

A personal testimony of the power of philosophy in my life¹

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I would like to offer a personal account of how the practice of philosophical enquiry can lead to an inspiring and fulfilling life. And although it might seem an extravagant claim, I would like to suggest the possibility that it could also play a major role in the evolution of human consciousness.

The most important and powerful effects of philosophy in my life are usually realised by solitary contemplation of the most fundamental philosophical questions, or by the exploration of the same questions within a dialogue at an intimate, personal level with one or two fellow adventurers. It is my hope that I can communicate to a larger group, within the format of a monologue, some of the joys, and some of the difficult challenges, that result from such exploration.

To begin, perhaps I can ask you to consider one of the most fundamental and profound questions - 'what is the meaning of life?' At the moment my reply would be 'to experience it to the utmost of my capacity to do so,' and I am going to suggest that living a life of philosophical enquiry has helped me to begin to realise this aim. I will try to illustrate how living such a life has shown me a place of exquisite joy, beauty and wonder.

At this point I would like to quote Alfred North Whitehead - 'Philosophy is the product of wonder.' (Whitehead, 1934). I would also suggest that wonder is the product of philosophy.

I will now try and relate how I came to discover the power of philosophy and how it had such a dramatic effect in my life.

I can remember that, as a young child, I was extremely curious about the world around me. I was always asking questions and was precocious in my challenging of the

answers I received from my parents - so perhaps it is no surprise that I would turn to philosophy in later life!

At about the age of six, I was particularly fascinated by dinosaurs and our solar system. Maybe scale had something to do with it - as a small child I may have been fascinated by dinosaurs being very large examples of life, and the solar system and beyond being very large examples of the physical universe. So perhaps at such an early age, the foundations of wonder and awe about life, the universe and everything, were laid.

As I grew older, I found a natural ability for mathematics and my interest in the material world extended to the microscopic level and the study of physics. At that time science was my accepted source of knowledge and truth. I believed that science with the aid of mathematics would be able to explain literally everything. It was from that point that I rejected the religion available to me at the time - how could I believe in anything that couldn't be seen, touched, or measured?

As I became more independent and responsible for my own choices and actions, I became more self conscious, and the need to understand myself and my relation to the world, and to others with whom I shared it, became more urgent. I had already rejected religion, and the physical sciences seemed less able to explain why I thought and felt what I did. Perhaps psychology could help? At first I was encouraged by the various theories on offer - there seemed to be some hope that I would be able to more accurately define myself, and to arrive at some explanation of my, and others', desires, drives, motivations, thoughts and feelings.

This period was a crucial time in my life. I was emerging from a very confusing adolescence, and, approaching the age of 18, was on the verge of entering independent adulthood, with totally new responsibilities and

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decisions facing me. There were some pressing problems to focus on - rational decisions to be made about further education, financial independence, future employment, and the irrational experiences presented by relationships with the opposite sex. I began a degree course in psychology - more in the hope that it could help me, than any possibility of finding successful employment. I soon felt that although it was addressing the difficult subject of the human mind and consciousness, psychology was still approaching it from an objective, scientific perspective. There seemed to be theories, empirical experiments, definitions, categorisations and so on.

There didn't seem to be any attention paid to what it *felt like* to be a human being - a unique individual that didn't fit exactly into any general definitions or categories.

And although I didn't believe in a conventional religious god, I hadn't ruled out the possibility that there was a spiritual dimension to life, and yet psychology as well as the other sciences were reducing this possibility to an irrelevance, where in fact, if there was some spiritual aspect to our existence I thought it should be extremely relevant.

It was about this time that I began to feel that science was just as arrogant in its assumed authority as religion was. The assumption that the world and our experience of it was reduced to the material and that which could be physically sensed and measured, seemed to ignore what I felt inside.

So where was I? I had no faith, no relevant explanations, and very few beliefs or certainties. Did I need them? Many other people seemed to function in the world without the need to know answers to fundamental questions - they just needed to know things like 'what time do I have to be at work', 'how much is a gallon of petrol', 'have I drunk too much alcohol', 'who are Arsenal playing on Saturday'. But as well as the people who seemed content to live their life indulging in what I considered to be only superficial trivialities, there seemed to be a growing number of people who needed more fundamental explanations and/or beliefs.

There was, and still is, an upsurge in interest in eastern religions and teachings, religious fundamentalism, and all sorts of cults and new age philosophies. It was like these people had a hunger for a deeper meaning to their lives than science could offer, or the technology it spawned could deliver.

So after two or three years leading a fairly conventional life as a young, and apparently successful, data processing manager, I was encouraged by a friend to look around for different perspectives on life to the western, materialistic, technological one that I was in danger of resigning myself to. I became fascinated by a whole range of different subjects and teachings that offered me very different explanations of, and attitudes to, life, consciousness, the cosmos, and my own existence. I became interested in the work of such people as Carl Jung, Krishnamurti, Alan Watts, Ram Dass, Lyall Watson, and later Ken Wilber. I studied a whole range of subjects from astrology and alchemy through meditation and theosophy to yoga and Zen Buddhism.

