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Why Philosophy?

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Why Philosophy? · *Simon Blackburn*

IT IS A GREAT HONOUR to be invited to give this lecture on this topic. The honour was not lessened by my first reflection. This was that the lecture was bound to be either unnecessary, or ineffectual. Unnecessary, because in the United States there is still an admirable background respect for liberal and humane studies that is now vanishing in my country. Or at least, if you feel this is too optimistic, there will be this respect in people who arrange and attend such lectures as this. Many of you will feel in your bones that philosophy needs no more explanation or defence than other components of the good civilized life: music, literature, art. Although I hope such people do not all leave at this point, I confess that they will not need my lecture. On the other hand if, in spite of this background respect, there are others who think that the practise of philosophy is akin to the practise of sorcery, a confidence trick played on universities by people too lazy to go into a library or a laboratory—then I fear I will not convert them.

But I hasten to add that this is not my fault. I do not think you are converted to the value of art or music or literature by lectures either. You are drawn into an understanding of their value by looking, listening, reading, and practising. After you do that, you begin to find that your life would be impoverished by their absence, whether or not you had noticed that before. It is no different with philosophy, which is only appreciated by practising it, doing it, living with it. Not, I am afraid, by hearing people like me talk about it. An hour spent trying—really trying—to reconcile free will with determinism, or to refute Hume on miracles, or to understand why you think your neighbour sees colours the same way that you do, would be far better. Of course, some amongst you may have no inclination to spend an hour doing these things. Perhaps you suffer from philosophy blindness. Since this defect is quite common it is more respectable than other kinds of blindness. In any case it shares with them the property that it cannot be cured by lectures.

Having proved to myself that my lecture was either unnecessary or irrelevant, I should perhaps have withdrawn. But being a philosopher, I started to reflect on my proof, and on the real problems of explaining and defending the activity itself. I found this a useful thing to do, and then I

began to think that if I found it interesting, perhaps there would be an audience which would also like to hear it. So my proof collapsed! There must be an audience who might be interested in following the matter further: there could be a lecture after all. And here it is.

Why Philosophy? There is a well-known reply to a question of this form supposed to have been given by the Dean of Christchurch, Oxford, in the nineteenth century. Dean Gaisford was asked by a visiting lady what was the value of Classical Studies. “Madam,” he replied, “it elevates above the common herd, it enables us to read the word of our Saviour in the original Greek, and it not infrequently leads to positions of considerable emolument, both in this life and in that which is to come.” Snobbery, an historical mistake, and a complacent acceptance of self-confirming social norms according to which those of a classical education got paid more, at least in Victorian Britain, and hence probably in the life to come. Can we do better, not necessarily in defending a classical education, but in defending philosophy?

As a preliminary I should say a little about what I take philosophy to be. The public perception is partly flattering, and partly not. The flattering part is the attribution of wisdom, of lofty disdain for the trivialities of life. The unflattering part is that this is all there is to it. Both sides are encapsulated in an apocryphal conversation. Two people were gossiping about a misfortune one of them had suffered, and the friend consoled the other with the remark, “Well dear, you’ve got to be philosophical—just don’t think about it.” One can point to philosophy: it is the practise of thinking about certain specific questions—those that occur in the curricula. Some of these are natural to everyone: why is there something and not nothing? How should we live? What does it all mean? Some are highly abstract: what is mind? matter? reason? truth? What are numbers? thoughts? laws of nature? What makes one opinion true and another false? Some are quite specific: can we make sense of free will, self-deception, rights, obligations? The lists can be constructed, but the trouble with this kind of answer is that it does nothing to tell us why a question gets to be on the list, or whether indeed it should be there. It fails to say, for example, why questions about mind are addressed in philosophy departments as well as in psychology departments, or why the rights and wrongs of particular actions, such as euthanasia or abortion, are found discussed by philosophers as well as by lawyers. What is the common denominator?

