



Books

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Philosophy Matters



Plato at the Googleplex • Rebecca Newberger Goldstein • Atlantic Books • 2014

KARL Marx famously wrote: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it”. Yet in his writings Marx himself demonstrated that before we can change society, we must first understand it. And understanding will elude us unless we think about the ideas that have shaped and moulded it.

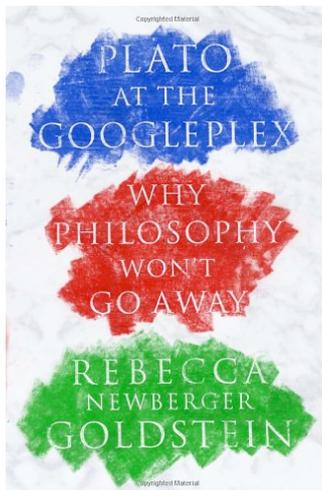
For, make no mistake, the world of our making is governed by the thoughts we have had about it. Even before Marx, in his *History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (1834), the German poet Heinrich Heine had written: “Note this, you proud men of action, you are nothing but the unconscious tools of the men of thought”. And the subject that structures our thoughts – and the history of our thoughts – is philosophy, which is not only our system of values and beliefs but also the rational and critical analysis of those values and beliefs.

Yet philosophy is almost feared in Ireland, a country whose literature has traditionally been biased heavily in favour of fiction. It is as if the Irish feel safer with made-up stories rather than direct probing of the realities of the human condition. This small island has an international reputation for imaginative writing but doesn't rank anywhere in terms of its thinkers.

George Berkeley, the only world renowned Irish philosopher, was a bishop whose philosophy was also an escape from reality, promoting as it did the notion that the external, material world doesn't exist and that the things we perceive are simply collections of ideas put into our minds by God. On the other hand, the few more secular Irish philosophers, like John Toland and Francis Hutcheson, have been effectively erased from the Irish literary landscape.

More generally, philosophers are often the butt of derision as

ivory tower intellectuals divorced from the real world and engaged in word games, hair-splitting distinctions and empty theorising. The mocking story of Thales, the man often called ‘the father of philosophy’, recounts that he fell into a well because he was so busy looking up at the stars that he was oblivious to what lay at his feet. Socrates was ridiculed by the dramatist Aristophanes in his play *The Clouds*, where he depicts the philosopher as



suspended in a basket, worshipping the clouds as goddesses and engaged in silly investigations such as measuring how many of its own feet a flea can jump. In the 17th century Francis Bacon criticised both Plato and Aristotle as being, according to his secretary Rawley, “only strong for disputations and contentions, but barren of the production of works for the benefit of the life of man”.

It would also seem to many that philosophy has lost its relevance to the modern world. In a recent book, *The Grand Design: New Answers to the Ultimate Questions of Life* (Bantam, 2010), Stephen Hawking bluntly declared that “Philosophy is dead”. He offered as a reason that it has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics, and that scientists have

become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge. Nor is he alone among scientists. The cosmologist Lawrence Krauss, recently in Belfast along with Richard Dawkins, told an interviewer in *The Atlantic* (23rd April 2012) that “philosophy used to be a field that had content, but then ‘natural philosophy’ became physics, and physics has only continued to make inroads”. In short, “science progresses but philosophy doesn't”.

Krauss is quoted in *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy won't go away* by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, the wife of Stephen Pinker and author of the novel *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*. She demonstrates that Hawking and Krauss are mistaken, because philosophy governs our thinking about everything – our ideas about truth, meaning, justice, beauty, freedom... and science. Without philosophy, Hawking and Krauss would not be able to distinguish between scientific and non-scientific views of the world and they would lack the tools to discover scientific truths or to convince anyone else that they were worth the effort. Why should we seek the truth about the world anyway? As science advances, it throws up ever more philosophical questions. Indeed, virtually every scientific area of inquiry began with a question or an insight from a philosopher.

Philosophy also governs our ethical values, and without them Hawking and Krauss would lack the sketch map to guide the ways in which he decides right and wrong and how he lives his life. Moral dilemmas surround us everywhere, both in our own little lives and in the bigger world. Working out how to live a good, meaningful life is very different from understanding the meaning of quantum physics or evolution. Is it right to assist someone to die? Is abortion the murder of an innocent child? Is gay

marriage wrong? When is it right, if ever, to kill or go to war? Whether it is science, ethics or politics, without philosophy we are flailing about helplessly without logic, consistency or direction.

