

PHILOSOPHY FOR TEENS

Ideas and Ideals

By

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PREFACE

How will high school graduates defend themselves from the sharks of deception lurking in the alleyways of life? Sharks like advertisers when they create desires for things we don't need; businesspersons when they hope our eyes won't fall on the fine print; reporters when they slant the news on TV, radio, newspapers, magazines; politicians when they represent lobbyists instead of needy citizens.

These wicked thoughts rumbled in my head after I retired from teaching philosophy to college students. Leisure allowed me to reflect about the few years I had taught Latin to high school students. Concern obsessed me about high school graduates who will never attend college and college students who will never enroll in a philosophy course.

By philosophy I mean practical philosophy with an emphasis on logic and ethics.

The Sword of Logic

Years in the arena of the classroom and in the arena of public life convinced me that cloudy thinking, even in educated minds, seeps down from the failure of differentiating scientific, philosophical, and religious problems. This master persuasion did not germinate from the soil of logic textbooks. Therefore I have insisted on how to recognize these three sets of problems in several chapters.

The Shield of Ethics

Chapter 21 unfolds a few practical guidelines on how to judge right and wrong actions regardless of one's religion or the lack thereof. (Chapter 23 outlines six stages of

moral development.) These ethical guidelines are applicable in all the chapters featuring the ethical issues of the death penalty, pornography, abortion, etc.

A vein of tolerance urges its path throughout all the ethical disputes. Tolerance is a virtue by which a person strives to understand and to allow another person's different view. America is the only country in the world that is home to such a large population of different peoples with so many different religions. It remains an ongoing experiment whether we can all live in peace in spite of our various religious beliefs and practices.

Let's Be Practical

This book skips over the history of philosophy and speculative problems such as free will and whether we can prove that the watermelon is on the table and not in our head. None of the practical issues selected dies from exhausted treatment. I selected practical problems that will last the lifetime of high school students. As in literary anthologies, it is impossible that the selections will please everyone. Technical words are avoided like the plague or immediately explained. The vocabulary is designed to express not to impress.

The purpose of the book is to equip the reader with a method of approaching problems: to locate the precise problem, to select the appropriate thinking tools with which to analyze and discuss, to avoid the obvious incorrect answers, to separate the pro and con answers, to find the direction leading to the correct answer, and sometimes to find the exact answer.

The False Fear of Philosophy

If it's true that many admirable Christians run the other way when they see a philosopher, to them I say there is no confrontation between philosophy and religion. Some rowdy philosophers in past history gave philosophy a bad name. Forgive them.

From the infant centuries of the Christian religion to the present time, philosophy served as the handmaiden of religion. Philosophy was always ready to show the reasonableness of religious teachings. A lyrical axiom always floated in clerical circles: the better philosopher you are, the better theologian you will be.

To be different is not the same as to confront. This book donates a generous amount of space to illustrate the important distinction between the two disciplines. Philosophy, properly understood, will not weaken one's religion but strengthen it.

If this book shapes the lifestyle for good of only one student, it would have been worth the toil.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am profoundly indebted to my wife, Phyllis Johansen Cook, for her insightful editorial contributions and to Jean Walsh for her devoted computer expertise.

Many thoughts expressed in this book can be traced to the numerous 101 philosophy textbooks used in my courses over the past decades. To their authors I acknowledge a deep gratitude. Their names are legion.

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

There Are Only Three Royal Highways To The Kingdom Of Knowledge

“A good mind possesses a kingdom.” (1)

Seneca

The Kingdom Of Knowledge

Scientist	Philosopher	Non-Specialist	Mystic
I like senses	I like reason	I like authority	I like intuition

Announcement

Everything we humans know flows from our senses, reason, authority. These are the only three highways to knowledge simply because of the structure of the universe and of ourselves.

John Doe: Why must we be aware of these three separate tools of collecting knowledge?

Philosopher: Awareness will help us to think more clearly.

Scientist: And assist us in avoiding unending discussions. Excuse me. I must return to my laboratory.

The Five Senses

When Mary observes, “It’s raining,” her sense of sight is working. When Cindy remarks, “It’s noisy,” her sense of hearing is operating. When Nathan shouts, “What a delicious banana!” his sense of taste is active. When Keith whispers, “This rose is fragrant,” his sense of smell is engaged. “What a soft marshmallow,” signifies that Angela is utilizing her sense of touch.

Scientists

Scientists specialize in harnessing the senses to harvest an abundance of facts. When these dedicated workers are absorbed in experiments, they press into service an arsenal of instruments, which extend the powers of the senses. The microscope stretches the power of sight. Scientists are fond of the term, “empirical evidence,” evidence gathered by the five senses as in the examples above. Naturally, they also use reason and the authority of earlier scientists.

Reason

Just as scientists emphasize senses, philosophers emphasize reason. When Shawn jogged by the smoldering embers of the local bank, his reason invited him to conclude, “A fire burned down this building.” What caused Shawn to arrive at this conclusion? After all, he did not witness the fire. Apparently, the empirical evidence, the embers, impacted his senses of sight and smell causing his reason to conclude that a fire burned the bank. From one source of knowledge, the senses, Shawn continued to another source of knowledge,

reason.

