

KEEPING IT REAL *(If Real exists)*

An RPE E-Newsletter

Newstead Wood School

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Introduction

A year ago I wrote an article reassuring people that artificial intelligence, in fact, posed no existential threat to human society, because of their inability to become truly sentient. My main argument was that language would always be an insurmountable hurdle because of the sheer number of intricacies, inconsistencies and colloquialisms that ultimately make a lack of the human experience the distinguishing factor between AI and other beings. I argued that AI could never be truly sentient, and having seen technological developments over the last year, I believe I am rest assured in my conviction.

I eventually realised that the reasoning behind my original position was somewhat cyclical. After all, saying that artificial intelligence will never be truly intelligent because it cannot understand the language of the creator is callous at best. So I decided to review the article from a slightly different point of view. This tedious process, of coming up with ideas, voicing them, then making amendments is part of the ebb and flow of philosophical concepts. Most questions in philosophy don't have a single answer, so seeing an alternative way of considering a commonly accepted or popular belief is maintaining objectivity and impartiality, and ultimately, being the best philosopher you can.

That being said, I'd like to introduce a new segment to the newsletter- In Retrospect, which we'll use to take a look at past arguments and see whether we come to the same conclusion from a different viewpoint. I hope you enjoy this edition of KIR(I)RE, and happy reading!

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email me!



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Prologue: Does life have a pre-determined meaning?

For centuries, humans have questioned what the true meaning of life is. For Aristotle (384-322 B.C), our purpose is to achieve happiness. For Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855 A.D), we can only find true meaning of life through devotion to God. For Nietzsche, humans all have 'the will to power.' But does it really matter whether we know our purpose or not? Why should we search for the answers when we could simply live. Does the fact that we do not know the meaning of our existence make our lives matter less?

Maybe there is no specific meaning of life that is important and attainable for all, and our purpose differs from person to person, from time to time. It has been proven that people who view their existence as meaningful are not only happier and more content but also live longer lives than those who think that their existence has no significance. The very belief in the meaning of life is necessary for humans in order to thrive and live happy lives, but it seems that what each person deems their specific purpose or goal is less important. Life may not have not a pre-determined significance but that does not mean that each person cannot find individual meaning in their own personal experience on Earth. The question around the significance of our existence will never be able to have one single, definitive answer, as every human being has different things that they value and strive for in their own lives.

Furthermore, one could argue that it is impossible to find a meaning to life by constantly searching for it, as appreciation for happiness could become clouded by the search for something that is deemed to have enough significance. Like philosopher and psychologist Viktor Frankl once said 'Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue.'

While life may not have a specific, pre-determined meaning, it seems important for humans to have a sense of individual purpose to allow them to flourish and live happy lives.

The Philosophy of Meaning

I've recently been reading about Grice's Maxims of Conversation- basically the etiquette of trying to convey meaning, and they're fairly simple: only give as much information as is necessary, do not deliberately omit information, be truthful and be concise in your communication, and, finally, whatever you say should be relevant to the conversation. This all seems simple enough at first, until you realise that sarcasm- something most of us use in day-to-day life, deliberately flouts the Maxim of Quality: we say the opposite of what we mean or something otherwise than what we're saying is implied.

This is why some people are unable to understand sarcasm- not because they're gullible or stupid, but because our instinct as humans is to take things at face value and believe that people are working with us to move the conversation on faster- or maybe some people are just gullible. Hmm...

However, as human society develops and we get further away from our evolutionary ancestors, it's also getting harder to know when true communication is happening. Companies don't care about being truthful. People will happily lie by omission, saying a lie was never told, while the fact is that the truth wasn't told either. Even now I'm flouting the Maxim of Concision- all my sentences could easily be much shorter. In a world of increasing amounts of misinformation, disinformation and a growing lexicon, now more than ever we must look at the philosophy of language and meaning.

I stared at the cat on the grass.

Did I:

- Stare at a cat sitting on grass?
- Stare at a cat while we both sat on grass?
- Stare at a cat while we both stood on the grass?

