

KEEPING IT REAL *(If Real Exists)*

An RPE E-newsletter

Newstead Wood School

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Introduction

Welcome to this year's second edition of KIR(IRE)! It's been a crazy three years so far releasing these newsletters, but it was made possible, in part, by Ms Jackson. Many of you will know her as an RPE teacher, but she's also the head of KS3 and KS4 RPE, along with teaching most classes from Year 7-11. This edition coincides with her last few weeks at Newstead, as she will be retiring at the end of this year. Having introduced me to RPE in Year 8, and fielded the questions of many students before and since, I would like to dedicate this edition to Ms Jackson. Thank you so much, miss, for the impact you've had on my- and many other students'- lives throughout your time at Newstead. Enjoy your well-earned retirement!

- Toni

If you have any queries, comments, ideas or articles, you can send them to my email!

My Philosophy By Ms Jackson

When Toni asked me if I would like to contribute to the latest issue of the philosophy magazine, I was initially flattered and then went into panic mode-what on earth would I write about? The temptation, knowing that I am retiring was to wander down memory lane and possibly becoming too sentimental-not something that I am normally accused of. It was only when I came into work the next morning that I had a moment of inspiration. I am normally in school before 7am, which although it means I am permanently tired, I love having the place to myself and the peace and quiet to catch up with marking/planning -or even occasionally thinking. I also love having the opportunity to listen to music uninterrupted which I rarely do at home. I like to think that I have an eclectic taste in music, ranging from classical/opera to hard rock. Early in the morning however, I tend to go for uplifting tunes to set me up for that day. This particular morning my song of choice was James' 'Sit Down' - in my humble opinion one of the most glorious songs ever written. It was then that I realised that it encapsulated my whole philosophy of life -in 4 minutes of a pop song! Please do listen to it if you ever get the chance-not only is it the instant cheeriness of the tune, but the totally poetic and masterful lyrics.

Those who feel the breath of sadness
Sit down next to me
Those who find they're touched by madness
Sit down next to me
Those who find themselves ridiculous
Sit down next to me
In love and fear and hate and tears.....
Sit down

I have worked at Newstead for 7 years and it has been a very mixed experience. On the one hand it

has been the happiest working experience of my life. The students and staff are just wonderful and that focus on achieving students' full potential, their curiosity and thirst for knowledge has kept me going during the most difficult personal times of my life. Within 3 years, my mum, my sister and my beloved dog died. So much grief in such a relatively short time has been so incredibly difficult. Many years ago I might have had some faith to sustain me, but unfortunately I lost that 25 years earlier with the death of my father. However, even at the funerals of both my mum and sister, music played such an important part. Yes there was incredible sadness but the closing music at my mum's funeral was her very favourite piece of music-'La Bamba'-by Trini Lopez which always made her get up and dance-even whilst grappling with dementia.

The closing music at my sister's funeral was even more surprising and raised a few eyebrows-'I get knocked down but I get up again' by Chumbawumba which succinctly summed up her remarkable attitude to such a difficult life. I am not quite sure what the point is I am trying to make (sounds like I am marking my own work!),but I think it is that I find my spirituality, philosophy ,whatever you like to call it, in music. It has the ability to make you feel every kind of emotion and along with the beauty of nature as witnessed by my trip to Scotland last year, is probably the reason why I still have a sneaking suspicion that there might just be a God.

The Moral Blame Game

I'm confident in saying that a lot of people have felt temptation to do something they know they shouldn't- maybe to shoplift or eat that last bit of rice even though it's your dad's. I'm also confident, though, in saying that most of these people manage not to give in to those feelings. This got me started on an interesting thought process- should we be morally praiseworthy for denying these desires, and what qualifies someone as morally blame – or – praiseworthy?

