

Creating The Life Worth Living: Philosophy Workshop, Ideas and Methods

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My practice began with, and continues to include, the development and delivery of workshops involving the introduction and application of philosophical ideas to everyday life. Although the specific focus of the workshops may vary, the main goal is generally to broaden and deepen participants' understanding of themselves, others and the world we live in so that each may be well prepared to create and actualise a self-chosen life worth living. This goal is accomplished by 1) Discovering what constitutes a personal philosophy/world view; its origins and its implicit/explicit values; 2) Critical Thinking/Socratic Questioning exploration and challenge of its past and current validity in their everyday lives; 3) Application of new knowledge to the development and practice of a personal philosophy that will, realistically, integrate and transform chosen values into actions that culminate in one's personal expression of a life worth living.

Since the workshop focus is not geared towards a history of Philosophy or a review of the differing points of view offered by major philosophers, I stipulate that no knowledge of Philosophy is necessary and make the assumption that most participants will have little or no background in the subject. For the most part, this assumption has proven accurate. This situation does not preclude the introduction of relevant philosophical perspectives that are appropriate to this audience and to the discussion. My experience informs me, however, that the majority of participants are less interested in understanding already established points of view than they are in examining, challenging, and creating their own philosophical world views in their endeavour 'to develop the life worth living.'

In those cases where there has been some background, the design and content of the workshop enhances that understanding, and expands and challenges it into practical application. For those who would like an overview of the background of basic philosophical concerns, some of which inform the workshop itself, I suggest the following: *What's Does It All Mean*, Thomas Nagel; *An Intelligent Person's Guide To Philosophy*, Roger Scruton; and *Think*, Simon Blackburn.

A prepared workbook accompanies the sessions and serves as the organisational format for the workshop as well as a workbook and reader. It contains text from a variety of disciplines that introduce and present diverse points of view on those issues relevant to the goal of the workshop. The readings, for the most part, replace the practice of lecturing, historically a didactic way of imparting information, with Critical Thinking methods of exploring points of view through reasoning and questioning. The readings constitute the jumping-off points for kindling workshop discussion and dialogue.

The readings may consist of only one sentence or multiple quotations and paraphrases generally not longer than three to four pages. For this reason, and because even the shortest of quotations may spark the most intense questioning and the longest discussion, there is no way to accurately predict the amount of time that will be spent on any specific reading. It is the participants themselves who structure the workshop time. I begin with only a general idea of what I would like to cover. The quality of the discussion and participants' engagement in it, determine the scheduling. When this issue is discussed with participants, they invariably choose quality of learning and understanding over coverage of material.

The readings are done during workshop time. Questions, dialogue, discussion, analysis, and connections to other readings are taken up as they occur. They are usually expanded upon and challenged for their validity and application not only to broad, world issues, but more importantly, to those that impact participants' personal philosophy and everyday being-in-the-world. There are also many cartoons that not only add humour, but serve to edify complicated philosophical and Critical Thinking concepts. To reinforce the learning, and encourage self-exploration, there is generally at least one assignment or exercise that accompanies each section of the readings.

The suggested assignments or exercises, as well as the sharing of them, is done on a completely voluntary basis. Participants are encouraged to commit their ideas to paper for their own edification, exploration, and modification. However, it appears that most participants look forward to the opportunity of sharing their thinking - even on a

personal level. It is in large part the sharing of personal points of view, rather than the readings themselves, that provides much of the discussion, learning, excitement, and participant insight within the workshop hours. Participants may choose to work alone or with a partner. Nothing is mandatory except mutual respect. The workshop leader, therefore, must be both sensitive and spontaneous in addressing participant and group needs and desires as well as allocating the workshop time effectively.

The workbook includes two sections on Critical Thinking. The first section, consisting of two parts, lays out some general suggestions for probing issues and structuring dialogue and discussion: a) 'Elements of Reason' (Paul, 1998), and b) 'Socratic Questioning' (Paul, 1989, pp. 28-30). The 'Socratic Questioning' parallels the structure of the 'Elements of Reason' to guide and support efficient and productive dialogue. The second section on Critical Thinking is an introduction to some basic terms and ideas in Critical Thinking. This section, introduced a good deal later in the workshop, challenges participants to explore their habits of thought, particularly those that might have a distorting effect upon their understanding of themselves, others and the world we inhabit.

