

Essay

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? And Why Do We Need It Now?

Ann Kreilkamp, 1986

Update: This essay, written nearly 40 years ago, remains, unfortunately, all too relevant. Back then, I would have been shocked to think we would still be here without a shift in our thinking patterns. And yet here we are! Even so, our common peril remains.

Today we tend to think of “philosophy” as some kind of mysterious and abstract field, confined to specialists in universities. University philosophers talk — and write, and lecture — only to one another. Both their community and their language form a more or less closed circle.

This image of philosophy has little or no relation to real life.

Or, we may think of “the philosopher” as a stooped old man with long white beard, eyes aglitter, mouth dropping pearls. We sit at the old man’s feet, listening to every word — and then promptly forget to apply what we have “learned” from him to our real lives.

Here, the image is that of philosophy as wisdom, gleaned only through long experience in life.

The first image divorces philosophy from life completely. The second image marries philosophy to life completely — so completely that only when we are old can we be philosophers.

Our current images of philosophy contradict each other. Moreover, *neither of them acknowledges the philosopher that lives inside us all, at least some of the time.* Beyond our current images of philosophy is the real world of philosophy, where there is no goal — no absolutely correct theory of the world, no optimum age to be reached — there is only the search, the journey. And it is the way we go through that journey which counts, not whether we “win” or “lose.”

Philosophy is not an image, philosophy is a way of life — at least it was for the ancient Greeks, and their original meaning of the word “philos” – “sophy” as “love of” – “wisdom.

The Greek Socrates, perhaps the wisest man who ever lived, did not consider himself to be wise. Rather he was a lover of, and was, searching for, wisdom. The more we learn, the less we know, so goes one of our wiser old sayings. Socrates would have agreed. What we think we know in this life is merely a certain (more or less narrow) frame — or series of frames; our frames are windows, through which we view the world.

Now, obviously, if anything is to make sense, it needs a context or frame within which it can be viewed.

And, obviously, the meaning of a thing differs when. placed within differing frames.

We all realize this.

What we seldom realize, however, is that we usually think (or hope) our own personal frames are the “right” ones.

We become blinded by our frames. We identify ourselves with our ways of thinking — with our expectations, our plans — and then project them onto the outside world as “real.”

Children are born without expectations, plans, frames. In a very real sense, our children are wiser than we are.

And to understand philosophy as it was originally practiced by Socrates, we must become as little children again.

Who am I?

Where did I come from?

Where am I going?

. . . they ask us, over and over and over again. We seldom bother to stop and listen. We are too busy. Busy with the things of *this* world. So busy we have forgotten to even remember to ask those fundamental questions — and to keep them in our hearts as we journey through life.

We are adults now, we say. We have put away our childish things, and are working to get ahead, to succeed, to win — or lose, if things go “wrong.” We are “wiser” now, less innocent, less naïve.

This version of the word “wise” is the cynical perversion of its original. As long as we are cynical, we will not be able to hear or value our children’s questions. Instead, as adults, we spend a great deal of time and energy making sure we have the “right” frames, and living up to them. We also expect others to have the same frames — and when they don’t, we try to convert or force them into our way of thinking or, failing that, defend ourselves against them.

Whether we do this with words or swords or nuclear wars, it is all the same. War is war. And “all’s fair in love and war.” This kind of love is possessive love, not compassionate. As long as our love remains possessive (of people, property, power — frames), we will need our wars for balancing: war is merely the negative expression of possessive love.

Positive/negative thinking is dualistic. It stems from the black/white frameworks with which we try to capture the world, to make it make perfect sense — never mind contradictions!

Given this attitude, we cannot help but jealously guard our territory against encroachment, and seek to conquer others' territory — to win, not lose.

Given that the number of (black/white) frames possible to render meaning in the world is at least as large as the number of differing individuals living in the world; and given that each individual wants his or her own frame to be the “right” one; then it is no wonder that now, after God only knows how many centuries of black/white thinking, we are, once again, as usual, at the brink of nuclear war.

As long as each of us thinks our views are the only “right” ones, things will continue to go “wrong,” and some one or more (person(s), ideal(s), group(s), etc.) will be considered “evil” by some one or more.

As long as we see things in black and white, “the devil” shall be among us. We create the devil. It is our thinking that makes it so.

This is not a new idea. Socrates himself taught that evil is ignorance, that the devil is in our minds. So the more we learn, the less evil, the less ignorant will we be.

Once we remember this, we will no longer need to take offense at our own or others' evil (ignorant) thought or action.

Once we remember our *selves*, we will have no more war nor the need for war.

To learn, said Socrates, is to remember what we have always known; is to re-member, to put back together again — who we are, where we came from, and where we are going.

To remember ourselves is to begin to love both ourselves and one another — with compassion for our common ignorance.

To remember is to begin to recognize the relativity of all our frames, their relations to one another.

To remember is to gain ever-higher, ever-deeper perspectives on our experience — through ever higher, ever deeper questions about that experience.

We need to return to philosophy as it was originally practiced by Socrates. We need to encourage philosophy as a process of asking fundamental questions about the world and any part in it, its relations to the whole.

We need to incorporate philosophy into the real world as an integrative process, as a method of investigation into personal, social, institutional, community, national and global frameworks, and their dynamics.

We need to move from diversity to unity, from war to peace, from politics to philosophy.

Our crises, both individual and collective, serve as creative challenges. It is precisely when things go “wrong” that we have the choice: either to blame some one (ourselves, another person, a group, an idea, etc.) or, we can detach ourselves from the situation in order to gain a wider, “more philosophical” view of it.

Our crises are opportunities. They invite us to learn, to change, to grow — to move continuously from one frame to another more inclusive one.

We need to remember how to think philosophically about our crises, and to ask once again, those questions which go to the heart of the matter, whatever it is.

Our world is fast slipping into chaos. Individuals, families, institutions, communities, our species as a whole — all of us are being ripped apart by the tension and stress of the last twenty years of this second millennium, A.D. These are critical times. A fork in the road has been reached. Crucial decisions must be made. Either we will learn to love, or we will soon be at war.

Each of us living has chosen to be here now.

There are no accidents.

If so, then what is the meaning of it all?

I don't know. I am not wise. I am a lover of wisdom, a searcher. Will you join me?