

SOUTH SOLIHULL PHILOSOPHY GROUP 1 (GENERAL)

ARCHIVE OF BLOGS Pre 2024

20th December 2024: Speculative Philosophy of History

Hegel's philosophy of history is speculative: he thinks that history has a purpose and evolves towards a goal. This was the starting point of the lecture by Professor Anton van Niekerk on the Speculative Philosophy of History at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pqmzlpWKhQ&t=22s>. He described Hegel's method of Thesis - Antithesis - Synthesis, and how he showed the progress of history through China, India Persia, then Greece Rome and Prussia, where he declared history ended! For Hegel history is about the state, not the individual: freedom for the individual comes down to freedom to obey the law. We noted that for Hegel war was a part of history. He would not have accepted a League of Nations or any global institution, which Russell challenged as illogical. There were many responses to Hegel, mostly refuting his ideas. Marx turned his Idealism - the Mind (of the nation) determines how things are - upside down: economics determines how we think. Putin seems to have gone back to Hegel - <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdjgzkxp97o>. We looked at Popper who challenged the view. Such a state leads to winners and losers and a government that knows best. Popper pointed out politics and human interactions are not analysable as are the laws of physics, and knowledge and circumstances will change over time in a way that cannot be known. His defence of liberal democracy is that we can get rid of a bad leader.

23rd November 2024: Critical Philosophy of History

We discussed the Philosophy of History. The lecture by Professor Anton van Niekerk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LliDCK5Smb8> was helpful. His thesis was that history is about humanity and significant, i.e. out of the ordinary events, and that these events are to be explained by getting into the minds of the people who caused them. There are natural disasters, and good or bad luck can play a part, but the intentionality is key to history. There are no natural laws as there are in science. We realised that we are - or soon will be - part of history, and - there is no Aristotelian place to stand outside history - our explanations are stories, and the stories depend on our viewpoint now and the aspect and scope of events that interest us, so they can change over time. It was interesting to hear van Niekerk link these ideas to the ending of Apartheid. The Stanford Encyclopaedia entry on Philosophy of History at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/history/> led us to consider the objectivity of history. We discussed historical novels: these are of course fiction, but held together by real events that happened, and they can help the reader understand the events and the people and their society and culture surrounding these events. But actual history has to seek evidence for what happened and how the key players or groups responded.. Oral history has its place, but the boundary with myth can be unclear.

18th October 2024: Hellenistics 4

We discussed Podcasts 60, 61 and 69-73 of "[The History of Philosophy without any Gaps](#)" and we focused on the epistemology of the Stoics and the Skeptics. The Stoics recognise their impressions and treated their validity cautiously, but they believed that knowledge is attainable, even if only by a perfect sage. The Skeptics disagreed, questioning whether we could even trust our impressions to derive beliefs. True, some Skeptics thought we could judge some impressions plausible, and they agreed we should act in accordance with such thoughts - avoiding apparently dangerous situations for example - but without commitment.

They could of course only go so far as to suspend judgement, because holding that nothing can be trusted is itself dogmatic and thus incoherent. In ethics, while the Stoics could assert that the virtue was the goal, the Skeptics could take no stance at all and must be moral relativists. This led us to a discussion of moral relativism and whether religion - any, rather than a particular faith, provides a sounder basis for a moral code than an atheist position.

Comparisons were drawn between the passive suspension of belief of skepticism and the active scientific approach of falsification. Further comparisons were drawn with Kahneman's approach of seeking the most probable explanation.

16th August 2024: Hellenistics 3

We discussed Stoicism. Yes, it is the basis of today's self help manuals with its teaching that we should be indifferent to everything that happens - what matters is that we act virtuously. There are times when it is right to be angry, but we need to be aware this will distort our thinking and think before we act. But we noted that Stoicism is not inward looking: one of the spiritual exercises for the Stoic is to seek "the view from above", actively widening our thoughts to our family, our society, our fellow men and women and beyond. This led to a discussion of whether, given that Stoics believe in God only as immanent in all things, whether Stoicism is a religion. This in turn led to differentiation of religion - that which binds a community - from spirituality - the feeling that there is something beyond and greater than us.

19th July 2024: Hellenistics 2

We discussed the Stoics and Stoicism, and again we found that their philosophy is very crudely described by the way we use the word today. We had looked at Stoicism by Massimo Pigliucci at www.youtube.com/watch?v=seLLJP3H1FU&t=5s and listened to The History of Philosophy without any Gaps podcasts 60 through 68 by Peter Adamson. The Stoic system has its own Logic and related Epistemology, Physics and Ethics. Their logic was different from Aristotle's, requiring propositions to be about something rather than just equations. They did not accept universals. In physics they postulated that the universe starts and ends in fire - then history repeats exactly over and over. They were materialists, though they did believe that God is immanent in nature (they influenced many later philosophers - here we might think of Spinoza). Their ethics followed from this base and from the Cynics - we may be indifferent to anything except our own virtue, which we must maintain, because that is all that is within our control. This at least suggests how we think of Stoicism. Stoicism in practice required discipline, and a daily routine requiring morning meditation, remembering that we are just one person in the whole world of people, anticipating tests of our virtue, being morally mindful and reviewing our day, not to regret but to learn lessons.