Goldstein argues that it was Plato who first framed the majority of fundamental philosophical questions, echoing Alfred North Whitehead's remark that the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. She sets out to explain what his works can teach us on a wide range of issues, including democracy and ethical decision-making, child rearing and education, love and sex, the meaning of life, and the uses of philosophy in general.

Goldstein approaches her task by alternating expository chapters on Plato and early Greek philosophy with fictional dialogues involving Plato on an imaginary book tour of contemporary America. The first stop on the tour is Google headquarters at Mountain View, California, where Plato argues with a software engineer against crowd-sourcing – relying on the aggregated responses of a large group. Then he moves on to the 92nd Street Y, a New York cultural and community centre, where he participates in a panel discussion on the education of children. Next he acts as consultant to an 'agony aunt' advising other women on affairs of the heart; followed by a Fox TV-like cable news channel debate with a presenter who thinks that both scientists and philosophers are full of bullshit; and finally a visit to a neuroscience lab to have an MRI scan of his brain.

The dominant character in nearly all Plato's dialogues was Socrates, whose basic approach was not to teach didactically but more subtly by helping others to see that they know less than they think and thereby encouraging them to seek the truth for themselves. Goldstein adopts this strategy with her fictional Plato and exposes the prejudices and assumptions of the people she calls 'philosophy-jeerers'.

Plato wins the arguments every time, though his interlocutors generally fail to see that. Thus Professor Shoket, the neuroscientist in the final dialogue, treats philosophers with satirical contempt, brackets them with astrologers and alchemists, and smugly asserts that "phi-

losophers hold down the fort until the cavalry, who are the real scientists, arrive". He continues: "science is like a sewage treatment plant. Scientists take the philosophical bullshit and reprocess it into knowledge". Philosophers, he argues, had authority when the human race didn't have the data to answer the questions. Now that neuroscientists can explain consciousness, free will and morality, what's left for the philosophers to ponder? Indeed, he even suggests to Plato that he's probably wishing that he'd run into him about 2,400 years sooner because he could have saved him a lot of wasted effort.

Plato has no trouble demonstrating that Shoket is confusing the physical mechanisms that produce mental phenomena with the mental phenomena themselves. We cannot



explain why people behave the way they do unless we understand what that action meant both to them and to others. To argue that science is the only viable route to knowledge is itself a philosophical position requiring philosophical justification.

This clever and challenging book is also a great introduction to ancient Athenian culture. Goldstein (above) convincingly argues that what survives for us from the Greeks is what their thinkers made of the secular approach to the existential dilemmas. It was the Ionian philosophers who invented what we now call the scientific method. Thus it was Democritus who proposed the atom. It was Aristotle who founded biology. And it was Plato who first examined the metaphysical problems that are still debated in mathematics and physics.

This secular approach is clearly seen in the attitude to the gods. While Plato was not an agnostic or atheist like Protagoras, he nevertheless eschewed revelation in favour of reason and an internal meaning to life. Indeed he addresses the issue directly in the *Euthyphro* dialogue which takes place on the day of the preliminary hearing of the trial of Socrates. Euthyphro tells Socrates that the holy is "what the gods love". Socrates replies: "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it's holy?" If the gods approve an action they do so either arbitrarily, for no reason at all, or else there is a reason which is independent of what the gods approve. If the former is the case, then how does this arbitrary whim confer moral worth? And if the latter is the case, then there is a reason for the divine approval which makes that approval redundant.

This so-called Euthyphro Dilemma remains one of the most common arguments against the claim that morality is grounded in theology. When joined with another of Plato's claims, namely that a person's action is virtuous only if he can supply a reason for its being so, the Euthyphro argument demonstrates the need for moral philosophy. We humans must reason our way to morality or we will not get there at all. As Goldstein says, it is ironic when freethinkers like Krauss lump philosophy and theology together. The Enlightenment came about when philosophers like Spinoza went back to the work of grounding ethics on purely secular reasoning, a project which had been interrupted by the centuries of theological ideology.

So philosophy is the basis of ethics and the basis of science. Indeed it is the ground of our thinking about everything and we are lost without it. Goldstein's book is a brilliant defence of its continuing relevance. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, published in 1912, Bertrand Russell agrees with its claim: "The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason". □