



FINDING PHILOSOPHY

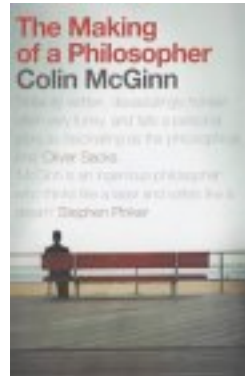
What made me a philosopher? Two great teachers, the promise of escape and a neat pencil case

Colin McGinn

I have been an academic philosopher for the past 30 years. I came from an academically disinclined background in the northeast of England, my relatives being mainly coalminers and other manual workers. I was the first in my family to attend university, and indeed had no thought of it until age 17, when a teacher mentioned it at school.

My father had become a successful builder, so we were not materially deprived, and it was expected that I would become some sort of technical worker, possibly a quantity surveyor. The idea that I

might one day become a professional philosopher was inconceivable in those days, to me and everyone else. I was simply not living in a place where that kind of thing ever happened; it was far likelier—though still not at all likely—that I would become a pop star (I played drums in a rock band).



The paperback British edition of my memoir *The Making of a Philosopher* has a photograph on the cover of a man sitting on a bench, placed in a grey and listless landscape. He is overlooking the sea on a misty grim day, and the atmosphere is bleak and melancholy. The man, hunched up, immobile, coiled almost, has a pensive posture, as if frozen in thought. This picture is based on a story I tell in the book about sitting on a bench in Blackpool, aged 18, pondering the metaphysical question of how objects relate to their properties. Is an object just the sum total of its properties, a mere coalescence of general features, or does it somehow lie behind its properties, supporting them, a solid peg on which they happen to hang? When I look at an object do I really see the object itself, or just the appearance its properties offer to me? I remember the feeling of fixation that came over me when I thought about these questions—a kind of floating fascination, a still perplexity. The photograph itself is an exercise in Cartesian dualism, presenting both the outer world of substance and drizzle, and the weightless inner world of thundering thought, so silent and so arresting. I had begun living in those two worlds, suspended between them, as my intellectual interests took root.

When I look back on this period in my late teens, I recall the harnessing of undirected mental energy by intellectual pursuits. Up until then, my mental energy had gone into things like reading *Melody Maker*, which contained fairly serious articles about pop musicians; I always knew the top 20 off by heart, and studied the articles about drummers intensely, hoping to improve my own technique. I suspect that this kind of swashing mental energy is fairly typical of boys that age. School doesn't seem to connect with it, and it goes off in search of some object of interest, often trivial, sometimes destructive. In my case, it was philosophy that seized that energy and converted it into a passion—though one that took several years to form fully. It is a delicate and fastidious energy that I am speaking of, despite its power, and it will only be satisfied by certain employments, which of course vary from person to person. I had had a similar passion for chemistry when I was ten,

and for butterflies and lizards before that. How to harness such passions to formal education remains a great and unsolved problem: how to convert a love of Harry Potter stories, say, into a taste for good literature. The mental energy of young people is not to be underestimated, even when it leads to nothing but an elaborate obsession with piercing.

It was—of course—a teacher who tapped into my formless and fizzing mental energy. Mr. Marsh, teacher of divinity, brimmingly Christian, a man with very active eyebrows and sharp enunciation, in love with scholarship (oh, how he relished that word)—it was he who first brought out my inner philosopher. From him I heard of Descartes, locked up in his room, wondering whether anything could really be known beyond his own existence, contemplating the possibility of an all-deceiving evil demon that delights in human error, finally saving human knowledge (and dignity) by proving God's existence and goodwill. But what I mainly got from the enthusiastic Mr. Marsh was the desire to study. His own passion for study shone through, and he managed to make it seem, if not glamorous, then at least exhilarating—when done the right way and in the right spirit. Pencils and stationery were made to seem like shiny tools, and the pleasure of making one's mark on a blank sheet of paper hymned. Choosing a good spot to study was emphasised. Above all, I learned a very valuable lesson, one that had hitherto escaped me: make notes. When reading a book, or listening to a lecture, or even just ruminating, put the salient points down on paper: this will fix them in your mind, give them firm expression, and provide a quick and easy way to recall what you earlier learned. Simple, I know, but even today I notice legions of my students sitting through lectures without pen in their hands. Thinking and writing should be indissoluble activities, the hand ministering to the thought, the thought shaped by the hand. Today, if I find myself without pen and paper and thoughts start to arrive, my fingers begin to twitch and I long for those implements of cogitation. With such rudimentary tools you can perform the miracle of turning an invisible thought into a concrete mark, bringing the ethereal interior into the public external world, refining it into something precious and permanent. The physical pleasure of writing, which I find survives in the use of a computer, is something worth dwelling on in matters of education.