21st June 2024: Hellenistics 1

We discussed Hellenistic philosophers: Cynics, Cyrenaics and Epicureans, based on episodes 53 to 59 of the podcast series "The History of Philosophy without any Gaps" by Peter Adamson, starting at no. 53: www.historyofphilosophy.net/cynics. All three schools were seeking personal happiness. The Cynics renounced everything and begged for food and shelter and lived like dogs. At the opposite extreme, the Cyrenaics were simple hedonists, seeking pleasure right now. The Epicureans were still hedonists, but took a more long term and constrained view. Fine food and drink are pleasurable if you can get them, but an excess will lead to regret, and if you can get simple food, enjoy what you have. This outlook was based on their view of matter and the world: they were atomists and materialists, and it followed that our souls die with our bodies and there is no afterlife and no gods to fear. Their philosophy was set out by Lucretius in Herculaneum in his poem "On the Nature of Things" www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/785. They felt they were self-centred, and we did question why Epicurus valued friendship but cautioned against having children, because they are troublesome, and shunned politics.

17th May 2024: Women Philosophers 6

We discussed Iris Murdoch's "The Sovereignty of the Good". It was also a happy coincidence that Melvyn Bragg's "In our Time" the day before was about Philippa Foot. All of the "Metaphysical Animals" were concerned with grounding ethics in the face of arguments that

morality cannot be demonstrated as a fact, but is a value based on opinion or a society's norms. They all turn to virtue ethics, and Murdoch emphasises that morality comes from within: the cultivation of the virtues and seeking of the good in the way we seek great art, then, perhaps through some parallel to prayer, turning away from our own concerns to give "loving attention to reality". The Good is something that will illuminate this search, an idea straight from Plato's "Cave" allegory. We did discuss morality based on societal norms and how to reconcile the plurality of codes and changes over time. As Marx said, it is often economic development that drives changes in society, and there is perhaps a "tipping point" where the need for a change in values and ethics emerges, examples being slavery and gender or racial inequalities. We need to recognise these movements, evaluate where the change applies (to particular or all societies), and persuade or seek legislative changes to effect such revisions

16th February 2024: Women Philosophers 5

We discussed an interview with Mary Midgely about her views put forward in 'Are you an illusion?' Midgely criticises the reductionist view of consciousness put forward by scientists (e.g. Crick and Dawkins). She argues against reducing complex phenomena like consciousness, free will, and personal identity to solely their physical basis in the brain. She claims that this approach oversimplifies reality and ignores the emergent properties that arise from complex systems like the human mind.

She accepts that physical processes in the brain are crucial but they don't fully explain the subjective experience of consciousness (and self) and the meaning we attach to it. For her, our thoughts, memories, and interactions with the world contribute significantly to our identity, and cannot be solely explained by physical processes. She cites Darwin's description of the development of morals via through selection for certain types of behaviours towards the group both in animals and humans. She believes that humans are not so different from animals; we may have bigger brains and more complex mental states but animals with simpler brains possess some degree of consciousness and deserve ethical consideration.

She has a nuanced understanding of the self that acknowledges the interactions between physical processes, mental experiences, and our place within the ecosystems of the world. She further felt that there was some purpose in our lives, something seemingly denied by the reductionist approach of concepts such as the selfish gene. We felt that she did not seem to accept that scientists worked in and interdisciplinary and there was a need for narrow detailed analysis of brain processes which could then be re-integrated into a wider world view; something that many scientists do. Separately we wondered whether women approach philosophy differently because of their lived experience which is quite different from that of men requiring more caring for family oriented demands. Whereas men tend to be more competitive seeking hierarchical status compared with women who tend to be more cooperative in their interactions. It was asked whether this resulted in a difference in the development of the approaches of men and women – perhaps a left/right brain difference?

19th, January 2024: Women Philosophers 4

We had set out to read the middle hundred pages of "Metaphysical Animals" and focused on Phillipa Foot and metaethics and her Trolley Problem. The question for metaethics is whether one can refute Hume and get from "Is" to "ought", or answer the Euthyphro problem: do the Gods (or current society) specify what is good, and if so by what authority; or do they know what is good, and if so, what determines the good? The mainstream Non-Cognitivists in Foot's time argued that moral statements have no truth value. Ayer said they were not empirically demonstrable, so they were "nonsense" - just emotive "Boo / Hurrah" preferences. Richard Hare held they were imperatives, and as a prisoner of war on the River Kwai, this enabled him to understand why some cultures put honour before the life of prisoners: but he did follow Kant, saying the imperatives should hold good in all similar situations. Phillipa Foot's WW2

experience was the horror of the Holocaust: surely there must be some absolute moral truth? She tried to root ethics in nature, calling on Aristotle's idea that rational social behaviour was an essential natural human characteristic, so we should aim to be moral and rational to achieve eudaemonia. We noted that the devil is in the detail: she set the original trolley problem to bring out the difference between actively killing and letting fatalities happen, in order to demonstrate the flaw in consequentialism, and we followed the early thread of various philosophers' responses to that issue.

15th December 2023 : Women Philosophers 3

We discussed women philosophers and their views and work. Susan Stebbing was an even earlier pioneer than the subjects of "Metaphysical Animals". She took up and promoted the work of the Viennese logicians, but rather than containing logic as an academic exercise she worked to popularise it, because she believed we needed a thinking electorate for a true democracy. We should not accept the meaningless slogans we hear and should question our own strongest beliefs. Aziza al Hibri is a Lebanese born American philosopher and legal scholar. She has read the Koran closely and points out practices and attitudes that do not comply with this prime authority for muslims. For example, a man may take four wives - but only if he can treat them all justly, which is high impossible! Her point is that culture overrides the demands of religion. Our previous studies of religion as a "glue" for society relates to this, and the powers in society will tend to use religion in this way rather than taking on board Mahomet's or Christ's teachings - subversive at the time - on how society should be. Simone de Beauvoir was the right person in the right place and time to lay down a philosophy of feminism. She had studied Hegel and Marx, she and Sartre together crafted Existentialism, proclaiming everyone should exercise their freedom to be themselves and refuse to be objectified. The war made her realise that this was more complex than Sartre said, that there were constraints, and this train of thought can be related to our discussion of free will at the Tuesday meeting. We discussed her best known words - "One is not born but becomes a woman": women should not be in thrall, but neither should they be just like men, so how do we achieve, well "non virtus sed muliebris"? We read the first hundred pages of "Metaphysical Animals": more history than philosophy, so we will seek other sources for that.