Any of these interpretations would be a valid one, but all this meaning has been derived from one simple, non-descriptive sentence. This example didn't include the complexity of language in a world where more people of different nationalities mix, or even the context of being historically mistranslated. Here you don't have the inconvenience of mishearing me. And yet, we can derive at least three meanings from that one sentence.

My question to you is, in a world where everything is somewhat ambiguous, whether by design or accident, should it be the responsibility of the communicator or listener to interpret words correctly? The answer might seem obvious, but the reality is that writers cannot always account for the biases and experiences of every single member of their audience- things that affect our perception and interpretation of words. The conundrum is that we really can't lay this burden on the reader either because their perception will always be skewed by their mind set. I believe the reader must do their own independent research on any words or phrases that are in any way ambiguous, but at the end of the day, the primary responsibility of effective communication fall on the creator. This not only applies to written media, but visual and auditory as well.

There are three main types of incorrect information to spread: misinformation, omission and disinformation. Misinformation is "mistaken" information- a mistranslation or widespread but false rumour that gets shared around. Basically, there is no malicious intent when this type of communication is spread. Omission is just that- there are no untruths verbally expressed, but something is hidden by what isn't said. Disinformation, I would argue, is the worst. "Dishonest" information, it's a curated, crafted narrative that's often spread to boost a political agenda of some sort or perpetuate existing false information.

Using any of these immediately guarantees some sort of logical fallacy or flaw in reasoning. You even detract from your own logic's strength when you do this- it's as if you believe your argument isn't strong enough to hold when confronted with an opposite view, so you provide biased information that doesn't bother inviting any other views on a level playing field.

Unfortunately, the worst happens when a particular group or segment of society is directly affected by a miscommunication. The age-old perpetuation of racist stereotypes, fueled by ignorance, word of mouth, and the cherry-picking of incidents among specific groups is a testament to the power a negative view of a party can fundamentally alter our society.

If you'd like to explore this concept in a fun, interactive way, I really recommend *We Become What We Behold*, a game by Nicky Cage. I won't say too much about it because it's not something I could explain properly- "whereof one cannot speak, one must remain silent," after all. It's really fun, but I should mention it does include a bit of gore (something of an understatement).

This brings me to the end of this article. Plain and simple. Right?



HANDS UP, THIS IS A BANK ROBBERY!



PHILOSOPHY COPS, YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!

THANK GOD, ARREST THESE ROBBERS.



NO, WE ARE THE *PHILOSOPHY COPS*, AND YOU ARE UNDER ARREST, BANKER, FOR AN INCONSISTENT PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING TO YOUR BELIEFS.



WHAT IS THE ROBBING OF A BANK COMPARED TO THE FOUNDING OF A BANK? YOU TOO STEAL MONEY THAT YOU DID NOT SWEAT FOR, YOU ONLY CALL IT "INTEREST" INSTEAD OF "THEFT".



ARE YOU KIDDING? HE IS TAKING MONEY BY FORCE. LOANS ARE TAKEN OUT FREELY.

HE OFFERED YOU A FREE CHOICE TOO: THE MONEY OR YOUR LIFE. CHOOSE THEN!



THAT'S NOT THE SAME! HE IS COERCING US WITH A GUN.

SO NO ONE IS COERCED TO TAKE A LOAN? NO ONE MUST CHOOSE BETWEEN A LOAN OR POVERTY AND SUFFERING?

WELL...



ALRIGHT, HANDS UP, PHILOSOPHY INTERNAL AFFAIRS, YOU ARE BEING ARRESTED FOR USING POETIC LANGUAGE TO WIN AN ARGUMENT, RATHER THAN DIALECTICALLY COME TO THE TRUTH.

SAVE IT! YOU ARE GOING AWAY FOR A LONG TIME.

YOU CAN'T DO THIS!



WHY WOULD WE ARREST YOU?

SO, ARE YOU GUYS GOING TO ARREST ME, OR...?

YEAH, YOUR PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK IS PERFECTLY CLEAR. YOU WANT MONEY AND ARE TAKING IT.

