

Personal Uses of Philosophy

In this introduction to philosophical thinking, we will read some essays specially chosen from four main areas of interest: (1) the philosophy of life, (2) the philosophy of religion, (3) ethics, and (4) metaphysics and theory of knowledge. Although our approach is not comprehensive, it is reasonably representative of some of the more significant areas of philosophical inquiry. The readings are intended to illustrate the interrelations between these subject areas of philosophy and, as well, to provide the foundations for future investigations of these and related problems.

Since the study of philosophy involves working with concepts rather than facts, the activity of philosophy seeks understanding rather than knowledge. In other words, emphasis in this course of study is placed on the reasoning process. Memorizing the subject matter of philosophy is less likely to give insight into the discipline than is engaging actively in process doing philosophy.

In order to make the most of the present opportunity, it will be helpful if we can invoke what has been called the principle of charity as we approach new ways of looking at things. That is, we ought to attempt to set aside, provisionally and temporarily, preconceptions about the philosophical views presented—especially when our initial reaction is to disagree. While suspending our own beliefs and tolerating for the moment any ambiguity and inconsistencies, we can obtain an accurate, sympathetic understanding of the presentation of ideas. In many instances, invoking the principle of charity takes some acculturation.

For example, as Bertrand Russell notes in his essay in the first part of this set of readings, our experience can be broadened and our thinking can be enriched. Once ideas are well understood, only then, can they be meaningfully analyzed, critiqued, or evaluated. Philosophical inquiry might not be the be-all and end-all of a good life, yet, to paraphrase Socrates' view in our first reading, a life worth living is an "examined life."

We begin our study of philosophy in Part I by first discussing the nature of learning and the different perspectives entailed by insightful understand-

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ing. The nature of philosophical disagreement is then sketched, and philosophy is distinguished from other kinds of inquiry. Philosophy as a discipline is characterized, and its major branches are elaborated and illustrated. A preliminary definition describes philosophy as an inquiry into the basic assumptions of any field of interest.

In Part I, a brief overview of the nature of philosophy is sketched before we begin our inquiry into questions concerning some of the personal uses of philosophy. In the first two chapters, a traditional overview of some of the main parts of philosophy introduces some important terms and approaches used in our study. These chapters represent a personal characterization of philosophy; some philosophers might warmly disagree with our beginning description.

In these first readings, we consider several different perspectives on the applications of philosophical methods of thought. These ways of thinking can radically affect how we think and live. For instance, the philosophers Socrates and Bertrand Russell emphasize the role of insight and understanding in our efforts to live well and do well in the affairs of the world, whereas Albert Camus and Leo Tolstoy emphasize the role of will to establish a meaning for our lives. Even if the purpose and the significance of the universe itself cannot be known, Tolstoy and Camus believe our lives can have meaning.

Socrates enjoins us to think and do *only* what is right; if we do so, he thinks no harm can come to us. He assumes that if we know how to live well and do well, we will attempt to do so. Initially, his doctrine appears naive, until we realize he is not denying that many unfortunate things happen to good people, nor that many fortunate things happen to ignorant people. On Socrates' point of view, we can endure physical pain as well as life's vicissitudes without great difficulty; the genuine pain in life is the harm to the soul or the mental anguish occurring from our lack of self-knowledge. He believes individual excellence is accomplished by "tending our soul," seeking insight, and doing what's right.

Certainly, in any life, faith as well as reason plays a part. On the one hand, Bertrand Russell explains how understanding synoptic philosophy enlarges our world by showing unexpected dimensions of life. Russell emphasizes the role of reason in a life of self-enlargement. Self-enlargement involves a healthy skepticism, a sympathetic understanding, and a respect for all modes of understanding. On the other hand, Leo Tolstoy concludes from his personal crisis only faith, not philosophy, can provide authentic

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meaning for our lives. Philosophy, he believes, is limited by rational understanding, art is in a fundamental sense a distraction from life, and science reduces the meaning of human existence to the trivial. Tolstoy, unlike Russell, believes our relation to the infinite is only meaningful through faith's irrational knowledge.

We conclude the readings in this section with an introduction to the thought of Albert Camus. Albert Camus believes the fundamental question of philosophy is *not* the choosing of a philosophical way of living or even of seeking a philosophical way of understanding. Instead, by choosing to impose a value on our lives, Camus illumines the "absurdity" of the human predicament: the objectivity of the external world can never measure or reflect the subjectivity of human existence.