Why Philosophy?

Ian Kidd

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Philosophers are allegedly highly reflective creatures, alert and attentive for prejudices and presumptions in their own arguments and beliefs, and those of others. As any undergraduate philosophy student knows, clarity, rigour, and ruthless critical acumen are the prize virtues of the modern philosopher. However, despite this praise of critical reflexivity, it’s surely peculiar that philosophers don’t place more of an emphasis upon identifying why it is that we do philosophy.

There is a standard repertoire of answers of course, such as ‘love of wisdom’, training in intellectual discipline, or the Delphic Oracle’s injunction to ‘know thyself’, as well as the transferable ‘key skills’ of modern philosophy syllabi, such as rapid analysis of complex materials, or the ability to construct potent arguments, and which are reportedly prized by typical big city graduate recruiters. However, it is arguably only rarely that such answers are directly raised in typical philosophy courses. ‘Why are you studying philosophy?’ This may be a question asked by a tutor upon meeting the new fresher philosophers, and of course it’s familiar to anyone who’s recently filled in a UCAS application. But once one ‘gets going’ in a philosophy degree - an hour of Descartes each Wednesday, two hours of logic on a Monday, weekly trips to the library, and so on - the question seems to fade from both the mind and the syllabus. As soon as one begins getting to grips with the problem of other minds, or Aristotelian virtue ethics, or the perils of formal logic, the question of why one is studying philosophy in the first place recedes, rapidly subsumed by tutorial schedules, essay deadlines, and the comfortable routine of university life.

This isn’t to say that one stops asking the question - especially when burning the midnight oil to learn Kant’s categorical imperative before the nine am tutorial the next day - but it is surely strange that the question isn’t asked, implicitly or not, by the degree course itself. Perhaps it’s considered that the question of why a student is studying philosophy is a very private one, something for them to ruminate on in their own time. Others might suggest that it doesn’t really matter, as long as the module quota is filled or as long as they turn up for the tutorials and hand in an essay. Others of a more cynical persuasion might quietly advise that the question is perhaps not better left unasked.

Common and understandable as these responses may be, it does seem strange, to myself at least, that the question ‘Why philosophy?’ isn’t a more constantly present motif in undergraduate philosophy courses. Of course, Kant’s ethics are important, and Hume’s account of causation intriguing, and yes, philosophy of mind can tell us a lot about ourselves as the unique cognitive beings we are: but, at the end of the day, what of it? Even if one is intrigued by the various ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical issues addressed by ‘Knowledge and Reality’ or ‘Moral Theory’ or ‘Philosophy of the Sciences’, these are specialised areas of inquiry, and perhaps do not aspire to this sort of perhaps more comprehensive ‘why question’. There is, for some at least, a more general sort of inquiry called ‘philosophy’, whose content consists in, but is not exhausted by, the various sub-disciplinary areas reflected in a modular syllabus. This is the more general sense of philosophy which is, in Pierre Hadot’s term, a ‘way of life’, a sort of ongoing exploration of how to comport oneself within the world, living the sort of ‘eudaimonistic’ life praised by the ancient
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Greeks, and perhaps enjoying the sense of ‘homeliness’ in the world gestured to more recently by Martin Heidegger.

This may sound preposterously ambitious in our ‘postmodern’ age, when ‘grand theories’ of ‘life, the universe, and everything’ are dismissed as intellectual fantasies indulged in by overzealous philosophers ignorant of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s urge for us to exercise ‘suspicion of metanarratives’. However, the aim of philosophy, in the sense that I intend, isn’t any sort of comprehensive cosmology or ‘worldview’, but the far more modest, yet no less important, project of developing a sense of oneself and one’s place within the world; to arrive at a ‘sense of things’ that can lend purpose, meaning, and direction to our lives. This seems to me neither overly ambitious, since anyone can do it with a little investment of time and effort, nor wholly dispensable, because there is so much at stake, namely one’s happiness, in the broadest sense of that term. Studying epistemology or aesthetics or environmental philosophy can all play a part in this, and there is much to learn from the history of philosophy, too; but the enormous resources afforded by these diverse disciplines and traditions is arguably best managed by directing them to a definite aim: namely, developing this sort of ‘comportment’, or ‘sense of self’, or whatever one wishes to call it, rather than simply fulfilling assessment criteria, getting a good two-one, or ticking the right boxes on a CV.

Philosophy, then, as I’ve described it, offers a very complex and diverse range of ideas, arguments, and opportunities for developing a sense of our ‘place’ in the world, contributing to an understanding, however inarticulate it might be, of who we are and where we stand in the world. If this sounds like existentialism, it needn’t, since it might equally be simply described as ‘ethics’ in the broadest sense, the inquiry into how to live and behave - not just in the sense of avoiding moral pitfalls, but in cultivating and enjoying the sort of ‘homely’, flourishing life that is, as Aristotle rightly remarked, the proper end of all human thought and action.

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