opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com

Lost in the Clouds?

by THE EDITORS • June 27, 2010

Those in the ivory tower might think themselves enlightened; those on the ground find them irrelevant.
— Mahmood, Richmond

Philosophers are little men in little offices who write unreadable papers about symbolic logic or metaethics. That's all.
— Ace-K

These sentiments — posted by readers in response to "What Is a Philosopher?" by Simon Critchley — touch on a common complaint: that the concerns of philosophers are far removed from daily lives of most people. Here we offer two more views on the matter: one from Alexander George, a professor of philosophy at Amherst College who runs Askphilosophers.org; and another from Frieda Klotz, an editor of a forthcoming book on Plutarch.

The Difficulty of Philosophy

By Alexander George

One often hears the lament: Why has philosophy become so remote, why has it lost contact with people?

The complaint must be as old as philosophy itself. In Aristophanes' "Clouds," we meet Socrates as he is being lowered to the stage in a basket. His first words are impatient and distant: "Why do you summon me, o creature of a day?" He goes on to explain pompously what he was doing before he was interrupted: "I tread the air and scrutinize the sun." Already in Ancient Greece, philosophy had a reputation for being troublesomely distant from the concerns that launch it.

Is the complaint justified, however? On the face of it, it would seem not to be. I run AskPhilosophers.org, a Web site that features questions from the general public and responses by a panel of professional philosophers. The questions are sent by people at all stages of life: from the elderly wondering when to forgo medical intervention to successful professionals asking why they should care about life at all, from teenagers inquiring whether it is irrational to fear aging to 10-year-olds wanting to know what the opposite of a lion is. The responses from philosophers have been humorous, kind, clear, and at the same time sophisticated, penetrating, and informed by the riches of the philosophical traditions in which they were trained. The site has

evidently struck a chord as we have by now posted thousands of entries, and the questions continue to arrive daily from around the world. Clearly, philosophers can — and do — respond to philosophical questions in intelligible and helpful ways.

But admittedly, this is casual stuff. And at the source of the lament is the perception that philosophers, when left to their own devices, produce writings and teach classes that are either unhappily narrow or impenetrably abstruse. Full-throttle philosophical thought often appears far removed from, and so much more difficult than, the questions that provoke it.

It certainly doesn't help that philosophy is rarely taught or read in schools. Despite the fact that children have an intense interest in philosophical issues, and that a training in philosophy sharpens one's analytical abilities, with few exceptions our schools are de-philosophized zones. This has as a knock-on effect that students entering college shy away from philosophy courses. Bookstores — those that remain — boast philosophy sections cluttered with self-help guides. It is no wonder that the educated public shows no interest in, or perhaps even finds alien, the fully ripened fruits of philosophy.

While all this surely contributes to the felt remoteness of philosophy, it is also a product of it: for one reason why philosophy is not taught in schools is that it is judged irrelevant. And so we return to the questions of why philosophy appears so removed and whether this is something to lament.

This situation seems particular to philosophy. We do not find physicists reproached in the same fashion. People are not typically frustrated when their questions about the trajectory of soccer balls get answered by appeal to Newton's Laws and differential calculus.

If one seeks illumination, then one must uncover abstract, general principles through the development of a theoretical framework.

The difference persists in part because to wonder about philosophical issues is an occupational hazard of being human in a way in which wondering about falling balls is not. Philosophical questions can present themselves to us with an immediacy, even an urgency, that can seem to demand a correspondingly accessible answer. High philosophy usually fails to deliver such accessibility — and so the dismay that borders on a sense of betrayal.

Must it be so? To some degree, yes. Philosophy may begin in wonder, as Plato suggested in the "Theaetetus," but it doesn't end there. Philosophers will never be content merely to catalog wonders, but will want to illuminate them — and whatever kind of work that involves will surely strike some as air treading.