While acknowledging that most participants come into the workshop with no familiarity with the 'Elements of Reason' or 'Socratic Questioning' as organising principles of discussion, they are well received. After some minor introductory definitions, and with consistent, relevant and appropriate reference to them within the workshop discussion, they become tools that participants find dependable, accessible and significant for probing issues more broadly, deeply, and accurately than possible prior to their acquaintance with them.

The Critical Thinking practices and methods serve not only as informing principles for understanding and enhancing one's own thinking, and the thinking of others within the workshop environment, but are practical, transferable tools that are effective in exploring and solving problems in all aspects of every day living. I have introduced and used them effectively in corporate settings, as well as in classrooms. In my private practice, I refer to them consistently and encourage one-on-one clients to apply these practices, not only to better understand the issues they are coping with, and how, but to enhance understanding, empathy and cooperation in their interpersonal relationships at home, at work, and in their community commitments, social and political.

When personally responsible for scheduling a workshop, I try to schedule eight to ten three-hour sessions. However, there is a good deal of flexibility in meeting the needs of individuals and organisations and any aspect of a workshop can become the focus of a shorter one. My first workshop for Employment Development, for example, was a half-day focusing on the introduction and application of Critical Thinking to seeking employment. More recently, I conducted a one-day workshop for a corporation on the use of Critical Thinking in Business and Management. Each of these workshops involved twenty or so participants. In the Employment Development workshop, participants worked alone. But in the corporate workshop, almost half the day was spent in a small group effort. After the introduction and discussion of the 'Elements of Reasoning' and 'Socratic Questioning' formats, groups with shared interests applied them to a current problem.

The point is that each workshop makes its own demands. However, it is not the logistics, or even content that is most important. It is the process, methods, tools and practices. These remain constant: minimum lecture/introduction to concepts; participant dialogue/discussion informed by the challenges of Critical Thinking principles and practices; application of new learning; preparation for integration into everyday living.

The following workshop, 'Creating The Life Worth Living' is offered more as a menu of possibilities rather than a fixed program of readings and activities. As such, it is to be considered a 'composite' rather than one workshop of inflexible design and delivery. It features all of the above mentioned methods, processes, and practices, but for the sake of clarity, applies them to a particular content, Creating The Life Worth Living.

'Creating The Life Worth Living'

I. a) Introduction to concepts, definitions, functions, purposes and examples of world views; b) reflections on everyday actions in the world as expression of a personal world view. This discussion leads logically to the next two sections, each of which explores the underlying sources, as well as the possible consequences, of a world view or personal philosophy: II. a) Where we came from (origins), b) sources of our accepted truths, beliefs and values; III. a) Making connections between specific consequences of accepted beliefs, truths and values and b) their effects on our actual decision-making and actions in the world. These issues invite the use of Critical Thinking principles to bring to light questions concerning the basis of truth, beliefs and values, the gaps or contradictions that may

exist between them and one's fulfilment of them in every day living. Section IV offers participants the opportunity of creating a personal philosophy or world view based on information, knowledge and insights accrued from the workshop discussion/dialogue and the Critical Thinking/Socratic Questioning assessment of old ideas. The assessment generally presents challenges to the taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves, others, and the world we live in, as well as our habitual re-actions in the lived experience. It therefore encourages and supports *realistic* re-assessment and restructure of one's world view, the goal being responsible transformation to fruition.

What follows are excerpts from some sections of the workbook. They offer a more detailed description of the content of the workbook including examples of the 'Elements of Reason,' and 'Socratic Questioning' to support effective discussion and dialogue. A sample workshop session can be found in the 'Addendum'.

When using the 'Elements of Reason' and 'Socratic Questioning' I introduce them during the first meeting. They are offered as *suggested* methods for establishing and maintaining a non-judgemental environment that engenders a sense of the possibility of establishing a non-defensive, creative environment through respect, careful listening, and empathetic understanding of others' points of view. Equally important, the use of the formats offers the opportunity for probing more deeply, more broadly, and more effectively, the complex issues under discussion.

