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PHILOSOPHERS ON PHILOSOPHY

The unexamined life is not worth living.

Socrates (469–399bc)

Other people may well be unaware that all who actually engage in philosophy aright are practising nothing other than dying and being dead.

Plato (429–347bc)

Curiosity first led men to philosophize and that still leads them.

Aristotle (384–322bc)

Philosophy is properly home-sickness; the wish to be everywhere at home.

Novalis (1772–1801)

To repeat the whole nature of the world abstractly, universally, and distinctly in concepts, and thus to store up, as it were, a reflected image of it in permanent concepts always at the command of reason; this and nothing else is philosophy.

Schopenhauer (1788–1860)

A philosophical problem has the form: I don't know my way about.

The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known.

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.

Wittgenstein (1889–1951)

A philosopher is like a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat... that is not there.

Anon

Prologue:

take your time

Philosophy is the child of wonder – of wonder and curiosity about the world. The world, of course, consists not solely of what we are able to perceive – see, hear, smell, touch and taste – but also of our thoughts, desires and imagination: of ourselves. The self and its awareness of the world generate wonder, curiosity and also bafflement. What is the self? What is the reality behind appearances?

We seek to understand the world, including ourselves, through science, mathematics and reason, through art, music and religion. We also act on the world, change the world and feel that some things ought to be done, while others ought not. We possess a sense of morality, of the good and the bad, of how societies need scope for liberty, welfare and justice, of how lives may possess – or lack – meaning.

Philosophers philosophize about all the matters just mentioned. Philosophers philosophize not just about the reality of the physical world and ourselves, but also about how we gain knowledge of the world and the nature of scientific theories about that world. Philosophers also reflect on quite what goes on in other areas of study and activity – in mathematics, physics and psychology; plays, poetry, art and music.

The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas.
That is what makes him into a philosopher.

Those are words from the Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, arguably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century. They tell us that philosophers may focus their thinking – and thinking is at the heart of philosophizing – on any arena. Thus, philosophers investigate the nature of mind, of time and action; they consider attempted proofs for God's existence, arguments about free will – and whether goodness and beauty are objective. Thinking philosophically is not quick and easy. Thinking hard can sometimes be as tiring as manual labour, though hands remain clean, and the thinking may well be accompanied by a glass of wine – or two.

The classical image, caricature indeed, of a philosopher is of Socrates wandering ancient Athens, head in clouds. In fact, Socrates was firmly earthbound: his philosophical beginnings were curiosities raised by everyday life – by what people did and said, and by their relationships. Some individuals are praised as courageous, virtuous and knowledgeable: they desire love, beauty and truth. So, Socrates would ask his famous 'What is?' questions. What is courage – virtue, knowledge? What is justice – beauty, truth? He was adept at showing the show-offs that, in the end, they did not know. Hence, there is Socrates' quip that he was considered the wisest man of Athens because he knew that he did not know – well, let us assume he added *sotto voce*, apart from knowing that he did not know.

Now, it is a substantial philosophical question how questions of the Socratic form should be answered. Consider: 'What is beauty?' Socrates and others assumed that items of beauty must possess a certain quality in common, running throughout, making them all beautiful. Wittgenstein – yes, his name will appear quite a few times – famously drew attention to 'family resemblances', suggesting that often a term is correctly applied to a group of items, even though there is no single thread running throughout, justifying use of that term. A rope is strong because of the overlapping of weak threads. Consider all the different activities that

are games. Must they have something in common, running through them all, that makes them all games?

Those few thoughts above have already edged us into some philosophizing, into a metaphysical puzzle, one concerning so-called universals. The flag, grass and emeralds are all green; they possess that similarity. Does that show that a 'universal' greenness somehow has being and is manifested in different places and times, in a flag here and grass there? That type of consideration led Plato into his Theory of Forms: Plato turns his eyes from the ever-changing physical world to an inspiring vision of eternal abstractions or forms. Plato focused on, for example, justice, beauty, truth, equality – but, as he later recognized, his approach could also lead, unhappily lead, to eternal forms of dirt, hair and mud – and worse.

Philosophy is associated with wisdom: etymologically, the term 'philosophy' is derived from the Greek, meaning 'lover of wisdom'. 'Wisdom' conveys a feeling of something grander, deeper and more insightful about life and the universe than worldly investigations undertaken by, for example, archaeologists, psychologists and physicists. Of course, we speak of insights gained through poetry, fiction and religion; but Western philosophy typically differs from those approaches – and hence from much of Eastern philosophy and, indeed, postmodernist writings – by paying attention to argument, clarity, the highlighting of assumptions. The results can be different ways of looking at how things must be, different perspectives on how things ought to be.

The purveyance of wisdom may seem far removed from the practice of today's philosophers; they are usually university lecturers, ever concerned to satisfy funding demands and preserve jobs by publishing more and more articles, with increasing citations and bibliographies. It was different in earlier times. Francis Bacon was Lord Chancellor and imprisoned; Spinoza ground lenses; Leibniz was a diplomat, then librarian. John Stuart Mill worked for the East India Company, moonlighting as a

journalist, and was later a Member of Parliament. Today there is also increasing specialization in philosophy, as if it is a scientific subject, accessible to few. Examine current volumes of academic philosophy: you will often encounter abstruse arguments, technical terms and sometimes unusual symbols. Now, some good philosophy can be done that way, particularly in logical studies, but it should not mislead us into thinking that, at heart, philosophy is a technical subject, impossible to understand except by professionals.

