

If philosophy gave us answers, and if we always immediately felt and acted according to the verdicts of philosophy, then we could not doubt its moral relevance. But as neither of these is true, why is it so many philosophers have thought that the activity of thinking was a vital part of our ethical development? This talk will consider the way doing metaphysics can change your soul, according to Plato and according to the Buddhists.

Within a philosophy department, the moral philosophers are invariably the ones making the dodgy moral decision; within the university, the philosophers sadly cannot lay claim to being more upstanding, courageous, or to having greater integrity; within society, it is not the intellectuals in the academy that one can confidently hold up as moral exemplars. All that thinking seems to have no edifying effect whatsoever, and the closer we get to philosophy and moral philosophy, the less safe any presumption of correlation.

To see a philosopher claim, then, that their activity has any moral relevance at all just looks like a self-serving delusion.

I am going to try to show that this need not be the case, and that philosophy can indeed improve your soul (if not save it). Of course, some of the plausibility of the claim will have to rest on what we think philosophy actually is – I will offer a few different versions of what it might be that it has morally beneficial effects. It may turn out that none of these describes what goes on in academic philosophy departments, or in the scholarly journals through which philosophical conversation goes on today. But I think that they are not so distant from perfectly familiar notions of philosophy – both inside and outside the academy – as to make the defense of philosophy’s claim to improve the soul miss its mark.

Three Models of Edifying Philosophy

1. Plato/Socrates
2. The Buddhist
3. Arendt/Socrates

I. Plato-Socrates: The knowledge model

A. Virtue is Knowledge: Philosophy gets you this knowledge

1. One way of understanding this is that the objects of knowledge which are the special domain of philosophy are *values* and *virtues*: friendship, piety, generosity, justice, honesty, wisdom. Because philosophy gives us knowledge of virtue, pursuing philosophy is morally relevant.
 - a. Socrates wants to know the truth about virtue – what piety is, what courage is, what friendship is
 - b. If he knew this, then we would be able to know what to do in order to be pious, etc., which of his actions were virtuous, and which actions of others' were virtuous
 - c. This knowledge would *immediately* result in acting and judging accordingly
2. This is a fairly crude reading of Plato's Socrates; but it has the advantage of leaving us in no doubt about what the ethical advantage of philosophy would be: It gives us knowledge of good and evil, with which knowledge we can not only immediately recognise what particular things are good and evil in each case, but also – recognizing the good as good – we will just do that.

3. Problems:

- a. It requires us to believe some pretty implausible things about human psychology; knowing what virtue is seems sadly compatible with being utterly unmoved by the fact. So if this claim is going to be saved, we have to understand something pretty special by knowledge – it has to be the kind of thing that, once someone has it, they couldn't possibly act contrary to it; and we have to believe some very particular things about human nature and the human good – in particular, that being morally bad is bad for us, and since we all want to be happy, all we have to do in order to be moved by the good is to see that getting it is what will make us happy.
- b. What sort of knowledge is it? Is it forthcoming? If not, what am I doing in the meantime? I'm doing philosophy. But is that moving me any closer to being a better person? Improvement on this model seems to need to wait upon success – knowledge. [Excursus on Socrates, who never in fact got the knowledge – yet he was considered 'the best and bravest of the Athenians'.]
- c. Knowledge of principle cannot give me knowledge of practice: it cannot show how to exercise good judgement in the particular case. [Give example of Euthyphro – life is messy]

B. Knowing is a Practice: Aiming at it (= doing philosophy) is a discipline of reorientation away from the self

1. Plato recognizes each of these problems

- a. taking up the challenge of the second problem (that Socrates, who devotes his whole life to it, never gets the knowledge he's aiming at – and in which, he claims virtue consists): shift attention to the *process* as the edifying element. Perhaps knowledge of the good – if we could have it – would indeed make you infallibly

virtuous; but the process of looking for it will make you better than you would have been otherwise. And this means that virtue is not *just* knowledge, though it may be related.

- b. taking up the challenge of the first problem: *do we always want the good?* Would we, if only we knew what it was – *really* knew? Would we if we *really* understood how being dishonest, unfair, petty, vindictive and so on was bad for us, not making us happy? Perhaps. But making the case that ordinary vices *are* making us unhappy – to say nothing of the extraordinary vices of the successful tyrant – is a lengthy philosophical argument in itself.

- But the fact remains that we want the pleasant, and not the painful, at least as much as we want the true and the real rather than the false and the fake. And if circumstances require us to choose between the two, it is not at all obvious that choosing truth rather than pleasure will make us happier.

- If that's right, then pursuing philosophy *cannot* be the whole answer to becoming virtuous. Philosophy may have *an* edifying effect; but it cannot make us good all on its own.

- Make the claim more plausible by making it less ambitious

- 2. So what edifying work does that leave philosophy to do?: Philosophy shapes Character by *aiming at* knowledge

- a. where knowledge is understood in a particular way: it is not the acquisition of a fact, but an *ability* to relate facts in meaningful ways, to understand how they relate to others and to convey them to willing learners. Knowing is in this sense *impersonal* – a person has to do it for herself, but what she does is by its nature communicable to any other potential knower. That's the sort of thing we're aiming at.

