

# 1. The ultimate questions

I once went to a meeting in London about the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. Just outside the meeting room someone was exhibiting a film about life in a mental institution. The film was new, but in black and white, and silent. I asked why there was no sound or colour. The exhibitor replied “to encounter the heuristic of the body”. I pondered.

The meeting itself wasn't much more illuminating. I struggled to follow the arguments. I also struggled to avoid distracting myself with the constant nagging question of why the participants were using such obscure language. I grasped that to appreciate the knowledge on offer you have to first learn the language it claims to need. That's a big ask. Not one person I spoke to could render its learning into words I could fully appreciate, or at least when they did, the actual idea turned out to be an interesting nuance at best, at worst, a triviality.

I was in a dilemma. Should I dive in, work hard and learn this language? If I surrender to it, it might open up new vistas of knowledge. On the other hand, I might end up pointlessly rewording old ideas, making trivialities seem profound, and finally losing the ability to explain anything clearly.

It occurred to me that many of the philosophical schools of the past may have been just like the one I encountered that day in London. The students of Deleuze and Guattari, and of what is sometimes broadly referred to as “Continental philosophy”, have a form of language that doesn't translate easily. In fact, they have no incentive to translate it.

Many people enjoy being thought of as intelligent or wise. They enjoy being looked up to by people who lack their intelligence or wisdom. But is this intelligence or wisdom real? Just as some harmless animals have evolved to look dangerous, so ideas have evolved to look clever. I think I can see the signs. All that's needed to look intelligent or wise is a blend of confidence, jargon and disdain for the ignorance of critics.

Obscurity fosters a mystique upon which the life of a school itself depends. Leading figures soak up the attention and respect of members, who get it from initiates, who get it from the world at large. It relies for its existence on the broad acknowledgement of its wisdom by people who have no idea what it believes. All of that accumulated credit would dissolve in an instant, if the triviality of its ideas were exposed.

None of this means that such schools of thought have nothing to say. On the contrary, they may very often be based on a significant insight. Always remember that something attracted people to the school in the first place. This first encounter rewarded a little attention, which inclined them to give a little more, whereupon they stepped onto the slippery slope. I think we should dip into these schools for two reasons. Firstly, as a warning against the dangers of vanity and obscurity and secondly, in order to recover the pearl from the dross.

In the pedagogic essays I refer to several schools of philosophy. I suspect that some or all of these behaved like exclusive sects, or taught such esoteric ideas in dense jargon they would attract only a small group of devotees. Talking amongst themselves they would no doubt have had many ideas, some good, some bad, some relevant, some irrelevant. My purpose in these essays is not to study the ideas of sects, but to extract any useful ideas from them. We are harvesting pearls.

In the essays, I express, in the simplest terms I know how, the key points in the evolution of the answers to the big questions of life. Should I ever drift into obscure language then I apologise. I trust your curiosity will prompt questions. Likewise, should any idea seem incomplete or otherwise unsatisfactory, then I beg that you share your feelings. I have always found writing difficult because it puts unfinished thoughts into a finished form. Like Socrates (who if anyone, gets to set the terms

of Western philosophy), I believe that dialogue is better than monologue.

For each essay there is a short commentary, of which this is the first. These are my opinions, that I hope will connect together coherently. To begin with I'd like you to appreciate my personal quest for knowledge, which has been lifelong and persistent. In the first essay I gave two quotes from Einstein, "I have no special talent. I am just passionately curious" and "I am not so smart, it is that I stay with the problem longer".

Does the fact that these things were said by Einstein give these thoughts credibility?

I guess in one sense it does. Having proved his genius in physics, Einstein could have fed the mystique and simply wallowed in the adoration of those who adore genius. Instead he chose to modestly confess that his genius was essentially persistence.

People seem to love genius and treat it as a special, mysterious power that is beyond lesser, simpler beings. Revealing how things are discovered breaks the spell and spoils the illusion. This is what Philosophy should be doing. I should disarm this particular mind-trap by focusing exclusively on knowledge. Philosophy rejects idols. We don't like mystery, so why should we imagine anyone has mysterious powers, let alone admire them?

The fact that Einstein revealed that persistence, rather than the magical power of genius, lies behind his achievements is, in my opinion, the greatest breakthrough in the history of philosophy (equal greatest – *see commentary 7*). It is the moment genius turned on itself, and yes, his status *does* give the quote more credibility, but it's a once only deal. From now on knowledge comes from enquiry not authority.

Human beings have an instinct to know (*see commentary 6*). It is as real as any other instinct. Just as we feel thirsty without water, and quenched when we drink it, so we feel unsettled by unexplained phenomena and gratified by plausible explanations. We are compelled to know things with an immediacy comparable to thirst. Even when we seem to settle for mystery, the very fact that we asked the question shows the instinct at work.

Curiosity, like thirst, can be sated in many ways, some healthy and some unhealthy. As a general rule, human cultures find ways to channel the curiosity of children in manageable ways until other adult instincts can kick in to divert their energies. Schools, churches and cults, with their group-think, and their ego-stroking hierarchies, are the main instruments of this diversion. Amongst them schools of "philosophy" are included.

The survival of our curiosity until late into, or even throughout, our long lifetimes, is the particular peculiarity of our species. Its manifestation in science, philosophy, educational institutions and vast libraries (and now "virtual" clouds) of literature, is so far, the crowning glory of the universe.

Douglas Adams, in *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, reduced the goal of our instinct to know down to one question, the "ultimate question of life the universe and everything". The novel's heroes discover only its tantalising vagueness. In these essays and commentaries, I will share my personal quest (although, I'm afraid to say, not nearly as heroic, adventurous or amusing).

There is no mystery (genius or otherwise) to my method, just persistence and passionate curiosity. I will try to use clear and uncomplicated language. In my view, the "ultimate question" is unanswerable because it is over-reduced, so we can start by breaking it into three: How does the world work? How can we know for sure? And, what should we do?