For centuries, many great philosophical thinkers were as much exercised by mathematics and the sciences as by philosophical perplexities. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz conducted empirical researches; Descartes and Leibniz were also highly important mathematicians. Philosophers, though, when philosophizing, are not scientists – though they will take into account scientific discoveries and concepts. For example, should electrons be thought of as existing just as tables and chairs do – or are they mere theoretical tools, useful in making predictions? Philosophers do not risk physical explosions by working in laboratories, or broken limbs from archaeological diggings.

Philosophers often explore concepts and concerns of which we are all aware – be it in Ancient Greece, twenty-first century Europe or a South American tribe. Whoever we are, wherever we are, we speak of the truth, of knowledge, of thoughts. Whoever we are, wherever we are, we notice conflicts between our desires, talk about fairness and sometimes worry about life being pointless.

Philosophers reason. Philosophy is largely an *a priori* subject, one that relies on our powers of reasoning about our concepts, beliefs and assumptions, not on further empirical worldly research. Contradictions may be exposed, arguments revealed as fallacious and conceptual revisions encouraged. This book, then, is an introduction to Western philosophy, with the emphasis on reason

and argument. That does not mean demoting the value of emotions, of beauty, of meaning; they can be reasoned about without devaluation. Furthermore, we should recognize that any philosophical stance may well itself be grounded in emotion. After all, truth-seekers possess the emotional desire for truth.

Although this is an introductory text, instead of laboriously going through numerous terms and theories – after all, there are many fine dictionaries and encyclopaedias (see notes and further reading) – I have deliberately focussed on some major themes, with deep and troubling problems, often with direct relevance to everyday life. Sometimes I have taken a position. As a result, readers will end up encountering important theories and ideas, as well as influential philosophers. The overall approach is to provide a flavour of the problems, a flavour that will stimulate thought and encourage further reading.

A philosophical work should not be read as a novel. Chapters may be skimmed to gain a ‘feel’ for the problems; but then particular thoughts and questions need to be mulled over, be it in the bath, on the train or as a way of falling asleep or (more likely, I hope) of being kept awake.

‘All things conspire’ wrote Hippocrates, pointing to how problems interconnect and can reappear in different contexts. This introduction to philosophy celebrates that fact; it has been deliberately framed so that certain concepts and problems that may initially seem obscure reappear in new areas and under fresh perspectives, aiding understanding. Chapter One, in particular, introduces matters that are delved into further in later chapters.



The best way into philosophy is to engage in the activity oneself. Although there are many right and wrong answers in philosophy, with the deepest problems it is often a matter of endeavouring to see the world in a certain light, engaging problems in ways that harmonize with other beliefs and ways of seeing.

Philosophers have often said very odd things, but, dig a little deeper, and we can usually find some good reasons. The philosophical wonder and curiosity led some Pre-Socratics – those ancient Greek philosophers prior to Socrates – suggesting very different realities behind appearances. ‘Everything is in flux’ said Heraclitus, yet, on the contrary, argued Parmenides, ‘What is, must be indestructible and deathless’. In more recent centuries, we meet Spinoza arguing that God and Nature are one and the same, Berkeley trying to persuade us that physical objects are nothing but collections of mind-dependent ideas, and, advancing to early twentieth-century Cambridge, we find McTaggart arguing that time is sheer illusion – though, as G. E. Moore would quip, no doubt he had his breakfast *before* he had his lunch.

Philosophers are keen to follow the argument where it takes them. That is one of the many fascinations in thinking things through – in philosophizing. There are no quick fixes in philosophy. Thinking deeply about matters, weaving musings into a coherent whole, takes time. And so, how can I resist a last comment in this preface from Wittgenstein? When two philosophers meet, said the anguished genius, they should greet each other with the words, ‘Take your time.’

In reading about philosophy, in doing philosophy – in philosophizing – take your time.

PHILOSOPHERS OF ANCIENT GREECE

Socrates, Plato, Aristotle – this Athenian triumvirate – are of astonishing and continuing influence over Western philosophy – metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy and, one-time, the sciences when subsumed as ‘natural philosophy’.

Socrates (469–399bc) was an intellectual gadfly, stinging the complacency of the rich and powerful – of those who thought they knew. Found guilty of corrupting the young and of impiety, he was sentenced to death by hemlock, and declined to escape. Most of what we know about him derives from his greatest pupil, Plato.

Plato (429–347bc): all subsequent philosophy has been described as a footnote to Plato. Plato looked beyond this world of ever-changing appearances, to unchanging ‘forms’ or ideas. He suggested recipes for the good life, radical ideas for society – women on a par with men – and offered thoughts on love, desire and mind.

Aristotle (384–322bc), Plato’s greatest pupil, was the first formal logician, engaged in considerable scientific researches, and even taught Alexander who became Alexander the Great. In Raphael’s painting *The School of Athens*, Plato points upwards and Aristotle downwards – for Plato sought reality beyond appearances, arguably with a touch of mysticism, whereas Aristotle was down to earth.

The Pre-Socratics are philosophers prior to Socrates. Much of their work is lost but they were highly influential – two notables being Heraclitus and Parmenides. Heraclitus – the enigmatic – announced that you cannot step into the same river twice for waters are always changing. A quick response is: you cannot even step into the same river once. Parmenides, in a poem, *The Way Truth*, argued that all is one and unchanging. It met support via Zeno of Elea’s motion paradoxes: how can you reach that wall? First you need to go half-way, then half of the remainder, then half the new remainder... and so on. Those halves of half, although ever teenier, go on endlessly, infinitely – thus, they cannot be completed.