Reasoning in this Critical Thinking vein suggests a variety of approaches by which an issue, or problem may be probed, clarified, understood and resolved. I use the relevant tools of reasoning throughout the workshop to familiarise participants with their application, thereby encouraging their awareness and their ability to apply them appropriately to the discussion. Three pages of the workbook lay out the format for using each of the suggested methods, the first, a one page graphic design that clearly suggests focus on the following: 1. Purpose of the thinking (goal); 2. Question at Issue (problem); 3. Concepts (ideas/ rules, theories/principles); 4. Information (data, facts, evidence, observations); 5. Points of view (frames of reference, empathy-building); 6. Implications and Consequences; 7. Implicit and Explicit Assumptions; 8. Interpretation and Inferences (checking conclusions, solutions) (Paul, 1998).

The 'Socratic Questioning' consists of two pages that categorise questions to support and encourage the use of the aforementioned reasoning skills. For example, there are questions that: probe assumptions ('What are you

assuming...why?'); ask for reasons, facts and evidence; try to expand frames of reference (Why have you chosen this point of view rather than...?'); challenge implications and consequences (Would that necessarily...probably occur?) (Paul, 1989). With these ideas in mind as organising principles for discussion, we move to Section I, World Views.

I: Introduction To World Views

Excerpts of 'Definitions, Purposes and Examples of World Views' as they appear in the reader:

1. A world view is: '1. The collection of beliefs (ideas, images, attitudes, values) that an individual or a group holds about things such as the universe, humankind, God, the future, etc. 2. A comprehensive outlook about life and the universe from which one explains and/or structures relationships and activities. A world view may be deliberately formulated or adopted, or it may be the result of an unconscious assimilation or conditioning process. It is the general perspective from which one sees and interprets the world.' (Angeles, 1981, p. 319)
2. A world view can be thought of as a perspective through which 'meaning' is created. It is sometimes referred to as a structure of assumptions that constitute a frame of reference for interpreting the meaning of life experiences.
3. One's way of life can be viewed as implicitly expressing the individual's personal philosophy. Actions, emotions, choices, hopes, plans can be interpreted as statements about oneself and the world. What is fair, important, what can be expected of oneself and others?

Example and Application:

1. Religions, for example, generally provide a structure for a world view. They satisfy the needs for: Understanding our world, who and what is in it, and how it/they came to be; meaning and purpose of life; hope; comfort; community; revenge; moral order; social order (Matson, 1987).
2. Application of definitions, structures, and purposes: Participants are asked to discuss historic religious perspectives from Eastern and/or Western traditions to see how they fit the definition and structure indicated. Secular Humanism, Capitalism and Marxism are discussed as possible expressions of world views without metaphysical associations. Participants are then asked to use the foregoing information to reflect on, and begin to identify their own concepts of a world view. They are encouraged to do the workbook exercise: 'Exploring Your World View' during the workshop. The responses to the assignment, then, are shared and become part of the workshop dialogue. They also have the option of doing the exercise as a homework assignment. It asks only for

general statements that express what participants now understand as substantive of a world view.

Sections II and III.

We move now from general ideas about world views to abstracting the specifics of them, and the philosophical questions they raise. These are the issues that have engaged philosophers since the beginning of time and continue to do so: Knowledge, Truth, Morality, Free Will, The Meaning of Life/Death, Love, Nature of Mind, The Meaning of Words, Self, Moral/Social Order, God, World, Nature of Human Nature, and so on (Nagel, 1987; Scruton, 1999; Blackburn, 1999). What we want to know is not only *what* constitutes our descriptions or definitions, but *how* we know, and *why* we believe the sources of our answers. This process challenges 'conditioned' or 'unconscious' acceptance of world views, thereby offering the possibility of opening up to broader horizons of thought. I include some Post-modern concepts that seemingly undermine the credibility and viability of any of the above as stable foundation for building a life worth living. As the discussion/dialogue continues, participants, enmeshed in the process, are excitedly, and almost inadvertently, 'doing philosophy'.

In keeping with the underlying Critical Thinking methodology, Sections II and III are headed up by one question: 'How do you make sense of...?' Keeping in mind that our actions in the world are highly dependent upon the 'gods' we choose, we begin with statements concerning origins: How the world came into being; Who/what is in the world and how it came to be; Your relation to the natural world; the nature of religion/spirituality/humanism. The discussion here opens out to consideration of evolution as well as a variety of creation theories and myths from different cultures, some of which are presented in the workbook.

