Reflections

Personal reflections from Practical Philosophers around the world on the uses of Philosophy in the individual’s search for wisdom or enlightenment, as a method of individual reflection or meditation or as a tool or context for therapy and counselling.

Metaphysical Insecurity

Elliot D. Cohen

The most fundamental human problem is *metaphysical insecurity*, that is, insecurity about reality itself. Why does a nation launch a pre-emptive strike on another nation? Why does it call for the cancellation of habeas corpus, censorship, careful monitoring of citizens’ private conversations, and the torturing of prisoners of war? Why do people procrastinate? Why do so many youths drop out of school, take dangerous drugs, and join gangs? While answers to such questions are complex they can all be traced to insecurity about reality - for example, fear of others, the future, being alone, failure, and rejection.

In fact, much of Western philosophy has been an attempt to grapple with such insecurity. When Plato looked about him, he saw a government at the hands of which his own teacher was put to death for challenging others to think. He saw what was by any account, a world that was not always just; one in which ignorance, the lust for power, and fear of change ruled the roost. So he looked to a heaven of Ideals - a world of Eternal Immutable Forms - to find Truth, and he consoled himself in his belief that the material world was only an imperfect copy of this heavenly world.

Plato’s attempt to deal with metaphysical insecurity is instructive. He made clear that it is a mistake to look for perfection here on earth. At the same time, he signalled a popular way of retreating from reality - that of looking outside this world for truth instead of within it. In contrast, Aristotle’s attempt to perceive form in matter had the virtue of refocusing us on the problems of this world instead of looking beyond it.

Aristotle saw in human reason a tool for grappling with practical problems in the here and now. In contrast to Socrates, he held that people can know right from wrong but is not frustrated by his inability to know all. Such a person accepts his fallibility and limitations as well as those of others and does not expect the world to be perfect. He remains hopeful about realistic possibilities, is humble in the face of the uncertainty of the universe, and has a strong desire for knowledge but is not frustrated by his inability to know all. Such a person does not attempt to control what is beyond his ability to control but stays focused on excelling in what he can control.

This Aristotelian fusion of reason and practice forms the basis of my theory of philosophical practice, Logic-Based Therapy (LBT). According to LBT, a major source of human suffering is self-deduced from an irrational rule that demands perfection in an imperfect world. Here is the syllogistic root of the problem:

If the world fails to conform to some state of ideality, perfection, or near perfection then the world is not the way it *must* be, and you cannot and must not ever have it any other way

The world is nowise ideal, perfect or near perfect.

*Therefore*, the world is not the way it *must* be, and you cannot and must not ever have it any other way.

Under the influence of this syllogism, we are malcontents, unwilling to accept and live peacefully with the imperfections of this world. The future offers no guarantees, only probabilities that may or may not happen. There is always the possibility of failure, and it is not always ‘safe’ not to try. Today the probabilities may be sanguine, and tomorrow they may be overridden by fresh information. And even then the future may contradict what seems probable - for better or for worse.

So what does it take to become metaphysically secure in such a universe? In my recent book, the *New Rational Therapy*, I offer the following description:

*Metaphysical security* refers to the ability to accept imperfections irreality. The metaphysically secure person accepts his human fallibility and limitations as well as those of others and does not expect the world to be perfect. He remains hopeful about realistic possibilities, is humble in the face of the uncertainty of the universe, and has a strong desire for knowledge but is not frustrated by his inability to know all. Such a person does not attempt to control what is beyond his ability to control but stays focused on excelling in what he can control.

As described, metaphysical security offers a general *philosophical antidote* to the ‘perfectionistic’ demand from which we deduce our metaphysical malcontent. Philosophers of all stripes have added their perspective to this human aspiration and chief ingredient of human happiness.

Religious thinkers remind us that only God is perfect. Thus speaks Augustine: ‘This I know, that the nature of God can never and nowhere be deficient in anything, while things

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2 LBT is also a form of Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), a psychotherapy developed by my late mentor, Albert Ellis.

made out of nothing can be deficient.4 It is therefore not in our nature to demand perfection of ourselves and of our fellow humans.

