

The Philosophical Method

An Approach to Life and Living

By

Todd F. Eklof

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When I was studying Philosophy in college, most the students I knew approached the subject with either trepidation or confusion, which is why, I'm sure, I was for a while the only student majoring in the subject, a number that only doubled to two before I graduated. The rest of the student body took their required six hours of *Intro to Philosophy* because they had no choice, were left feeling completely bewildered by it, and often concluded the prerequisite course was trivial, impractical, and ultimately meaningless. This is so, I'm confident, because, unlike other subjects, Philosophy, more than anything else, doesn't teach us about a subject, it leaves us with unanswerable questions about every subject. By the time we get to college the education system has given us a foundation of certain facts about the world upon which to build all our conclusions—simple, benign, undeniable facts like “one plus one equals two” and “Christopher Columbus discovered the New World in 1492.” But philosophy forces us to question what we mean by “one” and how we know what “one” is, and asks us to question the conventional paradigms we otherwise take for granted.

Bertrand Russell, perhaps the last of the great popular philosophers, defined philosophy as an “intermediate between science and theology,” because, in his words, “Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority...”¹ That's a pretty good definition, but I think the heart of philosophy is inquisition. That is, philosophy, simply put, is the discipline of asking questions. The paradox, however, is that it always hopes for, but never expects answers to its questions. It is the path that relentlessly pursues answers it knows it can never obtain—a tragic/comedic path of fools and sages who have learned to live comfortably in each moment with no certainty of the next. And when, along the path, an answer appears, the philosopher clutches it and examines it like precious gold, then quickly casts it aside intuiting it is not enough, that it is only fool's gold; that grasping and clinging to any such answer makes it a lie. This is why Russell helps us understand Philosophy best, not by calling it the “No Man's Land” between science and theology, but by asking a series of unanswerable questions:

Is the world divided into mind and matter, and, if so, what is mind and what is matter? Is mind subject to matter, or is it possessed of independent powers? Has the universe any unity or purpose? Is it evolving towards some goal? Are there really laws of nature, or do we believe in them only because of our innate love of order? Is man what he seems to the astronomer, a tiny lump of impure carbon and water impotently crawling on a small and unimportant planet? Or is he what he appears to Hamlet? Is he perhaps both at once? Is there a way of living that is

¹ Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 1945, 2007, p. xiii.

noble and another that is base, or are all ways of living merely futile? If there is a way of living that is noble, in what does it consist, and how shall we achieve it? Must the good be eternal in order to deserve to be valued, or is it worth seeking even if the universe is inexorably moving towards death? Is there such a thing as wisdom, or is what seems such merely the ultimate refinement of folly?²

True, the philosopher genuinely seeks answers to these questions and more, and, on occasion, comes up with reasonable answers, creating entire philosophical schools of thought in the process. But the genuine philosopher also understands, as my own philosophy professor use to preach, “No human statement is ever adequate.” Our answers are never complete. The journey is never finished. Ultimate truth is always beyond reach. The question is the answer. All we ever really have is the question, the journey, and the philosopher understands, more than any other, that this is enough. Again, as Russell once put it, “Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves.”³ It is with such understanding that Socrates, considered among the wisest of men, is reported to have admitted, “I have no wisdom, small or great...⁴ I neither know nor think that I know.”⁵

But already I fear I’m losing those among you who experience philosophy with confusion and disdain, asking yourselves how the pursuit of that which can never be obtained can possibly lead to a fulfilling and productive kind of life? How can speaking in riddles and paradoxes be anything more than an impractical waste of time? Since it is my contention, however, that Philosophy is, indeed, a way of life and living, let me move forward by telling a few stories from my own life.