In this scenario, two people drive home from a party completely wasted. They get in the same make of car, drive the same route and at the same speed, with the only difference being that there is a 5-minute interval between their departures. The first person arrives home without incident, but the other hits a pedestrian on their way home. The second person is tried for manslaughter, sent to jail and rubbished in the court of public opinion, but Person A continues living their life as normal. The question is, in this event, would it be fair to only punish the second person? After all, both people are moral agents* and are aware of the repercussions of drunk driving. Wouldn't only punishing person B imply that they were only wrong because they got caught? B was obviously the morally unlucky one, but does that excuse A's actions?

Consider that doing harm and doing wrong are not mutually exclusive events; stealing from a shop - especially one as multinational and profitable as Primark- would be wrong, but doing so would not physically harm anyone. Likewise, a playful punch in the arm could hurt more than expected while there was no malicious intent behind it.

Maybe exploring several types of luck will be helpful here. Thomas Nagel, while studying the ideas of moral luck and blameworthiness, distilled all moral luck down to four different forms.

Constitutive luck is that luck we have due to our genetics or physicality. For example, some people find it easy to be generous and grateful while others need conscious reminders to do so. In cases like these, some could make the argument that the second group of people would be more deserving of praise for giving to charity or helping other people out, as they manually must choose to do against their natural predisposition.

Circumstantial luck is luck that comes out of the situation we're in. The same person, placed in 1930s Germany and 1960s USA could turn out as almost two wildly different people, based on the circumstances of the time and significant socio-political events. A would-be Nazi could have been a racial rights fighter, given either chance, and it would be near impossible to blame- or praise- them for either.

Antecedent luck and consequential luck are like cause and effect- antecedent moral luck regards the circumstances surrounding your upbringing and external influences that shaped your life. Of course, there are outliers here- people raised in broken homes can be extremely kind and high-functioning, and people raised in good homes still do atrocious things. For the most part, though, it's pretty hard to overcome preprogrammed bias baked into you from birth.

Consequential luck, meanwhile, is the luck that results from your actions affecting things out of your control- think of the drunk drivers, of whom one happened to run into a child they had no clue was going to be on the road. If human beings hold, in our fickle morality, that people shouldn't be judged for things outside of their control, shouldn't the drunk manslaughterer be liberated from moral blame? Theoretically, yes, but it doesn't sound right. After all, his actions did end up leaving someone dead.

Nagel makes the argument that moral judgement, then, comes not necessarily because of one's actions, but of their consequences. After all, this concept applies in terms of positive actions too. We glorify the person who runs into a burning building and ends up saving lives, but not nearly as much do we venerate the one who tried to, despite them both having the same morally "right" attitudes.

To you, this might sound deterministic- after all, if I can only be blamed or praised according to the consequences of my actions, what's the point in even trying to be good? I would say this is where the key argument lies. I believe we're quick to condemn the driver who killed someone, possibly incarcerate them, because it provides a lasting deterrent and memory of what happens should you choose to drink and drive. Likewise, the person who saves lives makes headlines over those who tried because we want to exemplify the courageous values we wish to see embodied in society.

So yes, it is mildly deterministic, but assigning moral praise and blame may help to push people in the right direction; this would help them avoid the consequences of the negative actions they otherwise might have undertaken.

In a word, I have misled you. The first part of my question is irrelevant in this instance; a moral agent cannot be judged on actions they are yet to take- this line of reasoning could result in a dystopian society where we punish criminals before they commit their crime. This is tantamount to the measures taken in George Orwell's 1984, where people are arrested and executed for committing 'thoughtcrime'.

But the second part of the question is more significant, because I believe that the assignment of moral blame and praise, in spite of our best efforts towards objective consideration, are more often indicative of the effect that one's actions have had on society, and how these could influence others. For better or worse, moral judgement is here to stay, and is the reason many people refrain from committing crimes or harming others. Maybe that thought should be reassurance enough.

* A moral agent: someone who is morally responsible for the actions they take (i.e. able to differentiate right from wrong)

Oluwatoni A, 10W

Summer Philosophy Reads!

Here are some books I've read this year that fundamentally explore some sort of philosophical, moral, religious or ethical idea. If you have any other book recommendations or reviews, feel free to send them over!