10th November 2023 : Women Philosophers 2

We discussed the issues of feminism. We established that feminism like racism is a form of discrimination. We differentiated biological sex and gender: the debate in society continues, but we concurred and agreed for the purposes of our discussions that sex means male or female and except in a few cases is determined at birth. Gender, suggesting masculine and feminine is a social construct: when Simone de Beauvoir said "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient." she is credited with alerting us to the sex-gender distinction. We discussed whether feminine qualities are genetic or all socially programmed. Genetic traits may well have arisen if they enhanced survival as we evolved. Social programming, Marx would have said, is part of our way of thinking which in turn depends on the economic structures of the age, and we discussed this. Whether genetic or socially constructed, the problem is that the environment of the present is very different from the past: as was said last meeting, improvements in medicine and the development of contraception mean that women are no longer limited by the demands of bearing and raising children, and the perception of women should therefore change. The forces favouring change are plain and captured above, but discrimination persists when there is a group threatened by the change - men (should that be "males"?). To bring about change, rather than pushing the forces for change it is necessary to remove the forces resisting change.

27th October 2023 : Women Philosophers

We set out to discuss women in philosophy as listed in "the yellow philosophy book" (Dorling

Kinnersley). The first point strongly made was that the book listed six contemporary female philosophers and classified them all under "feminism". We then discussed possible reasons why men came to be dominant over women and whether the socio-political structure of society and the relevance of survival and evolutionary characteristics had since changed and made those reasons irrelevant.

Fortunately, Joseph our visitor was able to talk about. G.E.M. Anscombe, who promoted virtue ethics against consequentialism - a term she is credited with coining to describe utilitarian ethics. This was excellently illustrated with quotations from the pamphlet she wrote in protest at Oxford University awarding an honorary degree to Harry Truman, who had authorised the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

15th September 2023 : Great Political Thinkers 4 - Marx

We discussed the last of the "Great Political Thinkers" - Karl Marx by Peter Singer. Singer first followed how Marx adopted Hegel's assertion - Mind or Spirit inevitably works out its purpose for humanity through a Thesis, which necessitates an Antithesis, and this alienation provokes a dialectic which resolves into a Synthesis which becomes the new thesis - but Marx substituted the reality of our socio-economic condition for Hegel's Spirit - hence dialectic materialism. We have progressed from feudalism with serfs and landowners to capitalism with the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The apparent liberal freedom to choose our employer masks the commodification of labour, and as the capitalist invests his profits, ever increasing efficiency reduces the demand for labour and increases the wealth of the bourgeoisie. The growing proletariat finding it ever harder to find work will inevitably overthrow the system and turn to communism to distribute the goods abundantly produced by planned production more fairly. Singer gives a clear argument why communism has failed with a variant of the prisoner's dilemma: we all agree that using our cars to commute is senseless and agree to use public transport - but then individuals take advantage to use their cars. Marx overestimated our ability to put the community before our own ends: as E O Wilson the ant specialist said, "Good idea, wrong species."

18th August 2023 : Great Political Thinkers 3 - J S Mill

We discussed the next of the "Great Political Thinkers" - John Stuart Mill. The difficulty we found with this study was the range of philosophical ideas and political influences (The Corn Law's and electoral reform) Mill took up, critiqued and built into his philosophy, which became the foundation of Victorian liberalism. His (over)education by his father taught him the value of rational thought, and his subsequent breakdown taught him through poetry the value of feeling. He adopted Bentham's utilitarianism, but poetry is better than pushpin, and people will postpone their own immediate gratification for charitable works to help others for the future satisfaction this brings. He rejected Bentham's felicific calculus, turning to Ricardo's, principles of the free market as a good empirical measure of, and means to general happiness. In summary he supported freedom for everyone to pursue their happiness, subject to the no harm principle. Happiness as he saw it and the widening of the franchise would be served by education for all. We discussed his difficulty with enabling people to get beyond learning by rote to thinking for themselves. This article is about his views on education and it actually gives another good insight into his philosophy.

21st July 2023 : Great Political Thinkers 2 - Hobbes

We discussed Hobbes in Richard Tuck's contribution to the OUP "Very Short Introduction" series and included in "Great Political Thinkers". Tuck placed Hobbes in a timeline from Aristotle through Kant up to (then) current times to explain how he came to the conclusion that without a sovereign life would be "Nasty, Brutish and Short" and how his philosophy

related to ancient humanism, addressed the prevalent scepticism and was challenged by the separation by Hume and Kant of ethics and the facts of the world and revisited since. We had read how Machiavelli questioned the humanist view of how a leader should behave a hundred years or so earlier. The rise of scientific enquiry brought more scepticism. Hobbes took up Grotius' proposition that one simple goal of the individual was their survival and treated it as their one right. The best way to protect that right was to surrender to the protection of a sovereign, who would make as good a job as anyone of deciding what was right behaviour in any related field. This did leave room for freedom in other areas of life, so Hobbes may be seen as a precursor of liberalism or laissez-faire capitalism, though the social context was different then before the rise in prosperity. Tuck did not deal with our criticism that such a sovereign would likely be corrupted by self interest and power. Plato envisaged philosopher kings, but "tyrant" and "dictator" have accrued very negative meanings. We did consider that rule by a sovereign might be more effective to combat climate change than a democratic system where we elect a government for five years and dismiss them if they do things we don't like.

