The New York Times
Opinionator

JANUARY 25, 2012, 9:05 PM

Philosophy — What's the Use?

By GARY GUTTING

The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers on issues both timely and timeless.

Tags:

Ethics, Philosophy

Almost every article that appears in The Stone provokes some comments from readers challenging the very idea that philosophy has anything relevant to say to non-philosophers. There are, in particular, complaints that philosophy is an irrelevant "ivory-tower" exercise, useless to any except those interested in logic-chopping for its own sake.

There is an important conception of philosophy that falls to this criticism. Associated especially with earlier modern philosophers, particularly René Descartes, this conception sees philosophy as the essential *foundation* of the beliefs that guide our everyday life. For example, I act as though there is a material world and other people who experience it as I do. But how do I know that any of this is true? Couldn't I just be dreaming of a world outside my thoughts? And, since (at best) I see only other human bodies, what reason do I have to think that there are any minds connected to those bodies? To answer these questions, it would seem that I need rigorous philosophical arguments for my existence and the existence of other thinking humans.

Of course, I don't actually need any such arguments, if only because I have no practical alternative to believing that I and other people exist. As soon as we stop thinking weird philosophical thoughts, we immediately go back to believing what skeptical arguments seem to call into question. And rightly so, since, as David Hume pointed out, we are human beings before we are philosophers.

But what Hume and, by our day, virtually all philosophers are rejecting is only what I'm calling the *foundationalist* conception of philosophy. Rejecting foundationalism means accepting that we have every right to hold basic beliefs that are not legitimated by philosophical reflection. More recently, philosophers as different as Richard Rorty and Alvin Plantinga have cogently argued that such basic beliefs include not only the "Humean" beliefs that no one can do without, but also substantive beliefs on controversial questions of ethics, politics and religion. Rorty, for example, maintained that the basic principles of liberal democracy require no philosophical grounding ("the

priority of democracy over philosophy").

If you think that the only possible "use" of philosophy would be to provide a foundation for beliefs that need no foundation, then the conclusion that philosophy is of little importance for everyday life follows immediately. But there are other ways that philosophy can be of practical significance.

Even though basic beliefs on ethics, politics and religion do not require prior philosophical justification, they do need what we might call "intellectual maintenance," which itself typically involves philosophical thinking. Religious believers, for example, are frequently troubled by the existence of horrendous evils in a world they hold was created by an all-good God. Some of their trouble may be emotional, requiring pastoral guidance. But religious commitment need not exclude a commitment to coherent thought. For instance, often enough believers want to know if their belief in God makes sense given the reality of evil. The philosophy of religion is full of discussions relevant to this question. Similarly, you may be an atheist because you think all arguments for God's existence are obviously fallacious. But if you encounter, say, a sophisticated version of the cosmological argument, or the design argument from fine-tuning, you may well need a clever philosopher to see if there's anything wrong with it.

Related More From The Stone
Read previous contributions to this series.

In addition to defending our basic beliefs against objections, we frequently need to clarify what our basic beliefs mean or logically entail. So, if I say I would never kill an innocent person, does that mean that I wouldn't order the bombing of an enemy position if it might kill some civilians? Does a commitment to democratic elections require one to accept a fair election that puts an anti-democratic party into power? Answering such questions requires careful conceptual distinctions, for example, between direct and indirect results of actions, or between a morality of intrinsically wrong actions and a morality of consequences. Such distinctions are major philosophical topics, of course, and most non-philosophers won't be in a position to enter into high-level philosophical discussions. But there are both non-philosophers who are quite capable of following such discussions and philosophers who enter public debates about relevant topics.

The perennial objection to any appeal to philosophy is that philosophers themselves disagree among themselves about everything, so that there is no body of philosophical knowledge on which non-philosophers can rely. It's true that philosophers do not agree on answers to the "big questions" like God's existence, free will, the nature of moral obligation and so on. But they do agree about many logical interconnections and conceptual distinctions that are essential for thinking clearly about the big questions. Some examples: thinking about God and evil requires the key distinction between evil that is gratuitous (not necessary for some greater good) and evil that is not gratuitous; thinking about free will requires the distinction between a choice's being caused and its being compelled; and thinking about morality requires the distinction between an action

that is intrinsically wrong (regardless of its consequences) and one that is wrong simply because of its consequences. Such distinctions arise from philosophical thinking, and philosophers know a great deal about how to understand and employ them. In this important sense, there is body of philosophical knowledge on which non-philosophers can and should rely.