Philosophy: What can you do with it? What can you do *without* it!

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Philosophers perpetually find ourselves justifying our existence in a pragmatic go-go capitalistic world. Aren't we the head-in-the-clouds people indulging in endless debates about how many angels fit on the head of a pin? The absent-minded professors who argue that the physical world might not exist- - even as we step aside to avoid that bus bearing down on us? The granola-heads who delight in pondering a world of brains-in-vats?

Alas, philosophers are not gifted in the art of public relations. And all-too-many adults have painful memories of philosophy courses that foisted upon students the most difficult reading in their college experience. To the extent those reluctant pupils could understand what Hegel or Kant or Wittgenstein had to say, they wondered, why would anybody care about this stuff?

Fortunately, under pressure from legislators and trustees intent on assessing the "bottom line," we are learning to make the case that we have more to offer than ivory tower musings and pointless riddles. Indeed, we now delight in pointing out that our contributions to the civilized world have been so successful we are no longer given credit:

*The English philosopher Bertrand Russell, with Alfred North Whitehead, developed the binary language that made computers possible, in their 1903 work *Principia Mathematica*. Logicians ever since have contributed the theoretical underpinnings that drive digitized developments, from modal logic to fuzzy logic.

*Scottish philosopher David Hume, in the eighteenth century, identified the prickly problem of distinguishing causation from correlation. Is violence in the movies a cause of violence in society or merely a correlation? Is Internet-addiction a cause of divorce or merely a strong correlation? Hume showed why we could never definitively prove the difference, an unsolved dilemma to this day.

*German philosopher Immanuel Kant, over two centuries ago, identified the central concept of the "person" in ethical reasoning and the bedrock principle of respect for persons in our conduct. Today, the centrality of "personhood" shapes our contemporary debates on everything from abortion rights to whether computers can "think."

*Maverick philosopher John Searle at the University of California, Berkeley, shocked the computing world with his "Parable of the Chinese Room," a challenge to the Turing Test so stunning that scientists at first found it easier to shun him than to engage the enduring dialogue he framed on the nature of human thought and consciousness.

So just what is philosophy and why does it consider itself the Queen of the Sciences in an age of Digitized Vocationalism?

True to form, philosophers disagree as vehemently on what philosophy *is* as much as they do on any particular issue. Today, many define "philosophy" more by methodology than by any particular content. To think philosophically is to step back and look at the "big picture," to search for implicit assumptions, to identify broad interconnections in human knowledge and experience, to scrutinize the most minute details of logic and language. Thinking philosophically is more a difference of degree than distinction from the variety of ways in which we approach our world.

Everyone thinks philosophically at times. Whenever we step back from the day-to-day rush and ponder what it all means or how things fit together or what is really happening, we wear our philosophers' hats. Professional philosophers have the luxury of indulging in these pursuits full-time, but philosophical thinking requires a certain mindset more than academic credentials. When Albert Einstein stepped back from his measurements and wondered about the nature of reality, he was thinking philosophically. When physicist Stephen Hawking explores the universe, he sounds more like a metaphysician than a scientist, making the distance between science and philosophy short indeed. When Werner Heisenberg pondered the stunning implications of randomness in the universe and the significance of human observation on our scientific knowledge, he was more a philosopher than a physicist.

If philosophy is as much method as content, it also follows that we can think philosophically about virtually anything. Specialties abound from the philosophy of religion and philosophy of art to the philosophy of sport and philosophy of sex. The philosophy of technology and computers is an easy step for unbounded thinkers.

But philosophy is more than method, and even today we raise questions that fall into three large categories, identified over two thousand years ago by Plato. If two millennia of philosophy are little more than an extended footnote to Plato, as many claim, we could do worse in working with perennially challenging and interesting questions.

The first of these areas is metaphysics, questions about reality, existence, and identity. "Metaphysics" has taken on a peculiar meaning, especially in California, where it has been co-opted by people who meditate on quartz crystal and believe in the power of pyramids and ESP. But philosophers are not merely meditating on spirit worlds or thinking that they are because they are thinking, á la Descartes.

What is the nature of reality? Is the world strictly physical objects or are there mental or spiritual realities? Do atoms and bits and bytes really *exist* or are they merely theoretical abstractions offered as explanations of complex relationships we will never be able to perceive directly? What is "consciousness"? Can we explain it entirely in terms of a reduction to physical matter, and why do such explanations seem so unsatisfactory and incomplete? What *is* the internet? When we speak of "cyberspace," are we merely using a metaphor for an aspect of the physical world or is there a different reality which does not reduce entirely to atoms and neutrons? Why do we persist in using the metaphors of the physical world to characterize this new world – superhighways, on-ramps, and mice? What is "virtual" about "virtual reality"? Does it exist or not? What is the meaning of "is" – a dilemma pondered by philosophers long before there even *was* a Presidency, let alone a particular inhabitant of the office?

A second area of philosophical consideration is epistemology, the theory of knowledge. What is knowledge? Is it merely "justified true belief"? Is it just a collection of facts -- statements

statistically corresponding to some state of affairs in the physical world? Is it a certain configuration in the human brain? How do we acquire knowledge – solely from our sense perceptions? Are certain ideas innate? Are our brains wired for language patterns? What is "artificial" about "artificial intelligence"? What is its converse – "authentic intelligence"? If "artificial intelligence" can duplicate all human accomplishments, why do we persist in calling it "artificial"? Can computers really *know* more than their human creators? If so, exactly what do we mean by "knowing"? How could humans know what they don't know, without knowing those things computers supposedly know better?

The third area of philosophy concerns value. Ethics is the study of value in human behavior – what makes a person good or bad? What makes an action right or wrong? Is ethics merely an arbitrary, subjective set of conventions that enable barbarians to co-exist in a finite space? Are there eternal values that bind us independently of a supreme being? If so, where do they come from? What is the relationship of ethics and the law? Are they distinct and separate or do they support and sustain each other's validity?

Aesthetics is the study of value in art – what makes a work of art good? Is this purely subjective taste or are there objective standards to which we all would adhere with enough training and experience of art? Why do standards of good art seem to mirror standards of outstanding scientific theories and mathematical proofs – simplicity, harmony, balance? Why are so many outstanding mathematicians and logicians gifted musicians and composers? Is there some inner connection between the arts and mathematics that we have barely recognized, let alone understood?

Folks who like simple answers, easy solutions, finalities, and closure are particularly unsuited for philosophical pursuits. But those who relish challenge, mystery, puzzles, intellectual excitement find a welcome home in philosophy, where questions never end and "answers" lead only to more questions. Stay tuned. . .we're dealing with infinity here and there is no last act.