

Part I

Personal Uses of Philosophy



Fig. 0.1 *Dartford, Messrs. Burroughs, Wellcome & Co.'s Factory, London and Suburbs, England (Library of Congress)*

We begin our study of philosophy in the first two chapters by investigating some aspects of the nature of learning and the different perspectives insightful understanding can occasion. The nature of philosophical disagreement is briefly introduced, and philosophy is both distinguished from and related to other kinds of inquiry. Philosophy as a discipline is characterized, and its major branches are elaborated and illustrated with some striking examples. The preliminary definition of philosophy proposed as a starting point is that philosophy is an inquiry into the basic assumptions of any field of interest.

These first two chapters conclude with a traditional overview of some of the main parts of philosophy together with some of the important terms and approaches used in our study. It's important to realize that these chapters represent one view of the traditional discipline of philosophy from a Western perspective; some philosophers might warmly disagree with our beginning and provisional description.

Starting with the third chapter, a number of influential readings on the topic of the philosophy of life illustrate some of the ways philosophers have

come to terms with questions of the meaning and significance of our lives. In these readings, different perspectives realized by different methods of thought establish radically different ways of how to 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 in establishing a meaning for our lives. Even if the purpose and the significance of the universe cannot be known, the philosophy of Tolstoy or of Camus could still justify how our lives can have meaning.

Socrates enjoins us to think and do only what we know to be right. If we do so, he argues, we will be free of mental anguish. He assumes that if we genuinely know how to live well and do well, we will attempt to do so. Initially, his doctrine might appear 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' view, we can endure physical pain as well life's vicissitudes without great difficulty; the genuine pain in life arises from the harm to the soul—the mental anguish occurring from our lack of self-knowledge. He argues individual excellence is accomplished by "tending our soul," seeking insight, and consequently doing what's right.

Certainly, in any life, faith as well as reason play a part. On the one hand, Bertrand Russell explains how understanding synoptic philosophy enlarges our world by showing unexpected possibilities and dimensions of life. Russell emphasizes the role of reason in a life of self-enlargement of self. Self-enlargement does not involve an egotistical or even an egoistic attitude toward others. Instead, on this view, if we garner a philosophy of healthy skepticism, a sympathetic understanding, and a respect for all modes of understanding, we achieve a freedom from narrow and practical aims by the development of wide interests, reflection, and understanding.

Where to go for help. . .

Notes, quizzes, and tests for many of the selections from this part of the readings, "Personal Uses of Philosophy," can be found at Philosophy of Life

Leo Tolstoy takes a radically different view of life than Russell or Socrates because he thinks philosophical reflection ultimately cannot prove anything useful concerning how to attain a worthwhile life. Philosophy, he believes, is severely limited by rational understanding. On Tolstoy's reasoning, since art is fundamentally a distraction from life and since science reduces the meaning of human existence to the trivial, neither of these approaches can provide a meaning for life either. As a direct result of a deeply personal life-crisis, he concludes only faith, not philosophy, provides authentic meaning for our lives.

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. Camus believes the fundamental question of philosophy is not how to choose a philosophical way of living or even of how to seek a philosophical way of understanding. Camus illumines what he terms the "absurdity" of the human predicament: namely the objectivity of the external world can never measure up to, or even reflect, the the subjectivity of human existence. What this means in practice is that human meaning and significance cannot be attained in an impersonal objective world radically different in nature from intangible human meaning and significance. Instead, if an individual life is to have value, he argues, that individual must arbitrarily and subjectively impose value to life. A meaningful act is one which is chosen to be so.

Given that there is no definitive answer forthcoming in Part I of this text to the meaning and purpose to life considered from the viewpoint of the individual person, Part II raises the question as to whether or not religious thought and the consequent proof of the existence of God might provide a substantial basis for life's significance.