16th June 2023 : Great Political Thinkers 1 - Machiavelli

We discussed Machiavelli in Quentin Skinner's OUP "Very Short Introduction" series and included in "Great Political Thinkers". Skinner's project was to present Machiavelli's history rather than his image as "Old Nick", the devil incarnate, explaining how he got his reputation. Machiavelli had been a diplomat representing Florence and in that tradition had been educated as a "humanist", here meaning taught the arts and history of ancient Rome and its ethics, the striving for "virtù" in the classical sense. His experiences created a conflict with what he had been taught, and on falling from favour he started writing. He had been taught that virtue involved honesty, straight-dealing, generosity, courage, and a desire for honour and glory for one's state. His notoriety arises from his assertion that if the honour and glory is (rightly) the main goal, it is sometimes necessary to go against the other qualities. We appreciated some of his recommendations for maintaining a good state - a balance of monarchical, aristocratic and democratic government, good arms and good laws, subordination of self interest, dismantling of factions and more. We thought potential Machiavellian great leaders ruled out would list Putin (tyranny), Boris Johnson (self-interest) but for us great leaders included Churchill, Zelensky and, concerning, Hitler - until over ambition wrecked things (phew).

19th May 2023 : Ontology and Metaphysics "Reality Bites"

We discussed Week 1: Introduction to Metaphysics and Week 2 Universals of the Coursera Course "[Reality Bites](#)". Unfortunately, we found the lecturer's informal approach lacking structure made it difficult to grasp the project or the question addressed in metaphysics and ontology. The Wikipedia entry on Ontology says that ontology addresses questions like how entities are grouped into categories and which of these entities exist on the most fundamental level. The first topic of the course was whether holes in cheese exist (!) The presenter said or at least implied not, though the proposal in Wikipedia that they are ontologically dependent on the cheese read better. Universals - how "red" can exist in different places at the same time (or vice versa) - is a long standing issue to which no answer has been agreed, but it was difficult to comprehend the difficulty from a working science based definition (a range of wavelengths of light). Overall, we felt that we were not sufficiently interested at this point to pursue the course.

21st April 2023 : Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 10

We discussed from Baggini: "Without God is everything permitted?" and "Can all moral dilemmas be resolved?" from Baggini's Ethics, The Big Questions". The argument through the chapter on the need for God as the basis of morality was well structured, starting with the

Pope Benedict's assertion that only God could define the good before bringing up Socrates' Euthypro dilemma, updated to "Does God command what is good because it is good, or are things only good because God commands them?" The latter gets difficult if God can change his mind or is exempt from regular rules, but if the buck pass to us, that is difficult. Is goodness objective, or just arbitrary choice? Neither answer will do. Baggini's answer is that morality is founded on facts, desires, feelings and needs, so an arbitrary rule must not conflict with these foundations. The final chapter asked if all moral dilemmas can be resolved. The examples he gave, from "the Heart of Darkness" and "Touching the Void" seemed quite simple to resolve - but only if a consequentialist position is held. More difficult was to resolve the differences between moralities of different cultures, particularly at different times, all sincerely held. This led on to a discussion of the need for sanctions to punish moral transgressions through to the relationship between morals and the law. Without a "sovereign" would life be "nasty, brutish and short"? Is morality what we generally live by so that we do not have to continuously appeal to the authorities when the code is breached?

17th March 2023 : Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 9

We discussed "Is torture* ever justified?" and "Is morality relative?" from Baggini's Ethics, The Big Questions".

Both chapters seem to convey the same messages. Never say "never" (OK and logically never say "always". Exceptions can be identified or constructed.. So moral laws are not absolute - they are more pragmatic: useful guides in nearly every case. A drawback of thought experiments is that they oversimplify the complexity of real life. So while we have a natural abhorrence for torture, it is easy to apply a consequentialist argument and do the sums: yes, we if torture could have elicited information to prevent the Manchester bomb, it would have been worthwhile. But such an argument ignores our hubris in our ability to predict what will actually happen in the future, our over- or underestimate of probabilities through confirmation bias. And as Eliza Manningham-Buller pointed out, perceptions of your moral authority are damaged. Moral standards do vary with place and time, and with the less than consistent will of God apparently. Conflicts arise when these differences meet - as society evolves or some diaspora is formed. Here it is necessary to distinguish between what is just a different way of doing things, which requires tolerance of diversity, from a seriously unacceptable divergence. This requires a serious attempt on each side to understand the underlying reasons for the difference and judgement whether to change. Usually this will mean bowing to progress, but in some cases, for example the Maori practice of purifying dehumanised warriors, there is an opportunity to learn from older traditions.

24th February 2023 : Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 8

We discussed "What is a just war?" and "What can science tell us about morality?" from Baggini's Ethics, The Big Questions". We started by trying to construct Vladimir Putin's case that he is pursuing a just war. He represents a legitimate authority (a nation state) and could argue a strong probability of success. He may be said to have just cause if that is the encroachment on the former Soviet Union territories by the West. We did note that such arguments always baseline a particular point in time. The encroachment is economic and ideological rather than physical and not an immediate threat to life, but Western domination is understood as a threat by those countries that have supported him. He has shown little respect for non-combatants. Overall, while we have tried to see his point of view he is guided less by Just War Theory than by Machiavelli. But why should he follow Just War theory when there is little chance he will be held to account? NATO's intervention in the Kosovo war has been questioned, but it did bring war criminals to justice. This is unlikely to happen to Putin, because there is no overarching global entity with sufficient power. War is a matter of survival, and humanitarian arguments are jettisoned by those powerful or desperate enough

to do so where threats are extreme. Without Hobbes' sovereign, life will be nasty, brutish and short. On science and morality, in Hume's argument, science is about what is, and morality about what ought to be. Science does allow us to examine past behaviours and correlate them with consequences, frequently to predict forward as circumstances change. AI was suggested as a route to a better society, but it is hard to see AI breaking out of the prevalent culture: could it have argued that slavery or eugenics were wrong in societies where these were implicit assumptions? It is clear that science is telling us we should be reducing our carbon footprint dramatically to avoid "catastrophic" changes to the world. So should we?