Stoic philosopher Epictetus admonishes us not to try to control what is beyond our control. ‘Remember,’ he says, ‘that if what is naturally slavish you think to be free, and what is not your own to be your own, you will be hampered, will grieve, will be in turmoil, and will blame both gods and men’.5 On the other hand, in giving up the demand to control what is not in your power - for example, the approval of others and the uncertainty of the future itself - you will save yourself a good deal of emotional and behavioural turmoil.

And Socrates reminds us that we are the wiser, and more contented, by realising what we do not know: ‘... if you remain barren, you will be gentler and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy what you do not know’.6 On the other hand, closed-minded and arrogant disregard for the views of others follow upon thinking you know what you do not.

Human happiness is possible to the extent that we, as individuals and as nations, overcome our metaphysical insecurity. Peace and tranquillity of the soul of an individual, or of a nation of individuals, is not possible unless there is peace made with reality. There is now much turmoil in the world. It is not the fault of reality. The burden of responsibility falls squarely on human shoulders - that means each and every one of us.

Beyond our Perimeter

Ran Lahav

One central urge inspires me to do philo-sophy: to be in touch with reality – not just in my abstract thoughts but in my entire being – and to help others do so. Sometimes it seems that not many philosophers are inflicted with this Platonic yearning, but what can I do – I am hopelessly Platonic and I have always been so.

The Platonic yearning assumes, of course, that we are not completely in touch with reality. That’s why we yearn to overcome the gap. And we believe that it is possible to do so, at least to some extent.

Reality – I should stress that I am not talking about some inconceivable Absolute that lies beyond all human horizons. I am not concerned with a Kantian Thing-in-Itself which forever evades human understanding. I am talking about our human reality, the reality that is in principle accessible to us. But even humanly accessible reality is, I believe, much greater and richer than we normally imagine. Getting in touch with it requires a long personal journey with much commitment, time and effort. This, for me, is the essence of philo-sophy (or so-called philo-sophical practice).

Here is one way to understand all this in simple terms: In everyday life we constantly interpret our world. We do so not just in our rational thoughts, but mainly through our attitudes, emotions, and behaviours. Our plans, choices, jealousies, angers, hopes, desires, etc. express a certain way of understanding our world. For example, our behaviour towards others expresses a certain understanding (often not conscious) of our moral obligations. Our attitude toward our lover expresses a certain understanding (usually not conscious) of the meaning of love. Our experiences with ourselves express our understanding of the self. We are constantly interpreting reality and constructing a world, usually without being fully aware of it.

These interpretations are useful – you must interpret your world if you want to live in it. But often they are also our prison, because they represent a one-sided, narrow, superficial aspect of human reality.

I call this the “perimeter” of my life: The narrow, restricted domain which I construct as my world. It often expresses itself in rigid emotional and behavioural patterns. We go to work, we do errands, we make plans, we get excited or angry, we love and hate – but throughout all this we relate to a restricted view that is not completely in touch with the full scope of human reality. You might say that we live in a movie.

Philo-sophy, if it is animated by the Platonic yearning, aims at transcending the narrow perimeter of our life in order to be in greater touch with a greater reality. And this means that philo-sophy is a personal journey: It must involve personal self-exploration, personal dialogue with other seekers, contemplation and experimentation.

I am familiar with four main frameworks that are particularly suited for this journey. One is the philo-sophical companionship, in which a group of seekers are committed to self-exploration together. Another format is the personal philo-sophical journey, which may include reflections in solitude, contemplative readings, philo-sophical journal-writing and occasional conversations with others. A third format is the philo-sophical workshop, in which an experienced facilitator helps participants explore their perimeter and the way beyond, using various exercises and group activities. Lastly, there is what might be called philo-sophical counselling, in which an advanced philo-sophical seeker helps another seeker. (The latter should not be confused with so-called “philosophical counselling” which aims at helping the counselee deal with her problems and feel better. Such aims seem to me external to philo-sophy, and thus not part of philo-sophy at all.)

Despite the differences between these four formats, the general philo-sophical process may be similar. It can start with trying to understand the person’s perimeter, i.e. her world as she lives it: its structure, its inner logic, its limitations and implications. A good first step is to help

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5 Epictetus, Encheiridion, in Baird and Kaufmann, From Plato to Derrida, 250.