The answer is that in philosophical discussion the topic shifts in a characteristic way. The shift is self-reflective in the following sense. A normal discussion will take certain categories of thought for granted. It will use them as a lens through which the topic is seen. Philosophy begins when the properties of the lenses themselves become the topic, or in other words when we begin to reflect on the very categories *through* which we are conducting our thinking. An ordinary discussion, whether, say, it is reasonable to do A rather than B, can ignore the question of what makes one decision reasonable and another not: it is when this category is examined that philosophy starts. A mathematician can proceed using well-known starting points and well-established procedures of proof; but it is when we ask what makes these axioms or these proof procedures good ones that the philosophy of mathematics starts. This is why philosophy is characteristically a process of raising ever more abstract issues. The question, say, of what if anything is common to proof in ethics and in mathematics rapidly raises the question of what counts as proof anywhere, and in distinguishing out things that this might mean we soon find questions about the nature of truth and the nature of meaning. This is not to say that the drive towards abstraction is inevitable: indeed it requires great philosophical skill to know when it is unwise to raise the further questions. But they are always lurking in the background. I shall return to some consequences of this sketch of the activity before the end. Meanwhile, supposing it serves to locate a characteristic philosophical stance and attitude, why should we encourage it?

I begin my discourse on this question—for with true philosopher's cunning I do not go so far as to call it an answer—by making the natural move of distinguishing between a low, pragmatic defence of philosophical activity, and a high, idealistic defence of the same. The low defence tries to show that such activity is an efficient means to other things that we value: to clarity of mind, or flexibility of approach to problems, or to other skills and abilities that our society values. This is the line most easily used to persuade Deans and Governments that philosophical education should be supported. I believe a recent director of the CIA testified in the *New York Times* that the qualities which led him to that particular summit were fostered by reading Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Oxford. Someone who sticks with this line may take the value of these other things, to which philosophy is a means, for granted. Or, more likely, he will imag-

ine clarity or flexibility of mind as itself useful for other purposes: perhaps for the defence of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Living securely and happily demands skills; if the pursuit of philosophy seems to help in the acquisition of some of those skills, then it gains a derivative value as a means to something good.

There is much in this argument. Philosophical education is, I believe, well-adapted to nurture abilities which are needed in many other activities. Young persons who have cut their teeth on philosophical problems of rationality, knowledge, perception, free will; other minds are well-placed to think better about problems of evidence, decision-making, responsibility, ethics, that they will be called upon to deal with in later life. But the defence is not quite plain sailing. For consider that the argument may be tarnished by association. It is replied that the same means-end virtues used to be claimed for the study of classical languages in schools, for example. Yet we now find no particular reason to believe that such study did indeed equip its beneficiaries (or victims) to do better than others in thinking about life's problems. In fact some (including myself) would claim that in some respects they probably did worse, particularly in having had foisted on them the view that a particular kind of pedantic accuracy is the peak intellectual virtue, to the demerit of the open-ended, exploratory, innovative and imaginative attitudes that the pursuit of knowledge really needs. Law has the same problem.

But the argument for philosophy is in better shape than this. The argument for classics demands that we believe in a *transference* of skills and habits across different subject matters. It requires us to suppose that if someone has a good memory for vocabulary, he will probably have it for other things, or if someone can spot grammatical error in Latin, she can probably spot forensic error in the opposing lawyer's case, and so on. Psychological evidence suggests that no such transferences are reliable: people can have remarkable memories in connection with some material, and be no better than average in connection with other material. The duffer who cannot remember Latin vocabulary and grammar may remember bridge hands or chess positions with extraordinary skill. Conversely, the businessman who is as sharp as can be over pork belly futures is a sucker for the first baldness cure that comes along. So the pragmatic merit of the education is called into question. To make the argument for philosophical training better, we must try to establish that in its case we are not dealing with

transference of this kind, but merely with everyday applications of the very same kind of reasonings that fill the philosopher's hours. Moral and practical dispute is not one thing in the study and another thing out of it. Nor is the assessment of argument, the ability to place probabilities and burdens of proof, and many of the other subjects that fill the curriculum.

