatic pursuits without guilt from within or shame imposed from without. I am one of these who think it is ultimately unknowable to us and so choose to devote time and energy to things otherwise directed. It does not make me any less perceptive, authentic, or anguished, does it? I think not. Time is perhaps the absence of perfection, of purity, so to find perfection would be the end of time in the way that an unsolved equation has meaning and begs action, while a solved equation becomes a static entity.

Philosophers who dedicate their time and energy to investigate the meaning of existence, who dote on their anguish in the most directly intellectual manner, are doing us all a service, and in return we serve their more daily needs, freeing them up to do so. Does that make them any better or authentic than I? Again, I think not. We each think the other is chasing a vanishing point. We may both be right. The uncertainty principle comes to mind; that observation itself changes what is observed. It seems an elegant example of relative perception, of high definition shadow interpretation.

Revelation is a relative term in the context presented here. It is an issue of perspective. Copernicus didn't change a single physical trait when he introduced a new view of the nature of our place in the universe, yet everything changed in the mind's eye. Kant didn't alter our perceptive faculties by introducing the concept of synthetic priori judgments as explanation of continuity that the empiricists couldn't make fit, yet it altered our perception of an otherwise fixed system of perception. Those that crave solid foundations are those that attack this method as being antithetical to mankind's supremacy defined by his rational model of logic and abstract victory over pure mysticism. Existentialists come under attack from fear of uncertainty once again rearing its ugly head; have we ventured so little toward the mouth of Plato's cave?

I think that a world full of philosophers would not be a very sustainable place in which to exist but that a world without philosophers would be a rather empty place where existence would be essentially meaningless. We need our philosophers, but they also need us, the worker bees. We also need rationality, but we can always twist it back into a mystic self creation if that is how we choose to interpret existence. We need ignorance to provide the motive for efforts to extinguish the source of our natural anguish, if that is even possible. We should recognize that those who do not exhibit

anguish explicitly as susceptible to supplied methods of distraction, like drugs, television, consumerism, soothsayers, and other more easily attainable outlets. I don't think that makes them less authentic, but perhaps a bit lazier, time deficient, or simply gullible. And we should always recognize that those who fanatically preach one viewpoint or approach as better than another simply reveal to others their own self doubt and may also be guilty of desperation and validation in their chosen method of ameliorating their own human anguish.

Please join the PDG for our discussion of the perceived elitism of philosophy and philosophy's role in the life of the common man. We will meet in Gamble Hall room 205 at 5:00pm on October 16th.

A Group By Any Other Name...

By Amanda Bartley

A common perception of philosophy is that it is simply a bunch of opinions. The cause for this negative perception of philosophy lies partly in its relation to one of its most fundamental tools: the argument. The idea of the whole of philosophy consisting merely of people arguing for argument's sake leads not only to the conclusion that

philosophy has no objective validity, but that it is meaningless as well. It is this conclusion that Plato fights against in his attacks against the Sophists.

The Sophists were a group of traveling intellectuals who lived in Greece around the fifth century BC. The Sophists would travel from city to city and offer to teach the young for a fee, usually too steep for anyone but the aristocracy to afford. The subject of their teaching would sometimes include anything from poetry to philosophy, but the common curriculum was political speech and rhetoric. As a result, the majority of their students would be young men preparing to go into the political arena, not people searching for “truth” in any Socratic sense. It is this division of intents that Plato stressed in his dialogues. To Plato, the Sophists represented a hunger for power and manipulation of words through rhetoric without any thought of who might be giving the truer argument, only who could give the most eloquent. While Plato may have been able to separate Socrates from his Sophist counterparts, the stigma attached to rhetoric has managed to find its way into the modern conception of philosophy by way of debate and its relation to philosophy.

For a while now, the name of *The Philosophical Debate Group* has bothered me. Aside from the fact that we do no formal debating, one cannot escape the implications of the word *debate* in our title. For a

debate to be executed correctly, the debaters must create a kind of emotional detachment from the topic. To practice this, debating teams regularly hold practice sessions in which a two team will debate two stances on an issue. After a certain amount of time, each team will switch stances then continue the debate. The intended effect is that each member learns to effectively argue both sides of the issue while at the same time remaining intellectually non-committed either way. While learning the art of argumentation is critical to being able to effectively communicate your point in philosophy, it is not nor should not be considered the end in itself.

For our group to say one thing in its title and embody another is a needless contradiction. It is for this reason that we have changed our name to *The Philosophical Discussion Group*. Our group exists to promote and challenge the ideas of truth, knowledge, and the good. It does not exist to simply play word games, unless the person is an analytic philosopher, but that is another story.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Our reading group will be starting the Part II of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Frederick Nietzsche at 1pm Friday, October 17 in Gamble Hall, room 205.

Join us as we read and discuss Nietzsche’s conception of friendship, what is and is not an acceptable attitude towards those who are “less fortunate”, the gift-giving virtue, the Overman, and his illuminating views on women.

Don’t be a fly in the market place.

“By your response to danger, it is easy to tell how you have lived and what has been done to you. You show whether you want to stay alive, whether you think you deserve to, and whether you believe it’s any good to act.”

*-Inscribed on a bench at
The Walker Art Center in
Minneapolis, MN*

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Amanda Bartley or Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone interested in writing a brief article for *The Philosopher’s Stone*, please contact either of us.

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