The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes, Suzanne Collins

Are humans fundamentally evil?

The will to power

Art as advocacy- the role of aesthetics in society

Contractarianism

Lord of the Flies, William Golding: (GCSE read)

"Mankind's essential illness

Man's rationality vs emotions and the base state

Arc of a Scythe series: Scythe, Thunderhead and the Toll, Neil Shusterman

Quasi-immortality and the necessity of death

Moral murderers and social responsibility

The abuse of power and how to counteract it

Dark Matter trilogy: Contagion, Deception and Evolution, Teri Terry

Medical ethics

Epistemic responsibility and the spread of disease- see last year's newsletter!

Useful lies and when honesty isn't the best policy

What constitutes the self?

(How) do our experiences define us?

Homo sacer and the "other" - creating the person that can die but never be killed

Why religion?

If you've done RPE to Year 9, you'll know of various theodicies that all hope to prove the existence of the Christian God, centred on Western philosophy as we are. A lot of these are actually pretty good ones- think of Blaise Pascal's Wager (it is always better to bet on the existence of God, and act as a Christian to avoid eternal damnation), or the Design argument, whose main fault is that it is idiocy to suggest that an all-powerful being would create a universe so cruel and imperfect. Who's to say, though, that God is exactly who we want him to be?

A lot of our problems with theodicies tend to be some variation on "this isn't the God we know" - it doesn't prove God to be personal, or compassionate, but paints Him as some cold, distant being. This stance does not invalidate a theodicy and is disingenuous. The whole point of theodicies is to prove the existence of God, not His nature. We can only know His nature through religious texts or miracles. How can we say definitively that religion was not devised and propagated by a schizophrenic (or group of schizophrenics) who have continued the "God Delusion" to this day?

One famous saying of Karl Marx is "Religion is the opium of the people. It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of our soulless conditions." The first part of this quotation is widely interpreted to mean that religion (and by extension Christianity and Heaven) is meant to assuage downtrodden people with the promise of a reward after death. This is even more poignant given the context in which Marx was writing- an extremely classist Russia with the rich dancing in palaces while the poor starved in the cold. However, the rest of the quote is marginally more optimistic, taking the negative light away from religion and having the oppressed reclaim their religion as something to hold onto and keep them afloat. To Marx, religion is not just something to placate people in poverty, but is also the balm to their wounds, the buoy they hold on to in their darkest times.

Sigmund Freud, meanwhile, believed religion to be an "infantile form of wish fulfilment" generated from humanity's need for a comforting father figure- especially during the early stages of our evolution. The sometimes-inescapable violence of the Dark Ages led humans to look to the cosmos for divine salvation- now, he says, we are to have evolved past this with the advent of science and technology. He also believed that religion was the result of mankind's cry for control in a turbulent world. He thinks religion is a

response to the Oedipal Complex; man believes in God to keep himself in control. After all, if you're always being watched by a supreme being who remembers all your actions for eternity, one could say this is a splendid deterrent to wrongdoing. Personally, I think Freud had something of a weird personal philosophy, but his understanding of religion is worth discussion.

In support of religion, however, there is the concept of "moral truth"- in other words, objective moral facts. For example, in most cultures it's not exactly best practice to kill people sans provocation (or at all, really). Despite major cultural differences due to geography and language, most of humanity understands this. Some people could point to this as an indication of one true God with various interpretations depending on how you think and what group you're a part of. Another major cultural similarity is the evolution of patriarchal societies. It seems unlikely that in most places across the world, women would be subjugated and men elevated, which is a flaw with this way of thinking. While not a strictly religious or moral premise, this shows that it does not necessarily take a deity to cause an idea to spread. Some could say that religious texts like the Bible contain said patriarchal themes. This just takes us back to the question of whether everything written in religious texts is acceptable- possibly contradicting the idea of moral truth.