Lest we are misled

Philosophers can be easily forgotten, when focus is on the greats. Other important philosophers include Protagoras – ‘man is the measure’ – later, the Stoics and Epicureans. Away from ancient Greece are St Augustine, the highly influential St Aquinas, and a medley of medieval logicians such as William of Ockham.

1

What is it to be human?

'We should live just for experiences,' say some. That strikes many as shallow for there is more to life than experiences; after all, we ought to be eager that the lives of others go well. 'Yet surely,' comes the response, 'their lives going well is solely a matter of their having experiences as desired.'

Suppose you are being betrayed – so-called friends speak badly of you behind your back; your partner deceives you – yet you are totally unaware of what is really happening and will never find out. Your life strikes you as going well, so well. Your experiences are just as they would be, were you not being betrayed. Even though you will never find out, is your life *really* going well in the way that you would wish? Would you not prefer a life in which you were not deceived?

Such questions lead to philosophical reflections and troubling depths. True, human life would not count for much, to say the least, if it lacked all experience; but arguably it needs more – and being human, we recognize and value the more. Being human, we are capable of reflection on the distinction between appearance and reality, between how things strike us – experiences of friendly, smiling faces; declarations of love and fidelity – and how things really are, such as undiscovered betrayal.



The above musings will lead us into philosophical arguments on the values and nature of human beings – on our 'selves' – via a

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much discussed 'experience machine' example, and the famous, nay infamous, Monsieur Descartes, the so-called 'father of modern philosophy'. They set the scene for later chapters, where those and related problems are further explored. 'Modern' for philosophers, by the way, curiously commences in the early seventeenth century, when, at least superficially, Descartes focused on understanding the world solely through reason, without reliance on classical, Aristotelian or biblical authority and when, a little earlier, Francis Bacon encouraged scientific experimentation for grasping the world's workings.

The experience machine – and what matters

Suppose you would love to sail, single-handedly, round the world, but you are lazy, lack the stamina and, for that matter, easily fall prey to seasickness. Suppose too that there is a machine, a virtual reality machine, a dream machine – *an experience machine* – that will provide you with any experiences ordered. Once plugged into the machine, you are unable to tell that you are on the machine, unable to remember that you requested the machine; instead you undergo all the required experiences, feelings, beliefs, indistinguishable from the real thing. Would you be getting what you wanted?

From 'within', from your experiences, all appears just as if actually travelling the oceans. You have the experiences, it seems to you, of the ocean's swell, the distant lands and some seasickness (though mildly presented, according to your pre-plugging requests) – experiences of beautiful maidens or handsome gentlemen welcoming you at ports, of media quayside interviews – yet all the time you are stretched out, let us suppose, in some grubby basement quarter, be it in London, New York or Delhi, plugged into the machine.

To date, such machines are technologically impossible; but there is nothing impossible – no contradiction – in the supposition of electrodes plugged into your brain, feeding you appropriate electro-chemical impulses and thereby the experiences mentioned. Such suppositions are now common fare in certain popular films – *The Matrix* is a typical example – with tales of virtual realities. What is the philosophical value of such thought-experiments? Well, one value is that they aid focus on what is distinctive about, and important in, human life.

Suppose that you could have access to such a machine, one that would deliver all the experiences that you sought, without your even needing to crawl out of bed. Would you be getting what you wanted, if suitably plugged? Are the important and valuable things in life solely matters of experiences?

The answer, for many, is 'no' – an answer encouraged by the betrayal example above. True, we can be eager just for certain experiences – we may enjoy tingles of pleasure – whatever the source. We sometimes desire certain distinctive contents to experiences – sounds of a flute or scents of freshly mown grass – without regard to whether they are actually caused by a flute or grass, or by some electronic machine. Most of the time, though, we have an interest in 'outreach', in touching what is real, in our experiences being of the real thing. The experience machine fails to deliver on that score: the experiences are real enough, but what they are *of* is not the real world.

Yes, we may long to know how it feels from within to be sailing the world's oceans; yet that is not actually to be sailing the world's oceans. I may make do with imaginary experiences of being a world-class pianist, yet what I truly want is to be a pianist in reality, with audience appreciation and garlands. People typically yearn for love, for children – to watch sports with their teams winning. They are not yearning solely for experiences *as if* of love, children, and wins: they want the real un-faked thing – and here is the rub – even though they cannot tell the difference

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between the experience *as if* of X and an experience really of X. People typically want to achieve things: on the machine they receive mere illusions of achievement. They do not win the race; it merely appears to them as if they win.

Existing without the body – as a mind, self or soul?

Tales of betrayal and of experience machines encourage the thought that what is valuable to humans is not solely experiential. The tales, though, may lead us to wonder how we secure a grip, if we do, on anything existing beyond our experiences. Indeed, how do we know that we are not already on experience machines – maybe having made bad pre-plugging selections of experiences, such as reading philosophy? That latter question raises the intense pressure of scepticism, of doubting whether, for example, we can ever have knowledge of reality. That is an epistemic question, 'epistemic' from the Greek for knowledge. The sceptical problem is explored in a later chapter; here, we shall see how Descartes uses scepticism to uncover what human beings essentially are. Let us gently lead into an understanding of his argument.