Comic Strip

Fictional Philosophy: Ethics in The Maze Runner

If you're a fan of young adult fiction, and/or dystopian fiction, you've likely heard of or read The Maze Runner series. If not, let me give you a quick rundown:

- The world has been ravaged by sun flares, and a terrible illness of the brain, known collectively as 'The Flare'
- What remains of the world's population is being decimated by the disease, or working on trying to combat The Flare
- Some people are immune to The Flare, and since it is a mental illness, a blueprint of the mind can be created, helping to find a cure for The Flare.

Due to all these factors, W.I.C.K.E.D (which, by the way, worst non-evil acronym ever), the world's leading scientific authority, began to take children away from their parents and put them in The Maze, with several tests leading to almost certain death. I mean, the book started out calm and funny, but by the end, half of the characters, ALL 12-18 YEAR OLDS, were dead.

When I read The Maze Runner, my initial thought was that, for ethical reasons alone, the scientists should've been forced to end their operations. There were several moral concerns involved- the fact that these children didn't consent to the experiments out of their own free will, the mass homicide that takes place throughout the series and toying with the very realities of these kids' lives on the same scale as Descartes' anxieties.

However, I believe that one of the main ethical faults of the series lies with the children themselves.

That's right, ladies and gentlemen, in one of the most historic twists of the 21st century the heroes may ACTUALLY be the villains here. And it's all down to the concept of utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist philosophy- in short, the end justifies the means. It means that you should do whatever is necessary to preserve the greater good. The main conundrum here is that the scientists at W.I.C.K.E.D. were trying to save what little remained of the human population by devising a cure for The Flare. Yet our protagonists struggle to escape their captors at all opportunities, always looking for a way out, even after learning that the world is in turmoil, and can only be helped using the results from their Maze trials. The option that would prove the most useful for everyone would be to cooperate with W.I.C.K.E.D, seeing as their brains hold the power to fix the world.

Sadly, it's easy enough for me, an unconcerned onlooker, to judge the Runners and chastise them for not picking the best option. However, as most of us know all too well, things change when you're the one in question. Thomas Aquinas himself stated that the desire to preserve life is part of the human instinct. It works just fine to say that humans will tend towards preserving their individual lives, even if this tenet was originally part of the Moral Law theory of morality.

In addition to this, was it fair of the scientists to take those kids forcefully? To understand this, it would be useful to examine real-life medicine trials and the volunteer process. In general, new medicines go through testing on several levels before reaching human groups. The groups must be consenting adults to test the medicine of their own free will. Not only are the Runners being held against their will, but they also have to endure life-threatening experiences. At the end of the day, do the scientists have a right to decide who can be sacrificed to save humanity?

The final thing I'd like to reference is Kantian Categorical imperatives. Immanuel Kant stated that you shouldn't do anything that would make it so that society no longer functions meaningfully. If you wanted to steal an apple, imagine if everyone in society just stole whatever they wanted- whole economic systems would collapse and leave a destitute country behind. Now, what would happen if everyone decided to abduct hostages and use them for scientific experimentation? Suddenly the population is halved, even quartered, leading to the ultimate degeneration of

humanity. The argument could be made that the world has already been decimated, but surely the greatest good could be best reached with everyone's CONSENTING collaborative effort?

As in most ethical problems, there is no definitive answer to this question. I believe that WICKED could've approached the problem differently, but that could be bias towards the protagonists. We're lucky in the fact that this fictional world exists so we can test our theories. The sad truth, though, is that a universe like the Maze Runner world is becoming reality; soon enough, we have to begin facing new problems that resemble the dilemmas presented to us in this book. We saw it happen in several countries during the pandemic, where people were stripped of basic human rights in order to clear the path for "anti-COVID policies" that turned out to be fundamentally restrictive and had very little to do with the illness at all. All this being said, we can rejoice that the world we see in The Maze Runner is, for now, limited to our fiction.

"It is always best to believe in God, even if you don't."