- b. The knowing at issue becomes object-independent – what is good about aiming at knowledge is engaging in the discipline of preferring truth and reality over pleasure, a practice of valuing the real, understanding this to be something that is the same for everyone – it is not especially mine, and my personal peculiarities don't count for much. They may happen to be part of the story of how I came to better understand something or another; but they do not form part of the in principle shareable understanding that I have arrived at.

- c. While there will be a restricted range of knowables – certain sorts of things can't be known in this way – seeking to know any one of them in this way has an edifying effect on the soul.

- 3. What is that edifying effect?

- a. As already indicated: it engages one in an ongoing practice of de-emphasising the personal and the particular. It is not very interesting or important. The sorts of pleasures, pains and desires that tend to get us into trouble are not worth it, they are not interesting or worth our attention. The activity of aiming at knowledge literally draws you out of yourself, and engages you in a practice of not over-estimating the importance of one's passing desires or accidental circumstances.

- We might even think of this as practice in adopting the gods-eye view; and without worrying too much about the god part, we might reflect here on what it does to someone to be habitually adopting this perspective, how this would change their engagement with their own personal, particular concerns.

- b. teaches humility, persistence: knowing so understood is hard to come by. One can try and try and try, and indeed acquire a better understanding than one would otherwise have had – even if it is only to come to the awareness, as Socrates did, that he knew practically nothing worth knowing.
 - think of the geometers: doing their job well, but still don't have knowledge
 - search for principles without holding dogmatically to them
 - c. philosophy is a *dialogue*, an activity of relating to one another in a shared project; so that's another way in which 'it's not about me'.
 - d. The Priority of the Good, the only good is *the good* – nothing else can play that role
4. This may not make us reliably moral saints; but it may lay claim to make each of us a bit better than we would otherwise be; and it seems to preclude certain kinds of moral mediocrity or failure.

C. Iris Murdoch

II. Indian Buddhism: The Perspective-Shift Model of Philosophy [Seeing Reality as it is Makes you a Better person (where 'seeing reality as it is' means *doing metaphysics*, but also incorporating and consolidating that throughout your values, outlook, beliefs, judgements)]

A. Simple-minded Buddhism: everything is in flux; 'No-self' means 'You are not today who you were yesterday'.

- 1. transience might just as well give me a reason to cling, rather than let go; but clinging is, according to the Buddhist, the source of the misery.
- 2. *Carpe diem!* Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die.
 - a. *karma* as a solution? But who really believes in that?
 - b. was no better a regulator in ancient India, or for non-Buddhists
- 3. To get beyond these simplifications, to see what the Buddhists are getting up to, we will have to actually *do* a bit of philosophy – and in particular, a bit of metaphysics

B. No-self as theory: So the magic that Buddhism is suppose to work is by showing you have no self, in some kind of metaphysical sense, this should make you selfless in the moral sense (generous, giving, not resentful or vindictive or defensive or aggressive). The difficulty to is to see how this is not just a play on words.

- 1. No-self as a general metaphysical claim: it's not just about you and I; it's a claim about reality, of which you and I are a part.
 - a. The default Aristotelian view
 - b. Walk through Milinda's chariot
 - c. No-self= no *thing* the properties belong to; it's just the properties
 - d. conclusion is: 'chariot' exists as a designation *because* of its parts; but they do not designate the parts (if they did, this would mean changes of parts make the designation false).

- e. And since the appropriateness of the designation 'chariot' can persist through changes in the parts designated, we see that there is something else on which the appropriateness depends – viz. on the usefulness of this designation.
 - f. Nāgasena exists as a designation because of all the simples, and also because of the usefulness. We might group the changing, inter-connected bits of reality an all kinds of ways – grouping *these* bits together Nagasena-wise is very useful in trying to communicate and coordinate activity.
2. Does Nagasena have a *self*? Is he a self? The aggregates so designated do no have a self. Is there any existing continuity of aggregates which it would be *useful* or constructive for us to designate as a self?
- a. The Buddha's answer is no: 'I see no conception of the self which does not cause misery'. In this respect the case with chariot is very different.
 - b. One of the aims we all share, indeed perhaps our overarching aim, is not to suffer. And this aim is thwarted by conceiving of anything at all as the 'self'. *Why*?
 - c. Because to think of something as 'self', for any of us, is to think of it as *my* self, and makes prominent the categories of 'mine' and 'not mine' as the most salient areas of concern.
- C. SO: the value implications: What is involved in thinking in categories 'mine'/'not mine'?
- 1. on the Aristotelian view: the thing to which properties belong is more real than the properties; the thing underlying change more real than the changing, and the independent more real than the dependent.
 - 2. for the Buddhists to reject substance-property metaphysics is to reject holism – that is, an implicitly teleological view which favours the whole over the parts, as what something really is, and a source of meaning and correctness of the constituent parts. It may look harmless enough to say that a good table-leg is one that plays its part in making a good table; but it is precisely this conception of reality that looks for meaning in a providential, well-ordered universe in which we all play our allotted roles. This is an overall orientation which is doomed to frustration because it is false; and it also plays into a great deal of justifying abominable means for the sake of a higher end.
 - 3. for the Buddhists to reject substance-property metaphysics is to reject a conception of being which demands persistence, independence, autonomy.
 - a. to exist is to arise within a complex causal network;
 - b. to be simultaneously the result of causes and the conditions for others
 - c. 'To be' does not mean to own properties, or to have control over them – so asserting one's existence does not require establishing ownership or asserting control; and things that seem to threaten one's 'property' or imply dependency or lack of control are not existential threats
 - d. even if they might be unpleasant, even that experience of such things as unpleasant will diminish when they are no longer regarded as existential threats; the immediate emotions elicited will be different, and less destructive, and the strategies for responding will be different and more constructive.

