



DREAMS OF REASON

Anthony Gottlieb
interviews
Richard Marshall.

Anthony Gottlieb is a former editor at the Economist and top journalist who is reluctant to call himself a philosopher but has thought about the early Greek philosophers, thinks modern philosophers should resist headline-grabbing activities, thinks that intellectuals and scientists in the public eye should know more about philosophy before they spout off about philosophical ideas, especially admires Socrates for his originality and moral vision, reflects on naturalism in relation to these early Greeks, on Parmenides, on why medieval philosophy is hard to grasp for moderns, on David Hume, on not wearing his philosophical anguish on his sleeve, on self-help philosophy, and on why there's always been a hankering for a lost golden age in philosophy.

Richard Marshall: What made you become a philosopher?

Anthony Gottlieb: I remember three or four steps on the road. As a child, I was puzzled by a version of the mind-body problem. Considering the difference between, say, a brick and a person, it seemed to me that the two were in some sense the same, and that the key difference between them lay in the fact that changes in the brick happened much more slowly than changes in (for example) myself. I like Gareth Matthews's idea that we are all philosophers from the ages of four to seven, and that this philosophical curiosity soon becomes submerged for most people. Perhaps one early sign that it wasn't going to sink beneath the surface in my case is that I began to develop a monist answer to the question, instead of pestering adults with the puzzle.

The second step involved God, or rather my conviction that his purported existence wouldn't explain much. Somehow I encountered Russell's "Why I am not a Christian", and thereby found my first intellectual hero. I devoured everything I could find about him, and became particularly interested in Wittgenstein and in formal logic. I was no good at maths, but loved logic, and began to study it in evening classes while I was at high school. Aristotelian logic was a surprisingly large part of the course, and I still can't get the medieval mnemonics for syllogistic out of my head.

At around the same time, we were reading Thomas Mann in German classes, and a master introduced me to Schopenhauer's writings as background to Mann. This led me to Kant. I couldn't understand him at all, but I felt that this was my sort of stuff. So by the time I got to Cambridge as an undergraduate in philosophy, I was already pretty far gone.

I should add that although I have written about philosophy, on and off, ever since, I have barely ever taught it, and have mostly been a journalist, so I am a little uneasy at being described as a philosopher.

RM: You've written about the early philosophers and a striking thing you say about some of the really early ones—Anaximander, Anaximenes, Xenophanes, all those Pre-Socratics—is that many of them were more like show biz acts than what we'd recognize today. As one yourself, do you think contemporary public intellectuals could learn something from these early masters in this respect?

AG: Actually, no. There are enough good philosophers who know

how to engage a wider audience, and there is no lack of demand for enlightenment of various sorts. I don't think that what is needed is more eye-catching public performances by professional philosophers, such as nattier clothes in TED talks, or other headline-grabbing activities—which is the sort of thing I was alluding to in the case of some Presocratics. What I wish for is better philosophy, and better history of philosophy, from those intellectuals and scientists who are in the public eye already and who wrongly believe they know what they are talking about when they venture into philosophy.

RM: How did thinkers in sixth-century BC Greece manage to start philosophy? Were there really no philosophers before then? I guess this is a question about what Thales and the other boys in the band did that others before them failed to do.

AG: I wish I knew more about both of those questions—how the Greeks got their start, and what we should say about earlier thinkers elsewhere. On the first question, it seems that nobody knows much more about the conditions that gave rise to ancient Greek philosophy than that argumentative discussion began to flower among a literate people who traded with (and therefore knew about) others. On the second question, I'm aware of knowing too little about non-Western civilisations, which is why I wrote that Greek philosophy was one start to the subject, but not necessarily the only one. I think one can argue, though, that it is the Greeks who did by far the most to shape the tradition to which the West, and many others, still cleave.

RM: Cicero makes much of the break that Socrates made with the early philosophers. Is he justified in identifying this radical shift? If so, what do you think the break comprised of?