In undergoing experiences and holding values, clearly we are conscious beings; but what are we, we who suffer the undergoing and holding? We each have a head and a heart (the latter at least literally), but what are we essentially? That is, what *must* we have – logically, necessarily – in order to exist? Reflect: millions of people believe in the possibility of survival after bodily death, even of survival without a body at all; but are those really logical possibilities, possibilities lacking contradiction? It is logically impossible for a triangle, Euclidean, to have four sides; such a triangle cannot exist without having three sides. Is it similarly logically impossible for you to exist

without a human body? Might a human be essentially a soul without need of body?

'THE FATHER OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY'

René Descartes (1596–1650) is deemed the father for he started afresh in trying to establish knowledge, what is certain and cannot be doubted, without appeal to ancient or religious authority. He encouraged reflective readers to take up the project, the order of discovery being shown in his six *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Life: Descartes, as a young man, travelled – he joined an army for that purpose – and in 1619, in a stove-filled room, dreamt of constructing a wonderful new understanding of the world. He laid the foundations for analytical geometry – hence *Cartesian* coordinates – worked on optics and astronomy and sought to explain the physical world and the human body in mathematical mechanical terms. The mind – the soul – he saw as distinct from the body.

He was set to publish a work on the world, suggesting the Earth orbited the Sun, but, on hearing about Galileo's condemnation by the Church, he withdrew. Although a Catholic believer, he was often attacked for his mechanistic philosophy; rumours were apparently sown concerning a mechanical doll he invented.

Demise: Descartes' fame spread and Queen Christina of Sweden asked him to tutor her. One cannot decline royal 'invitations' and Descartes, in any case keen on patronage, ended up in a Stockholm winter. Tragically for one who would rise after noon, tutorials were at 5.00 am. Descartes soon died from pneumonia.

The experience machine shows how things may not be as they seem. Suggesting something far more radical than that thought experiment, Descartes argued that we can doubt the existence of *all* material items – of trees and turnips; of land and lakes; of marmalade... and machines. We may be dreaming that

such things exist. For that matter, an all-powerful evil genius may be deceiving us. Who knows? That evil genius may also mislead us into believing that we have limbs, organs and brains. After all, there are real cases of 'phantom limbs': people awake after surgery, feeling pleased. 'From within' it feels as if their legs were not amputated – yet when they remove the sheets, they find themselves legless (literally so). They feel pains where their legs should have been; in fact their legs are miles away in an incinerator.

Scepticism about what really is so does not require the possibility of powerful cleverness and malignant motivation. Simply reflect: we assume an external physical world exists which causes our experiences. Perhaps, though, as with the experience machine, the cause of our experiences is something completely different from what we think. Perhaps our experiences are caused by nothing at all; they just happen. Those suggestions appear as logical possibilities, however unlikely in fact. Indeed, how could we even assess that likelihood?

I have spoken of Descartes and used 'we'; but the discussion needs the first person – *I* – for just as I may doubt the existence of an external physical world, so I may doubt the existence of other people. That is the sceptical problem of 'other minds': even if other human bodies exist – something that may be doubted – there is a further level of doubt: namely, what justifies my belief that there are minds 'behind' such bodies? It is surely possible, or so it appears, that those others are nothing but bodies, lacking all consciousness. Maybe you are the sole conscious being in the universe, these words having been generated, printed and transported by mechanical robots or by creatures, 'zombies', without experiences; it is you who gives meaning to the words.

After his sceptical reflections, Descartes concludes that even if the external world, the physical world, does not exist – even if he is radically deceived – still he must exist. However hard an evil

genius may deceive him, he, Descartes, would have to exist to be deceived. The underlying thought is that while he can feign – pretend, imagine – that the external world lacks existence, he cannot feign that he lacks existence. From this derives his famous ‘I think, therefore I am’ – ‘*cogito ergo sum*’ – abbreviated to the *cogito*. One argument lurking here – Descartes’ Feigning Argument – popped into the first person is the following:

- Premiss 1: My body (including brain) can be feigned by me not to exist.
- Premiss 2: I (whatever I am) cannot be feigned by me not to exist.
- Conclusion: Therefore, my body is not identical with me (the ‘I’, whatever it is that I am).

Descartes’ conclusion leads to the possibility, but only the possibility, of his surviving after his body’s destruction. Descartes does, in fact, offer a quick argument for immortality, though with a caveat. An item, he claims, can be destroyed only either by being broken into parts or by annihilation courtesy of God, an omnipotent being. The mind – the I – is indivisible: the mind lacks parts. I can make no sense of my being simultaneously two distinct consciousnesses. Hence, eternal survival is guaranteed – so long as God sustains.

How are we to understand the Feigning Argument? Here is an approach. Suppose you have heard talk of Belle and of Tinkers. You are wondering whether they are one and the same person possessing two names. Well, one way of establishing that they are distinct is by discovering that Belle has a property that Tinkers lacks. If right now Belle is in New York and Tinkers in Calcutta, then they cannot be one and the same. We assume that one and the same single human being cannot be stretched miles across continents and oceans.

