

Method

There is something wrong with at least one of the following three statements:

1. *Method* – from the Greek *meta* ('in pursuit of') + *hodos* ('system', 'journey', a 'way' of thinking, seeing).
2. Philosophical method was first developed in ancient Greece. Before that, men were content to gape wondrously at the stars and the gods.
3. The modern philosophical method was invented by René Descartes in the 17th century. One day he decided to subject all his beliefs to doubt, in order to rebuild knowledge on clear and distinct foundations. The minimum he could demonstrate was that as he was thinking about doubt, he was therefore a thinking thing...

Now, we philosophers are rather familiar with these appeals to the immutability of words and the fixity of concepts, unmoved by everyday usage, time, and the struggles of power, as we are familiar with the appeal to the authority of ancient Greece in most matters, or the tendency to historicise life's teeming intellectual firmament through Great Men and their Ideas. It's often how we do it. But why exactly do we do it like that?

And there I go making a fourth error – appealing to a "we", as if you and I are proximate, perhaps even the same, as if I want to confidently lead you on a 'path' (the most common analogy in philosophy, beside the construction of houses), where the inner chambers of a concept are revealed without anyone getting lost.

But there I am getting it all wrong again. Because in questioning the basis of authority, I'm implying that philosophy involves either the study of authority (follow *this* path), the self-assembly of authority (come into my house-system of knowledge, don't go in that dodgy one over there) or a vaguely radical disposition to critique all authority (often via a textual appeal to another authority). These are often how it's done. But they are ways of seeing and relating, habitual ways, not necessarily ways of knowing.

I seem to be saying that philosophical method involves a negotiation with or challenge to the authority of existing thought and beliefs. And, that methods are plural and many-voiced, implying a kind of equality among them (merely "ways of seeing"). But I'm not sure that's right.

Along the way I've narrated my would-be-claims using literary devices – the red herring, the unreliable narrator. Not axioms, definitions, or a certain familiar authoritative way of speaking (perhaps sermonising on global challenges as I go). Perhaps you're wondering if it's been worth your trouble to get this far. Or perhaps

these words, this voice (what Jacques Derrida called a 'metaphysics of presence', of writing as merely transcription, an imperfect residue of once-spoken, living words) is nothing more than black pixels or html code on a page unknown.

This little journey has got ponderously stuck. So I want to think out loud about three aspects of method in philosophy: causality, metaphor and exercise. By the end, I'm going to say that what matters more than the specific end of a philosophical journey is the "way" we walk it.

So far as has long been observed, human beings from early childhood strive to understand their needs, encounters and the actions of others in terms of causality. *Why*. ("Why do I have to eat porridge?", my 4-year-old asks me; but also, recently, "Why did your Grandpa die?")

Why implies *How* (and more on this shortly). Yet our processes of ascertaining causality are neither reliable nor transparent. They involve what David Hume called "principles of association", a natural and universal lurch to discern relations between things, be it through resemblance, contiguity or causality – each impression habitually aligned with the last we recall. They also rely on the mind's perceptions of events to be transparent and disinterested. But there are good reasons for suspicion. As the discovery of the unconscious, desire, ideology, and the power of instincts and the emotions over free will shows, the disinterested gaze can become distorted by self-serving prejudice.

Benedict Spinoza asked the question why so many religious systems begin with the view that the Earth was made by a human-like God for the purpose of serving human advantage and need (or sometimes merely the advantage of God's particular "chosen" people). He argued that we are universally disposed to understanding things in terms of their final causes, recognising and defining them by their end or purpose they apparently serve. This is a universal weak spot in our reasoning, wherein we tend to view the conveniences and satisfaction of our needs within a drama of divine favour and retribution: "eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light", and so on, until ultimately "they consider all natural things as means to their own advantage". But this introduces a mindset that all Nature exists for human advantage and expropriation, an Anthropocene-mentality. And in viewing the gods as capricious, jealous, demanding fidelity and gratitude from their children like wretched King Lear, it serves to make them 'as mad as men'.