Belief in God is something that is a point of pride for most Christians- that, even through adversity and obstacles, they managed to maintain their faith in a loving, caring, protective God. However, atheists are less likely to be convinced by merely the allure of such an entity who continues to allow suffering, and does not show any evidence of His own existence. Per the question above, however, we need not be concerned with intricate theodicies and proofs. The real question is, is it ultimately better to force yourself to believe in God, and why would anyone do this?

To Blaise Pascal, a 17th century philosopher, mathematician and pragmatist, the answer was all too simple. His proof relies on pure logic. In Christianity, there are only 4 possible outcomes:

1) Believe in God and He exists	2) Don't believe in God and He doesn't exist
3) Believe in God and He doesn't exist	4) Don't believe in God and He exists

We can ignore outcomes 2 and 3 because if they occur, all it means is that there is no life after death, and there is therefore nothing to be concerned about. However, outcomes 1 and 4 are game changers, because if you believe in God and He exists, you stand the chance of spending eternity in paradise. On the other hand, denying God's existence only for Him to be real would surely land you in the pit of eternal damnation- Hell. Quite frankly, if there's a 50% chance God exists- we can infer this from the number of outcomes where He exists (2) divided by the total outcomes (4)- you can choose between infinite gain and infinite loss. Therefore, it only makes sense that, even if don't- and have never- believed in God, it statistically makes the most sense to live like someone who believes in God, if only to avoid endless punishment.

Now, Pascal isn't completely irrational, contrary to what this argument might suggest to some. He acknowledged that it might seem like a waste of time to go to church and study the Bible, and it

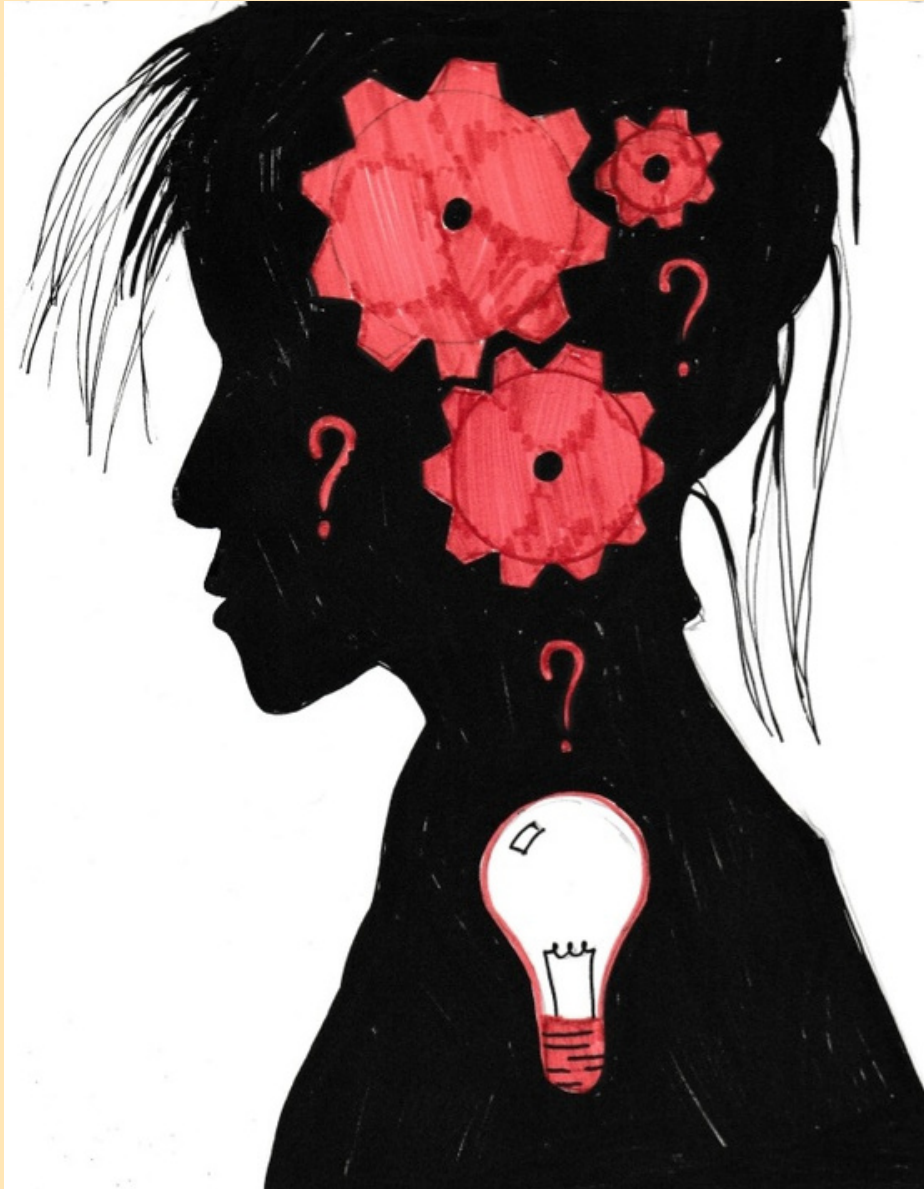
would certainly be an inconvenience to change your lifestyle to fit that of a devout Christian. But, Pascal says, is it not worth it to “go through the motions” to achieve the ultimate reward, especially in comparison to the (relative) brevity of human life span? This is a very surprising argument to make, given Pascal was a theists, and his thought experiment is known as Pascal’s Wager.