But how high into the air must one travel? How theoretical, or difficult, need philosophy be? Philosophers disagree about this and the history of philosophy has thrown up many competing conceptions of what philosophy should be. The dominant conception today, at least in the United States, looks to the sciences for a model of rigor and explanation. Many philosophers now conceive of themselves as more like discovery-seeking scientists than anything else, and they view the great figures in the history of philosophy as likewise "scientists in search of an organized conception of reality," as W.V. Quine, the leading American philosopher of the 20th Century, once put it. For many, science not only provides us with information that might be pertinent to answering philosophical questions, but also with exemplars of what successful answers look like.

Because philosophers today are often trained to think of philosophy as continuous with science, they are inclined to be impatient with expectations of greater accessibility. Yes, philosophy does begin in wonder, such philosophers will agree. But if one is not content to be a wonder-monger, if one seeks illumination, then one must uncover abstract, general principles through the development of a theoretical framework.

This search for underlying, unifying principles may lead into unfamiliar, even alien, landscapes. But such philosophers will be undaunted, convinced that the correct philosophical account will often depend on an unobvious discovery visible only from a certain level of abstraction. This view is actually akin to the conception advanced by Aristophanes' Socrates when he defends his airborne inquiries: "If I had been on the ground and from down there contemplated what's up here, I would have made no discoveries at all." The resounding success of modern science has strengthened the attraction of an approach to explanation that has always had a deep hold on philosophers.

But the history of philosophy offers other conceptions of illumination. Some philosophers will not accept that insight demands the discovery of unsuspected general principles. They are instead sympathetic to David Hume's dismissal, over 250 years ago, of remote speculations in ethics: "New discoveries are not to be expected in these matters," he said. Ludwig Wittgenstein took this approach across the board when he urged that "The problems [in philosophy] are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known." He was interested in philosophy as an inquiry into "what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions," and insisted that "If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them." Insight is to be achieved not by digging below the surface, but rather by organizing what is before us in an illuminatingly perspicuous manner.

The approach that involves the search for "new discoveries" of a theoretical nature is now ascendant. Since the fruits of this kind of work, even when conveyed in the clearest of terms, can well be remote and difficult, we have

here another ingredient of the sense that philosophy spends too much time scrutinizing the sun.

Which is the correct conception of philosophical inquiry? Philosophy is the only activity such that to pursue questions about the nature of that activity is to engage in it. We can certainly ask what we are about when doing mathematics or biology or history — but to ask those questions is no longer to do mathematics or biology or history. One cannot, however, reflect on the nature of philosophy without doing philosophy. Indeed, the question of what we ought to be doing when engaged in this strange activity is one that has been wrestled with by many great philosophers throughout philosophy's long history.

Questions, therefore, about philosophy's remove cannot really be addressed without doing philosophy. In particular, the question of how difficult philosophy ought to be, or the kind of difficulty it ought to have, is itself a philosophical question. In order to answer it, we need to philosophize — even though the nature of that activity is precisely what puzzles us.

And that, of course, is another way in which philosophy can be difficult.

Alexander George is professor of philosophy at Amherst College. A new book drawn from AskPhilosophers.org, "What Should I Do?: Philosophers on the Good, the Bad, and the Puzzling," is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

The Philosophical Dinner Party

By Frieda Klotz

What is the meaning of life? Is there a god? Does the human race have a future? The standard perception of philosophy is that it poses questions that are often esoteric and almost always daunting. So another pertinent question, and one implicitly raised by Mr. George's discussion, is can philosophy ever be fun?

Philosophy was a way of life for ancient philosophers, as much as a theoretical study — from Diogenes the Cynic, masturbating in public ("I wish I could cure my hunger as easily" he replied, when challenged) to Marcus Aurelius, obsessively transcribing and annotating his thoughts — and its practitioners didn't mind amusing people or causing public outrage to bring attention to their message. Divisions between academic and practical philosophy have long existed, for sure, but even Plato, who was prolific on theoretical matters, may have tried to translate philosophy into action: ancient rumor has it that he traveled to Sicily to tutor first Dionysios I, king of

Syracuse, and later his son (each ruler fell out with Plato and unceremoniously sent him home).