So, I ask again: why do we have religion? I think it's due to various factors. Like it or not, people need something to believe in, and when humans prove themselves so often to be as flawed and fallible as we are, it is more comforting to believe in one or several supernatural being(s) as a remedy to our cruel reality. I also think that religions can promote values and actions that benefit everyone- things like giving to charity and respecting people regardless of their origins or beliefs. It may seem like members of certain religions can be antagonistic to others, but I would posit that this is the result of a misunderstanding of their core values and principles. Kirkegaard once said, "The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly."

Anecdotally, I was recently in a debate with the proposition that “Religion is outdated” - somewhat along the lines of Freud’s argument- but I find myself disagreeing with this stance. Religion remains relevant for several reasons- not least because people still believe in God or gods. To this very day, wars are fought over religion, and while I do not endorse religious conflict in any way, it shows just how seriously people are willing to take their faith.

To conclude, I think that religion is a flawed and illogical thing- after all, something fundamentally based on having faith in the unseen can never be truly logical- but philosophers in ages past and present have often asserted that this is why we must revel in the delirium of religion and leave behind our day-to-day inhibitions. That, I believe, is why religion has stood the test of time where other civilisations and ideas have risen and fallen.



OKAY, I'VE GATHERED YOU PHILOSOPHERS TO DECIDE WHAT WE SHOULD BEST DO WITH THIS TIME MACHINE. WE CAN ONLY GO BACK ONCE. WHAT SHOULD WE DO?



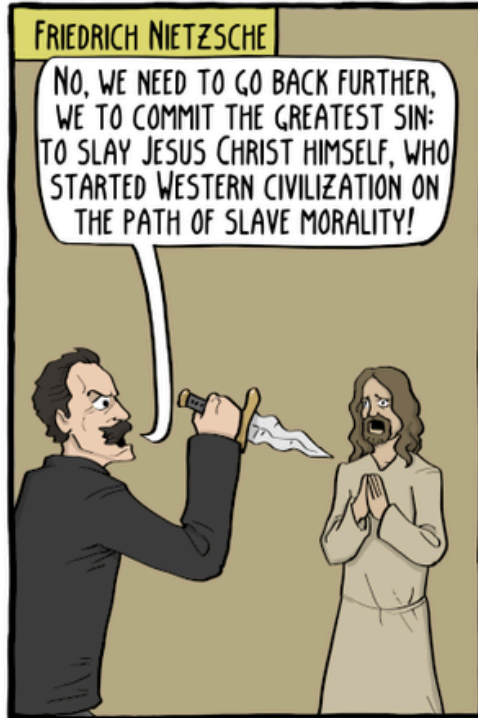
EMMANUEL LEVINAS

OBVIOUSLY WE SHOULD GO BACK AND KILL HITLER!



KARL MARX

NO, WE SHOULD GO BACK AND SAVE ROSA LUXEMBURG. KILLING HITLER ISN'T ENOUGH TO STOP FACISM, SOCIALISM MUST SUCCEED!



FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

NO, WE NEED TO GO BACK FURTHER, WE TO COMMIT THE GREATEST SIN: TO SLAY JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF, WHO STARTED WESTERN CIVILIZATION ON THE PATH OF SLAVE MORALITY!



ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

NO! NOT FAR ENOUGH! WE MUST CORRECT THE ORIGINAL MISTAKE, AND DESTROY THAT FIRST WRETCHED FISH WHO HAD TO AUDACITY TO STEP ONTO LAND!



SCHOPENHAUER, WHAT THE HELL?

ALRIGHT, YOU'VE LOST YOUR TIME MACHINE PRIVILEGES.



MAYBE WE SHOULD GO BACK AND KILL YOU AS A BABY.

NO KIDDING.



GUYS...GUYS...



CAN WE JUST KILL HITLER? COME ON GUYS!

Pascal's Wager

The existence of God is a complicated and intricate topic argued over many centuries by many philosophers who sought to prove (or disprove) why you should believe in the divine being. Of course, some of you today would think 'Frankly, I don't care whether He exists or not, I'm an atheist!'. However, according to Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century French mathematician who also happened to be a philosopher, believing in God is a huge gamble, and actively avoiding making that choice is certainly not a practical stance to take. Thus, he argued that each individual should decide between two options: to believe in God, or to not believe in God.