Around this time I started to write a diary, chiefly as a way to practice my writing skills. Since there is no need to monitor the quality or interest of what is being written, the diary is an ideal form for developing the technique of writing, and for taking the

anxiety out of it. No one will correct your grammar and spelling, or make fun of your naive thoughts and banal phrases, so you are free to get on to friendly terms with the language you speak. I would often try out new words I had learned—the dictionary had become my friend, rather than a standard I was failing to live up to—secure in the knowledge that solecism would not lead to embarrassment. A few hundred words a day, complemented by steady reading, will soon produce a passable prose style. The habit of daily reflection also fosters a critical sense, and an articulacy about what is going on; moral acuity can grow from this, as well as self-knowledge. Yes, a diary can seem like self-indulgent wallowing in the trivial details of day-to-day life, but it is the form, not the content, that counts. I have never read any of my old diaries, and I haven't written one for over 20 years, but I do think that composing them helped teach me how to write and even how to think. Everyone should have one, starting young.

All this was before I went up to Manchester University in 1968. Since Mr. Marsh had taught me how to study, I had done well enough to be admitted to university to study for a degree in psychology, thinking I might become an educational psychologist or some other useful and worthy thing. Philosophy was more of a hobby then, and maybe its tangential relation to my main studies added to its allure. In any case, philosophy wasn't something you did for a living. I had two notable teachers at this time: Professor John Cohen, head of the psychology department, and Dr. Wolfe Mays, a senior member of the Manchester philosophy department. I would describe both, intending no disrespect, as short Jewish men with funny voices. Cohen had trouble with his "r's," producing a slightly guttural sound, which is hard to put into phonetic form. He would say things like, "Colin, have you chrread Pchrroust?" (I pronounced it Prowst). Mays had that habit of saying his "th's" as "v's," as in, "Vis is the ve difference." His accent seemed suspended somewhere between south London and Cambridge.

Not to put too fine a point on it, I adored these two men, despite the fact that they were many decades my senior. And, for some reason, they both took a shine to me. John Cohen, who I always referred to simply as "Prof," would invite me into his cluttered office and discuss some psychological topic with me in a man to man kind of way, just as if he valued my opinion. He would joke with me, smoke his pipe, make fun of some of his more earnest young colleagues, and offer encouragement, all done in the lightest and least condescending way possible. What seemed to me his vast

erudition would fill the room, and I felt that here was a man for whom learning and life were one.

Mays was my link to philosophy. His style was more pugnacious, though twinkly and guffawing. His lip would curl in humorous disdain when skewering the follies of other philosophers, often mounting to a giggling fit as he warmed to his demolition. In one class of his we went painstakingly through **Sartre's** formidable *Being and Nothingness*, with Mays operatically reciting the text and then revealing its mysteries with a prefatory, "It's simply vis!" as he brought Sartre's impenetrable words down to earth. One of the qualities I liked most about him was his open immodesty, his sense of his own importance, as well as his love of showing off. Apart from being extremely entertaining, this struck me as an admirable form of candour, and it reflected the importance he attached to the views he held (views which today I would largely reject). I suppose what I responded to was the way he brought ego into the proceedings, an air of intellectual superiority, an idea of excellence; it wasn't all remote and dry and disinterested. He always called me simply "McGinn," and tried not to make fun of me when I got things wrong; not always successfully. I remember the time, a couple of years into our relationship, when we were walking back from a class, discussing something or other, and he abruptly turned to me and said, "Cup o' tea?" We went into the senior common room and chatted philosophically over our tea and biscuits—a high point for me in my student career. It was that unforced meeting of minds, combined with a fondness (in no way erotic) that can blossom between teacher and pupil, which meant so much to me—and still does to this day.