20th January 2023 : Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 8

We discussed "Are we responsible for our actions?" from Baggini's Ethics, The Big Questions". The main point at issue was whether we could be responsible for our actions, given that we are conditioned and programmed from birth. We discussed different cultures and conflicts of morality and indeed legal systems posed by, for example, honour killings and blood feuds, and gang culture. Our good fortune and privilege in upbringing meant we felt we were better conditioned than many to control our actions. This underlined the need for early moral education and correction for later transgressions. We considered how strong emotions might cause loss of control - one example was neighbours from hell. So the effect of conditioning was hard to refute, but eventually we took on Baggini's Compatibilism argument: we still have a choice to be self-regulating. Perhaps one way of coming at this is that we are programmed "to know that.....", for example to know what is right and what is wrong, but also "to know how...." from tying our shoelaces through to conceiving consequences and deciding between actions.

16th December 2022 : Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 7

We discussed "Is free trade fair trade?" and "Should we protect the environment?" from Baggini's Ethics, The Big Questions". We soon agreed that competitive "free markets" are quite rare, because in so many markets there is significant imbalance in the powers of the buyer and the seller, distorting the price negotiation often to the point of exploitation. The further problem of differing standards, particularly safety standards and working conditions, distorts the market and cries out for regulation, but globalisation of business has not been matched by co-operation between governments responsible for such regulation. This is a moral issue, though perhaps not so easy to uphold by the poor of the earth with less disposable income. All that said, markets will be driven by innovation and enterprise, and where workers can live reasonably on lower wages there will be a competitive advantage. Baggini's case against "saving the planet" is that we are not separate from "nature" but part of it, that we have exploited, at least modified our environment since ancient times, and that the part will always find a new equilibrium after any catastrophe. That may be true, but we may well be about to inflict a change so enormous that the recovered earth might be a CO2 covered desert like Venus. So what? Maybe we should seek to protect not the planet but our future - or at least a potential future for sentient beings. This may be romantic, but a feeling of respect for the genes and the memes we have inherited is a driver.

18th November 2022 : Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 6

We discussed "Is sex a moral issue?" and "Can discrimination be good?" from Baggini's Ethics, The Big Questions".

Taking "morals" to be the rules a society expects its members to follow, is the moral code and culture responding to the changes that might affect sexual behaviour, such as effective contraception (directly controllable by women), treatment of most sexually transmitted disease and the emancipation of women? Even if so, the sticking point is the issue of trust between long term partners. We noted a feature in The Times on open marriages, which emphasised that there had to be rules governing liaisons outside the relationship. Whatever

the agreed rules, they are there to protect the actual and perceived status of the party who might otherwise be perceived as the “cuckold”. Even then, there is the question whether one party is being persuaded or coerced into the arrangement by the other. This aspect applies to those not in a long term relationship, such as the young, where sexual experimentation is otherwise generally less frowned upon - but there is still opprobrium should an unwanted pregnancy result - mostly at failing to take responsible precautions. Despite the enablers of freedom, the perception of the intimacy of the act is ongoing and that and the perceived entitlement of the individual continues to conserve the moral culture around sex. On positive discrimination, we agreed that quotas led to box ticking. We did like the idea that if a candidate from a minority group is rejected for a job, for example, the reasons should be articulated and recorded - and reviewed to determine if any change in the organisation could be pursued to facilitate equality of opportunity.

21st October 2022 : Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 5

We discussed chapters 8 & 9 : “Is Abortion Murder?” and “Should Euthanasia be Legal?” In both chapters Baggini pointed out that morality and legality may be in conflict, so abortion is not murder, but there was discomfort with his contention that a fertilised human egg is not a person. That may be true, but contrary to the Warnock report it may be considered a potential person - all humans go through that stage of development. We argued that consequentialism could be a better ethical approach to abortion: a case-by-case examination of the choices considering the outcome for the embryo, mother, father, family and society. We recognised this is not a simple problem - circumstances may change drastically with time, and it would be good to support the mother to construct the stories to work out what path would lead to the least regrets in the future. On euthanasia we recognised the need to protect the old and vulnerable through laws from pressure to end their lives for convenience or economic advantage to their heirs or society. That said we thought we would rather not exist in physical or worse mental incapacity - though would we say that at the time? We also recognised there may be the needs of others keeping the dying going beyond reason. We agreed that after our three score years and ten, quality of life appears more important than longevity

16th September 2022: Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 4

We discussed chapters 6 & 7 : “Are drug laws morally inconsistent?” and “Do animals have rights?” The use of drugs for recreational purposes hinges on moral rights, which may be positive and negative. These sit within the contractual tradition within which the individuals find themselves. We noted that an assertion of an individual’s rights confers duties or obligations on others. The distinction between law and morals: we noted that laws were determined by the state, published and not violable without some punishment, whereas morals were personal and societal, abstract and resulted in no punishment for their violation. We considered notions of property (the body and money), and noted that it was a sovereign right of an individual to use these as they wished as long as there were no harms to others. Some nation states do allow the use of recreational drugs and this is often related to traditional attitudes and practices. The right to use animals for human purposes arises out of the religious allocation of dominion over earth. Modern science and changes on things such as consciousness, sentience and emotions have clearly resulted in a change in that view such that the welfare of animals is now granted greater importance. We were unclear about where the line for sentience was to be drawn but it is clear that we should not wantonly cause suffering to animals, especially those in our care. We have always developed and exploited animals (and plants) for human benefits through selective breeding programmes which now include factory farming to pets. These activities are interlinked with our social customs and traditional practices as well as our economic structures. While there are clearly economic consequences to changing these radically, we felt that we should be moving towards well managed and sustainable practices which would meet our needs and at the same time ameliorate the

deleterious effects to the environment.

