

## **The Morphing of Philosophy Again**

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The ancient philosophers, the Stoics and Epicureans most particularly, were concerned with questions about how to live. Philosophy was seen by the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers as a way of life (Hadot 1995). Though difficult, these questions were not seen as unanswerable. Questions about how our lives are to be ordered, about how the social, political and economic world is to be ordered, are contestable, often deeply so, but they are not unanswerable. They are not pseudo questions. Perhaps always in fact contestable, they are not in principle unanswerable or unarguable. But belief here is not Peirce's method of fixation of belief or answerable to such a method.

But when we have alleged metaphysical questions we have something that cannot be so fixed, Peirce-wise or otherwise. Such questions cannot be fixed because they are not real questions. Indeed, it would be irrational to try to answer them. There is in reality nothing to answer or to fix. Peirce's famous methods for fixing belief will not apply here. But *that* need to so fix belief need not obtain in asking about a decent life. But still we have some idea of what would count as an answer. Indeed, only vaguely but we do not have incoherence here.

Asking whether a decent or a good society is possible is also not like asking if time is real, if an external world exists, whether human beings really exist or whether a sense-datum has a backside. All these standard philosophical matters are absurd. They involve asking absurd pseudo questions.

It is not only that these 'questions' are not at all demanding in the way that questions concerning what a decent life and a decent society are or what non-evasive living is or a life well lived is. These latter matters are both contested and humanly and indeed practically demanding. They

engage us both intellectually and emotionally, indeed existentially in a way that asking whether time is real and the other above standard metaphysical questions are not. Such metaphysical matters are radically different from asking questions concerning ways of life, e.g. about a decent life, a worthwhile life, whether a better way of living than we have in our societies is possible, about a life well lived. These questions do not leave us utterly without a sensible or reasonable response or without some sense of a need for, even if only a utopian response, an engaging human response. Something that we care about rather than something which is just a puzzle for us to play around with and perhaps solve. The difference between these matters is obvious. The person who thinks that philosophy is just a matter of puzzle solving is one kind of human animal; the person who thinks philosophy concerns itself with the problems of life is another. Socrates, Wittgenstein, Dewey and Foucault, as different as they were, are the second kind of human being. They are not concerned with solving puzzles for their own sake. Philosophy for them is in some way a way of life. Pierre Hadot was onto something here, as was Hilary Putnam.

Asking whether a decent society is possible is indeed not just, if at all, a question for philosophy. It is something for all of us, though not exclusively, where we are living in a society, developed or not, where many people are impoverished and particularly in which poverty is increasing and where a few are getting much richer and more powerful and many are getting poorer. That is where the bite is felt most. Wages in the United States have remained stagnant over the last forty years. This is becoming the fate of many of us and it is quite unnecessary. But that is the way capitalism goes on for everybody but the superrich or the near superrich. Even the dwindling middle class, though not so severely as the precariat. To be concerned about this is not like concerning ourselves with asking and pondering if time is real, if there is an external world or whether sense-data have or even can have a backside. Philosophy seminars went on about these latter topics, particularly in Anglo-Saxon philosophy departments. The questions that were raised were artificial issues. Something of no human concern. Good, fun puzzles if one likes those sorts of things.

Continental Philosophy had its silliness too, but it was different. Puzzle solving wasn't a big thing. All this was particularly distressing just after many of us had, in one way or another, experienced and often had been deeply affected by the horror of our world at war. Our philosophy classes often went on with such desert-island artificial issues, if they even properly could be called issues. There was no relation to experience of life, to what was going on in the world. A central puzzle was whether we could prove there was one. Philosophy seemed just to be fiddling while Rome burned. There is disaster all around us and we philosophers fiddled away at doing philosophy.

We are still doing much the same thing, though not quite as blatantly with the demise of British empiricism and Continental rationalism. Though with Hume on the one hand and Spinoza on the other, things were in a way better. They did not fit with Hobbes's caustic observation that there is nothing so absurd as something some old philosopher will not say. Spinoza and Hume were philosophers having their answers to the problems of life. But that was not true of much of philosophy. Think, for example, particularly of Berkeley and Leibnitz and the way they were taught and as philosophy as taught by so-called Marxians in the so-called Age of Analysis.