But this isn't a nihilistic cry of despair. Anthropologists and historians observe common features in early polytheism, with their deification of animals and conflictual dramas between personified nature-gods. Consider the treatment of animals. The earliest existing human art – found in caves in Sulawesi, Indonesia; Kadadu, Australia; Karas,

Namibia; and in Lascaux, France – are drawings of animals. In a sense the discovery of human identity lies in this separation from animal nature. “If the first metaphor was animal”, writes John Berger, “it was because the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric”. Imaginative projections, visions, that brought into being a distinction (arbitrary, perhaps) between the human and the animal.

Animals have been an enduring guide in asking questions about who we are. For instance, in Aesop’s fables, the basis of much moral education in European history, or in satire and political analysis, like Machiavelli’s account of the lion and the fox, Bernard Mandeville’s account of the drudgerous bee, to George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. Metaphorical animals have helped people make claims about human nature, whether in its virtuous aspects (“Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise”, says Proverbs), or in its dehumanising aspects, like historical European patriarchy’s othering of women or colonial subjects as beast-like, unhuman or less human – the “Beast Within”, as Mary Midgley put it.

The bigger point here is the effort towards other ways of seeing, knowing and relating. Metaphors are just one method among many in struggling to find meaning in an inherently uncertain, exciting, dangerous and disappointing world. The struggle is unending, its epiphany moments less summits on a mountain path and more plateaus between valleys and hostile rock. But it is necessary, in whatever form, to overcome the mental paralysis and sleep of falling back on superstition, prejudice and deference to rituals of power.

This search for meaning is most often narrated in its external, world-facing aspects. Each begins in causality – why this, why now, on what grounds. From which unfolds a repertoire of techniques for formulating knowledge from questions: induction, proceeding from observation of particulars to the demonstration of a general rule; and deduction, in reverse, from the demonstration of a general rule to its application to particulars. If we had time we could play a game of which Great Philosopher employs which technique. But underlying the techniques is a more general effort to orientate oneself in thinking. I owe this phrase to Immanuel Kant. For Kant, to “orient oneself in thinking’ is the great demand placed on us by philosophy. In general terms, orientation describes ‘when objective principles of reason are insufficient for holding something true, to determine the matter according to a subjective principle’. Reflecting then the contingency, openness and uncertainty of this method. But Kant is alarmed at mental freedom without boundaries. What if we lack the “compass” of a “pure rational faith” (for him, a conventional Christian one)? We might be led to a thinking that’s too free, too radical, too sceptical – thereby inviting the wrath of the authorities upon other philosophers. But while well-meaning, Kant’s efforts box many others in; philosophy at

the service of the authority's demands for deference and submission might not really be philosophy at all.

It also offers only a partial recognition to the *where* that one orientates oneself. For there's another gravitational pull to the inside, to the inner life. This is *what does it mean ... for me*. The earliest philosophy (or at least that which survives as text or as a continuous tradition, which will not be the earliest) is concerned with questions like *why should I live, in what way should I live, and what is life worth living for?* Each of these questions necessitates different answers according to societal conditions – the Buddha seeks an exit from suffering, Confucius a restoration of tradition and virtue (*De*) in a time of cynicism and war, Laozi a restraint of the will and self-liquefaction into non-action, *wu wei*. Socrates too, as a way of unceasing examination to uncover what was not inconsistent, true knowing as a basis of true living, and truth as what is worthy to be loved. This is philosophy understood as a way of life, whose value is in its service to human flourishing and freedom, against the mental servitude of prejudice, ignorance and fear.

This view of living philosophy motivated the Stoics, whose enduring appeal is in their affirmation of a philosophical life lived according to nature yet necessitating the mastery of one's own nature. For in Zeno or Epictetus there is nothing easy about being a Stoic. It involves daily exercise: meditation, self-interrogation, correspondence with friends, candid and frank; the study of nature, the study of logic and syllogisms; and silence, the memorisation and recitation of rules, and then their reformulation. They called this "askesis". In his final years, Michel Foucault became very interested in the Stoics in terms of care and techniques of the self. For him,

askēsis means not renunciation but the progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, obtained not through the renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth. It has as its final aim not preparation for another reality but access to the reality of this world.