A celebrated example of reasoning after the use of the senses is that of Darwin, the English biologist, who saw thousands of animals and fossil remains, i.e., empirical evidence, which guided him to reason to the theory, not the fact, of evolution. This is an example of the process of reasoning without specifying whether it's correct or incorrect reasoning.

Philosophers

Philosophers enjoy a reputation as thinkers; scientists as doers. Before philosophers begin to puzzle over a problem related to science they peep into the laboratories of the scientists to learn from them. Afterwards philosophers ask questions which lie beyond the range of scientific inquiry. For example, philosophers learn the big-bang theory and then ask themselves, "Was there always matter before the big-bang? Will matter always exist?" (Chaps. 9 and 10 explore these questions.)

A scientist does not fuss over such inquiries; he lacks empirical evidence. A philosopher jumps into these inquiries precisely because there is no empirical evidence.

If we glance at scientists and philosophers, we notice that they both sport the same t-shirt with the words, "Show me. I come from Missouri." They are informing us that they demand empirical evidence and reasons respectively.

Incidentally, philosophers and mathematicians, from masters of arithmetic to trigonometry, must be blood brothers because both shun authority as much as their specialties allow.

Authority

The third royal highway to the kingdom of knowledge is authority: statements of experts of various specialties. Our brains are overheated with facts accepted on the authority of parents, teachers, doctors, scientists, historians, etc. At some future date, a cultural anthropologist may calculate the average daily frequency that we humans utilize empirical evidence, authority, and reason.

Non-Specialists

We are all non-specialists in the areas of knowledge about which we know little or nothing. Therefore, we are compelled to depend on experts. Due to our limitation of time and ability we accept the authority of others for tons of knowledge. Up to the age of reason we rely on the authority of our elders. This dependency continues into adulthood. Who can deny that our knowledge of history is almost entirely grounded on the authority of historians? We never saw Julius Caesar invade Britain but we believe historians who “prove” he did.

Mystics and Their Intuitions

Does anyone travel on the fourth highway to the kingdom of knowledge called intuition? (Dictionaries list various meanings of intuition.) Religious mystics, (Meister Eckhart, St. Theresa of Avila) and non-religious, (Alfred Lord Tennyson) assassins of kings and presidents all claim to be regular hikers on the mystic road less traveled. Their source of knowledge is not senses, reason or authority, but a direct line to God or the Ultimate. Is this

direct line a trustworthy fountain of knowledge?

“Yes” thunder the mystics. So firmly do they believe in God’s communications to them personally that they are willing to be burned at the stake.

“No” counter their objectors. “Or at least prove it! With all due respect, you may be suffering from hallucinations, even saintly ones.”

Summary

The only tools we humans use to learn anything are the senses, reason, and authority. The scientists rely heavily on the senses for their accumulation of knowledge; the philosophers on reason; and the non-specialists on authority of experts.

Working Out

1. Write in between the parentheses to indicate which of the three sources of knowledge the statement is based on: senses, reason, authority.
 - a) The date of Napoleon’s retreat from Russia is 1812 according to my history book. ()
 - b) Adrian whispers to Simon: “As soon as I entered my room and viewed the wreckage (), I knew that a thug had burglarized my apartment.” ()
2. Scribble three sentences exemplifying the use of the senses, three exemplifying the use of reason, and three the use of authority.
3. Are there intelligent human beings besides us earthlings in the universe?

Which ONE of the three responses would you choose and explain why.

a) Yes, God told me in a dream last night. (Appeal to intuition)

b) Yes, some scientists say so. (Appeal to authority)

c) No, not until you show me one. (Appeal to senses)

4. Although there is nothing in fictional literature to illustrate the three sources of knowledge as expressed in this chapter, there is a fascinating “Benjy section” of Faulkner’s novel, *The Sound and The Fury*, in which all the events are narrated through the eyes of a 33-year-old idiot. The events are sensory, without order or logic. On the other hand, the “Quentin section” is narrated by a reasoning, intelligent, suicidal mind. Contrast the two types of thinking (the sensory and the reasoning) with examples from the novel.
5. Comment on the epigraph.

A Richter Scale of Truth

“The most important solutions in life are usually those of probability.”

F. S. de Laplace

I got FACTS I got OPINIONS I got GUESSES I got (plenty of) NOTHING

Two of the royal highways to the kingdom of knowledge are the senses and reason. Might it be useful to become aware of an evaluation of statements based on the senses and reason according to the state of mind regarding truth? A Richter scale from certitude to ignorance may help. An awareness of evaluation of statements sharpens our analytic skills.

EVALUATION of statements	DEGREE of certitude	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Fact	10	Statement of certitude with empirical evidence	I see a cow.
Opinion	7	More probable statement with much evidence	He’s guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.
Opinion	5	Less probable statement with little evidence	All nations will live in peace.
Guess (impressions, hunches)	1	Statement with no evidence, only feelings	The teacher does not like me.
Ignorance	0	Statement with no evidence, no feelings. Culpable ignorance	“Officer, I did not know the speed limit.”
Ignorance	0	Inculpable ignorance	“I don’t understand Einstein.”

Climbing Exercises on the Richter Scale (2)

1. Construct a Richter Scale of your own or revamp the scale above. You might prefer to say that all nations will live in peace is a guess.
2. Substitute all the examples above with your own examples.
3. Comment on the epigraph.