

“Taking Philosophy with You”

Philosophy Graduation—May 18, 2013

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Slide 1 (intro)

I hope you can all remember the day when your daughter or son told you that she was going to major in *philosophy*. I know what you were *thinking*.

Slide 2 (you want to major in what?)

But perhaps to be polite, your first question aloud was—what is philosophy?

I'm not sure how your child answered that—because it's not an easy question *to answer*. But oftentimes what engages a student first in a philosophy class is that we *argue* about things! After many years of sitting in classrooms being told what the teacher thinks,

Slide 3 (students asleep)

and probably several years of being told by their parents NOT to argue with them, it is no doubt refreshing and even inspiring to come into a university classroom in which the teacher encourages the student to *argue*. Of course we don't encourage the kinds of arguments that teens have with their parents

Slide 4 (arguing with parents)

—disagreements that lead to shouting matches. Rather we encourage the kinds of disagreements that are backed up by reasons. The difference is well illustrated in this skit.

Slide 5 & 6

Monty Python (“The Argument Clinic”):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnTmBjk-M0c>

Here we see that the term “argument” is ambiguous. That is, it can have two meanings. In one sense it means a disagreement that can lead to a shouting match—what Michael Palin called “the automatic gainsaying [or, contradicting] of what the other says.” That's what happens too often between teens and their parents! But in our sense it means, “a connected series of statements designed to establish a definite proposition.”

Slide 7 (definition of argument)

Philosophers do encourage disagreement with conventional wisdom, but only when it can be backed up with reasons.

Socrates was really the first philosopher in the Western tradition.

Slide 8 (Socrates)

He questioned the conventional wisdom of his time, but always did it with reasons. Or rather—he pressed the upholders of conventional wisdom at his time for the reasons behind their conventional wisdom. And he generally found that the reasons were sorely lacking.

When discussing some conventional wisdom,

Slide 9 (Socrates and interlocutors)

Socrates would say (Euthyphro 9): “Let us examine whether this is sound...or do we let it pass, and if someone merely says that something is so, do we accept that it is so? Or should we examine it?” This often had the effect of revealing that the emperor had no clothes. And you can see how a teenager would be attracted by this attitude.

Of course this irritates defenders of conventional wisdom, especially because the negative result of knocking things down is not always followed by a positive proposal in its place. Here’s what Calicles, one of the men who knew Socrates, had to say to him about his constant philosophizing (Gorgias 484-486):

Philosophy is no doubt a delightful thing, Socrates, as long as one is exposed to it in moderation at the appropriate time of life. But if one spends more time with it than he should, it’s a man’s undoing. For if one is naturally well-favored but engages in philosophy far beyond that appropriate time of life, he can’t help but turn out to be inexperienced in everything a man who’s to be admirable and good and well thought of is supposed to be experienced in... To partake of as much philosophy as your education requires is an admirable thing, and it’s not shameful to practice philosophy while you’re a boy, but when you still do it after you’ve grown up and become a man, the thing gets to be ridiculous, Socrates! My own reaction to men who philosophize is very much like that to men who act like children.... When I see an older man still engaging in philosophy and not giving it up, I think that such a man by this time needs a beating.... Listen to me, my good friend, and stop all this refuting:

'Learn the philosophy of business, and acquire the reputation of wisdom. But leave to others these niceties,' whether we should call them just silly or outright nonsense: 'For they will only give you poverty for your roommate.'

Stop, then, emulating these petty quibblers, and emulate only the man of substance and honor, who is well-to-do.

So, philosophy is all well and good for a student (perhaps fulfilling a humanities requirement), but it is positively harmful in adulthood—in the real world.

I propose to reply to Callicles this morning. He argues that you should leave philosophy behind from here on. I wish to show why you should take philosophy with you—into the world. Like all good sermons, mine will have three parts. In each part I want to share a bit of philosophy and show how it helps in the real world.

Slide 10

1) The Metaphysics of Identity:

The notion of identity is very simple: $1=1$, or I am Jim. But what about cases like this:

Slides 11 & 12

Friends (“Joey gets a new brain”):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8s15GFBjfs>

Slide 13 (identity options)

Joey seems to suppose the resulting person will be Jessica Lockhart. But I imagine others will think he remains Drake Remore, with odd new tendencies. What would make the resulting person be one of those people rather than the other? Or, maybe you agree with Ross, that the whole idea of a brain transplant is ridiculous—nothing but science fiction. This raises the question whether identity is a matter of having the same body, or having the same memories and character.

OK, what about this one:

Slide 14 (river)

Can you step into the same river twice? Heraclitus thought, No—since every moment there is different water flowing past. But most of us would say, Yes—since a river is not the water that makes it up, but the course of the water, which remains relatively constant. This raises the question of whether identity is more the substance, or the form. Or, some of you might think, how could it possibly matter?

Well, here’s a case where identity matters a great deal.

Slide 15 (twin towers)

We all remember September 11, 2001, when the twin towers were destroyed by a terrorist attack from the sky. Was that one event or two events? Surely, this sounds like logic-chopping if ever there was such a thing. Who cares? Well, the insurance industry cared. It turns out the insurance policy on the twin towers had a maximum of \$3.5 billion in payouts, per insured “occurrence”. Whether it was one or two events made a difference of \$3.5 billion!

No doubt the insurance companies argued it was one event—because it was part of a single over-arching plan with a single purpose. I just called it “a” terrorist attack, not “two” terrorist attacks. No doubt the owners who held the insurance

argued that the plan involved 2 planes that followed different routes, and had different destinations. This raises the question of whether events are identified by their location in space and time, or whether they are identified by their cause and effect. How to individuate events is a metaphysical—ultimately a philosophical—question.

