

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

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## WHY PHILOSOPHY IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

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The knowledge we can derive from science and history, are limited to first-order knowledge by their investigative mode of inquiry. They are incapable of enlarging our understanding by the second-order work, or philosophical analysis, with respect to ideas and all branches of knowledge. Without the contributions made by philosophy, we would be left with voids that science and history cannot fill.

Even in the one sphere in which the contributions of science and philosophy are comparable—our knowledge of reality—philosophy, because it is noninvestigative, can answer questions that are beyond the reach of investigative science—questions that are more

profound and penetrating than any questions answerable by science. By virtue of its being investigative, science is limited to the experienceable world of physical nature. Philosophical thought can extend its inquiries into transempirical reality. It is philosophy, not science, that takes the overall view.

Furthermore, when there is an apparent conflict between science and philosophy, it is to philosophy that we must turn for the resolution. Science cannot provide it. When scientists such as Einstein, Bohr, and Heisenberg become involved with mixed questions, they must philosophize. They cannot discuss these questions merely as scientists; the principles for the statement and solution of such problems come from philosophy, not from science.

For all these reasons, I think we are compelled to regard the contributions of philosophy as having greater value for us than the contributions of science. I say this even though we must all gratefully acknowledge the benefits that science and science gives us over our environment, health, and lives can, as we all know, be either misused and misdirected, or used with good purpose and results. Without the prescriptive knowledge given us by ethical and political philosophy, we have no guidance in the use of that power, directing it to the ends of a good life and a good society. The more power science and technology confer upon us, the more dangerous and malevolent that power may become unless its use is checked and guided by moral obligations stemming from our philosophical knowledge of how we ought to conduct our lives and our society.

One can be a generally educated human being without being knowledgeable in this or that specialized field of empirical science. Such knowledge belongs to the specialist, not the generalist. But one cannot be a generally educated human being without knowing the history of science and without having some philosophical understanding of science. Becoming a generally educated human being also involves some grasp of the history of history and of philosophy, and some understanding of the philosophy of history and philosophy.

That is one reason I say that philosophy is everybody's business. Everyone is not called upon to be a lawyer, a physician, an accountant, or an engineer; nor for that matter scientific research. But everyone is called upon to philosophize; thinking individuals, whether they know it or not, have some traces of philosophical insight or analysis in their moments of reflection. To be reflective about one's experience or about what human beings call their

common sense is to be philosophical about it.

Why philosophy is everybody's business, as no other use of one's mind is, is that every thinking individual is, in reflective moments, a philosopher, and that everyone philosophizes and is enriched by doing so is not to say that everyone should aspire to become a professor of philosophy.

Try to imagine a world in which everything else is exactly the same, but from which philosophy is totally absent. I do not mean just academic philosophy; I mean philosophizing in every degree—that done by ordinary men and women or inexpertly by scientists, historians, poets, and novelists, as well as that done with technical competence by professional philosophers.

Since philosophizing is an ingrained and inveterate human tendency, I know that it is hard to imagine a world without philosophy in which everything else is the same, including human nature; yet it is no harder than imagining a world without sex as one in which everything else is the same.

In the world I have asked you to imagine, all the other arts and sciences remain continuing enterprises; history and science are taught in colleges and universities; and it is assumed without question that everyone's education should include some acquaintance with them. But philosophy is completely expunged.

No one asks any philosophical questions; no one philosophizes; no one has any philosophical knowledge, insight, or understanding; philosophy is not taught or learned; and no philosophical books exist.

Would this make any difference to you? Would you be completely satisfied to live in such a world? Or would you come to the conclusion that it lacked something of importance?

You would realize—would you not?—that even though education involved acquiring historical and scientific knowledge, it could not include any understanding of either science or history, since questions about history and science (other than questions of fact) are not historical or scientific but philosophical questions. You would also realize that a great many of your opinions or beliefs, shared with most of your fellowmen, would have to go unquestioned, because to question them would be to philosophize; they would remain unenlightened opinions or beliefs, because any enlightenment on these matters would have to come from philosophizing about

them. You would be debarred from asking questions about yourself and your life, questions about the shape of the world and your place in it, questions about what you should be doing and what you should be seeking—all questions that, in one form or another, you do, in fact, often ask and would find it difficult to desist from asking.

This experiment does not solve the problems with which this book is concerned. It merely justifies the effort, by the writer and reader, of considering the conditions that academic or technical philosophy must satisfy in order to provide the guidance it should give to everyone in his efforts to philosophize; and in order to supply the enlightenment that we know, or should know, to be unobtainable from history and science and that, therefore, would be lacking in a world bereft of philosophy.

Philosophical systems are a peculiarly modern—and regrettable—phenomenon. We do not find them in the dialogues of Plato or in the treatises of Aristotle; nor can we find them in the great philosophical works of the Middle Ages.

Aristotle's procedure in the opening pages of most of his treatises is to survey what his predecessors or contemporaries have to say on the subject with which he is dealing, and then to try to sift the wheat from the chaff. It is worth quoting here two passages in which he explicitly summarizes this procedure in philosophical work as a public and cooperative enterprise.

In Chapter I of his *Metaphysics*, he writes: "The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but every one says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed."

In Chapter 2 of his treatise *On the Soul*, Aristotle writes: ". . . it is necessary . . . to call into council the views of those of our predecessors . . . in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their suggestions and avoid their errors."

In the middle 1940s, I wrote essays on the 102 ideas that went into the *Syntopicon* that was attached to *Great Books of the Western World*, published in 1952. I did not then realize that these essays were a kind of dialectical summation of Western thought on basic philosophical controversies that had been poorly carried on be-


cause the philosophers so seldom joined the issue and argued relevantly against one another. Though I wrote all of the 102 essays, that could not have been done by me without the help of a large staff of readers that were engaged in producing the *Syntopicon*.

I was thoroughly conscious, however, of the difference between the kind of writing that reports the findings of dialectical research and the kind of writing that expounds an individual's own philosophical views. Since this difference is so important to the understanding of philosophy itself, let me state it briefly here.

Dialectical writing abstains from making judgments about the truth or falsity of the philosophical views or doctrines it surveys. To proceed dialectically, one must deal with all the differing views one encounters with complete impartiality and neutrality—that is, without favoring one point of view against another. One must be point of viewless in treating all points of view.

To be a philosopher, one must make up one's own mind about where the truth lies on the great issues that have filled the pages of philosophical controversy. Some of the same ideas that I wrote about dialectically in the *Syntopicon* essays I have more recently written philosophical essays about. In these I argued for the truth of the views I then espoused, against the opposing view that I rejected as erroneous.

While philosophy corrects and refines some of the opinions and convictions held by common sense, philosophy is nevertheless continuous with common sense and elucidates its deepest convictions by providing their rational basis and elaboration.

This last point throws light on why philosophy is everybody's business. Common sense is a common human possession. We all live in the same world, participate in common elements in our experience of it, having human minds that are specifically the same in all members of the species. Hence, when human beings philosophize in moments of reflection about the serious problems that confront everyone, they have the same background for doing so. Only those who make philosophy their lifelong vocation acquire the intellectual skills to go deeper and further than reflective individuals who have common sense. 

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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