AG: Cicero wrote that Socrates was “the first who brought philosophy down from the heavens”, by which he largely meant that Socrates focused on ethics and politics rather than astronomy and physics, and that this was an influential shift of attention. We need to add three things to that. First, Socrates wasn't the only one to focus on how to live rather than what the world is made of: there were the Sophists around at the same time, for example. Secondly, he did not stamp out the proto-scientific side of philosophy: Democritus, for instance, was younger than Socrates, though he is conventionally reckoned among the “Presocratics” in order to keep the story simple. Thirdly, for all we know, some or all of the older Greek thinkers were interested in the question of how to live—it's just not what they are remembered for.

Socrates, we might say, gave moral philosophy a big boost, which was helped along by Plato's championing of him.

RM: You especially admire Socrates, don't you? What is it that you find so powerful in this ancient thinker? He's sometimes conflated with Plato but they're very different in key regards aren't they? You call him 'Philosophy's martyr' which seems to speak to a deep engagement with this figure on your part.

AG: Yes, I do especially admire him, both for the force and originality of his moral vision (being good is in your best interests, even though it doesn't seem to be), and for his philosophical method (the relentless questioning). He literally died for philosophy. So, arguably, did Hypatia of Alexandria. But there are not many others.

Thanks to the toil of generations of scholars, we can do quite a lot to sift the historical Socrates out of the writings of Plato. There are views in metaphysics, especially about mathematical and other abstract objects, which seem to have been put into "Socrates's" mouth by Plato; but the extent to which Plato himself believed them, and when, is not all that clear. It is not only the real Socrates who is to some extent hidden in Plato's dialogues, but the real Plato as well.

RM: At one point you call the earliest philosophers "naturalists". Naturalism is a notoriously slippery term. So what is it you mean by naturalism here? Isn't there a case for saying that mathematics was an important ingredient, and that maths isn't helpful for the naturalist case?

AG: I'm simply thinking of Aristotle's distinction between the *theologoi* and the *phusikoi*—those who talk of the gods and those who talk of natural causes. The first philosophers were naturalists in the sense that they were *phusikoi*. Now, a materialist metaphysics must indeed struggle to accommodate mathematics, which I think is what you're implying. But to be one of the *phusikoi* does not necessarily involve having a materialist metaphysics. It just means not invoking the actions of gods when you're trying to explain phenomena.

The Pythagoreans count as naturalists in this sense, because they embrace non-theological explanations. But their distinctive explanations are famously mathematical. (I mention the Pythagoreans, not Pythagoras himself, because we really don't know what he himself thought.) It is also worth pointing out that some other

phusikoi laid the foundations of a mathematical approach to nature insofar as they tried to explain qualitative phenomena in quantitative terms.

RM: Your book is called the *The Dream of Reason*. That suggests that although these were the beginnings, they weren't fully able to realize the dream. That would contrast with another attitude towards people like Plato which suggests that all philosophy since has no more importance than footnotes.

AG: My title is intended to reflect the ambiguity of the term "dream": dream as ideal and dream as illusion. I think it's built into the nature of the enterprise of philosophy that it will always fall short of its aim, and so in one sense the promise of philosophy is a mirage. You have to keep trying, but you will fail. So it's not just that the Greeks couldn't realise the dream, but that nobody can.

If western philosophy is, as Whitehead famously suggested, footnotes to Plato, then these footnotes must at least be recognised as very substantial ones—as detailed and incisive commentary. And if they are commentary, then evidently a great deal is commentary on Aristotle, not Plato. These two figures do have quite exceptional significance. One can, if one likes, force an interpretation on everything that came afterwards according to which it is all either expounding on or reacting against something Platonic or Aristotelian. But I can see no real advantage in doing this. It is an oversimplification.

RM: Parmenides seems a very important. His arguments regarding nothingness continue to be the starting point for contemporary discussions of the topic.

AG: His discussion of "what is not" was indeed very influential on Greek philosophy: it presented a challenge that stimulated later metaphysics, and also the development by Plato of what would now be called a Wittgensteinian approach to at least some philosophical problems. When Plato sought to refute Parmenides, he did so by (among other things) distinguishing different forms of negation, and suggesting that false linguistic analogies lead us astray. (Wittgenstein knew these passages, but does not seem to have noticed the parallel with his own methods.)