26th August 2022: Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 3

We discussed chapters 3-5 of "Ethics, The Big Questions" by Julian Baggini. These chapters were; "Is terrorism ever justified?", "Should we favour our families and friends?" and "How much should we give to charity?" Given that even killing someone can be justified in certain circumstances, psyching them out with terror must be justifiable, but the conditions are very stringent. We appreciated Baggini's refusal to take a simplistic consequentialist view, just counting total deaths and losses, and agreed there are wider implications. We also felt that there should be very few options, and (morally) terror is a weapon of the weak and oppressed and certainly not of a powerful and oppressive state. The chapter on favouring our friends points out the problem that utilitarianism would appear to aim to increase the happiness of all, not necessarily those nearest to us - and we noted that Jesus said "Let the dead bury their dead". Again Baggini takes a broader view and puts weight on the value of relationships - it does make sense to help someone we know rather than someone we have never met (but see the next topic). We noted this argument does work in favour of an immigration policy - favouring those who contribute to our economy rather than being a burden on it. The chapter on giving to charity of course takes us in the opposite direction, with Baggini saying that despite the previous chapter, it is hard to defend not giving more to charity. We noted the "Drowning Child" argument, and here are some quizzes on this I found: [The drowning child](#) and [The letter and the sedan](#).

15th July 2022: Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 2

We discussed the first three chapters of "Ethics, The Big Questions" by Julian Baggini. We concurred with the summary last meeting on The Golden Rule, and we like the way Baggini shows these simple principles are not to be taken as rules but applied thoughtfully to the situation at hand. We did debate consequentialism versus virtue in relation to the government. Consequentialism seems to dominate, and the issue is that it seems to focus on consequences for London and the powerful rather than for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Further afield, we could envisage that the revolution in Ceylon may well be justified as an option to oust a disastrous government. The logical conclusion is that terrorism can be justified - though it has to be in dire circumstances. Exercises on variations of the Trolley Problem ("Should you kill the fat man?") were helpful in questioning the consistency of our logic. But they can show that choices are influenced by our relationship with and responsibility to or contract with "the fat man" in question. This will lead on to next meeting's theme.

10th June 2022: Julian Baggini-Ethics the big questions - 1

We made a start on "Ethics, The Big Questions" (other titles are available!) by Julian Baggini. In the preface, Julian Baggini puts forward his aim to help us develop our ability to think about the dilemmas we face individually and as a society. It seemed a good idea to compile a list of reasons people get things wrong to serve as a background to the book, and our list is [here](#). We did not get far with the first chapter "Is there a Golden Rule?" We noted his point that in a world of relativistic ethics, it seems universal. The problem he raises is that people do not all choose to be treated in the same way and hold different values, but that the rule does imply an ethos of reciprocal demand. He debates this further before concluding the rule is a test of this consideration of other people, but does not tell us how we should actually live.

13th May 2022: Aristotle & his Successors - Week 5 Stoicism

We will continue the Coursera course on Aristotle and his successors [here](#) this on Stoicism. We learnt that this is much more than keeping a stiff upper lip: the analogy of the archer teaches that what is important is to learn your art and aim as best you can, so that you attend

to the things you can control. It is beyond your control - and it is fate, whether the arrow actually hits its mark, and missing is then no cause for regret. Unlike the Epicureans, who thought the Gods would not trouble themselves with us or our doings, the Stoics believed that an active principle or Logos at work everywhere in the cosmos. Cicero's writings on this are evocative of St John's gospel. Rather like Aristotle, the Stoics aim to follow our nature, which is twofold: our own natures and nature of the universe that Logos or divine reason permeating all things which the Stoics identify as God. While the Stoics believe that outcomes are fate, and that the world will be as it is and the best of all possible worlds, they do not believe in fatalism. It does matter that we try to bring about the required outcome. We follow and discussed objections to fatalism, and saw the distinction between the impression on us which is fated, and our response to the stimulus which is generally not unavoidable. We agreed the courses have been enlightening in understanding Greek philosophy and its evolution.

15th April 2022: Aristotle and his Successors 4

We discussed the fourth "week" of the Coursera course, this on Epicurus. His metaphysics is based on Democritus' atomic theory, adding his "swerve" to avoid the need for an unmoved mover. The Gods are not required for the creation or continuance of the world, and since he says they share with men the desire to live free from pain and anxiety, they don't want to interfere with our lives. We need not fear them while we live, and since the should is material and dies with the body, we do not exist after death, so need not fear the Gods nor death itself. He proposes we live to minimise pain and maximise pleasure: minimise pain by recognising and aggraving its mental effect, and - in contrast with the present day meaning of epicurean - maximise pleasure not by seeking hedonistic experience but by restraining our desires to that which is natural and necessary. The course gave counter reasons why we might fear death and encouraged debate on that and whether pharmaceutical treatments for anxiety and depression would meet with his approval. We also considered whether the universal adoption of his principle of reducing desires was feasible in these times.