But, alas, I let both of them down. John Cohen wanted me to become a psychologist and I defected to philosophy; Wolfe Mays despised Oxford-style analytical philosophy, being more of a continentalist and historian of science, while I was bent on a graduate education in analytical philosophy. Their disappointment was, I think, quite deeply felt in both cases, but they didn't try to drown me in it. Perhaps all good teachers must expect, if not encourage, such disappointment, because it is a sign of intellectual independ-

ence on the part of their students; instead of producing carbon copies of themselves, endlessly repeating their words, teachers permit their students to have minds of their own, however much those minds might offend them. Many years later, I was invited back to Manchester to lecture. I came across Mays, not having seen him once in the interim. His mixture of pride and disappointment was evident: how could his prize student of years ago, now returning to give a series of prestigious lectures, come out with such rotten stuff? He told me, in his old tone of long-suffering amused disdain, that I was “azzumin’ vat ve concept of identity applies to the empi’cal world”—and his facial expression indicated that he believed he had thereby refuted everything I had just said. But by this time I knew enough to know that he was the one getting it wrong, not me. So it inevitably goes between student and teacher. In any case, it was these two singular men who were my formative models, and a profound sense of gratitude suffuses my memories of them.

What I liked most about philosophy was its extremely non-local character. Philosophy is highly general, abstract, impersonal, and even non-factual. Not only is it about everything that is; it is about everything that might be. Physics takes in every physical object in the universe, but philosophy takes in every object—physical or nonphysical—in every possible universe. The question about objects and their properties that obsessed me at the age of 18 applies to any conceivable object of any possible type: is an object, quite generally, something made up of the collection of its properties, or is it an entity distinct from them? Such questions belong to metaphysics, the study of “being as such,” as the dictionary unhelpfully says, but could just as well be called logical or conceptual questions. Philosophy is about our most general ideas and how they fit together—ideas of causality, time, space, object, property, truth, meaning, necessity, identity, existence, knowledge, self, consciousness, freedom, goodness, beauty and so on. It is not about some limited set of things; still less local historical circumstances. Philosophy tries to get to the bottom of our most basic and far-reaching categories.

This abstractness is what so fascinated Plato, with his notion of the transcendent realm of Forms that hovers over the world of sense-experience, loftily distinct from all particulars, yet the source of everything real. Even a simple perceptible property, such as the colour red, takes us from the realm of the particular and local to the level of the abstract and universal, since that colour will be possessed by many objects and could be possessed by many more; the

colour itself is something inherently general that is never exhausted by its particular manifestations. The task of the philosopher, for Plato, is to discover the nature of these abstract and eternal universals, and in so doing to develop the human mind to its highest capacity.



Bertrand Russell was captivated by this Platonic vision as a precocious boy, especially in relation to mathematics, and strove to escape his miserable surroundings by immersing himself in Plato's Forms. I don't doubt that this promise of escape—of stripping the bonds of local space and time, and of the tedious particulars of daily life—is part

of what motivated me to pursue philosophy. I may live here and now in this particular body, but I can think of anywhere, anytime, in whatever degree of abstraction suits me. I am not a being whose nature is to be tied down to the contingent particularity of my context. At root, this is a yearning for freedom, of the most inward and radical type. One wants one's mind to take flight, to abolish all constraint.

But there is another aspect to the philosophical impulse that is less remarked upon—the preoccupation with technique. Read any piece of serious philosophy, or attend a philosophical lecture, and you will notice a texture to the discourse that makes it stand out: there is an expository and argumentative skill at work that takes considerable development, and which is often difficult for the untrained person to connect with. Philosophical writing, talking and thinking, deploy various kinds of methods to achieve their ends, chief among them explicitness, logical organisation, certain types of sentence formation, a specific vocabulary, scrupulous attention to such particles as “thus,” “therefore,” “possible,” “not.” Writing philosophical prose is a skill unto itself, and thinking rigorously in the philosophical mode is what we strive to impart to our students. The ability to grasp and analyse a long abstract argument is difficult to acquire and takes much practice. And the ability to generate a novel philosophical idea is something one labours to acquire over a lifetime. When I first started studying philosophy I was attracted to this kind of verbal and mental agility. Russell had it in a particularly pure and powerful form, and I devoured his works as much for their style as their substance. I thought: I want to do that! What I wanted was mastery of a certain type of skilled performance.