So, let's say you choose to believe in God. Or perhaps you've finally realised the weight of this decision and flipped a coin instead. Whichever route you took to come to the decision, what if it turns out God actually does exist? Let's look at the gains: in Abrahamic faiths (namely Christianity, Islam and Judaism) you are rewarded with eternal happiness, or heaven. Now, let's say you spent your life believing in God, and it turns out he doesn't exist. Honestly, I don't think you've lost much. Maybe you've lost out on certain luxuries and had to sacrifice sleeping until 12pm on Sundays in order to go to church, but these are all finite, material losses. In comparison to the everlasting happiness you could experience in heaven, surely the few, finite sacrifices you have to make in this lifetime more than makes up for the possibility, however slim, of heaven. After all, our lifetime only lasts for a few decades, whilst everlasting happiness lasts forever!

Now, let's look at the flipside. In Western beliefs, the punishment for not believing in God is hell, or eternal punishment. Pascal saw apathy as the same as not believing in God (it really is in your best interest to not be impartial), since whether or not you believe in hell is irrelevant. There is a sliver of a chance (let's say 0.01%) of hell existing, and surely the possibility of everlasting torture would not be worth a couple decades of partying and ignorance? This is the problem with eternity: no amount of finite pleasure, however rewarding at the time, will be worth infinite pain and suffering.

Thus, we come to the conclusion of Pascal's Wager: whether God exists or not, we have little to lose if we believe in Him, but an awful lot to lose if we don't. Thus, it makes the most sense to believe. It's a lot like betting that a loaded gun pointed right at your head won't kill you. You've got little to gain, but a hell of a lot to lose.

Thomas Hobbes on Contractarianism

A lot of kids fantasise about a world without rules, where one can do as they please without fear of repercussions. If you want to stay up late, raid your favourite shop for all their chicken burgers and chips, be my guest! This manner of living, according to Thomas Hobbes, is called the “state of nature”, and while on the surface it seems like a utopian world, I can assure you it is not one you want to live in. This world would be one without society and all the benefits that come with it. You would have infinite freedom limited only by the laws of nature, yes, but so does everyone else. And even if you don’t want to do anything particularly harmful, anyone else can use their agency and unlimited freedom to do whatever they wish. This is the concept from Hobbes’ ever-famous quote comes from: life outside society would be ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’.

First, we must establish what a social contract is. It is an agreement entered into by the people and the state to allow consenting people to sacrifice personal freedoms in order to protect everyone within that society.

Hobbes poses various questions stemming from this line of thought:

- How much of your personal freedom are you willing to sacrifice for collective security?
- Where is morality rooted?
- What does a contract entail?

Hopefully I can answer these questions for you.

In case you couldn’t tell, Hobbes was something of a pessimist at heart. He believed that man is inherently selfish and evil, and will do anything to exert his own power over others (the Will to Power, initially devised by Nietzsche). To the point, the constraint of government is the only thing keeping all of humanity descending into chaos and anarchy. The state or individual in power, known to Hobbes as the ‘Sovereign’, should have the power to punish wrongdoers as cruelly as they see fit to maintain disciplinary standards in society. There is a very real possibility that governments can overstep the boundaries of fit punishment and absorb all the civil liberties we still have, but Hobbes argues that this is a necessary risk to prevent mindless wrongdoing as humans are wont to resort to. This system generally works very well- you can’t steal from someone else because you sacrificed that freedom, but

As you read this, you might wonder how to devise the rules by which sovereigns are able to 'reign' so cruelly. Hobbes, ever the Optimist, thought that there is no such thing as universal morality- in other words, what one person may consider immoral could be the most noble act in the eyes of another. By this logic, morality must be created according to man's self interest. After all, we have etiquette rules not because its natural to use 3 different forks, knives and spoon sin one dinner but because... politeness? Class? The point is that morality is a social construct just like etiquette. For instance, the reason it's perceived to be immoral to kill people in Western society is because its not really fun to be brutally murdered. Morality is man's self-interested way to prevent coming to great harm, whether physical, mental, or fiscal as the case may be.