The first of these regards a gay couple that moved in next door to my boyhood home. Both men seemed nice enough, although one was quite shy and kept to himself most of the time. The other, however, spent much of his time outdoors working on his automobiles. He was very kind and never seemed bothered when I came around to talk to him, longing, I’m sure, given my own sadistic father, to experience kindness from other adult males. Then one day my mother instructed me not to talk with him anymore and to stay away from both of them. When I asked why, she simply repeated her instructions. I continued to press for a better answer until she finally responded, “Because, they’re queer.” I pondered this bizarre term for a moment then responded with yet another question, “What’s queer about them?” When she finally explained what she meant, I recall being quite taken aback, having never considered the possibility two men could live together in the same way as a man and a woman. My mother was uncomfortable going into further detail, but the one thing I did understand from both her

² Ibid., p. xiiiif.

³ Russell, Bertrand, *The Problem of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1912, 1959, p. 161.

⁴ Plato, *The Five Great Dialogues*, Classics Club, Walter J. Black, Roslyn, NY, 1942, p. 37.

⁵ Ibid. p. 38.

instruction and her awkwardness, is that there was something terribly wrong with being “queer.”

But the real point of bringing this example up is to show what happens when we lose our questions. In this case, my question, “What’s queer about them,” left me open to the neighborly kindness they engendered, to their friendship, to their example as positive male role models. But once the question was answered, once I came to understand that there’s something wrong with being “queer,” I lost the opportunity for such communion. I lost my friends. I lost my mentor. So without my question, my path became more narrow, and my life more isolated and alone.

Skip ahead from this openminded openhearted little boy who lost his question the moment it was answered, to the eighteen-year-old young man he became, at a busy airport in Newark, New Jersey. By now, especially as a fundamentalist Christian, I had lost most my questions, and felt confident the narrowing path I had embarked upon was the one and only true path. I was preparing to fly back to California after working as a summer missionary in Greenwich Village, New York, and as a camp counselor for some of the kids who lived in the projects on the lower eastside of Manhattan. As my traveling companion and I sat waiting for our planes to arrive, an obviously gay couple happened to sit down next to us. After witnessing them gazing lovingly and longingly into each others’ eyes, one of them playfully pushing the nose of the other like a button with his index finger, I took it upon myself to open my Bible and read aloud a verse condemning “effeminate men” and “abusers of themselves with mankind.” One of the men, the more delicate of the two, fumed and seemed ready to explode with a response. But the other simply took his hand, patted it gently, and calmly smiled; silently saying “let it go, it’s no bid deal.” But his smile did not seem restricted to his partner, but rather as if it were meant more for me; as if, despite my arrogance and rudeness, this stranger I was insulting, held me with compassion and affection. I don’t know why, exactly, but imagine I was probably a mirror of himself as a teenager who once, perhaps, shamed himself for his sexuality, the same way I was shaming him then. Perhaps the ease and graciousness with which he received my assault reflected the sort of man he had become, the kind of man who somewhere along the line rediscovered the question I had lost, “What’s queer about them?”

It wasn’t long after this experience that I became a student at Howard Payne University where I first became exposed to the subject of philosophy. Obviously I entered my studies with a rather rigid and narrow outlook on life, but was fortunate that something more pliable remained of mind. It was early on, during my Introduction to Philosophy, that I began to question all my presuppositions about the world. I came to comprehend the potential error of knowledge gained from trusting experts and authorities, from fallacious logic, and even from the limitations of my own senses. Because these avenues to knowledge proved inadequate, I found myself scrambling for a means to truth I could hold with absolute confidence. That’s when I decided to major in Philosophy, believing such a course of study would enable me to eventually answer all my questions.

It was during my second semester that I experienced the sudden shock and realization that there is no apparent means of knowing the truth with absolute certainty. Everything I had come to believe was now under suspicion, and I found myself mildly depressed questioning everything, even the purpose of life itself. I wasn't suicidal, but life did seem pointless. It wasn't until one of my smart aleck friends responded to my question, "What's the point of living," by asking, "What's the point of dying," that I felt positive about life again. After all, I thought, I will eventually die anyway, I might as well live for now, at least it's something. But after a year or so passed, I began to emerge from my epistemological funk, finding that living as if everything is in question didn't have to leave me merely lacking the answers everyone else took for granted, but, on the contrary, opened my life to a slew of possibilities. Living with my questions, rather than with the erroneous and incomplete answers to them, did not subtract, but added to my life by exposing me to potential truths and realities and experiences others can't even imagine.