There is an element of truth in this reply, but again the sceptic will find a rejoinder. For it is not straightforwardly true that there is no change of topic. Philosophy, remember, started with reflection on the categories which are normally just used in forming opinion. The intellectual lens through which we look is what is now looked at. But then there is plenty of scope for persons who are good at thinking about such categories, but bad at using them in mundane affairs. (In the same way you can have someone skilled at looking at eyes, but not very good at using them: a myopic ophthalmologist.) The defence demands that the reasoning skills of everyday life are not so different from those fostered in the study. The philosopher is, as it were, practising an intelligent approach to everyday problems even in office hours. But in that case, what is his separate skill? He begins to sound like someone who could just as well develop his talents by sticking with those ordinary, everyday contexts in which problems of responsibility, ethics, rationality, and so on actually arise. In other words, the nearer the discipline sounds to mere exercise of enlightened common sense, the less it sounds like a separate practise worth pursuing, and conversely, the more it sounds like that, the more difficult it is to believe that its practitioners will be better at everyday applications than the rest of us.

This is not an armchair paradox. There is a real problem about the co-existence of genuine philosophical ability with the everyday ineptitudes of those who have it. Philosophers ought, we think, to acquire wisdom, but many do not, and perhaps no more do than do from other walks of life. If their skills do not transfer from the study to life, then it will be difficult to defend the education provided by insisting on the connexion. So this part of the low pragmatic ground becomes boggy. Is there another?

So far we have talked of the furthering of skills used in pursuing other ends. There is also a negative, or defensive side to it. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan records going up to Oxford at the time of the First World War, and having his first philosophy lecture begin with the words: "Young men, when you leave this place you will take up many professions. Some of you will go into the civil service, some will be lawyers,

teachers, or businessmen. Some will go into academic life. Except perhaps for this last group, nothing of what I am about to say will be the slightest use. Except for this fact. If you pay attention, and you are diligent, then ever afterwards you will be able to tell when a man is talking nonsense.” And this was justification enough. Philosophical practise inevitably encourages critical and reflective modes of thought. As Hume put it, “the spirit of accuracy, however acquired, carries [every art or profession] nearer its perfection, and renders them more subservient to the interests of society. And though a philosopher may live remote from business, the genius of philosophy, if carefully cultivated by several, must gradually diffuse itself throughout the whole society, and bestow a similar correctness on every art and calling.”

There is a well-known story about a trainload of academics en route to a conference. The train crosses a frontier, and passes a sheep. “Oh look,” says the sociologist, “the sheep in this country are black.” “No,” says the physicist, “one sheep in this country is black.” “Too risky,” replies the mathematician, “one sheep in this country is *currently* black.” “Humph,” says the philosopher, “one sheep in this country currently seems black *on one side*.” Certainly such a habit of thought — one making Hamlet seem like an impulsive maniac — arms its followers against believing the first thing they think or the first thing they are told. It shows them the frailty of the “proofs” with which all kinds of ideologies and theories seek to gain acceptance. Indeed, the hallmark of modern philosophy since the Enlightenment is the dethronement of such reliance on Reason as would buttress particular ideologies. From the beginning this has been seen as an essential virtue of philosophy, but also as a two-edged one. The questioning of dogma and invisible presuppositions is no doubt valuable. But how is it to be distinguished from destructive nihilism, rootless inability to form any kind of intellectual or perhaps moral loyalties? A modern disease, but not a modern question. Plato’s answer to it is to ensure that the young study philosophy only after studying other disciplines such as geometry and astronomy, and only after sufficient experience of life (including active service). In a similar vein Aristotle insists that ethics is only a proper study for mature individuals, too settled in a pattern of life for sceptical thoughts to be truly corrosive.