The final thing we need to understand is what makes you a moral agent capable of entering into a social contract. This aspect is not too difficult- it's essentially all the same criteria for a physical contract. You cannot be forced into a social contract or enter one under duress- thus, a slave is not obliged to obey the rules set out by their master's society. You must be fully aware of what the social contract entails- this would be familiarising yourself with the law of the land and is how immigrants can become culpable under the law of their chosen country. Some may argue that becoming a citizen of a society by birth contradicts this rule, but it is worth noting that in most cases you still have the freedom to leave the country.

Hobbes does eventually become problematic. Hobbes would have us give complete control of society to the Sovereign- no checks and balances on power whatsoever. He argues that, no matter how badly affairs of state are being managed, no matter how poor your quality of life is, you cannot revolt against the Sovereign because your terrible society is in any case still better than the State of Nature.

Except this has proven to be historically inaccurate. Under the likes of dictators like the Communist USSR under Stalin, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya or even North Korea today, people are forced into survival mode, so crime and immorality run unchecked. This effectively creates a State of Nature under the Sovereign. And the Sovereign's absolute power does not account for

For the most part, I think Hobbes got his moral theory right. Society is the only way through which man can overcome his primal instincts of greed and rise to the highly-ranked use of rationality. Actions should have consequences, and as discussed in the Moral Luck article, these consequences should serve as a deterrent to others. However we must be wary of the amount of power Sovereigns are allowed, lest that power causes them to revert to a State of Nature and misuse their post. In other words,
“Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Oluwatoni A, 10W

Phi-LOL-sophy

HEGEL

KANT



REASON IS IN ALL THINGS!



REASON IS WITHIN US!

Anyone: *makes a claim*

Philosophers:



It's more complicated than that, you know it is!

SCHOPENHAUER

NIETZSCHE



PHILOSOPHERS WAY BACK THEN



GOD IS HIS EXISTENCE



PHILOSOPHERS THEN

PHILOSOPHERS NOW



PLZ GIVE JOB

Life has no meaning



Panik

You can create your own meaning



Kalm

That meaning is meaningless



Panik

Everyone at Schrödinger's funeral looking at his coffin...



Hmm

Descartes when he realized that people who don't think also exist



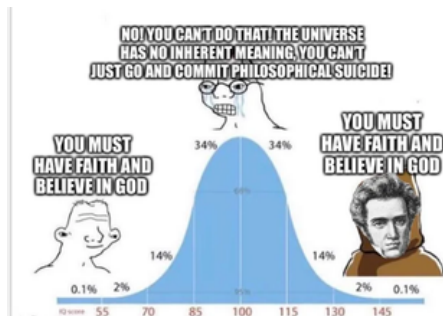
Janna
@_bwabwa_

Philosophy people disproportionately look like villains and I don't know why



incredible good fun francis dances
@Freudian_Dreams

You're not gonna like the answer



Useful Links/References

And that's it for this edition of KIR(IRE)! Thank you for reading through this edition of my humble newsletter and I'm so grateful for our contributors this term.

Video/long-form format (all available on YouTube):

Crash Course Philosophy Series

PhilosophyTube

Ted-Ed Religion, Philosophy, Morality and Ethics videos The School of Life

Listenable/podcasts (both available on Spotify): In Our Time: Philosophy (BBC Radio 4)

Philosophize This! (Steven West)

Reading material (all accessible in the school library):

The Pig That Wants To Be Eaten and 99 Other Philosophical Thought Experiments
50 Philosophy Ideas You Really Need To Know

The Philosophy Book: Big Ideas Explained Simply

Ask Miss Mullins, Miss McGarr or Miss Walker for any Philosophy essentials in our school library!

General RPE Knowledge

Crash Course Philosophy Series

Ted-Ed Religion, Philosophy, Morality and Ethics videos The School of Life