Slide 16

2) The Meaning of Symbols:

Words are the most common kinds of symbols—often they stand for something. How do we decide what a word means, or stands for? Here's one theory:

Slide 17 & 18

Alice and Humpty-Dumpty:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHJk3K1leEA>

We could call Humpty Dumpty's theory of meaning the Intention Theory—what a word means is what the user intends by the word. The humor of the scene comes from the apparent absurdity of that theory. Once we think about it, it makes no sense to suppose people get to decide what their words mean. Well then, how do words get their meanings?

The importance of this question was brought home to me about 15 years ago, when I was chair of the local school board. At that time, the mascot and logo of Blacksburg High School was the Indian.

Slide 19 (Blacksburg Indian)

I had grown up in Cleveland and always rooted for the Cleveland Indians, and so an Indian mascot was nothing new to me.

Slide 20 (Cleveland Indian)

Nevertheless, I had never given any thought to its significance. At one school board meeting, during public address time, we were addressed by representatives of a local American Indian coalition. They complained that the mascot was offensive to them. After people of European origin killed off or drove off, and disposed the natives of the new world, they then took all that remained—the image and idea of the Indian—and proceeded to use that for their own purposes as well. The Indian coalition found this disrespectful and offensive. As you can imagine, this caused quite a stir. Defenders of the mascot, which included the vast majority of residents, argued that, far from disrespect, they meant to honor the Indian and all of the positive traits that the Indian stood for. So, here we had to determine what the Indian mascot “meant.”

While this issue was settled more than a decade ago in Blacksburg,

Slide 21 (Blacksburg Indian to Bruin)

it continues to be an issue for teams like the Washington Redskins.

Slide 22 (Washington Redskin)

In that case the issue is even more controversial, since “redskin” was commonly used as a derogatory term.

Slide 23 (Meaning options)

The defenders of the mascot argued that the mascot meant what they intended it to mean—something honorable. The opponents of the mascot argued that it meant what they took it to mean—something offensive. This is what opponents of so-called political correctness fear—that symbols can become offensive just by anyone claiming to be offended. But if neither of these theories of meaning is correct, then what theory is correct? How to determine the meaning of a symbol is ultimately a philosophical matter.

Slide 24

3) The Ethics of Means and Ends:

We commonly distinguish between the goals we have, and the way we achieve those goals. In most cases the two fit together neatly: I have a goal of getting a good job, and I go to college as a means to achieving that goal. Both the goal and the means to the goal are good. But some goals are hard to achieve, and the only apparent means to get to them are questionable: Say, a poor man’s family is starving to death, and his goal is to feed them, but the only means he can find for doing that is to steal a loaf of bread.

Slide 25 (Jean Valjean)

This was the predicament of Jean Valjean that framed the famous novel, play and movie *Les Miserables*. Does the wrongness of theft as a means get cancelled out, or overridden, by the goodness of saving a poor family as the end? Obviously the law did not think so in that case. And the law was embodied in the thinking of Inspector Javert.

In cases like this we may be inclined to think that “the end justifies the means.” But in some cases the means may be rather nasty, involving betrayal or death.

Slide 26 (Machiavelli)

These are the kinds of cases we associate with Machiavelli and his view that some ends can be achieved by any means necessary. Here is a modern expression of the same idea:

Slides 27 & 28

A Few Good Men: "You can't handle the truth"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5j2F4VcBmeo>

Here the end of national security requires the means of illegal maneuvers and deaths. This is also the thinking that led to the methods of surveillance, extreme extradition, and waterboarding. These are real and live issues for us here and now. Those who think that the end CAN SOMETIMES justify the means are confronted with the need to weigh and balance the good and bad.

Slide 29 (Gandhi)

Some, such as Mahatma Gandhi, thought that the means were ultimately found in the end, and not simply cancelled out by it. So it is that some people say that in fighting terrorism we have sunk down to the level of the terrorists themselves (by adopting their means).

Slide 30 (Ethics options)

Now, you might be thinking that, as interesting as these cases are, when it comes right down to it, no solutions were reached. It seems that philosophers can argue—until they are blue in the face

Slide 31 (blue face)

—and not ultimately resolve anything. In fact students are often bothered by the fact that Socrates had lots of questions but not many answers. The ancient Athenians got so irritated by Socrates that they put him on trial for corrupting the youth, and convicted and executed him!

Slide 32 (death of Socrates)

So that's not a promising start for philosophy! Nor is it an encouraging role-model to offer our young people.

But while philosophy does not generally offer answers for our difficult questions, it does offer tools for thinking about those questions, and a framework for using those tools. While we did not spend much time on any of the three cases I raised, I bet the considerations I mentioned have already prepared you for a pretty good discussion of those cases on the drive home this afternoon! In fact, I challenge you parents to get your newly minted graduate to put down the smart phone and discuss one of these cases with you. Or better yet, ask your graduate to name

another case, of special interest to him or her, worth discussing and, yes, arguing about. Because while the arguments your teen had before going off to Tech might have been simply the automatic gainsaying of whatever the other person said, now your graduate should be equipped to provide a connected series of statements designed to establish a definite proposition. You have the tools to think through real and important cases like these, in whatever job or context you might find yourself in.

Slide 33

John Cleese (“What do philosophers do?”):

<http://www.phil.vt.edu/JKlagge/JohnCleese.wav>

Slide 34 (end)