

## Stuart Low Philosophy Forum: Week 1 Summary

The session began with a description of what philosophy is. Philosophy is defined by the kinds of questions it asks, and the methods it uses to answer them. Some examples of questions are:

- Are there objective values?
- What is beauty?
- How do we know what's right and wrong?
- What is the most just society?
- What is happiness?
- What is a person?
- What is consciousness?
- What exists?
- How do we know any of this to be true?

What these questions have in common is that they are deep and open-ended, and tend to be about concepts that make up the building blocks of life.

There are many, many more questions that you can ask as a philosopher, and the list is open-ended: part of the thrill of philosophy is discovering questions where no one realised there was one. For instance, one of the SLT groups asked about the possibility of Artificial Intelligence: could a computer ever count as a person, or as having a mind, or as conscious? While philosophy has been going on for thousands of years, this is only a question that philosophers have been able to ask recently, now that computers have become sophisticated enough for their consciousness to be a real possibility.

The second distinctive thing about philosophy is the method: it attempts to answer these questions by reasoning. It does not involve, like science, large labs or sophisticated equipment. We can all do philosophy using just thought and discussion. Philosophers say that their aim to produce *arguments* for their conclusions. An 'argument' here does not mean a confrontation. What it means is that any answer to the question is supported by a clear line of reasoning: a sequence of propositions linked by logical steps. We can discover these sorts of arguments by discussion, and that is what this SLT group aims to do.

Why do philosophy? I suggested three personal reasons—there are many more. First, we *all* do philosophy already—it's impossible to escape! If you have any values that you take to guide your life, or if you have any sort of general picture of what the world is like, then you have a philosophical view. Philosophical questions pop up all the time: in any moral dilemma or life-choice you have made, or any time you've thought about what's important, what's beautiful, or what you or other people are. Some of the philosophers of the past have the greatest minds that humanity has ever

known, and with their help, and with the help of teachers, we can use their ideas as a stepping-stone to thinking about these questions more clearly ourselves.

The second reason is that philosophy can be empowering. The world presses beliefs onto us all the time: politicians, journalists, advertisers all try to persuade us to think one thing or another. Philosophy teaches you to examine these views to see whether they really are supported by proper reasons. Philosophy can give you the confidence and the ability to form your own view, rather than merely accepting the views of others.

Finally, I said that philosophy makes me happy. Partly, this is because I find it very interesting, and spending my day doing interesting things of course makes me happy. But also, I said, much unhappiness stems from failing to realise what it is that is bothering you. Or, if you do realise what is bothering you, you might find it hard to put it in perspective. Philosophy encourages self-consciousness: it asks you to reflect carefully about how you think, and to examine the importance of those thoughts. Over time, it can teach you to understand yourself and the world better. And that can help eliminate a great source of unhappiness.

With all that in mind, let's look at a philosophical question...

## Socrates and Plato

The first truly great Western philosopher was Socrates. He was born in 469BC – about 2,500 years ago. Socrates lived in Athens, in ancient Greece. He used to wander around the city and engage people in conversation. He would ask them philosophical questions (about justice, or virtue, or the soul, for example) and then examine their answers. He would always show that the other person knew much less than they thought! Like us in this group, his main method was conversation and reasoning.

Socrates wrote nothing down. We rely almost entirely on Plato for reports of his views. Plato was a great admirer of Socrates. He wrote many 'dialogues': they are like reports of the conversations that Socrates would have had with various people around the city.

In one famous dialogue written by Plato, called "The Euthyphro" (after the character it involves), Socrates meets someone called Euthyphro outside the courthouse in Athens. In ancient Athens, individual citizens could bring criminal prosecutions against other citizens. Euthyphro is bringing a prosecution for murder against his own father for killing a servant. This was a very controversial thing to do. Euthyphro, by pursuing the prosecution, would sentence his own father to death. The conversation that Socrates and Euthyphro have is about whether this is the right thing to do.

A quick health warning. Much of the following talks about God. Some of you may have religious views, and some may not. But the questions that follow are important, whether or not you believe in God, for reasons I shall explain.

Euthyphro is a religious man, and believes that it is right to prosecute his father because it is 'pious'. This basically means that it would fulfil his duties towards the gods. Socrates asks Euthyphro what piety *is*, and their discussion raises a question that people have thought about ever since. Many

people have thought in the past, and still think today, that moral rightness and wrongness come from a God (or more than one God). Ultimately, it is God's commands that determine what we ought to do. Socrates asks Euthyphro this question (in a slightly different form):

(1) Is something good because God commands it?

OR

(2) Does God command it because it is good?

Why is this question important? Well, if you answer (1), then you think that God is the ultimate source of what is good and what is bad. Everything that is good or bad is only that way because God says it is. The problem with this view is that goodness and badness look *arbitrary*. If God had commanded something else then *that* would be good. For instance, if God had commanded that we should all be cruel to one another, then that would be morally right. But that doesn't seem correct. We tend to think that moral standards are more robust than that, and if someone commanded you to be cruel, then no matter what His authority you could never quite come to believe that that was morally right.

If you answer (2), on the other hand, it means that there has to be a source of goodness *independent* of God. God *discovers* what is right, He doesn't create it. There is a higher authority, one that God respects when commanding people to do certain things. That avoids the problem of arbitrariness with answer (1). But it brings in a new problem: if God isn't the source of goodness, then *what is?*

What do you think the answer is? (1) or (2)?

Socrates prefers option (2). He realises that, as a result, God cannot be the source of goodness: there has to be another source. And that's true *whether or not you are religious*. So we are left with a puzzle. Whether a God exists or not, we don't know what goodness is, or where it comes from. Ever since Socrates asked Euthyphro this question, philosophers have struggled to ask what goodness is, where it comes from, and how we discover it. We will be looking at some of their answers in the coming weeks.

Harry Adamson