I was never big on 'form of *lifeless givens*' or windowless monads. We were confronted when I was a graduate student with a lot of artificial puzzles having little or no human concern. A lot of fiddling away while the problems of life were ignored. The study of John Dewey, while I was still green behind the ears, was for me a great relief. Without Dewey and without a concomitant study of literature, I would have never gone on with philosophy. Though some of my teachers told me that perhaps what Dewey was doing may have some interest but it wasn't philosophy. But I persisted as I went on trying to write a novel.

A little later, when logical positivism came along in North America and, still later, Wittgenstein, both were a great relief for me and for many others. What we were doing, if we did philosophy, during much of my student time was concerning ourselves with absurd pseudo issues raising silly intellectual puzzles, Alice in Wonderland style. I was cured of metaphysics forever by

the combined forces of Dewey, Reichenbach and Wittgenstein, though all in different ways. Though they might not like me putting it this way, they all had an existential philosophical problems. But to remind ourselves again, there are these existential problems such as trying to make sense of our lives or articulate what a decent or even a good life or a life well lived would be. We need not be so caught in our tangled lives that we are so humanly incapacitated that we cannot get something of a grip on these matters. They have an existential bite or demand on us often in ways that are confused or at least confusing, but not necessarily utterly so. Our perplexities here are not like metaphysical or epistemological or even meta-ethical or meta-political questions which have little such existential bite or tug. 'Are there other minds?' is not like 'Can we have a humanizing social and personal life?' Can we say with any cogency what a life well lived is?

Can we forge and sustain such lives? Trying to get a grip on something that is decent we human beings cross-culturally will not always or even usually sing the same tune and even when we try to it will not be to the same tone. Human cultural differences run deep. Even philosophical issues in different cultures are significantly different. We do not even have a sense of what it would be like for something to be unreal in much philosophy. It is not that we don't sing the same tune when it comes to philosophy but we don't understand how to so sing at all. It is not like being able to solve crossword puzzles. That is not the triviality of metaphysics. With such philosophical puzzles as it sets for us we are utterly lost to a knowing of when something is significant and when they are not. If we become like Jaspers, Heidegger or Derrida we just end up making strange noises. And some people are conned into believing something significant is going on.

With problems of life or how to live things are different. We may well have a feeling that life is just one damn thing after another until we go kaput. We may come to believe that is how any tough-minded person will see things. Moreover, we will also see that philosophy, even if it is well done, will not answer to such feelings either to show how this skeptical response is on the mark or that there is a way of life that is a good and decent life, a life well lived.

Is there a way of life that answers to our interests? To our 'true interests' if there is such a thing? Is there something that really answers to our interests and that grips us? What goes on here is very different than when we try to wonder whether we can know or doubt that the external world exists, whether solipsism is so and our other idle questions of doubtful sensibility that we can and should set aside. Sometimes matters that are self-contradictory and thus are logically contentless and are logically unanswerable unreal questions though less obviously so than wondering whether there can be round squares. Is this the way of philosophy? Is this the way to go on the *philosophenweg*?

By contrast, whether we have fascist, socialist or a socialist liberal order (a Millian Deweyian one) or, to come to the present, whether the Golden Dawn or ISIS prevails are not humanly indifferent questions. They are not just little puzzles or even big ones. Indeed, they are not puzzles at all. They are, rather, humanly challenging and indeed sometimes threatening, such as whether we will have a social liberal social order or a left-wing social order rather than a Hayekian-Friedman one or whether a German style ordo-liberalism or a neo-liberalism which is a denial of almost everything classical liberalism stood for. Or to take something specific: what should we do, against all reasonable expectation of its *desirability*, if Donald Trump becomes the next President of the United States? Hunker down?

Philosophy's artificial philosophical puzzles are not like political or religious convictions. However, particularly of late in many developed countries, things are changing. There are many who rather complacently and automatically have a religious identification of a mild sort without much of anything in the way of religious convictions. They do not passionately hold religious beliefs but they go along with the conventional flow. Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, etc., whatever culture they are in, without getting excited or really caring about them. It is a doing of the thing done without concerning religious, moral or political commitment. This is something clearly true of

developed societies. Quebec, a nominally Catholic society, accepts physician assisted death in certain circumstances. In Italy fewer people go to mass.