But now we have a rejoinder similar to that given above, against the positive pragmatic argument. There, remember, the problem was that the

topics and skills remain close to those of everyday life, in which case no doubt the activity is useful, but it loses its title to being a separate specialty, or the discipline gains its own identity, but only because the topics and skills remain apart from those needed in other places. Here the dilemma is that either it is only the mature, rooted, practical mind that may be allowed to come to philosophy, since it can handle any destabilising effects properly. But this mind is already fixed in its ways: it is unlikely to be much changed for better or worse. Or, if we unleash the questioning habit on the immature, unprotected young, we risk doing as much harm by undermining proper confidences and loyalties, as we do good by fortifying the mind against false ideologies and false prophets.

We can, of course, thread our way through these dilemmas. The horns are none of them sharp. Skill in reflection may well be apt to further skills in use of the concepts reflected upon; knowing how to handle sceptical arguments well can both protect one against unsupported dogma, and leave one properly confident of those things that deserve allegiance. But these happy outcomes are decidedly likely to depend on the native sense or judgement of the particular individual, and again, if the individual started with that, perhaps he was set to exercise proper rationality without the benefit of philosophy. Altogether, then, the low ground, if not uninhabitable, is decidedly boggy. There is no clear route from admiring businessmen and lawyers to admiring the specific reflective concerns and habits of the philosopher.

The defender of higher ground need not deny any of this, although he is apt to shudder at its coarse, utilitarian form.

The higher ground can be introduced by the story about Lytton Strachey, who was walking in Oxford during the First World War. In those days it was dangerous for a young man not to appear in uniform, and sure enough Strachey was accosted by an aggressive enthusiast, who forced a white feather on him and demanded to know why he was not fighting to defend civilisation. "Madam," he is supposed to have replied, "I am the civilisation they are fighting to defend." Few of us these days have Strachey's confidence. When we find ourselves defending the value of our activity to Deans, or Governments, or just to colleagues or children, we are apt to be far more defensive. We do not take the high hand that engineering, or dentistry, or medicine, or the whole political and economic edifice of society, is there in order that philosophy can be practised, and it would not cut much ice if we did.

It was not always so. For Plato, and for Aristotle, the business of acquiring understanding was the highest possible goal people could aspire to. It set a task which was the proper concern of the highest and best intelligences; it defined the only truly good life that should be spent in the pursuit of that aim. In its extreme form this is what it is to use life properly, and the other desires we may have—for wealth, for health, for life, liberty, and the pursuit of pleasure—ought not to be regarded as fundamental. They fall into place as secondary. These things are worth having, indeed, but as means, for they enable the pursuit of understanding to flourish.

How should we react to this? A great and noble ideal, certainly, but in this extreme form, surely an unsustainable one. The doctrine is that the unexamined life—meaning the life devoid of self-reflection, of understanding of its own sources and its own patterns of desire and conduct—is not worth living. It may contain states of mind that are means to the end, but not the end itself. But surely such a life is sometimes very much worth living. There are people who lead quite enviable lives, without any more than the faintest understanding of the things that Plato and Aristotle cared about so much. They miss something that intellectuals care about, but have other things that they do not—freedom from the cares of thought, for instance. Naturally, one would expect the intellectuals to despise this and to honour their own particular form of activity, but this is special pleading, and it is not clear why it deserves more attention than we would give if a dentist defined the good life as one spent exploring teeth, or the engineer defined it as one spent designing structures.

This however was an extreme reading of the Platonic position—one in which only intellectual reflection counted as a true aim of life. The more plausible claim is that it is one proper end amongst others: to return to the list I started with, it would be valued in the same spirit as music, art, and literature:

How Charming is Divine Philosophy!
Not harsh, and crabbed as dull fools suppose,
But musical as is Apollo's lute,
And a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets,
Where no crude surfeit reigns

as Milton has it. Not everyone is suited to such enjoyments, but there is no need to deny the value of lives which find their concerns elsewhere. Nor

should those who have no appetite for philosophical questions bother unduly. They lack one source of pleasure, but can substitute others, just as the unmusical do, or those incapable of taking pleasure from fine art or writing, or the discrimination of wines.