Perhaps the most important novelty in Parmenides is his use of abstract argument to undermine commonsense views of the world. Because of this, it is fair to regard him as the father of what Strawson called "revisionary metaphysics".

RM: Your book is organized in three phases. There are the Presocratics, then the big three—Socrates and Plato and Aristotle. The third section has two chapters—“Three Roads to Tranquility” and “The Haven of Piety”. Taking the first of these chapters first, what are the Epicureans, Stoics and Sceptics doing that is new?

AG: Each of these groups has distinctive achievements to its credit. The early Stoics developed logic, philosophy of language and philosophy of physics, for example; the Epicureans, among other things, developed a materialist metaphysics; and the Sceptics—well, they earned their name. What ties together these strands of Hellenistic thought, according to conventional wisdom—which I think is largely right—is that they also offered their ideas as a grounding for what would now be called a philosophy of life. It’s not too far wrong to see them as turning philosophy into (among other things) a branch of self-help. The seeds of that are in Socrates, but they are only seeds.

It’s not surprising that self-helpy-philosophy today often draws on the Stoics, and sometimes the Epicureans, though not nearly enough on the Sceptics.

RM: And between Late Antiquity to the Renaissance what happens?

AG: Well, that’s a big question, of course. Plenty happens: we’re talking about 1,500 years or so. My position is that what falls either side of this period is of much greater interest to us than what fell within it, and so I give in my book only a very summary treatment of it. Barely a treatment at all, in fact. This is not because I think it is not worth discussing, but that it is less worth discussing than other things. The decision was a matter of priorities, given limited space. Not only is there a great deal of magnificent philosophy between Augustine and Bacon, but, even if it were all somehow second-rate, it would still be important to study it, in order to understand where various of our ideas come from and how they developed. But if you want to know what you should study first, it has to be the ancients and the moderns.

One main reason for this has to do with the early forms of Christianity, which suffuse Western philosophical writing in the period and thereby make it foreign to us, in a way that ancient and modern philosophy are not.

Most people just can’t get on with medieval philosophy. One can

argue about why that is, and whether one should try to persuade them otherwise, but it is a fact. When I once taught a course on medieval philosophy, I found that there were only one or two usable English textbooks for such a course. Every other period has dozens. This fact speaks volumes, as it were.

RM: So now you're working on the next phase of philosophy, and Hume is the model for you of what philosophers should be doing. Are you placing him in a line back to skeptics of old and why do you find a Humean approach the ideal?

AG: Hume is a favourite, but I wouldn't hold him up as a model that all others ought to follow, or as an ideal. I contributed to a jockey magazine feature on "What is the best philosophy?" and went to the hustings for Hume, which is presumably what you're thinking of. I'm pleased to say that "Hume's scepticism" won the online poll of responses to this feature .

He is a favourite for several reasons. First, there is his engagement with scepticism, which is the most thoroughgoing such engagement of all modern philosophers. (Descartes was just using scepticism as a stage device to frighten conventional thinkers into the arms of his own new system.) What I like is Hume's refusal to accept any easy answers, combined with an equally resolute refusal to say something bonkers (ie, that we don't in fact know anything). We could all do with more of Hume's moderate scepticism, especially in science. This is one thing that years of science journalism taught me.

Then there is Hume's naturalism, by which I mean something different from the Greek "naturalism" mentioned earlier. Here I mean Hume's determination to see man as wholly a part of nature and fundamentally similar to other creatures—that is, as an animal among other animals. This type of naturalism informs his treatment of our cognitive faculties, our moral sense, and, in a way, of the phenomenon of religion, which is, for him, something to be explained rather than justified. In the case of our cognitive faculties, his approach is, tellingly, the opposite of, say, that of Hobbes or Leibniz. They say: well, such-and-such can't count as knowledge, because even animals can do that. But Hume says: animal knowledge is such-and-such, so ours is, too.

In all these areas (cognition, morals and religion), I think Hume raised the right questions, and I largely sympathise with the direction of his answers. I remain in awe of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which I think is his masterpiece. For one thing, it

is the definitive treatment of the idea that the world looks as if it were made by God. Richard Dawkins has written that it was Darwin, not Hume, who made unbelief intellectually satisfying, but I disagree. It was Hume, and in that book.