TERMS OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL ART [I]

Arguments

Philosophers rarely physically fight, but they do argue: premisses are presented, reasoning occurs and conclusions are reached. Arguments are *deductively valid* when conclusions logically follow from premisses – when it is impossible for all premisses to be true and conclusions false. An argument is *deductively sound*, if it is valid and all the premisses are true. An argument may be deductively valid (but not sound) even if premisses are false – for example: All women wear hats; Bert is a woman; therefore Bert wears a hat.

Here is an *invalid argument*. If it rains, then the guests get wet; the guests are getting wet; therefore it is raining. It is invalid because even if the premisses are true, the conclusion could be false. Perhaps the guests are wet because the host is using a water pistol. There are good arguments that do not pretend to deductive validity, notably inductive ones (see Chapter Eight).

The Feigning Argument has a similarity to our Belle/Tinkers argument. One thing true of my body is that it 'can be feigned by me not to exist', yet that is not true, it seems, of me, of my self. It is not the case that I 'can be feigned by me not to exist'. Hence, I and my body cannot be the identical item; so, it is logically possible that one can exist when the other does not – just as the different locations of Belle and Tinkers shows that it is logically possible that one can exist without the other. Logical possibility, though, does not ensure that something is naturally or practically possible. Maybe, in practice, Tinkers happens to exist only because of Belle's existence: Belle may have given birth to Tinkers and may affect her in many ways. Here are further examples of the logical point. There is no contradiction in the supposition – it is logically possible – that a man runs a mile in

two minutes; but it does not follow that in practice it can happen. There is, it seems, no contradiction in an experience machine existing, but it does not follow that technically one could ever be built.

Is the Feigning Argument any good? In more detail, first, does the conclusion follow from the premisses? That is, if – if, note – the premisses are true, then are we committed to the truth of the conclusion? If so, then the argument is valid: validity concerns solely the relationship between premisses and conclusion.

Even if an argument is valid, the conclusion may yet be false: a valid argument may validly transport you from false premisses to false conclusions. From the premisses ‘All philosophers are beautiful’ and ‘Socrates was a philosopher’ it validly follows that Socrates was beautiful; but that conclusion is false – Socrates apparently was physically ugly – and so one of the premisses must be false: it is false (surprisingly) that all philosophers are beautiful. (Please see the insert above on arguments.)

In assessing our Feigning Argument then, we need not merely to assess whether the argument is valid, but also whether the premisses are true. With validity and true premisses, we have a deductively *sound* argument, an argument which must have a true conclusion.

Returning directly to Descartes’ Premiss 1, Descartes’ silver tongue has surely shown us that we can feign – pretend – that bodies do not exist. At this stage, it is a distinct question whether bodies really do not exist: we are just talking of what we can pretend. So, we should accept Premiss 1 as true.

Premiss 2 is open to question; after all, I can feign that the world is such that I never existed: once it was true that I did not exist. In response, perhaps I cannot feign that I do not exist at the time of feigning – contrasting with my ability to feign that my body does not exist at the time of my feigning. Maybe, though, my feigning inability manifests merely poor powers of pretence. Indeed, we ought not to be too impressed by Descartes’ foundational *cogito*.

After all, even if it is meant somehow to verify itself – in thinking, Descartes must be existing – it does not follow that Descartes cannot doubt it or pretend it is not so. Ply him with sufficient whisky, and he may doubt even the *cogito*.

Let us grant Descartes the benefit of his doubt so to speak: let us accept Premiss 2 as true as well as Premiss 1. We still have the separate question of whether the conclusion follows from the premisses. If it does (and assuming the premisses are true), then we have a sound argument and hence true conclusion. Remember, it is a remarkable conclusion – that human beings are really distinct from their bodies and brains; so they could, in theory, continue to exist despite bodies and brains being annihilated. We are essentially minds, selves or souls: Descartes uses the terms interchangeably. Non-human animals, so it seems for Descartes, lack minds or souls – though that merits challenge. Just because cats, gorillas and dolphins cannot conduct Cartesian reasoning, it does not follow that they lack consciousness forming their essence.

A metaphysical principle: the Indiscernibility of Identicals

Descartes' argument has the same form as our valid Belle/Tinkers argument. Such arguments rely on a principle brought to the fore by Leibniz, an outstanding mathematician, scientist and philosopher writing soon after Descartes. Leibniz spoke of the Identity of Indiscernibles which, in part, says: if two seemingly distinct items possess all properties in common, then they are not really two; they are one and the same item.

Now, the Identity of Indiscernibles is open to doubt: can we not conceive of the only objects existing in the universe as being two copper spheres, indistinguishable from each other? They would have all their properties and relations in common, yet would be two. The converse of the principle, though – the

Indiscernibility of Identicals, as it may be called – is plausible. We used it with Belle/Tinkers. If Belle and Tinkers are identical, one and the same individual, then they (so to speak) cannot have different properties; they are indiscernible for they are one. If Belle is raven-haired, so must be Tinkers – assuming that they are one and the same individual.

Leibniz's Indiscernibility of Identicals is well and fine – until it is applied to certain types of properties. Unfortunately, one type includes properties such as 'feigning'. The principle fails to hold when properties involve relations concerning psychological states. Here is an example of failure.

Luke admires the virtuous Verity, as he sees her. He knows her only in his philosophy seminars; she comes over as demure, honest and modest. Yes, Luke admires Verity. Luke reads in the newspapers about the gangsters' moll Maxine. Maxine is a prostitute who rips off clients: she engages in violent criminal activities. The police's identikit pictures of Maxine show her in disguise. Luke holds Maxine in contempt and loathes her; he certainly lacks admiration for such a woman. It could well transpire, though, that Verity and Maxine are one and the same. One person can present in two different ways to Luke such that he unwittingly holds conflicting psychological attitudes towards that one individual. We now relate the point to the Feigning Argument.