There are, of course, some true believers but more and more they tend to be the poorer, less educated members of society and people in Third World countries. There are, of course, passionate Barthian type believers even among intellectuals, but they are increasingly off the cultural radar. For the wealthy, the dwindling middle class, *some* semi-educated, there is little in the way of faith. There is *sometimes* by contrast considerable religious belief among the impoverished and poorly educated in all societies, though less so in Europe. There are many in the slums of India, the Philippines and in Africa. But where security and some wellbeing obtains, religious conviction tends to wither away or remain mildly as a purely cultural convention, but it does not generate a secular humanism or anything like it. Religious devotion then plays less and less a part in people's lives in developed countries. This religious indifference though is seldom accompanied by secular commitment. Even a concern with *laicity*. Television, secular and usually non-religious but not anti-religious activities, are far more popular than religious services. In such circumstances people tend not to bother as much, if at all, about church, synagogue or mosque. As long as religion does not come under attack or its commitment is required there is now, and increasingly so, little fuss about religion one way or another. The attitude is don't bother about such matters but don't get steamed up about them up either. Atheism, for many of those steamed up, goes along with Communism as something to be firmly eschewed. Some will say that Donald Trump has got it right. Obama, Trump claims, is a socialist. Bernie Sanders, in being a declared democratic socialist, is in reality, Trumpists claim, a communist hooked on matters that Trump takes to be the evil heart of darkness.

Trump's remarks here are plainly propagandistic either deliberately deceptively or as a matter of gross ignorance on Trump's part. More likely the former. But either way it works against a decent way of life. It generates fear and hate of different others. Something that goes on so often in many different cultures. People too often do not cotton to different others. It neither goes well

with a Hayekian conservative nor, of course, with a Rawlsian liberal. Where Trump's way is successful, it contributes to dumbing down and to a bad politics rooted in fear and even hatred of Moslems. There is a propagandistic stirring up of seeing Moslems as a dangerous bunch. There are dangerous Moslems, dangerous Christians, dangerous Jews, dangerous atheists, but the vast majority of all of them are not dangerous.

Matters concerning how to live cut far more deeply than our (implicit or explicit) metaphysical beliefs. Whether we are monist or dualist, idealist or materialist or naturalist or Thomist or just ignore such matters or are utterly unknowing of them or uncaring of them, we can *know* that an external world exists or just take it on reasonable trust that there obviously is. It is crazy to doubt it or even try to. However, it very much matters how we live and should live. That is something we want to untangle if we can. Whether we are de Sadian or John Stuart Millian or a Nozickian liberatarian or a Rawlsian liberal socialist or a Catholic or a Quaker or a Buddhist or a Marxian how we are to live normally will matter to us.

There is over such matters, though in varying degrees, sometimes deep differences about what is a good or decent life or a life well lived. These are matters that often profoundly affect us that musings about whether we can know or not know if there is an external world certainly do not. We, normally at least, do not get worked up over such matters. They may be puzzles that some of us may find interesting, even for some of us fascinating or intriguing, though not for me. I found such philosophical talk a pointless bore. They are not like form of life changes such as whether there should be capitalist powers determining how things go or socialist ones or anarchist ones. There are similar conflicts over being religious and if so how. Should we take a way of faith? Should we believe in God? And if we have or take a religious faith, should we be Jews, Christians, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus or something else? And if so what kind of Jew, Christian, Moslem, etc.? What kind of Moslem you are may be a matter of life or death in Saudi Arabia. After struggling with these things do we become atheists or agnostics or just let such matters fade away uncommittedly? Or whether

materialism is, as Santayana took it to be, a matter of animal faith or for strictly philosophical argument or instead a matter of attitude or any of these seemingly momentous matters? These form of life matters are not like the earlier mentioned metaphysical matters mere puzzles. They are by contrast things that can really matter to many of us, perhaps most of us. Things that we do care about and should care about. Is there any getting it right here? And can philosophy help in getting that?

Consider in this vein whether we should be a conservative or a Rawlsian social liberal or something else entirely. A Marxist or Anarchist perhaps. This is something which is not just a mere puzzle. It is something we are very likely to care about. If we don't we should. It matters to individuals and sometimes for the world. It is not *just* a matter of intellectual orientation. But people who differ, or think they do, about whether they can prove there is an external world or disprove it or whether there are other minds or whether sense-data can have another side are just playing around with mere puzzles. The same thing is true, though less obviously, whether we can have grounds for materialism (what is now often called physicalism) or whether such a belief is grounded or not grounded or just existential choice or is a matter of animal faith as Santayana thought. For one who claims that there is a sharp and important contrast here, whether it is a matter of reason and not animal faith or inclination or enculturation, it is not unreasonable to believe that it is not settled and cannot be settled by rationality or reasonability alone or perhaps even at all. It is not a claim of reason or at least that reason is not decisive here.