It wasn't long after I graduated from college that I abandoned all the answers I had learned as a child and teenager, including those I had held as a Christian. Christianity was too small, too straight and narrow, for my queer and vast questions. But mine is not a journey so much of letting go of my answers as it is of rediscovering my questions. When my mother answered my question, "What's queer about them," I became more rigid and less open to the ways of others. But in rediscovering this very question, I opened myself to the possibility that there is nothing queer about them at all. Why is it queer for two men or two women to love each other? Why isn't it considered queer for men to hate each other, to wage war with each other, to drop bombs on each other? Why aren't war and hate and violence considered shameful and abhorrent?

Obviously questions like these can make others uncomfortable, and sometimes cause them to react with hostility toward anyone questioning the status quo. Such a response, however, does not result from those who feel confident of their own ways and beliefs, but of their insecurity, of the repressed knowledge their rigid answers aren't really enough. If they were truly confident they would respond, not with hostility, but with a quiet smile like the gay man I encountered at the airport so long ago. Nevertheless, many in our culture treat those who ask too many questions with disdain, and spin circumstances to suggest there is something wrong with them. A few years ago, for instance, when I was taking a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at one of the local hospitals, I found myself immediately at odds with my classmates, all of who were Christians, after I questioned the value of a chaplaincy student's evangelical response to a patient. When accounting for my behavior to the program's supervisor, explaining that I have a background in philosophy and have been professionally educated and trained to generally question everything, he concluded that I have a "pathological" approach to life.

As funny as it may sound, he was right, to a degree. I try to approach life, especially answers to life's questions, by asking "What's wrong with this?" Or, perhaps, better put, "What's queer about them?" The result, I believe, has hardly been pathological. As many of you know, having reopened this particular question, has led to a set of circumstances in my life that are financially burdensome, yet which have proven

psychologically and emotionally rewarding. During the 2004 national elections, voters in Kentucky passed a constitutional amendment banning marriage for gays and lesbians—one of 11 similar bills passed around the country at the same time. At the time I was working as a full-time corporate video producer in Louisville, in addition to my role as minister at Clifton Universalist Unitarian Church. I was so disturbed and offended that the government had begun officially telling me who I can and cannot offer my ministerial services to that the following Sunday I informed our congregation I can no longer in good conscience marry anyone until I'm free to marry everyone. I received a standing ovation and a few weeks later our church board passed a policy prohibiting wedding ceremonies in our building until we're free to open our doors equally to all, including gays and lesbians.

Because my stance was so extreme, "Minister Says No More 'I Do's,'" the local media ran with the story. Less than a week later my secular employers called me into a meeting and essentially reprimanded me, demoted me, and asked for my resignation. After I realized what had happened, I hired an attorney to work out a severance agreement. Less than two months later they fired me outright without even giving me the two-weeks severance the law requires, or the vacation pay they owed me, citing several trumped up charges, including that I had not received advanced permission from my supervisor to be off work sick. Company officials claimed the fact that its policy manual, the basis of its lobbying efforts, included the statement, "The institution of marriage should only be recognized as the legal union of a man and a woman," had nothing to do with my termination. Today, three years later, I remain in an expensive lawsuit in the hope the courts will agree this sort of behavior is not permissible. We shall see.

For now, however, it is enough I hope, having shared a bit of my biography, to show that the study, and, more importantly, the practice of Philosophy, of living in our questions, is not a pointless exercise engaging with insolvable riddles, but is a path that is as rewarding as it is vast, as exciting as it is uncertain, and as fulfilling as it is emptying. "What's queer about them?" Please don't trouble me with an answer; the question itself is enough for me.