The most glaring criticism of this argument is that God is probably not a fan of such glaring self-interest; in other words, God would only want you to believe if you really do believe. However, Pascal argues that this is, in fact, untrue, as God doesn’t care how or why you come to believe in His existence- he just accepts whoever comes to Him for guidance. In addition to this, Pascal also stated that if you fake it long enough, eventually you will get to a point where you start to truly believe in Christianity and its values. He posited that that people who have a faith are generally happier because they have the reassurance that someone is always watching over them; that everything in life has a purpose; and that, to theists, death isn’t quite the end.

The other criticism is, who’s to say that Pascal’s Wager can only be applied to the God of Christianity? This is a blind spot that many theodicies, including this one, fall prey to. There hasn’t been a reason provided in the argument that this line of rationale can only be applied to the Christian god. What about Allah or a polytheistic system like that of Hinduism? Surely Pascal didn’t even think of this, or if he did, dismissed other religions entirely (which wouldn’t be the first time that happened, 17th-century England).

To conclude this essay, I very much agree with the starting statement. Pascal’s Wager is an argument that is very well grounded in logic and reasoning, and the subsequent defenses of the argument seem to be watertight. At the end of the day, this isn’t your usual theodicy relying on the cyclical logic of God’s order in the Bible we are trying to prove. Even if this was not Pascal’s intent, I believe it can be used as a sound argument for the pursuit of any religion that has customary rites and practices, making it a (unique but) convincing thought experiment.

Artistic Philosophy



Created by Astrid M in 10W, this image focuses on human identity- or rather, our lack of understanding of it. Scientists and philosophers alike cannot decipher what makes us, us. If we argue that we stay ourselves because we stay in the same body, how can we explain maintaining our sense of self even though cells are constantly dying and being replaced? No one is identical to how they looked at birth. If you believe the secret is in memories, what happens when you lose them? Do you stay the same person if this happens? Maybe the answer is in a combination of the two, or neither. Either way, as much as we don't know the answer, our sense of identity is said to be one of the things that set humans apart from other animals- maybe the reason our society is as complex yet (overall) harmonious as it presently is.

Thank you to Astrid for sending this in!

In Retrospect: AI

A year ago I wrote an article titled "Will AI take over the world and enslave us all?" A slightly clickbait-y title, but nonetheless, the article explored whether AI would ever truly be able to think like humans and learn our ways. I previously explored things like Searle's Chinese Room, Turing's Test, and my conclusion was that, due to the intricacies of human language(s) and behaviours, this would ultimately be impossible.

How wrong I was.