This is a tempting position, and again there is some truth in it. But it is not quite right. The trouble is that the unphilosophical do not just lack a source of pleasure. They lack something rather different: a capacity for certain kinds of thought, and ultimately for certain kinds of knowledge and self-knowledge. It is because these are the stakes that philosophical blindness typically issues in hostility to philosophy, rather than mere indifference. The fear is that if there were anything to it, then it would be a defect of judgement and understanding not to appreciate it, in which case self-pride demands thinking that there is not anything to it after all (La Rochefoucauld noticed that although men will often mention with a kind of pride their bad memory, nobody ever takes pride in having bad judgement).

It is, I think, a truth well worth pondering, and the central truth that I want to insist upon in my talk, that there is no getting behind philosophy. By that I mean that any attempt to bypass it, or dismiss it, or show that its glories are delusions, is inevitably in the very same ball game. The dismissive mathematician, say, who confidently pronounces the whole activity to be worthless, is not relying on mathematics to deliver such a view. He is philosophising, and may be doing it well or badly. To do it well he would need a view about what makes an inquiry worthwhile; about truth and appropriate ways of finding it, ultimately about the limits of proof and understanding. To whom should he turn to form intelligent views about such matters? He can rely on his own first thoughts, and is probably doing so, but that is always an unwise strategy. For he is in the same arena as Plato, Kant, Wittgenstein, and the other classics in this field. Enter it, by all means, with the firm intention of unseating their doctrines and substituting better ones. But do not think that you thereby escape the thickets and snares that entrapped the others. Indeed nobody has been more fervent in the desire to cut philosophy down to size than the great philosophers. Hume enjoined us to commit to the flames books containing no mathematics or empirical discoveries; Kant entitled his great work the *Critique of Pure Reason*; Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* enjoins us to throw it away after we have climbed it. But each of these great philosophies is full of work and

of controversy. There is no short cut to the position—no philosophically untainted position from which the labours of philosophers can be evaluated, and perhaps diagnosed away.

This truth, that there is no getting behind philosophy, is, I believe, the kernel of the answer to our question. All thought conducts itself using various concepts and procedures, methods and starting points. There is no sharp distinction between using such things, and reflecting on what you are using, and maybe rejecting parts and accepting others. But then you have entered the arena: your questions and problems will be recognizably philosophical, and if conducted at a sufficiently abstract level, your problems will be those that trouble philosophers. So, like speaking prose, philosophising will be something you are doing all your life. The practical question will not be ‘why philosophy?’ for that is unavoidable. It will be ‘how philosophy?’—meaning how best to conduct such thought intelligently, and how best to educate persons so as to do it. Perhaps I can best illustrate the force of this point by comparing the question ‘why ethics?’ Just as you cannot get behind philosophy, so you cannot get behind ethics, for any pattern of life exemplifies a choice as to how to live, and is a fair subject for evaluation and criticism. People may not listen to such criticism, certainly, but that is just another element in a particular form of life, and not one that is so very easy to defend. So the choice is never ‘why ethics?’ but only ‘what kind of ethics?’—whether, for instance, we educate the next generation in the light of Aristotle, or Hume, or John Stuart Mill, or whether we abandon anything to be got from those works, and leave them to the Harvard Business School, or College for Strategic Studies.

So far I have been talking of philosophy as an activity which has existed for several thousand years, and was common to the Greeks and to us. Now we might concentrate a little on the particular forms that this activity has taken in recent years. How is the activity of reflecting on the categories of thought pursued in the present time?

