

## 6. The need to know

When I was a child, in Britain in the 1980s, the interminable catchphrase of the day was “you've got to look after number 1”. This was during the premiership of Mrs Thatcher, when the old consensus that the state was responsible for the common good, was under attack. The government embodied and promoted the idea that you should put your own interests first. Mrs Thatcher even went as far as to say “there is no such thing as society, only individual men, women and their families”.

I don't find it difficult to imagine a world where people have no concern for the common good. Humans are naturally family-centric, so what seemed unusual for British people in the 1980s, may not be unusual in history. I wouldn't be surprised if family-centric ethics were the norm of ancient Athens. This would help to explain why those philosophers who talked about civic virtue were regarded as freaks. The Cynics for example, lived on the ethical fringe.

For a brief moment, in the 1980's Britain I remember, it was considered normal and admirable to put the interests of your family first, and so it was freely confessed. It turned out to be a fad. The consensus survived. Today, if you have any role in public life, you must at least say that you stand for the public good, whether you mean it or not.

Brief swings aside, it seems that somewhere down the line the values of the ancient Cynics won. I wonder if this is why the meaning of the word “cynical” has somersaulted. To be cynical means to be opposed to social norms. In ancient Athens the norm was to favour selfishness over civic virtue. In modern Britain the norm is to favour civic virtue over selfishness. Society has turned and flipped the meaning of “cynicism” over.

Another curious inversion of meaning seems to have befallen the word “philosophy” itself. It is the love of knowledge and hence the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Philosophy therefore has no purpose beyond itself. It is about as self-indulgent as it is possible to imagine.

An awful lot of the work of any profession is self-justification, and the work of a professional Philosopher is no different. So, no sooner was a Philosopher a thing, than a socially acceptable justification was needed. As Socrates favoured civic virtue and mental tranquillity (“the good life”) they became its point. Centuries later, the ancient Roman philosopher, Cicero, said that the old man had “brought philosophy down from the heavens”. In other words, the champion of endless enquiry over sophistic social climbing is credited for making philosophy practical.

The ancient trend culminated in Pyrrhonism (see *essay 4*), which said that mental tranquillity is more important than the truth. The love of knowledge became the quest for the good life, and thence slipped seamlessly into the solace of convenient beliefs. Hence, philosophy turned into its opposite.

Today, now that science seems to have the study of nature sewn up and post-modernism has us floating in our own island truths, it isn't surprising that we are reverting to the ancient quest. Modern popular works, like Jules Evans' *Philosophy for Life, and other dangerous situations* points philosophy toward “the good life”. I do not doubt the wisdom of the old philosophers that Evans and others dig up. Nor am I challenging the value of their thoughts. I am simply saying that this therapy, not philosophy.

The problem is that, when it comes to “peace of mind”, philosophy can't beat religion, which goes for our deepest fears and isn't bound by the truth. When it comes to mind-traps, nothing compares to “revealed truths”. Religions convince young, susceptible minds that they alone are the source of wisdom, that is to say, they are self-affirming. They divert natural curiosity into the service of some kind of unearthly power.

At the end of the ancient period, philosophy waned in the face of ascendant religion. Scepticism had

created an intellectual climate of permanent doubt and insecurity, a kind of void that only scriptural certainty could fill. The tranquillity of the mind became more important than knowledge, and so naturally, religion triumphed. Philosophy was buried, but not quite dead.

Self-affirming ideas tend to be sticky, so it took many centuries for curiosity and philosophy to crawl back to life. It seems strong today, but it is worth remembering that the anxieties of the ancient people are the same as ours. We may be no more than a plague and a social crises or two away from another inglorious religious revival.

Meanwhile, and despite everything I've just said, there is one sense in which philosophy is the best medicine. When people talk about “well-being” it reminds me of the old school medicine men peddling their grand elixirs, as if the cure for everything could be squeezed into one bottle. Human needs can't be reduced to one thing. We have several needs, and philosophy is the best way to deal with one of them.

The idea of human instincts is not a new one. The pioneers of Psychology, such as William James and Sigmund Freud, wrestled with how to describe the animating forces of life; the compulsions, drives or libidinal energies that instigate behaviour. Today the word “instinct” crops up from time to time, but is rarely given the systematic treatment it deserves. After all, what could be more important than why we do anything at all?

I suggest that we think of humans as having an array of instincts, each characterised by deprivation and satisfaction states. Think of the immediately tangible and irreducible needs for food and sex, for the sake of simple examples.

The need to know is an instinct just like the others. When we're not sure about something we feel a restless, nagging sensation that drives us to enquire. When satisfaction takes a climactic form it is called an epiphany. Why it evolved is unclear, instincts don't fossilise, but that it exists is attested again and again, from the nagging “why?” questions of a child to the resurgence of philosophy in the modern world. It is reborn in each generation and encapsulated in Socrates' famous aphorism “the unexamined life is not worth living”.

To end this commentary I will summarise ancient ethics as dividing first on the first component of “the good life”: virtue. Philosophy, which is *for* its own sake, can't at the same time be *for* the betterment of humankind. It is not therefore, inherently virtuous. The Hedonists spotted this. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that philosophy can't examine virtue and reveal its nature.

Civic virtue, that is to say, politics, is for the ancient philosophers simply an extension of individual ethics and doesn't seem to escape the conventions of its time. They identify the quality of a society with the personal qualities of powerful people. They are therefore *elitist*, that is to say, they show relatively little concern for how society is organised and relatively more concern for the character of rulers.

Ancient ethics does seem to be united on the second component of “the good life”: tranquillity of the mind. Yet this is, in my opinion, misguided. Philosophy, which is *for* its own sake, can't at the same time be *for* your mental well-being. The Pyrrhonists took this to its logical conclusion, arguing that mental tranquillity was more important than the truth. The new religions put this into practice.

Nevertheless, just because philosophy is not for your mental well-being doesn't mean it can't examine it and reveal its nature. In my view, we have an instinct to know the truth, which is as strong as any other instinct. Philosophy can't solve every mental ailment, nothing can, but it is the best medicine when what ails you is the need to know.