D. No-self as practice: it is not the metaphysical argument on its own that will have these beneficial effects; rather rehearsing and repeating the reasoning in a variety of practical contexts

1. In particular, in relation to others in situations which demand action
2. agency: neither active nor passive, neither principle of autonomy and control, nor victim of such autonomy – there is no such thing.
 - a. the metaphysics supports no such thing as indignation, resentment, revenge and so on: our task in the face of those causing us offense is to consider their entanglement in a web of causes and conditions which they didn't choose – which no one *chose* – and consider what might be done to dissolve these destructive confluences before more damage is done.
 - b. Responsibility as responsiveness

III. Arendt-Socrates: Philosophy as Thinking – a Process of Raising Questions, rather than giving answers

A. Progress in Philosophy; frustration – looking for the right answer; philosophy as a series of errors. Why would we do it, anyway?

1. Process of realising there are questions where we thought things were obvious
2. Raising questions where before we hadn't seen there was anything to question
3. Exploring possibilities for answers, seeing which options have which implications, which possibilities are foreclosed or non-starters, and why:
 - a. Yields something more precious than knowledge: yields understanding
 - b. Understanding isn't what Plato thought it was; it is not infallible, and something that once we have it, we don't need to do anymore – we're done.
 - c. Thinking in pursuit of understanding is the activity of trying to grasp things as they are related, to discern the explanatory relations, and reasons and meanings that things have. Philosophy as the activity of thinking is, as Plato and Aristotle promised, about trying to answer the question *why*. But the philosophy is in the process of seeking an answer, not in the answer found.

B. The example Hannah Arendt gives, when she wants to describe what *thinking* is: A house

1. What thinking of a house looks like: why one thing can and another cannot count as a house, reveals something about the more subtle connotations and meaning with which we invest the concept 'house'
2. Thinking need not be about Grand Topics or the Big Questions – and indeed usually it is not;
 - a. indeed we are more likely to find more meaning in the more homely questions
 - b. and we are more likely to be able to think well about the Big Questions if we are in the habit of trying to think about anything at all, no matter how apparently banal. What philosophy on this account show us is that nothing is banal as such –

things are as interesting as our ability to take an interest in them shows them to be.

3. Socratic-essentialist conception of philosophy: Thinking as asking 'what is it?'
 - a. But the purpose is not to establish a set of vacuous necessary and sufficient conditions for 'being a house'
 - b. Nor, in contrast with substance metaphysics, is it concerned with the status of objects as bearers of properties or independent;
 - c. Thinking (philosophy) as meaning making, as making sense

- C. It is only *thinking*, on this account, so long as it does not presume to knowledge.
 1. Knowledge is something fixed, settled, final, sealed. In certain domains, this is perfectly appropriate.
 2. But, as Socrates points out in the *Meno*, when we know, we no longer *ask*. And when we stop wondering, we are no longer doing philosophy.
 3. Philosophy is in the asking, and in realising that whatever answers might have been found so far – whatever understanding or insight we may have gained – it is always provisional, revisable.

- D. How should such a strange, and literally pointless activity be beneficial? No direct link between thinking and practice
 1. No promise that thinking will make you a kind, generous, loving, caring person, or even will keep you from being petty, grudging, grumpy, intolerant, or vain.
 2. Noted earlier that no amount of knowledge can tell you how to judge well; similarly with thinking – it does not guarantee good judgement. But it **does** increase the possibility that you will engage and exercise your judgement at all.
 3. It is a guard against one particular kind of evil, and in our age a particularly relevant one.
 4. Independent thought is essentially subversive of any power relations.
 - a. Effective autocracies want to maximise knowledge of facts, technical knowledge, knowledge that has *impact*, without allowing any independence of thought.
 - b. This is not at all impossible.

- E. Arendt was particularly exercised about Eichmann-types – those who commit atrocity by 'accident', without having to decided to do anything of the kind, but just going along with what is going on around them. Is that a kind of evil we need to worry about so much today?