18th March 2022: Aristotle and his Successors 3

We discussed the third "week" of the Coursera course on Aristotle. This covered his metaphysics and his (Nicomachean) ethics. His metaphysics leads logically to an "unmoved mover" setting and keeping the universe in motion and existence. Susan Sauvé Meyer asks how we would relate this to the "Big Bang" theory - a challenging question. Science can take us back in time very nearly to its beginning before which the laws of physics break down, but a "first cause" as efficient cause is not linked to time. The Cosmological Argument is well covered in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, but we have to accept that we cannot ever know the answer to this question. Aristotle links his ethics to the "virtue" (arete) of man as opposed to the animals. He thinks it is OK to pursue happiness or pleasure, but not the sensual pleasures we share with animals. As humans we have reason, and we can seek to follow the laws and the virtue of being good citizens. But he thinks we can aim to surpass this and try to achieve episteme, the contemplation of pure knowledge.

11th February 2022: Aristotle and his Successors 2

We discussed the second "week" of the Coursera course on Aristotle. We recalled that we are re-tracing the development of Western Philosophy (and Science) in Ancient Greece, and we have Aristotle first addressing Parmenides' issues with change and bringing Plato's Forms down to earth. In the first week of the course he established that a subject is the unchanging entity to which change happens, and that subjects have substance. But how to explain the causes of these subjects coming into being? he can apply his four causes (or reasons) to a statue well enough: the bronze is the material cause, the shape of the subject the formal cause, the sculptor the efficient cause and adorning the temple the final cause - but how does this work for natural entities - plants, dogs, people? Is Aristotle forced to deduce that the elements

constitution natural plants and creatures are the subject and people are just inherent properties of them? He first demonstrates that nature acts consistently and purposefully in its creations, and claims that nature drives and provides the form of living things, and that form rather than matter is nature driving the change in the subjects. The efficient, formal and final cause of living creatures is the soul. Given he could not have known about evolution and genes, a good explanation.

21st January 2022: Aristotle and his Successors 1

We discussed the first “week” of the Coursera course on Aristotle [here](#). We were told that we only have his notes, these catalogued by Becker. His Categories differentiate Subjects, from individuals through hierarchies of universals, from qualities and activities that may be “said of” a subject but do not define it. But for Aristotle this is not a linguistic exercise but ontology: he refutes Plato’s ideal Forms and holds that it is the Subjects that are real and changing. The debate continues: In The Times 1st January 2022 Matthew Parris denies that good or evil are eternal forces that possess people - there is only us. We debated whether Richard Dawkins’ Memes are a modern example of forms, existing beyond the individual brains that hold them. A further thought: If we “discover” maths, does it exist independently as an ideal? Or did we just invent maths?

19th November 2021: Plato and his Predecessors: Week 4

We continued and completed the Coursera course on Plato and his Predecessors by discussing Week 4 - Plato on Reality & Goodness [here](#). We hardly touched on his cosmology, just noting that it was he was originally recognised for, and that he started the idea that you need the maths. Our focus was on his concept of philosopher-kings or rulers: whether this did indeed make any sense, and why there would be resistance to the idea. We considered how our world view had moved on and what difference that made to his thesis. One change has been the waning of any teleological purpose to the world or the state, and with no goal or perfection (arete) in mind, whether his fundamental axiom of forms can be used as a basis of a political theory. Anyway, would philosophers make a better job of government and in what ways? We looked at the divided line and the cave similes as structure for knowledge, differentiating “illusion”, belief, mathematics and “intelligence”.

22nd October 2021: Plato and his Predecessors: Weeks 1-3 Revisited

We revisited the first three weeks of the Coursera course on Plato and his Predecessors [here](#). We understood that the Milesians were trying to explain the nature of the world without recourse to divine intervention. We looked at the conflict between Parmenides’ view that nothing could change and Heraclitus’ view that all is in flux. Susan Sauvé Meyer’s explanation is that “to be” can be used in an existential or a predicative sense, but beyond that there are still difficulties with being and becoming in time. We noted that all we know of the pre-Socratics is from fragments of what they said or were reported to have said, albeit carefully catalogued, and we only know Socrates from Aristophanes and Plato. Socrates clearly was a Gadfly - and ugly and careless of appearance and personal hygiene, let’s say, but he clearly made an impact, and for us he showed the value of questioning what we think we know in an attempt to get to a better understanding. His Meno dialogue on virtue led us to discussions of belief and knowledge.

1st October 2021: Social Meeting / Poverty and Our Response

This was intended as a relaxed, social meeting, but we did get round to the episode from “Crash Course Philosophy”: Poverty & Our Response to It: [here](#) We started with Garrett Hardin’s “Lifeboat Ethics, The Case against Helping the Poor”, and noting that Elon Musk spent more on his space project than would be needed to eliminate world hunger; we considered that the lifeboat would seem capacious and sturdy. But problems were identified with the

effectiveness of attempts to help the poor. Just giving money can be ineffective, because unless the objective is clear and the channel monitored, much of the money may be diverted through both illegal and legal interventions. Then without trying to differentiate the deserving and the undeserving poor, the political, social and cultural state of the societies of both the donor and the recipient can sustain a poverty trap. That said, does it justify those who have accumulated wealth legally and often through hard work and application feeling no obligation to help those with less? There is a case for the individual (and the state?) taking a view that the top slice of income or wealth may be better spent relieving others than on some further discretionary expenditure.

20th August 2021: Social Meeting

Many of us had commitments elsewhere so we just met socially - and talked about identity.