Concerning this some might just shrug their shoulders. If we want, they might claim, but again we need not, we can just comfortably keep on playing with these puzzles including the last one just for the fun of it. Just for our entertainment or amusement. There is nothing irrational here. Just peculiar and pointless. Criticism of so going on may be itself ungrounded. But to say that doing such philosophy is perfectly alright is holistically irresponsible. It is a nullity but it all the same is good clean fun for some.

There are things by contrast that we human beings normally care about that need our attention and should have it. Things that grab our attention intellectually as well as morally and emotionally. To get intellectual stimulus we need not spend time with *such* sterile forms of cognitive puzzlement as metaphysics dishes out. We have some understanding concerning how to live and how to have a decent and indeed a good world conducive to human flourishing. There are good human reasons for trying to sharpen it. Philosophers, but of course not only or even predominantly philosophers, can reasonably so devote themselves and stop playing around with mere puzzles such as the metaphysical ones or epistemological ones. That is not the only way to exercise our cognitive powers. But it is one way. But people don't have to go around being cleverly trivial. And they should not. We can have and should deploy a reasonably robust sense of how to confront matters of how to live. Such matters are not in for decommissioning.

Purely metaphysical questions, or so they are called by some philosophers, such as whether time is real or that there are or even can be 'spiritual bodies' or souls or immortality should be put out to pasture. Still, we should instead face what our world is actually like. We should stop seeking out a Big Other; being wisdom seekers, as Jacques Lacan proclaimed, is something we should stop.

Our world is often hellish and people do not like to acknowledge that. People are not infrequently in a state of denial about that but that need not be so. Or instead *at least* perhaps it could become less so. Yet hellishness, in one degree or another, is widespread. There are places where badness just abounds. In either event, it is something to be overcome. Baltimore and New York City are merely bad. Cairo and Damascus are hellish. Stockholm, Amsterdam and Copenhagen are neither hellish nor bad but they are not Shangri-La's either.

It is not enough merely to have an idea of what it would be like for a place (a city, a society, a nation, the world) to be decent. We need to know how to get cities, societies, nations and the world to be decent or to be on the road to becoming decent. It is clear enough where in all the many cases that some level of decency obtains or fails to obtain. Even if we compare the contemporary United

States and Sweden we get a clear knowledge that can be free of bewitchment by ideology in which Sweden wins over the United States in terms of a decent living for their populations. And when we compare Sweden and South Sudan the differences are glaringly obvious. But then there is the puzzling case of good and bad in Switzerland. Direct democracy and a citizen army along with ill treatment of their many guest workers and their capitalism. They all abide Switzerland.

When we go very cross-culturally and historically we get even wider differences in decency and its lack. Compare the Incas and the Aztecs at the time of their imperial cultural flourishing with contemporary Switzerland or Uruguay. It is clear enough who wins out. We may acknowledge cultural relativism, ideology, as a matter of factual indeterminacy or even what has been called, though mistakenly, essential contestedness. But if there is no essentialism. As there is not, there is no essential contestedness either. And while there is a lot of indeterminacy around, or at least apparent indeterminacy, there is little such cross-cultural understanding achieved. We human beings, if not racist, are in varying degrees ethnocentric. There is no ready escaping of that. Perhaps none at all of non-ethnocentricity. I am not happy with people who talk too loud in restaurants or spit on the streets. Perhaps I am mildly ethnocentric here. But I don't proclaim it. Am I ethnocentric here?

Still, all is not indecency. I notice with gratitude people who kindly and helpfully treat me as one of the aged. But as I toddle along to my café I see beggars and people examining cigarette disposal boxes for cigarette butts to smoke. How can Montreal, a reasonably wealthy city, have that? Quebec is not Sweden or Switzerland but we are not South Sudan or Haiti either. Even where there is some decency there is a lot of indecency there as well.