The argument deploys psychological states in the ascriptions to 'my body' and to 'I'; so, it is possible that my body and I are one and the same, but presented differently. Hence, the conclusion does not validly follow from the premisses: even if the premisses are true, the conclusion could be false. If I looked more closely, so to speak, perhaps I could come to see that my body (or just my brain) and I are identical – just as one day Luke may come to see that Verity and Maxine are one and the same. Mind you, we have been glib with the 'just as'. How could I possibly come to see 'from within' that I am physical? That rhetorical question could be Descartes' reply.

TERMS OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL ART [II]

A priori v. a posteriori

Much of what we know we acquire through experiences – of what others tell us, of what we see, hear etc., and remember of such. We know about Plato, maybe who Venezuela's President is, and that it rained yesterday. That is a *posteriori* knowledge: we could not know such facts by reason alone. In contrast, some knowledge *can* be acquired by reason alone: namely, a *a priori* knowledge. We can reason, once we possess relevant concepts, that 29 cannot be divided by 3 without remainder, and that a twin was not an only child. In contrast, understanding a president's role and that Venezuela is a country does not enable us to work out who its president is.

Contingency v. necessity

Contingent truths are true, but they might not have been true. Descartes philosophized, but he might not have; he might have gone in for pig-farming instead. There are contingent falsehoods. 'You are not reading these words.' That is false. It might have been true: you might have slept.

In contrast, there are necessary truths and necessary falsehoods. Necessary truths – for example, that $2 + 2 = 4$ – cannot have been otherwise; they hold under all possibilities. Yes, the symbols, '2' etc., might have been used differently; but given current meanings, what is expressed must be true. 'A thousand men cannot undress a naked man' is a necessary truth, known *a priori*. Contradictions are necessary falsehoods: it cannot possibly be true that these words right here are printed *solely* in black yet also not in black.

Although Descartes' argument clearly has problems, what he argues for may yet be the correct picture of things. After all, just because there are bad arguments to show that Hedwig runs faster than Nicolette, it fails to follow that Hedwig is not the faster runner: let us wait for the race. Descartes' understanding of the

human being as a combination of two distinct items, mind and body, may be correct even if his particular arguments are dubious; so, we turn to that understanding.

Ghosts, machines and the stoical sofa

Descartes' dualism is a dualism between what I essentially am (the self) and my body. More easily, I am my mind – for the self, as said, is taken to be the mind. Descartes thinks of the self, the mind, the soul, as a substance, albeit immaterial, without spatial extent or location; so, it is not in the head. It can no more be located in space than can the number seven. According to Descartes, the self can exist independently of everything else – well, except God. Strictly, argues Descartes, there is only one substance for only God is completely independent of everything else. Speaking a little loosely though, minds – and body – are created substances.

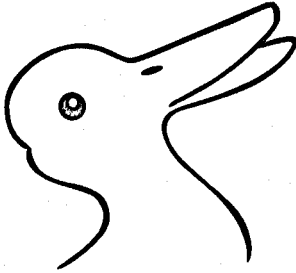
Although the dualistic picture offers the mind and body as distinct items, within this mortal coil they interact. The world impinges on us through perceptions – our seeing, hearing, touching *et al.* We impinge on the world through our actions: decisions and desires move the body. When the clock strikes six, vibrations cause changes in my nervous system, causing aural experiences in my mind which cause me ('my mind') to think that it is time for a drink which leads to my decision to head for the tavern; that decision, a psychological event, causes changes in my brain, causing electrical changes in muscles and resultant walking.

The Cartesian picture – the picture derived from Descartes – presents perception as passively mopping up what the world gives us and then our acting in certain ways. Both the perception and the action are far more complicated than this suggests.

Regarding perception, consider the duck/rabbit picture: what we see can flip from duck to rabbit or rabbit to duck, yet the

INTERACTING WITH THE WORLD

Perceiving: seeing the duck/rabbit



What we see flips, from duck to rabbit, yet the lines on the paper remain the same. What we see is not determined solely by what is there to be seen.

Acting: feeding or poisoning the penguins?

When I cast peanuts in the direction of the penguins, what determines what I am doing? Am I feeding the penguins? Am I killing them? Am I simply ridding myself of unwanted nuts? Am I, strictly speaking, just waving my arm and unclenching my fingers? Answers hang, in part, on what happens in the world, but also on my intentions, deliberations or motivations – but are such psychological states and happenings based in an immaterial mind, as Descartes argued?



drawing, the lines on paper, remain unchanged. In perception, we often contribute to what is seen; we are not sponges, passively absorbing the external world. Regarding action, what we do is partly determined by the world; our action may be that of (unwittingly) poisoning the penguins, not merely feeding them. If the notice tells us not to feed them, are we feeding them on purpose – and with what purpose? Of course, we may not even be intending to feed them; we may just be waving our arms, not realizing that, as a result, we are sprinkling nuts.

According to Descartes, the mind – the Cartesian *ego* – is essentially a conscious item, a thinking thing, where ‘thinking’ covers all conscious experiencing. It is an enduring item with psychological qualities, abilities and tendencies – with thoughts, intelligence, desires and sensations (though the latter may also essentially involve the body). Indeed, Descartes seemed to think that we can always directly access our thoughts and beliefs; no deeply unconscious thoughts exist in the Cartesian world.