For at least one ancient philosopher, the love of wisdom was not only meant to be practical, but also to combine "fun with serious effort." This is the definition of Plutarch, a Greek who lived in the post-Classical age of the second century A.D., a time when philosophy tended to focus on ethics and morals. Plutarch is better known as a biographer than a philosopher. A priest, politician and Middle Platonist who lived in Greece under Roman rule, he wrote parallel lives of Greeks and Romans, from which Shakespeare borrowed liberally and Emerson rapturously described as "a bible for heroes." At the start and end of each "life" he composed a brief moral essay, comparing the faults and virtues of his subjects. Although they are artfully written, the "Lives" are really little more than brilliant realizations of Plutarch's own very practical take on philosophy, aimed at teaching readers how to live.

Many of Plutarch's works are concerned with showing readers how to deal better with their day-to-day circumstances.

Plutarch thought philosophy should be taught at dinner parties. It should be taught through literature, or written in letters giving advice to friends. Good philosophy does not occur in isolation; it is about friendship, inherently social and shared. The philosopher should engage in politics, and he should be busy, for he knows, as Plutarch sternly puts it, that idleness is no remedy for distress.

Many of Plutarch's works are concerned with showing readers how to deal better with their day-to-day circumstances. In Plutarch's eyes, the philosopher is a man who sprinkles seriousness into a silly conversation; he gives advice and offers counsel, but prefers a discussion to a conversation-hogging monologue. He likes to exchange ideas but does not enjoy aggressive arguments. And if someone at his dinner-table seems timid or reserved, he's more than happy to add some extra wine to the shy guest's cup.

He outlined this benign doctrine over the course of more than 80 moral essays (far less often read than the "Lives"). Several of his texts offer two interpretive tiers — advice on philosophical behavior for less educated readers, and a call to further learning, for those who would want more. It's intriguing to see that the guidance he came up with has much in common with what we now call cognitive behavioral therapy. Writing on the subject of contentment, he tells his public: Change your attitudes! Think positive non-gloomy thoughts! If you don't get a raise or a promotion, remember that means you'll have less work to do. He points out that "There are storm winds that vex both the rich and the poor, both married and single."

In one treatise, aptly called "Discussions Over Drinks," Plutarch gives an account of the dinner-parties he attended with his friends during his lifetime. Over innumerable jugs of wine they grapple with 95 topics, covering science,

medicine, social etiquette, women, alcohol, food and literature: When is the best time to have sex? Did Alexander the Great really drink too much? Should a host seat his guests or allow them to seat themselves? Why are old men very fond of strong wine? And, rather obscurely: Why do women not eat the heart of lettuce? (This last, sadly, is fragmentary and thus unanswered). Some of the questions point to broader issues, but there is plenty of gossip and philosophical loose talk.

Plutarch begins “Discussions” by asking his own philosophical question — is philosophy a suitable topic of conversation at a dinner party? The answer is yes, not just because Plato’s “Symposium” is a central philosophic text (symposium being Greek for “drinking party”); it’s because philosophy is about conducting oneself in a certain way — the philosopher knows that men “practice philosophy when they are silent, when they jest, even, by Zeus! when they are the butt of jokes and when they make fun of others.”

Precisely because of its eclecticism and the practical nature of his treatises, Plutarch’s work is often looked down on in the academic world, and even Emerson said he was “without any supreme intellectual gifts,” adding, “He is not a profound mind … not a metaphysician like Parmenides, Plato or Aristotle.” When we think of the lives of ancient philosophers, we’re far more likely to think of Socrates, condemned to death by the Athenians and drinking hemlock, than of Plutarch, a Greek living happily with Roman rule, quaffing wine with his friends.

Yet in our own time-poor age, with anxieties shifting from economic meltdowns to oil spills to daily stress, it’s now more than ever that we need philosophy of the everyday sort. In the Plutarchan sense, friendship, parties and even wine, are not trivial; and while philosophy may indeed be difficult, we shouldn’t forget that it should be fun.

Frieda Klotz is a freelance journalist living in Brooklyn. She is co-editing a book on Plutarch’s “Discussions over Drinks” for Oxford University Press.