I was able to take a great deal of inspiration and optimism from those subjects and writers that talked about a subjective experience of a wonderfully awe-inspiring, yet sometimes paradoxical reality. I felt safe to travel with them beyond the limits of rationality and materialism. They spoke of a wisdom that transcends knowledge and even thought, a humility and an acceptance that I hadn't found in science. A reverence for all of a creation that was unified and interdependent, and not to be divided up, defined, limited, manipulated and exploited by technology - the product of a scientific, materialistic outlook.

I began to see the life I was leading as just one of many different possibilities and began questioning, as best as I could, as many aspects of my life as I was able to. Naturally I was confused. With so many different, and sometimes conflicting, answers to the questions I was asking, I guess something had to give. I was ripe for a dramatic change. It happened when I had the most profound and beautiful experience of my life. I won't go into details now but it was like waking up from a dream-like turning from the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave and seeing the light that was forming them. It was an experience that transcended space, time, and location; a state of peace and beauty. And although this experience was far greater than anything I had encountered before, and more real than anything since, it appeared as though this was just a glimpse of something that was beyond my capacity to comprehend or accept. I certainly wasn't looking for anything so awesome, in fact if someone had told me beforehand what I would experience, I would have been too afraid to proceed. I had no prior expectations, and to the best of my knowledge hadn't taken any mind altering substances and was not under hypnosis or any form of mind control. The result was that I couldn't take the life I was leading seriously any more. I couldn't believe that I had been asleep, yet

thinking I was awake, for so long. I had to do something different. I decided to pack up my job, leave home and go to India. I think that at the time I went looking for something without knowing what it was yet hoping that I would know when I found it.

As it happened I only spent a month there as I found the culture shock too much to take after having lived a fairly comfortable, sheltered, suburban life until then. But while there, I experienced some more of the magic I had felt during my previous 'awakening' experience. When I returned to England it was almost just as much of a culture shock as when I arrived in Delhi. I saw things completely differently - everything I had previously taken as normal - cars, supermarkets, politics, sport, television, the news, money - now all seemed ridiculous and arbitrary. Yet there I was, back amongst it all and trying to reconcile it with the beauty and joy I had recently experienced.

Then one day I went to the library and for some reason, instead of going to the newly fashionable sections on contemporary religion, mind body and spirit, new age, or popular science, I found myself walking out with the *Problems of Philosophy* by Bertrand Russell (Russell, 1967). I can still vividly remember reading it, and physically shaking with excitement that at last I had found a field of enquiry that asked questions at a deeper level than all others, and that didn't presume to tell me the way things were.

I had heard about Descartes 'I think therefore I am' before, but didn't realise the significance of it, or how he had arrived at it. To let go of any certainty, to doubt one's own senses, to even question one's own existence seemed to represent the courage that I myself needed in order to make sense of my life up to that point. I read about Berkeley's idealism - here was someone who was questioning the materialist view of things that I had found so arrogantly proposed by science and which I found so inadequate. His ideas resonated with the experience I spoke of earlier when my usual waking life appeared as a dream, or an illusion. The principle 'To be is to be perceived' also reminded me of the role of the observer of quantum physics, which I am fascinated by, with the possibility of subjective conscious awareness playing a role in creating an otherwise objective reality.

I read about relativism and the opinion that there might not be any absolute truth - and that was quite a shock for me. All my life I had been looking for answers and explanations and to find that there may not be such things made me feel totally lost. But here were people

who were brave enough to go to that place of doubt, uncertainty and confusion. Anything that I had considered true or right could be questioned.

And this is when it hit me. Rather than feeling afraid to lose the security of any certainty, belief or truth, I found that I could also consider that security as a restriction or burden. It felt like I was liberated from all of my previous assumptions, my culture, the authority of religion, science, politics, morality. I was filled with tremendous excitement and wonder - the universe was mine to explore forever. I saw everything in a new light - with the eyes of a child so to speak. It was a similar experience to that life changing moment a year or so previously - less dramatic and less concentrated perhaps, but more easily accessible. The words of wisdom that I had come across from philosophers, religious texts and spiritual teachings from the Bible, the Tao te Ching, Zen parables, and also some of the so called new age writers, suddenly took on more significance, meaning and profundity. I felt like an explorer standing on the shore looking out to sea and imagining new and exciting lands to visit. But at the same time everyone was telling me that the world was flat and that I would fall over the edge if I was mad enough to travel to the horizon. Yet now I feel that one can never reach the horizon no matter how far one travelled. Horizons aren't physical boundaries, they are just the limits of our vision.