And here I see a connection to another interest of mine, then and now, which may surprise some readers—sport. What I have al-

ways appreciated about sports are the skills involved, not the competition. The sports I worked hardest on as a teenager were pole vaulting and gymnastics, although I played any number of racket games, as well the standard cricket and soccer. To get anywhere in sport requires practice and dedication, and a tolerance of failure; persistence is the key. You will fall, get hurt, make a fool of yourself, swear and sweat, feel like you will never be able to do it, and then one day it all comes together—the pole plants firmly in the box, your body inverts, you twist, pull, and you are clean over the bar, with a soft pit in which to land triumphantly. And then you can do it nearly every time, ever higher—although there will be those bad days of regression and failure. I learned how to windsurf when I was 50 and, boy, do you fall off that board into the water a lot of times: your back hurts, your hands hurt, you look stupid, you have neither style nor grace. But if you persevere you eventually get the hang of it, and before too long you are coasting along at a handsome clip, savouring your skills. Philosophy is a little like that, as are other intellectual endeavours: it takes persistence, patience, tolerance of failure, a stubborn desire for mastery. Essentially, it is a matter of gradually acquiring a skill, one component at a time. And, as with sports, some people are going to be better at it than others.

The metaphor that best captures my experience with both philosophy and sport is soaring: pole vaulting, gymnastics and windsurfing clearly demonstrate it, but the intellectual highwire act involved in full-throttle philosophical thinking gives me a similar sensation—as if I have taken flight, leaving gravity behind. It is almost like sloughing off mortality. (Plato indeed thought that acquiring abstract knowledge is a return to the prenatal state of the immortal soul.) There is also an impressiveness to these physical and mental skills that appeals to me—they evoke the “wow” reflex. Showing off is an integral part of their exercise; but as I said earlier, I don’t have any objection to showing off. In any case, there is not, for me, the discontinuity between sports and intellectual activities that is often assumed. It is not that you must either be a nerd or a jock; you can be both. It has never surprised me that the ancient Greeks combined a reverence for the mind with a love of sports: both involve an appreciation of the beauties of technique skilfully applied. And both place a high premium on getting it right—exactly right.

None of this is to extol the supposed virtues of competitiveness in sports or academia. I don’t much care for competition myself. Academic life can be highly, even disagreeably, competitive, rife with the “top of the class” mentality. I find this limiting, as well as

vaguely contemptible. To measure oneself merely by how one stands in relation to others is to be constrained by the talents of others, and it converts achievement into a game of rivalry. No doubt it would be unrealistic to try to expunge this from intellectual pursuits, but I think a focus on skill for its own sake—and not for what it can do to elevate you above others—is an antidote. Winning a point at tennis with an ugly slashing backhand that bounces off the net cord is unsatisfying; winning an argument in philosophy by browbeating and superficiality is even worse. One has to learn to appreciate a good point for its own sake. This is a matter of the aesthetics of the activity in question.

A reviewer of *The Making of a Philosopher* remarked that philosophy has been, for me, the love of my life and the bane of my existence. That is not too far off the mark. I would say, in fact, that philosophy combines these two features inextricably; indeed, it is lovely because it is baneful. Philosophy is difficult, taxing, and infuriating—and these very characteristics are an essential part of its appeal. It is because it is such a struggle that it can produce exultation. Philosophical work is demanding, lonely, enervating and inhuman—but it is secretly sublime. There is probably no time in my life when I am more certain of the meaningfulness of my existence than when I am thinking about philosophy—and no time at which I am more reminded of my own inadequacy. 

Colin McGinn is professor of philosophy at Rutgers University, was educated at Oxford University. He has written widely on philosophy and philosophers in such publications as the New York Review of Books, the London Review of Books, the New Republic, and the New York Times Book Review. McGinn has written thirteen previous books, including:

Logical Properties: Identity, Existence, Predication, Necessity, Truth (2001)
 The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World (1999)
 Knowledge and Reality: Selected Essays (1999)
 The Character of Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind (1997)
 Minds and Bodies: Philosophers and Their Ideas (1997)
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