In the process, there's a shift from *logos* to *ethos*, from philosophy as the effort to understand "the word" (*logos*) to an effort to live well, with others; to live well, amid the transience of death and uncertainty; and maybe even to transform, utterly, the worldly conditions in which some live well, and all one day might.

This touches on a broader peculiarity of method in philosophy. Whereas other disciplines like sociology, psychology or the life sciences use methods as a means to an end – e.g. a semi-structured interview, a biopsy, an ethnography – in philosophy method is often indistinct from the end it apparently serves. Spinoza's *Ethics* demonstrated in geometrical order presents an entirely new understanding of metaphysics and

epistemology in the service of ethical flourishing and self-contentment. A philosophy realised through its methods of inquiry, experimentation, discussion, reflection and friendship.

But wait a second! I'm still appealing to authority and tradition here. Had all evidence of Spinoza, the Buddha and Socrates been wiped from the face of the Earth, philosophising would still occur with colour and vigour. For it begins when one asks why of life, death, knowledge and love, when one asks about their causality and nature, when one can no longer easily stomach the prejudices and platitudes of the community's prevailing fairy-tales.

In that sense, one of the most powerful images of the urgency of philosophy, of the impossibility of not thinking critically or speculatively – in those moments between living and living-no-more – is the prison cell. This is where the journey often begins (and ends). A man or woman shackled to the floor in a darkened room, chained beside others, blinks for a moment at familiar TV-like images all watch in silence from the other end of the room. But where did they come from and why? Plato's Allegory of the Cave is a tragic tale. In medieval Europe, Boethius summoned up Lady Philosophy in his prison cell, who taught a kind of reconciliation with the vicissitudes of the Wheel of Fortune. "If you desire to look on truth and follow the path", she says, "rid yourself of joy and fear, put hope to flight and banish grief". Malcolm X vividly describes how he found his freedom in prison when he turned to books, particularly philosophy. "I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life", he recalled. "As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive." He read Kant, Gandhi, W.E.B. DuBois, Spinoza. Philosophy became a conversion experience. Its method was its own end – the cultivation of critical skills of reasoning and evaluation, the acquisition of understanding about politics, cultures and language (Malcolm painstakingly studied the entire dictionary). But in those dark nights of the soul, it also involves a stumbling, a breakdown, and a re-assembly of oneself capable of walking without falling. For Spinoza the path of blessedness leads to nowhere – the way one walks it is its own reward.

Picasso's image of the dove escaping the bars of a prison cell captures some of this. Sometimes we find ourselves in prisons or fetters of our own making – unexamined habits, negative patterns, "mind forg'd manacles" as the poet William Blake put it. A comforting and homely living room beside the fire (if you can afford the bills these days), like that of Descartes, can become a stifling and alienating place. That in a sense explains the enduring popularity among the public for the kind of philosophy done by the Stoics, by Socrates and the Buddha, even by Malcolm X, through which we read

others orientating themselves in thinking, asking questions, proposing techniques, through which ways of seeing becomes ways of life.

How might people do philosophy in the 2120s? Perhaps as they have for hundreds of thousands of years. Some techniques may change – previous thinkers drew on religious experience, politics, drugs, lashings of coffee (Voltaire drank 40-50 cups a day), metaphor and art. But if anything can be learnt from previous attempts – acknowledging too the all-important value to rip it up and start again – it is in those exercises of (self-)examination, (self-)criticism, (self-)doubt and (self-)experimentation. Towards an art of formulating new questions and new arguments, capable not only of narrating or explaining but orientating oneself among what Virginia Woolf called “new forms for our new sensations”. Being little better than our ancestors at formulating questions that take us on journeys that end in the grave and live on, sometimes, in other’s ideas, it probably also requires some modesty, humour, and capacity to respectfully disagree.

“Nullius in verba” – take no-one’s word for it.

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