I don't think that philosophy should seek answers. Once one thinks an answer has been found there is the temptation to accept it and look no further. If you want answers, get religion, most religions will give you the complete set. If that doesn't satisfy you, and you want more answers, then join the new religion of science. While most religion gives us a pre-ordained, dogmatic system as unquestionable truth, and science gives us slightly less primitive explanations of, and theories about, limited aspects of ourselves and the universe, philosophy offers us the freedom and opportunity to question assumed authority. It liberates us, as individuals, and as an evolving species, to seek our own truths, create our own meanings, find our own way to live. Not necessarily to progressively comprehend or explain away the mystery of existence but to be able to creatively experience more of it to the limits of our potential to do so.

Now it might appear that I am being unfairly critical of religion and science. After all they both have the ability to inspire. Faith is very important, and sometimes very uplifting and beneficial to a large number of people, and

science has undoubtedly provided us with huge material benefits.

But for me, science provides an accumulation of generated facts about a world that is approached from, and in my opinion, limited by, a perspective that is supposedly objective, impersonal and largely materialistic and deterministic. But philosophy offers the opportunity of meaning from a subjective, personal, and creative perspective.

Philosophy is sometimes seen as a purely cerebral activity - a logical, rational pursuit of wisdom, knowledge or even truth. But I really feel that it can move us on all levels, especially towards what is a state of being that has been described variously as nirvana, satori, cosmic consciousness, the kingdom of heaven, transcendence, enlightenment, and perhaps significantly, the philosophers stone, the ultimate goal of alchemy.

Perhaps some may think of alchemists as a bunch of misguided, medieval chemists, but as Jung suggested in his book *Psychology and Alchemy* (Jung, 1980), they may have been using metaphors to describe a process of psychological and spiritual transformation, rather than that of base metals into gold.

Karl Marx said 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it.' (Marx, 1975) I suspect that Marx meant this from a mainly political standpoint, but for me it is a pointer to the power of philosophy on a more personal level. Although I feel that to interpret one's own world is already to change it somewhat, philosophy offers a great opportunity for an autonomously creative transformation of it.

Now, as well as the delights that living philosophically can offer, I have encountered very difficult challenges. It's not always plain sailing on the good ship philosophy. There always seems to be a tension for me between living in the world, and the urge to retreat from it to some deserted place where I can escape from what I see as unnecessary activity and sensory excess.

When one reaches the point of being able, as William Blake (1984) put it,

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour

it is quite possible to be overwhelmed by everyday life - especially if you visit the beach or a garden! But seriously, I think that human beings are capable of the most exquisite sensitivity and yet it appears that we are becoming desensitised to the point where we crave and need ever more stimulation. I mean, maybe I'm getting older and slowing down, but everything seems to be getting faster, everything has to be more spectacular to attract our attention and satisfy us, everything seems to be getting more extreme. I am not necessarily criticising this state of affairs, I'm just pointing out that when one reaches a point where one's senses, emotions and reason are fulfilled and satisfied by less and less, then anything more can be extremely tiresome. I also think it is disappointing that in their desire for MORE, people are losing appreciation of what they already have and are capable of - and seem to be chasing some happiness or fulfilment that will recede further the faster they run after it.

Another difficulty that I struggle with is indecision. As life today is quite complex, I am constantly faced with a variety of decisions. Now when one is constantly aware of the multitude of levels operating in every situation, and when one can observe these many levels from many different perspectives then making the RIGHT choice is extremely difficult. So, for me, this is another reason, and hopefully not an excuse (!), to spend my time in contemplation and withdraw from a world that demands so many decisions.

Yet another challenge that I am struggling to meet, is my relationship with other people. When I try to share my experiences with most other people I find that communication often breaks down. I know that some people find it difficult, scary, or embarrassing to discuss and explore the areas I like to, and this can lead to misunderstanding and fear that they would rather avoid. So I feel that I am constantly withholding something I feel passionate about and which is most important to me. It's strange, but sometimes when I am with others I feel isolated, yet when I am by, or rather with, my Self, I feel a deep connection with everything and do not feel alone. One thing I have noticed though, is that after their initial wariness, many people actually want to begin their own exploration, and the willingness of others to discuss more meaningful matters is often very inspiring.

So I can't say that to live philosophically is an easy journey. The difficult challenges I have mentioned - remaining sensitive in an increasingly harsh world, constant indecision and doubt in a world that demands decisions and certainty, and living with, and relating to,

others on a mundane level, seem to point to a choice between withdrawing from the world of present human activity, or developing an appropriate attitude and the strength to function within it without being overwhelmed by it. Now while I am personally struggling to find the correct attitude, I gain strength from my passionate desire to help others become aware of an alternative and fulfilling way of living. I joined the SPP (originally of course called the SCP) with a view to finding the opportunity of offering hope and support to people who find themselves in a similar situation to what I was in when I felt so alone and misunderstood.

As I mentioned earlier, it appears that there are a growing number of people who are increasingly dissatisfied with their lives and who are searching for something that will offer them autonomy and meaning as responsible human beings who are able to realise their true potential.

If I have any belief or faith at all, it is that living a life of philosophical enquiry can offer a never-ending journey of joyful exploration, of limitless meaning, and the realisation that there is nothing to do, nowhere to seek and nothing to find. It's all right here, right now, everywhere and forever.

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