I should add that I also like the sound of Hume as a person. With most philosophers, you have no clue what they were like; but of those about whom we can get some inkling, I'd most like to spend off-duty evenings with Hume.

RM: I guess a pushback against your story is that it doesn't include non-Western models of philosophy and that in a sense this is a limitation. Do you accept that this is a limitation explained by pragmatics of writing such a book, or are you claiming that this tradition is actually the one everyone should be looking to because it's the best? And to paraphrase George Steiner when he read your book, where's reason's dark stuff in your account?

AG: I wrote about the Western tradition because that is what I know about, not just in order to keep the project manageable. Yes, restricting the story to the West is a limitation, but not, I hope, a defect. There is a point to writing a history of Britain that isn't also a history of China, or a history of chemistry that isn't also a history of geography, so I don't see why one shouldn't write a history of Western philosophy. (These comparisons are slightly complicated by the fact that one might argue that early Western philosophy had significant Eastern influences, but this is not a big complication.)

George Steiner's comment, at the end of a review, that I "skate lightly over much that is dark" is somewhat gnomonic. He doesn't mention any dark topics or ideas; his only specific complaint along these lines is that my book doesn't sufficiently convey "the strangeness, the almost physical obduracy, the solitude of 'doing philosophy.'" Well, I think it is too obvious to be worth saying that philosophy is lonely, hard and painful. It never occurred to me that some readers might come away with the impression that it was relaxing fun from dawn to dusk. For their benefit, I'm happy to acknowledge that it isn't. I suspect it's a difference of taste in expository styles that is at issue here. I wrote rather jauntily, partly to help the rather strong medicine to go down, and partly in an awareness that philosophy can go laughably wrong. Others may prefer more anguish to be worn prominently on the sleeve.

RM: Modern philosophy doesn't seem to be as obsessed with righteous living as the earlier bunch were. Guru-like advice tends to be left to cranks, outliers and those with a quick buck in mind.

But is this a mistake? Should there be more direct engagement with issues of how we ought to live and why isn't it as central to the philosophical toolkit as it used to be?

AG: Western philosophy has always involved both technical discussions of abstract matters and also discussions of how to live. Some people and some schools have focused more on one side than the other, but there are not many periods in which one side has been very dominant for very long. Analytical philosophy pretty much eschewed ethics for a while in its early days, while the Hellenistic thinkers, as I've mentioned, very much embraced it. But I don't agree that there has been a uniform broad development in a single direction, moving ever further away from a concern with how to live, as you suggest. Philosophy today seems to me to be exceptionally rich in good treatments of the meaning of life and of myriad technical topics. However you count the contributions, I'm sure that the latter outnumber the former, yet I doubt if there are any interesting conclusions about the *Zeitgeist* that you can draw from that. It's probably true that few philosophers today are as obsessed with righteous living as Socrates was, but then that was probably true in his day, too.

It's also worth noting that you will find, in practically all periods of its history, people saying that philosophy used to deal with the big issues, but now it is too dry or technical or unambitious. Even Aristotle said this (there's too much maths in philosophy, he wrote), and Galen (there's too much verbal quibbling, he complained.) This is just another example of the myth of a golden age.

RM: And finally here are the five books you could recommend that would take us further into these issues?

(1) On Greek philosophy as a whole, there is a magnificent essay by Bernard Williams, which is really a short book, called "The Legacy of Greek Philosophy", It's reprinted as a chapter in his posthumous collection, "The Sense of the Past".

(2) On Socrates in particular, I recommend Gregory Vlastos's "Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher" (Cornell University Press)

(3) One take on Hume's naturalism, and the history of philosophy since Hume, which is particularly stimulating is Edward Craig's "The Mind of God and the Works of Man" (Oxford University Press).

(4) Hume's "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion" (many editions)

(5) Lastly, I mentioned Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy, and would like to recommend an enthralling and scholarly account of him that I've just read: James Klagge's "Wittgenstein in Exile" (MIT). Among other things, this book is a good companion to thinking about the nature of philosophy.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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