The mind must be distinct from the body, from the brain, for that latter, in contrast, possesses spatial location, shape and size. Just as it is, apparently, absurd to suppose that physical things – lumps of matter such as bicycles, pebbles, oceans – are thinking or desiring, so it is absurd to suppose that a mind exists so many inches above your jaw, or weighs two pounds. On this view, minds and bodies belong to two radically distinct categories. There is a ‘real distinction’, a distinction in reality.

Minds are not the sort of things that can be spatial; pebbles are not the sort of things that can be conscious. It is not just that pebbles happen not to be conscious; it is, on Descartes’ view, a contradiction to propose that they are. The brain, being but another physical thing, also necessarily lacks conscious experiences – though here on earth it is causally involved in generating some. Recall, there is a big difference between saying that Belle and Tinkers are the same person and saying that Tinkers causes changes in Belle. Further, in saying that the mind is essentially

conscious, Descartes means that it *cannot* exist without consciousness. Maybe he believes that during sleep and coma we are still conscious, as in dreams, but often forget those experiences.

Gilbert Ryle, a twentieth-century Oxford philosopher, influenced by Wittgenstein, introduced the term 'category mistake'. Descartes, as implied, is saying that it is a category mistake to ascribe physical properties to the mind. Ryle attacked Descartes for committing his own Cartesian category mistake – in treating the mind as a substance, a thing, yet lacking physical properties. Ryle, with deliberate abuse, labelled Descartes' understanding of mind as of a 'ghost in the machine'. According to Ryle, the mind is not a thing at all. True, we do speak of minds and bodies, as if they are distinct. We may, indeed, identify ourselves more with the mind than the body, even though we speak of having a mind just as of having a body. Language can, though, mislead. In Wittgenstein's terms, language bewitches: philosophy should be a battle against the bewitchment.

Allow me to introduce the average butcher. The average butcher has maybe 1.7 children, but individual butchers cannot have 1.7 children. They have whole numbers of children or none at all. It would be bizarre to conclude that, because the average butcher has a property that individual butchers must lack, the average butcher is a special type of butcher – an immaterial thing – causally related to flesh-and-blood butchers. The average butcher is a 'logical construction' out of flesh-and-blood butchers. Now, much of what is true of the mind is not readily true of the brain and body parts, but maybe the mind is a logical construction, a way in which we summarize features of the body and behaviour – an approach discussed in Chapter Six. Here, though, we continue with direct objections to Descartes' dualism.

For Descartes it is a contingent fact – one courtesy of God – that a mind, on Earth, is linked to a human body. The logic of the distinction between mind and body would, in principle, allow for a buttercup to be linked to a human mind, for a digital machine

to be so linked – for, indeed, a sofa. Of course, buttercups, machines and sofas are unable to manifest what any such linked minds think and feel – or maybe the sofa's mind is particularly stoical. The absurdity of those apparent logical possibilities should surely make us hesitate before swallowing Cartesian dualism. Let us assume, though, that Descartes' God would rule out such bizarre possibilities. The Cartesian picture still has problems.

We possess a scientific understanding of material things such as metals and marmalade. Further, neuroscientists can increasingly show which parts of the brain are activated, when we perceive, imagine or think – but that may just show that brain activities *cause* thoughts, memories, decisions and so forth, not that they are *identical* with the psychological happenings. Further still, if we turn to psychology, analysts and therapists, there is no body of knowledge, similar to physics or chemistry, concerning what *constitutes* minds, the psychological stuff.

Putting that constitutive question to one side, how can two created substances, mind and body, interact? How can a non-spatial, immaterial something be the cause of the brain's electro-chemical activities that cause heavy limbs' movements and vocal chords' production of meaningful sounds?

The interaction problem much exercised Descartes and subsequent philosophers. It led Malebranche, a priest inspired by Descartes, to argue for Occasionalism as a solution: on the *occasion* of your willing your arm to rise, God intervenes and moves your arm appropriately. Now, God is immaterial and non-spatial, as are we, but with God's being all powerful, whatever he wills must happen. That generates moral problems: if you will your arm to rise to stab Caesar, then, because God performs the stabbing, it looks as if God is minimally an accessory to Caesar's murder. Working within the Cartesian metaphysics, Malebranche's stance is not, though, as crazy as it appears. Arguably he is suggesting that causality needs simply to be understood as regularities grounded in nature, albeit, for Malebranche, a divine nature.

The interaction problem is a problem only if causes and their effects must possess certain properties in common, such as both being spatial. Now, minds and bodies exist in time, but in other respects they are understood as essentially different. Let us remind ourselves, though, that in the physical world gravity differs radically from apples yet affects them, leading to their bruising – and ours – when they fall. Electrical currents are very different from resultant wheel movements. We use those thoughts as an excuse to introduce David Hume, deemed ‘the great infidel’ by Boswell.

Hume’s first work, as he noted, fell ‘still born from the press’, but his stature these days is high, with his ‘empiricist’ attempt to derive all knowledge from observations of the world, contrasting with Descartes’ ‘rationalism’ which sought to understand fundamental matters solely by reasoning. How would the Humean approach handle Descartes’ problem? Well, Hume looks to experience: when one event causes another, all that we experience is one event, then another – for example, the tube is squeezed and toothpaste emerges. There is far more to Hume’s analysis than that, as we shall see later – and squeezing is itself a causal act – but the Humean stance is sufficient to make us question whether effects must have some essential similarity with their causes.