There is usually a lag between common perception of what philosophy is up to, and the actual contemporary scene. My impression is that many colleagues in neighbouring disciplines think of philosophy as dominated still by G. E. Moore’s famous question: what exactly do you mean by. . . . This question encapsulated several presumptions. It displays the philosopher’s claim to especial accuracy—the virtue noticed by Hume above. It

showed his area of expertise—meaning. It portrays an image of the whole activity as conducted from the armchair, since reflection on meanings has all its necessary data to hand, in the unaided understandings of the people conducting the discussion. The discipline retained an a priori status, just as the giving of definitions of mathematical constructs—a circle is the locus of one point about another, and so on—is an a priori matter. The question also displays the philosopher in a faintly censorious, schoolmasterly role—woe betide the poor pupil who does not know exactly what he means by . . . (it was by surviving years of this that the pupil benefited so much). Analytical philosophy was called this just because its techniques were adapted to answering just Moore's question, by a process of analysis, or the giving of conceptual breakdowns, enabling us to see exactly what we do mean by mind, matter, truth, reason, and the rest. Finally, the question suggests a certain conservatism—as if the role of the philosopher is limited to exploring the conceptual status quo, regardless of whether our concepts are actually adequate to delineating the world properly, or due for replacement by advancing scientific understanding. In its heyday analytical philosophy often prompted the complaint that it could find no radical role, no standpoint from which to criticise entrenched modes of thought.

Moore's question is not dead, nor does it deserve to be. When the categories of thought become themselves the object of inquiry, the first problem is to be sure what they are—what we mean by matter, mind, and the rest. But there is very little else in the thumbnail sketch that has survived. Change began when philosophers noticed that meaning is a slippery fish to catch, and there is no a priori reason why the method of analysis should succeed. Categories of thought typically form little families or circles: there is no capturing the same content, the specific thing that members of the family mean in terms drawn entirely from outside. This is one of the implications of the pregnant slogan “meaning is use.” We give a specific use to, say, ethical terms or the terms in which we think about causation. They have a particular niche in our cognitive economy, or, to change the metaphor, they have evolved to fill a particular role in the conceptual ecology. That is why they are useful, and why they have survived. So there is no reason for there to be any way of saying just the same thing using terms which do not have that specific use, that is in terms which are not themselves ethical or causal.

This puts a severe limit on the probability of success in any head-on attempt to answer questions like Moore's. But it does not block indirect approaches: attempts to place our concepts under the lens by gaining a better understanding of just what their use is. You can describe an item of the cognitive economy, and theorise about its utility or its possible defects, with or without believing that you can replace it. You can describe, to stick with my examples, what human moralising is, or what it is to interpret the world in causal terms, without believing that such activities are capable of being conducted with any other terms from our conceptual repertoires. But this shift from the analytical model carries consequences of great importance. I mentioned above the relatively a priori, armchair character of analytical theorising. When we turn to the more discursive approach, this disappears. There is now no limit on the areas from which data may usefully be drawn. To theorise, for example, about ethics might require understanding of many aspects of social interactions—game theoretical problems, evolutionary problems, theories of coordination, as well as psychological theories about the sources of well-being, and ultimately historical understandings of the way our precise way of doing ethics has emerged. To use a piece of jargon, the enterprise becomes much more “holistic,” and there is no one methodology for doing it well. The same shift is visible in almost all branches of the subject, and it is, I think, wholly beneficial.

It is also fortunate that this new preparedness to use whatever approaches lie to hand has come at a time when there are indeed valuable new insights into old philosophical problems thrown up by new sciences. I am thinking particularly of computer science, and the explosion of new themes and directions in our understanding of mind that this has engendered. Nobody could read recent work informed by this understanding without feeling that even if the philosophical problems of mind will be with us for a good while yet, nevertheless they have been recast in a new, cleaner, better form than any available in the early part of the century.

