

Some of you will find introduction to philosophy fascinating without any special effort on either your part or mine. Experience shows, however, that others of you will have difficulty orienting yourself in this new subject area. Those who find the most difficulty with philosophy tend to fall into certain categories. First, they tend to be younger: having lived less, they have less experience to reflect upon. Second, they tend to have less experience living elsewhere than their hometown. Thirdly, they tend to view higher education solely as a means to job trainine and employability; they are impatient with learning anything that does not seem to serve a vocational purpose. Fourthly, they sometimes tend to be sectarian and dogmatic in their religious beliefs. And fifthly, they tend to have limited theoretical curiosity, and to be irritated by suggestions that the world is a different sort of place from what they always assumed. Others are irritated by the suggestion that pure theory should take away from time devoted to practical improvement of the world. The fact that a student falls into any one of these five categories already gives reason to suppose that philosophy will pose an extra challenge. It can be well imagined that the challenge is even greater in the case of students who fall into more than one of these five categories.

What all the categories have in common is limited awareness of the relations between different points of view. The older student is able in principle to communicate with the younger persons, but the younger person cannot as easily understand an older person whom he or she has never been. Students who have lived in other states or foreign countries carry around with them a continuing dialogue between foreign points of view, whereas this kind of inter-cultural communication is absent in the case of students who have never left their hometown. Thirdly, students who subordinate their education to training for a specific job tend to be closed to communication with other specialized points of view in the division of labor. Such students fail to realize that the division of labor into numerous specialized labor functions is like the division of an organism into different organs: the occupational specializations are divided only to be inseparably reunited by trade relations--the exchange of products and services. On a purely practical level, they endanger their own employability in an ever changing job market. And in performing this practical disservice to themselves they also make a subject like philosophy much more difficult. Fourthly, students who are religiously dogmatic are cut off from the possibility of understanding other religions (or ideologies) from the inside.

Fifthly, students who find theoretical curiosity lacking, who draw little enjoyment from playing with ideas, are limited in their ability to communicate with hypothetical points of view. Such points of view may never have been actually held in history, but they form the system of possible alternatives which (through their contrast to actual history) illuminates actual history. Secondly, practical action in the world will be more successful when one recognizes the alternative points of view one might encounter, or which have been encountered. A famous revolutionary, Karl Marx, had to contend throughout his career with people whose heart was in the right place, but who lacked theoretical understanding of the economic constraints operating on the existing perspectives in the world.

If the above analysis is correct, the way for such students to benefit from philosophy is to cultivate the power of empathetic understanding, the ability to take alternative points of view. Put otherwise, such students need to develop the love of travel, not just actual travel but even more importantly, travel in the imagination. Not just travel in space, but also time travel, travel across vocational barriers, beyond the boundaries of the commonsense, into the realm of the purely possible. Travel into the past, across space into other lands, into possible futures, into the merely possible or fictional perspectives, into other walks of life or vocations, and into other religious and political worlds. And in all instances "travel" must not be understood as merely "passing through"--e.g., "Today is Tuesday, so we must be studying the case for creationism." By "travel" we mean a consciousness-expanding activity of spending time with an initially foreign perspective.

The other side of the coin is that those students (1) who are older, (2) who have lived away from their home town, (3) who pursue higher education in part for its own sake, (4) who (without necessarily abandoning their own beliefs) are comfortable discussing alternative religious beliefs, and (5) who enjoy playing with ideas regardless of their superficial lack of practical utility are likely to find philosophy easier.

Yet the students who find philosophy the most difficult are the one's who need it the most. The argument is simple. We in fact live in a world of widely divergent points of view. Anyone who does not encompass this diversity within himself or herself is alienated from the world in which we live. Such a person will either retreat from the world, will develop hostility towards the world, or will feel threatened by the world. Philosophy, which is essentially cosmopolitan, is an antidote to withdrawal, self-isolation from the world, aggression, and fear. It is a means to harmony with a world of different related perspectives which includes (and contextually clarifies) one's own original home-base perspective.