

TEN REASONS NOT TO DO PHILOSOPHY

I am sure that most of you here think there are good reasons to do philosophy. Certainly I can think of five good reasons.

In the first place I am certain that you all think that it is a good thing to think; and, of course, philosophy just is the science or craft of thinking.

In the second place you are all going to go to university soon, and as you perhaps know, universities are places where you are supposed to learn to think. Thus it was that the first universities were the philosophical academies of Plato and Aristotle; and even today a university that lacks a philosophy department is simply an imposter.

In the third place you might have noticed that thinking *lasts*. There is an aspect of the eternal in good thinking. And so it is that so many of the universally known names of History - not only Plato and Aristotle, but St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, George Hegel, Soren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, John Paul Sartre and Simone deBeuvoir – are all philosophers.¹

In the fourth place you might just be consumed with curiosity about the big issues. Is there a God? Are human beings free? Do they have a mind that is more than the brain? Is anything really, objectively, right or wrong? What is truth? What is knowledge? What is Being? And where can these things be found? And so on.

And finally, and because as a philosopher you are a thinker *par excellence*, you are very employable; for many employers know that you don't have to teach someone trained in philosophy how to think, analyse, argue or write.

¹ And not quite all male.

But let's be careful, and let's be fair. For there are reasons *not* to do philosophy; and I think I ought to present some of them to you before you make, what is, a momentous decision.

The first reason not to do philosophy is that it can be fatal. This is no exaggeration, it is just a fact. The person we usually think of as the founder of the whole shebang, Socrates, was executed by Athens in 399 BC for practicing philosophy. He was, apparently, “corrupting the youth” by encouraging them to ask smart arse questions of their elders which they – as is often the case – found themselves ill-equipped to answer. Understandably this upset them. Very much. And so they took Drastic Action. So I warn you, smart arse questions can get you into serious trouble.

The second reason not to do philosophy is precisely what led Socrates to ask his dangerous questions in the first place. It sensitizes you to bullshit. It gives you a thin skin when it comes to nonsense, balderdash, blather, bunkum, claptrap, drivel, garbage, idiocy, piffle, poppycock, rigmarole, rubbish, spin, tomfoolery, trash and twaddle. And don't think this is a good thing, or that others will think it a good thing. After all we are surrounded by bullshit; it is, probably, our major resource and our major product. Bullshit makes the world go round; it oils the hinges of life; it enlivens the conversational world; and it is available to everyone, free of charge. To be sensitized to it is to be in a pitiable state. It is to be always hurting, and always finding new ways to be hurt.

The third reason not do philosophy, like the first, concerns your health. For even if you are not given the ultimate punishment for asking smart arse questions of bullshit artists, still you will spend a lot of time sitting, reading, thinking and writing. Your cardio-vascular fitness will inevitably suffer, your behind will spread, and you will squint. It can't be helped. It's just the way it is. And don't believe all that stuff about the sexiness of a beautiful mind. I mean who wants a beautiful mind in a big bummed, squinting mess of palpitations, leg swellings and fatigue?

The fourth reason not to do philosophy is aesthetic. Have a good look at me. You see what I'm saying? Philosophers are not a pretty bunch. In fact, the collective noun for a group of philosophers

is an ugly of philosophers. Yes, a philosopher may be good, or they may be bad, but typically they will be ugly. Again this goes back to the unfortunate Socrates. He had bug eyes, a bulging forehead, wing nut ears and baboon nostrils. And get this – he liked looking like that! Well, are you prepared to sign up to the ugly bunch?

The fifth reason not to do philosophy is that it will deform your character. You will lose any shred of intellectual modesty. No-one else's work will ever be as good or as brilliant as yours. There is, in fact, a unique mental disorder available only to philosophers. It is that inferiority complex which leads you to think others work might sometimes be as good as yours. Such a disorder is crippling, and I hope you are not naïve enough to expect any sympathy for your sufferings from your fellow philosophers.

The sixth reason not to do philosophy was pointed out by the Monty Python boys. For some reason – perhaps connected with their poor physical shape, their offensive looks, their sensitivity to bullshit, and their lurking death wish – philosophers have a tendency to get smashed, and – even worse – to take pride in getting smashed. As by now you might suspect, Socrates lies at the heart of the problem. In the *Symposium* he takes great pride in drinking all night and drinking everyone else under the table. Hegel, of course, never once approached sobriety; and you couldn't prize the pint from Wittgenstein's hand. So if you value your liver, perhaps economics is your cup of tea.

The seventh reason not to do philosophy - assuming you need another, given your poor physical shape, your unfortunate colleagues, your pitiful social skills and your alcohol problem – is that you will not actually *so/ve* anything. With most jobs you finish something. You draw up a set of plans, you build a house, you mow your lawn, you build a better mouse trap – you start something and you finish it. Then you put your feet up and feel proud of what you have accomplished. Not in philosophy. In philosophy everything gets started, but nothing is ever finished. We still don't know if there is a God or not; or if human beings are free. We don't know whether the mind is more than the brain, or whether there are objective moral values. We still don't know what truth, or knowledge or being are, or where they are to be found.

The eighth reason not to do philosophy is a matter of social decorum. Philosophers are prone to talking to themselves. And not just talking to themselves, but to arguing and haranguing themselves. The reason for this is that because philosophy insists that thinking is *allowed*, it follows – does it not? – that it is best done *aloud*. Of course it is not all downside here. Sure people will eye you strangely and edge away from you, but some of them will give you money “for a cup of tea”, or “a bite to eat”. One of my former colleagues once collected over \$100 dollars in two hours in the Sydney mall. All by sitting down and thinking aloud about the inner contradictions of the Hegelian dialectic. But for all the upside, there is still the downside. After all, there you are; a physically repulsive drunk mumbling to yourself about incomprehensible matters reduced to begging in the streets. Not so different, come to think of it, from what Socrates was up to in Ancient Athens. And who can forget how he ended up?

The ninth reason not to do philosophy is that it is a proven relationship wrecker. I mean who would want to be in a relationship with one in the first place? Who could possibly be expected to put up with that mumbling, drooling, wreck, sitting all day at their desk and working on a heart problem? Socrates wife, Xanthippe, refused to let him into their house, on the grounds that not only was he an ugly drunk, he just wouldn't shut up. He argued about everything, she said, and he always had to have the last word. At that moment, legend has it, she emptied a chamber pot over his head, leading the Master to remark that “After the thunder there generally falls rain”.

And so to the final, and tenth, reason for not doing philosophy. It is this. After having brilliantly, and conclusively, stated your mind, so that, as far as you are concerned, there is nothing more to be said, you have to say something like this: *Any questions?*

*Tony Lynch,
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