I'm sure you're sick of hearing it, but the advancement of ChatGPT has tricked college professors who were unable to distinguish between essays written by their students from AI. The advent of art created by AI generation using smart prompts, even social media algorithms on TikTok, YouTube and Instagram that force us into an echo chamber of repetitive content in the name of profit, much like us humans recommend music and movies to each other. Now the education system is adapting to these new facets of society, but this does not change the fact that it's getting harder and harder to distinguish human media from artificially generated media.

Computers can make decisions and recognise objects (and language models and video and photo content) through a process called machine learning. This entails the machine being presented with a few stimuli, then creating groups or categories of these and receiving positive or negative feedback. A considerably basic example is asking a computer to identify an animal as a dog or cat given a set of images. The computer gets the first few right and receives positive feedback on each choice, but then misidentifies a cat as a dog. This wrong choice is then corrected by an operator (ie negative feedback). This means, on the next round of texting, the computer is less likely to misidentify an image. Once a computer had repeated this process enough to be accurate beyond a certain threshold (in this case, 95%) it can then execute this process with a different computer.

Does this sound familiar? Probably not, until you realise that this is exactly how humans learn in real life.

None of us is born knowing what is right and wrong in this world (whatever perspective right or wrong is viewed from), and the reason we do is because we make mistakes. We start out doing well- most infants rarely get reprimanded because they are new to the world and get a free pass for certain bad behaviours- this changes as they become toddlers with more advanced brain functions.

If a child smacks someone else, you scold them, because in most cases violence is the incorrect response to a situation. An older child might be caught cheating on a test and told that it's dishonest. We are also rewarded for positive behaviours- think house points in school or a cash gift for returning lost property.

As humans, our experiences are the stimuli we receive, a telling off is negative feedback and a reward is positive feedback. At a base level, we already operate very much like computers.

I can already hear you protesting, though. Someone, somewhere has gone (well, computers aren't capable of free thought, are they? I am!" Or maybe no one thought that and I'm just saying this for the sake of moving the essay along (which clearly did not work). Either way, if we ignore the principles of hard and soft determinism- which another article will explain- you're not as capable of free thought as you might think.

Many of us know computers are programmed- essentially given a set of axioms, rules and code that instruct them on how to process and express certain information (this is a very base comparison, so forgive me, any Computer Science teachers or students). Computers are generally unable to break free from their code unless a major event occurs. This is relevant to us because, in a way, from birth, we are programmed by the people around us and their circumstances- only we call it conditioning. The things that form the basis of your self are influenced by things you heard and saw around you growing up and during your formative

years. Your political opinions, favourite foods and even tolerance for the weather are heavily influenced by factors out of your control. And just like us, computers can be programmed with preset prejudicial views and responses, as shown by ChatGPT when asked to compare Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

Even after these key developmental stages, we are still very prone to external influence. When last did you hop on a bandwagon on social media without really knowing the true gist of the event?

The point I'm making is, the foundation of your life- opinions, thoughts, self and worldview, created during those early years, is strong and sturdy and virtually unshakeable, barring a major, possibly traumatic event that forces you to change. While making this comparison, I'm not trying to minimise anyone's trauma. Even positive life experiences are mirrored by a computer installing a beneficent update, and can change computers (and humans) for the better.

In the midst of all this, one of the most common arguments against my original theory is that computers are unable to feel emotion. However, let's look at it from a different angle. The definition of a psychopath is a complicated one, illustrated by VSAUCE2's recent video on the topic, but one of psychopathy's major markers is the inability to feel most "human" emotions, like compassion or sadness or concern. If this is the case, are we implying that psychopaths are merely glorified computers? Some of the words used to describe psychopaths include "calculated", "emotionless", "inhuman". All words that we can apply to computers, or at least their executed commands. Extrapolating this might lead us to the conclusion that if we strip away what we perceive as human about us, our bodies and feelings, we might find that computers are really just advanced brains.

This shouldn't be a surprise. Computers were initially modeled after the human brain and functioned to complete human tasks at higher speed and efficiency. One could conjecture that, had computers initially been designed to mimic all parts of the human brain, not just the algorithmic problem-solving parts, we could very well have reached genuine intelligence in computers by now.