A second group of questions motivates exploration of participants' responses to the first group and asks: 'What are your sources of truth?' (Fernando-Armesto, 1999): Sources of Knowledge (direct/indirect experience, the senses, books holy and otherwise, reason, emotions, Science, intuition); Sources of moral/ethical behaviour (conscience, law, empathy, revenge); Sources of Meaning/end purpose of life; Sources of understanding death, the soul (mind/body issue); Concepts of Freedom and Free Will; Nature of Human Nature (what we can realistically expect of ourselves and others in relationship, global and intimate). Here, through discussion and workbook texts that address each of these issues, we consider contributions from a variety of disciplines and

critique their sources and values and the possibilities for their instantiating aspects of a foundation for creating a personal philosophy. These include: Philosophy, Biology, Cognitive Science, Neuroscience, Psychology, Science, Sociology, Music, Literature, the Humanities.

Throughout the discussion, attention is brought to the connections between one's truths and beliefs, their implicit and explicit values and how those would naturally be expressed in one's every day actions in the world. Some examples will clarify: Revenge: sustaining/eliminating capital punishment; Relationship to the natural world: commitment to environmental issues; Free will: responsibility to self versus 'chance' 'Fate'; Nature of human nature: Capacity for giving and receiving love/trust; real possibilities for world peace? Godliness/spirituality and its relationship to social/political responsibility (My brother's keeper?...or, God helps those who help themselves?) Mind/Body (Western/holistic medicine); The practice of matching values with actions in the world is probably one of the greatest challenges for participants. It is here that application of Critical Thinking, or Meta-Thinking, the questioning of one's own thinking, comes into play.

I introduce participants to some of the most common stumbling blocks to clear, accurate thinking: ego/ethnocentricity; informal fallacies; rationalisation; fear of change; submission to authority; conformity; careless inferencing; unexamined assumptions, stereotyping, etc. Although the recognition of these stumbling blocks in thinking are difficult to own, the courage to do so can become the key to freedom of thought and creative action in the development of the life worth living.

Section IV: Choosing, Mapping, Actualising The Life Worth Living

We begin the last section of the workshop by reviewing Section I: Definitions and Examples of World Views and their purposes. Participants are asked to re-assess the tentative definitions/purposes and structure of those they expressed earlier in the workbook exercise, to reflect on them, and to make any changes they deem necessary. This part of the work leads to thinking in terms of chosen world views and the values that naturally emerge from them.

I generally elicit a list of deeply held values from the participants themselves before turning to the list that appears in the workbook which includes for example: Family security, World Peace, Social Recognition, Mature Love, etc. Closing exercises provide formats for

participants to, a) choose one, but not more than two of these they wish to focus on, b) to match them with means by which they can *realistically* be brought to fruition and (c) to address changes that might have to be made in their relationships and/or current life schedules to accomplish their goals.

The workshop, the discussions and dialogue, the exercises in thinking, are merely the beginnings. There may be no possibilities for acting on examined and desired changes at this point in time and I make a point of discussing this. However, it is my belief that the thinking itself, directed towards a goal, is often sufficient impetus to prepare the mind not only to recognise, but to risk reaching out to opportunities that once seemed unreachable. In addition, participants come away with a developing awareness of signposts of deceptive thinking, necessary not only for self-exploration, but applicable to exploration and challenge of others' points of view, both written and verbal, that might inadvertently - or intentionally - attempt to distort presentation of 'facts' and 'evidence' to support a particular point of view. In short, one begins to recognise attempts at the 'manufacture of consent'. Their experiences in using Critical Thinking, 'Elements of Reasoning' and 'Socratic Questioning' offer a strong, tested support system for successfully balancing possibilities with necessities, and pipe dreams with reality checks. These constitute tremendous advantages in decision making in every facet of daily living.

Workshop Critique, Conclusions, Addendum

The foregoing 'composite' workshop obviously covers too much material to present thoroughly in the prescribed time. Once, at the request of participants, I extended a similar workshop to twelve weeks but still had not depleted the interests of participants. Probably the most effective way to use the ideas presented is to select those aspects of it that are most relevant for the particular audience in mind. An entire workshop could be built around 'meaning of life,' or concepts of a personal, moral or social order. In a 12 hour workshop on Decision-Making, for example, each participant could create a world view, and then, after proper introduction to the Critical Thinking sections, have each apply the principles and practices to a chosen life decision -regardless of the specific domain of engagement.