Things in the world could be a lot more decent and indeed better than they are now. We need to understand that and to act on that understanding and not merely to describe how there is and could be such indecency or sometimes such beastliness. Think of what is going on in Syria (2015) and of ISIS and of Saudi Arabia. Think of what Saudi Arabia (in 2016) is doing in Yemen with the

support of the United States. But we also have to act on an operational causal idea of how to bring decency and non-beastliness about and how to sustain decency and non-beastliness and act on them. We need to grasp the causal mechanisms here and to work with them. That must be the kind of society we will have. Description, even if accurate, is not enough. What is needed is action with an understanding of causal effectiveness. And for this to be fruitful there must be the necessary causal mechanisms and their being applied. Something that Thorsten Veblen taught us some time ago. Otherwise we are left with just chatter. Obama, his intentions notwithstanding, is a leading member of the political wing of the chattering class while Trump is a prodigious bullhorn for a segment of it and cheerfully so. But he is too crude to be a *bona fide* member of the chattering class. A crude bullhorn for the capitalist class which not only misleads people but inspires fear in them of others while cheering on others in Neanderthal ways. Trump effectively dangerously inspires hate and fear of Moslems. He is not something to be merely laughed at and dismissed.

Moral relativism as well as moral absolutism is a confused and confusing matter. To assert it or deny it makes for confusion. The same goes for historicism. We should be very cautious about straightforward assertions here. There is a lot of muddying of the waters. But we should avoid bald assertion there and assuming we should just clarify or at least try to clarify these matters so that we can reasonably speak of human decency or of a way of life that makes for that. That is important but it is not enough.

We should not, MacIntyre like, go metaphysical here in the belief that only by doing so will we have a sound social account of how to live. That is a bad philosophical confusion and an obscure affront to reasonableness. But we should not assume that to get things straight here we must or even should go philosophical. That we must or should engage in philosophical investigations concerning the problems of life by turning them into metaphysical problems or even epistemological problems or just into conceptual problems. If we do that or try to do that we will likely be led down the garden path into confusion—skepticism about matters we should not be skeptical about or into triviality or

obscurantism or both. When we read or hear, for example, as cold weather sets in, of refugees fleeing from the war in Syria desperately trying to make the short trip from Turkey to Greece in rubber rafts, sometimes dying or nearly so and cold and without food and even sometimes drinking water. They are washed up on Lesbos's shore. We know without philosophy that they have not been treated decently. Indeed, their lives previous to their trip across the sea from Turkey have been terrible. And from the smugglers who placed them in rubber rafts for the crossings they have not been treated decently. Indeed they have been treated indecently. The people seeking refuge understood all this and chose it in their desperate attempt to escape still worse conditions in Syria. They are harshly pushed up against the wall. Their lives have been a horror because of the deliberate but still avoidable actions of others or sometimes partly because of their own actions. In any event, they are refugees desperately trying to escape intolerable conditions in Syria. This, of course, is not the fault of the people of Lesbos but of a result of the actions of the Syrian government and of *some* people set against it as well as some people in support of it. It is not due to philosophy and these conditions will not be resolved by philosophy or rectified by philosophical reasoning or clarification. Rectification or even understanding here will not be achieved by philosophical reasoning nor by actions rooted in philosophical reasoning. Nor will it be helped by them. It is not a matter for philosophical investigation. Rather, it is empirically evident, as well as morally evident, that these people have been treated badly and that their lives are miserable. Neither Putin nor Bashar Al-Assad need philosophical training to be able to know that that is evil. Though they don't acknowledge that. They can have philosophy seminars and be no better off. Nor can any philosophy establish that what they are doing here is morally acceptable or gainsay the judgment that it is not. Those empirical facts speak for themselves. We don't need any philosophy to tell us that there is evil here as we don't need philosophy to know the evil of those that were the murderers in Paris that left 129 dead and many others critically wounded. Or what went on in the capital of Burkina Faso. There, as in Paris, we have gross indecency and more. We have no need of a philosophical account to know that it is plainly a

gross evil that no philosophy can gainsay. And we do not require or need philosophical clarification here. There are no philosophical foundations or philosophical knowledge needed to establish that those acts are evil. To ask for philosophical establishment here is, to put it mildly, silly. What we need to know is how to successfully fight these evils. And again, this needs, let alone requires, no philosophy or philosophical analysis. In our world as it is there are much better things to do. Again, am I moralizing? If so, so be it. Am I not plainly and obviously telling it like it is? And it, again plainly, should not be.

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