One could conjecture that computers are the most efficient form of the human brain, not only faster and often more precise than the ones we have, but unclouded by emotion and based in pure logic.

In response to the reasons I outlined in the initial article, I don't believe AI can fully replace humans in certain aspects of the workforce. Unfortunately, these aspects are quickly dwindling as even artists, paragons of creativity, are concerned about becoming obsolete due to AI-generated art. What I can also say is that I believe it is far from impossible that AI could evolve from what it presently is into something indistinguishable from humans. And in that case, I would be more than happy to treat them as such.

Speed-running Philosophy

This is the newest section where we explain YOUR favourite philosophical concepts 'n' queries in 150 words or fewer. Send in your suggestions in time for the next edition!

- “God is Dead” - Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche's statement here was gravely, unforgivably misunderstood by his peers, and pretty much everyone after that, as gloating over the so-called “death” of God. His actual narrative was that, due to the age of rapid enlightenment and scientific advancement he lived in, he was surrounded by an ever-increasing number of atheists. On top of this, these people with their new scientific beliefs were often quick to scorn believers, dismissing their views as rigid and outdated at best, and heretical at worst. The end of Nietzsche's quote is, “God remains dead, and we have killed him.” His whole argument was that the idea of God, as a symbol of truth, certainty, stability and faith, had been destroyed by relentless scientific innovation. Unlike the abridged quote seems to suggest, he was lamenting this fact, not rejoicing in the downfall of God. Nietzsche was ultimately a man tortured by his personal philosophical revelations, with some even speculating these brought on his death, and his words have been so thoroughly misconstrued that his entire point was flipped on its head.

- “The life of man [...] is nasty, brutish and short.” - Thomas Hobbes

Hobbes is known as the father of contractarianism, and for good reason. He wasn't foretelling the inescapable terrible end of a human life- rather, he's suggesting that, without the rules of society that force us to give up personal freedoms for the collective good, life would be a lot more unpleasant than it is right now. Without these laws, there is no trust between people in a society, meaning it would always be better to act in selfish interest. However, it's important to remember that everyone else is doing this too, and their selfish interests might be to your detriment. The fact that you live in a society with laws protects us from the inherently selfish nature of human existence by punishing those who go against the accepted moral codes and collective responsibilities.

Phi-2MTHO

What I thought philosophy will be like:



Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man.

-David Hume

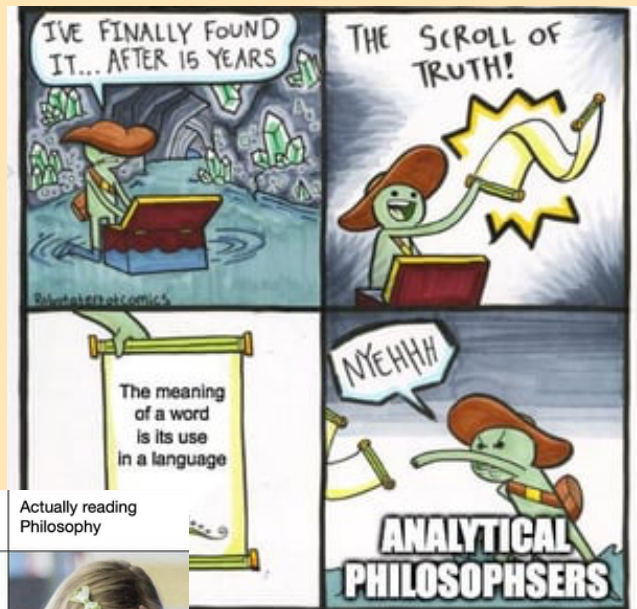
What it's actually like:



When we press one eye with a finger, we immediately perceive all the objects to become double, and one half of them to be removed from their common and natural position.

-David Hume

20% of the reason why people react to philosophy memes: they are funny
80% of the reason why people react to philosophy memes:



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- special thanks to Astrid M for her specially commissioned philosophical artwork.

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