Not Everyone's Cup of Tea

The workshop has been well received by most participants. However, it is not a workshop that will suit those looking for a quick fix or authoritative answers. To be actively involved in thinking, and in examining one's

own thinking concerning deeply held beliefs and values is intellectually, and perhaps even more so, emotionally challenging. In addition to these difficulties, one must acknowledge that the underlying assumptions behind the principles and practices of Critical Thinking and Philosophical Enquiry support the concept that Reasoning, Thinking and Meta-Thinking, *although inextricably tied to the emotions*, is the preferred road to learning and change. In our Post-modern culture, that road is not necessarily valued positively. Lastly, one must not overlook the possibility of clashing personalities within groups or between participants and practitioner.

In my privately organised workshops (Maximum 10), where I make a point of speaking to prospective participants prior to the opening session, *I have had no drop-outs*. Very often, private clients attend the workshops, and new workshop participants became private clients.

Effecting Life Changes

Many participants have stated, either orally or in writing, sometimes even months after the workshop, that the learning, insights, and supportive environment served as triggering events that culminated in life changes. Two participants reported leaving unsatisfactory relationships; many have reported accomplished and/or anticipated career changes. Another participant who was willing to discuss major anxiety concerning a long-term relationship, did in fact, become engaged. What I can state even more unequivocally is that when I had the opportunity of continuity between workshop and private practice, there was even more of a correlation between the work and the effecting of desired changes.

Conclusion

I take an Existential view on the nature of actualising one's potential: each of us is always in the process of 'becoming'. It is my understanding, therefore, that defining and redefining beliefs and values, and finding ways of expressing them in our every day lives, is, of necessity, an ongoing process - as long as we are willing to strive toward integrating our most deeply held beliefs and values into a life worth living. I believe that the informing principles of the workshop go a long way towards accomplishing this. The goals, principles and practices presented have long been an integral part of my personal life work; the workshop is an expression of my goal as Philosopher Practitioner: helping people create a realistic, thoughtfully chosen life worth living.

Addendum

As previously stated, it is the participants who determine the allocation of workshop time according to their particular interests and concerns. Given this disclaimer, I feel free to offer the following 'sample workshop' with *suggested* time scheduling.

The section on Love, as it emerges from one's sense of the Nature of Human Nature, and the effects of those beliefs and values on what to expect of oneself and others, is one that generally creates a good deal of interest and excitement. The cover page for this section offers three cartoons, each suggesting humorous commonalities that we encounter in our everyday experiences with love and relationships. The introductory readings (2 pages), draw from many sources. These include: Philosophy (Solomon, 1983, 1990); Sociology (Giddens, 1992), (Bellah, 1985) Psychology (Fromm, 1956); Psychology/Neuro-Science (Lewis et al., 2001). These readings introduce definitions of love from many perspectives as well as current attitudes toward love and relationships and the problems and pleasures associated with them. More cartoons follow. Estimated time for reading, discussion, dialogue and personal responses: 1 and 1/4 hrs.

After a break of approximately 15 minutes, class would resume and the rest of the time, 1 and 1/2 hours, would be devoted to a Humanities approach to love and relationships, followed by an exercise. There are three pages of love poems spanning the ancient to the contemporary, the comic to the sexual, and the tragic. Selected poems, or excerpts from them, are read; others are suggested for home reading. When time permits, I introduce the story, and play three to five minutes of what some consider one of the most passionate musical expressions of love: 'Liebestod' from 'Tristan and Isolde'. Throughout the session, participants discuss the relevance of the readings, cartoons, poetry, and music to each other, and most importantly, the relevance to their own experiences, past present and future.

I introduce the closing exercise by playing a piece of popular music, 'The Rose', that defines love in terms of a variety of metaphors, some of which evoke fear and caution, others risk and courage. Participants offer their own experiences as well as others' to clarify the meanings of the metaphors and bring home the impact of them in their everyday lives. Participants are then asked to write and/or draw their own metaphors beginning with, 'Love is....' Those participants who wish to share are invited to do so. Some courageous participants invite others to offer analyses and interpretations. The metaphor exercise has

proven to be extremely powerful for effecting self-insight. I have had participants apply it to other life situations, like work/career dilemmas with much success.

Approximate Scheduling:

Introductory Readings: 1 1/4 hours

Break: 15 minutes

Poetry: 1/2 hour.

Metaphor Exercise: 1 hour

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