‘I am not solely as a pilot in a vessel’

Interaction, arguably, presents a non-problem for dualism, but the dualistic understanding of action raises questions. It sees all human *actions* as involving psychological events; in contrast bodily changes, such as kidney functions, involve no psychology, no subject’s direct control. The dualistic idea is this: wanting breakfast, I decide to head to the fridge. The decision is a psychological act, an act of will, a *willing*, that causes the relevant neurological changes leading to the muscular movements fridge-wards.

MODERN PHILOSOPHERS

Rationalists: Descartes emphasized reason for gaining knowledge, our ideas being innate. University courses traditionally deem him 'rationalist' in contrast to 'empiricist'. The distinction is coarse; philosophers are not so easily categorized.

Spinoza (1632–77), born in Amsterdam, argued that reality possesses a rational necessity; the good life lies in reason. He identified God with nature, supported toleration and was, for his pains, excommunicated by his synagogue. He became a lens grinder, deemed god-intoxicated by some, atheist by others.

Leibniz (1646–1716), unlike Spinoza, was worldly, engaged in diplomacy, yet he became trapped as royal librarian in the backwater of Hanover. He discovered the differential calculus independently of Newton, engaged in experiments, yet reasoned that reality consisted of non-spatial unities. He was mocked by Voltaire for judging this world 'the best possible world'.

Empiricists: Contrasting with rationalists, certain philosophers stressed experience and empirical research – a stance of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Lord Chancellor of England. Bacon died of pneumonia, experimenting with snow for meat preservation.

Two leading empiricists, influenced by Newton's scientific successes, are **John Locke (1632–1704)** and **David Hume (1711–1776)**. Locke saw himself, philosophically, as under-labourer to 'the incomparable Mr Newton'. The splendid Scottish Enlightenment Hume sought to be a Newton of the psychological. 'Empiricist' also covers **George Berkeley (1685–1753)**, later Bishop of Cloyne. He argued that reality consists only of souls and their 'ideas'. Idealism – from 'idea', not 'ideal' – is summed: to be is to be perceived or perceive. Berkeley curiously also advocated tar water as a cure for many ills; psychoanalysts have had a field day.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is amongst the greatest of philosophers – with Plato and Aristotle. Awoken from dogmatic slumbers by reading Hume, he synthesized rationalism and empiricism. He also analysed jokes. The jokes and analyses augured poorly for his sense of humour – and dinner parties.

There is the immediate worry that if that willing itself is an *act* – something that I do – then, on this approach, it too needs a prior psychological act; thus, we lapse into a regress of decidings or willings, without end.

We may wonder why we should assume that every human action involves or is preceded by a mental act. Reflect on your daily actions – making breakfast, running for the train, reading this book – have they all involved acts of will, and how many? 'Ah,' comes a possible reply, 'acts of will are often unconscious.' That is a non-Cartesian reply, for, as mentioned earlier, Descartes' approach lacks the unconscious; and it is a reasonable reply for others, only if they can independently give grounds for the existence of such unconscious acts.

Somehow, though, we can *intentionally* twiddle our toes, be *motivated* to go for a jog – or *decide* to lie down until the jogging thought fades. The following becomes tempting: there really must be psychological events marking the difference between, for example, your leg twitching outside your control and deliberately jiggling your leg. Deliberations, decisions, intentions – they are surely something. That may, though, manifest another category mistake.

Someone, her leg once in plaster but now unplastered, needs to relearn how to walk: she tries to lift her leg – she strains. Such cases can mislead people into thinking that there must be events akin to little tryings, strainings, willings, whenever we deliberately act – yet there is no good reason to believe that is so.

When actions are performed intentionally, on purpose or deliberately, we accept responsibility for them, often providing reasons for what we did. That truth does not imply that certain prior psychological happenings caused the movements. Doubtless there are many neurological happenings involved, but it is a further controversial claim (see Chapter Six) that sense can be made of psychological happenings being identical with neurological happenings. Let us, though, muse more on Descartes' dualism.

The Cartesian dualistic model seeks to show what is distinctive about humans. It is open to a further vital objection, paradoxically one voiced by Descartes. Regarding my relationship with my body, he writes, I am not solely as a pilot in a vessel, a captain of a ship, but am most intimately linked to my body. The observation highlights the experienced unity of the human being rather than its dualistic division. Phantom limb exceptions apart, we can often tell immediately and in a privileged way the location of our limbs, our need for water, and whether our toes have been trodden on. We do not usually investigate these things as a pilot investigates the state of his ship. The sensation of thirst is radically different from knowing intellectually that we are dehydrated.

Descartes himself speaks of the mind being united to the whole of the body, yet he is dragged back to his basic dualism. Indeed, he argues that the mind/body interaction occurs at a particular point, namely, at the brain's pineal gland. Even if that is so – and there is no good reason to think so – it does nothing to resolve the mind/body unity puzzles. It does nothing to explain how a separate non-physical mind can, for example, intrude upon the physical world, if that world can be completely explained by the physical sciences.

So it is, that we lead into the problem of free will – for many, including Descartes, are tempted by the thought that a further distinctive feature of humans is their ability to act freely. Now, what is that free action; what is it to act freely?