This new openness brings a danger. If the philosopher no longer carries a private expertise with him—the ability to construct and criticise analyses of concepts—but is instead open to any intelligent reflection on the nature of our categories of thought—then what is his special contribution? Psychologists and computer scientists, game theorists and economists, are perfectly capable of free-wheeling speculations and claims about the gen-

eral significance of their results. Has the philosopher been relegated to the role of staring at the disappearing rear end of departing science (a role some would say, slightly more dignified than self-absorbedly staring at the rear end of the latest philosophy)? There is no unique and simple answer to this, and indeed some philosophers have, in my view, been too quick to think of themselves not so much as part of any team which is actually increasing understanding, but as mere cheerleaders for ongoing science. Others have accepted that we may have no special voice in the “conversation of mankind” and abandoned anything recognisable as a scientific study of concepts, their roles and their potential for change.

Although understandable, such radical reactions are not warranted. The eclipse of analysis does indeed go with an eclipse of confidence in a priori, armchair expertise. When we look at our own modes of thought, we do not escape using modes of thought as we do so; there is no jumping outside the boat and surveying its structure whilst treading water. This may seem to block the possibility of genuine self-reflection but in fact it does not. It merely conditions the way it is done. Consider for instance the very vigorous contemporary industry of criticising and developing ethical systems. Few people think that this is a foundational activity, getting as a starting point some ideal of cleansed pure practical reason, in the light of which departures from an ideal ethics can be seen to be akin to contradiction. The activity is pursued as best it can be in the light of the best ethical understanding available to us. But this does not stultify it. It leaves open room for an evolving understanding, bootstrapping itself potentially to positions quite far from the unsystematic, common-sense jumble that it takes as a starting point. You can polish a set of glass objects without external assistance, by grinding one against the other, and in the same way the attempt to bring order into ethical or conceptual chaos can, in principle, result in a set of concepts each of which has been honed by being exercised against the others.

What I have said about ethics can go for any other area of thought. So I think the fears and insecurities, the difficulty people have in isolating a role for philosophical reflection, are quite unnecessary. The philosopher has always found his subject matter, more or less consciously, in the ways of thought that have evolved in other disciplines – mathematics and astronomy for the Greeks, physical science for most philosophers from Descartes to the present. These are the ways of thought that matter, the concepts

that it is worth discussing. But to know what is special about them, why they are valuable, whether they are bound to be successful, whether they are optional and historically mutable, or whether they have a fixed component—all these discussions and many more require the philosopher's special knowledge. (This is not of course to imply that such knowledge is acquired only in philosophy departments. It is open to anybody to read Hume or Kant, Russell or Wittgenstein. They merely have to be careful, diligent, intelligent, and, if they are doing it without a guide, remarkably sure-footed.) I have only defended the ideal of philosophical reflection, not the existence of a professoriat or institutional structure within which it is done.

Nevertheless, that is quick to follow. For if it is important that there is a tradition of trying to understand such matters, then it is also important that there is a tradition of trying to understand them in the light of the best that has been thought and said in the world. And this standard, and the heritage that needs to be transmitted for it to operate, is the special concern of the professoriat, and of the institutions devoted to it. Without them, the tradition is bound to wither.

This phrase is Matthew Arnold's. For Arnold the ambition to do this—to understand things in the light of the best that has been thought and said in the world—is the hallmark of culture. This is, of course, a despised word, a word that causes many people to reach for their revolvers. But it should not. As I have tried to explain, the option is never whether to do philosophy. The option is whether to do it in this light—in the light of the best that has been thought and said—or whether to do it ignorantly, relying on first thoughts and uncorrected speculations.

A philosophical culture therefore ought to act as a communal resource: a set of approaches and guidelines to thought that will not be infallible, but which have at least survived the best criticism that can be levelled against them. So the question does indeed become 'how philosophy?'—how are we to keep that resource healthy enough to enable the following generations to use it? There are many things that can be said here, but they take us into a new topic—the politics of education, about which I do not propose to talk.