16th July 2021: Altruism

We really because we could - and enjoyed the summer weather. We did look at Altruism on the Stanford Encyclopaedia [here](#) to ask ourselves whether we should be altruistic and why. According to the article, there are three reasons: the ancients would have said it is in our own interest to aim for "Eudaimonia", the highest good, which is the good of the community, so a win-win there. "Modern" philosophers take an impartial and impersonal, consequentialist view of how we should act" Kant's moral imperative, or the Utilitarians' greatest good of the greatest number. A third approach, championed by David Hume (1739), Adam Smith (1759), and Arthur Schopenhauer (1840), gives sympathy, compassion, and personal affection—rather than impartial reason—a central role to play in the moral life. This may well be supported by what we know of genetics: sure the gene is "selfish", but humans are social animals.

25th June 2021: Social Meeting

With so much to catch up on, and being depleted, we didn't get round to Ancient Philosophy: in fact we decided to put this topic on hold for a while.

9th April 2021: Ancient Philosophy - 3 Plato's Meno and Republic

See [here](#) We noted Socrates' method. He claims that there is something he does not know. He then asks someone who claims to know the meaning of that thing, and follows this by showing how that is wrong. He continues like this until it there is some impasse, and the relevant definition is not achieved (aporia).

We discussed the Meno and had a brief discussion on the idea of virtue. We noted that unlike the mathematical examples of Socrates it is uncertain because it is a value judgement. We moved forward to a discussion on belief and knowledge. We didn't think that knowledge was innate, although accepted that we had the potential to do certain things.

We discussed the notion of Knowledge and its constituents of belief truth and evidence or justification extensively, and in a variety of contexts. We noted that the ideas of 'knowledge' and 'facts' were used in different situations.

On the Republic we considered some of the points with respect to their relevance and applications to current affairs. The ideally functioning city was like medicine which benefits the individual similarly the guardians to rule the city to benefit the citizens. The functioning of a just city related to the functioning of an individual. We noted the separation of 'jobs' in the city and we compared these to some of the systems around the world. We discussed the requirements of each individual to do their job and do what duties and obligations they owe the city as well as the happiness of individuals with respect to the work they do in the modern societies.

19th March 2021: Ancient Philosophy - 2

We discussed the Coursera course from Penn University: Ancient Philosophy: Plato & His Predecessors week 2 [here](#). We saw a move on from the ontology of natural philosophy to questions of language and ethics. Parmenides held that change was impossible, because something cannot come from nothing, but that paradox arises from a failure to distinguish the use of the verb "to be" to mean to exist or to indicate a property. We read Socrates' (Plato's) Euthyphro and Apology. The Euthyphro question - whether piety is good because the gods love it, or whether the gods love piety because it is good demonstrated not only the Socratic dialogue but also something of Socrates' claim to know nothing: he well knew that there were questions with no simple answers - philosophy still discusses them! The Apology, his defence at his trial led to a discussion of high principles and how they can lead as far as martyrdom. We discussed the possibility of living the examined life and its development with experience, leading to a thought that old heads are respected paradoxically when they know that change is necessary. A summary of the ideas and lessons from the Apology are: Ideas: Do not betray your own philosophy, even if death is on the line; Hold the laws of the land in high regard; Resilience to stand firm for a higher qualitative way of life that is expressed in intellectual & moral virtue rather than live for such things as mundane thinking, popularity, power, wealth, & minimal goals. Lessons: Honour what is right and what is just regardless of possible outcome; Ensure that your soul feeds on truth and understanding: forsake pride and pretentious behaviour; No evil can befall a good person; The supernatural realm exists; Truth liberates; Humility is to be prized; Misery accompanies duplicity, misrepresentation, and injustice; Even when biases are entrenched, proclaim, pursue and advance truth; The presence and power of truth brings hope; Disciple others unto intellectual and moral excellence; The unexamined life is not worth living.

17th February 2021: Ancient Philosophy - 1

We discussed the Coursera course from Penn University: Ancient Philosophy: Plato & His Predecessors starting with The Milesians & Heraclitus [here](#). We first noted that there are only fragments and comments on the early philosophers and their ideas have been reconstructed - and catalogued as a standard for reference. The Milesians were Natural Philosophers: not scientists because they did not experiment, but they sought to explain the substance and animation of the world around them without recourse to the supernatural. Thales thought the fundamental element was water, Anaximenes earth, Anaximander fire. Heraclitus had a dynamic view: all is change and everything contains its opposite, but with a unity (reminiscent of Yin-Yang). The unity is one reading of logos (λογος). Here are links to a diagram and a summary

15th January 2021: The Reith Lectures: Mark Carney

There were four lectures in the series [here](#). In the lectures Carney assesses value - why have financial values come to be considered more important than human ones? He reflects on the 2008 crash - more than a decade on, how much have bankers changed their ways? He looks at the tensions between economic and human values during the Covid crisis. Can human life be assigned a monetary value? He suggests the market can be redirected to alleviating climate change. It was interesting to hear a Banker arguing so cogently that monetising everything had corrupted our real values, and we should do well to note the lessons of the 2008 crash and the Covid pandemic to reset our goals and constrain and demand that a resilient finance sector enables the outcomes we want, particularly in combating climate change. But is he nevertheless coming from within the system? Will we forget all too quickly the lessons learnt, or can we make a difference and demand a fairer world?

11th December 2020: Moral Maze

We discussed: Moral Lessons for a Post-Covid World [here](#). Four panellists will propose one moral principle, relevant to the crisis, that they believe would serve us well in a post-Covid world. First, The Morality of the British Empire [here](#). Most British citizens have for too long been ignorant of the dark and shameful parts of their history. But was the Empire, as many passionately contest, predominantly a system of racism, slavery and exploitation? It must be said we found both episodes disappointing: there was little to no dialogue, just speakers taking a position, and apart from Michael Burke once mentioning Utilitarianism, no reference to any recognisable ethical principle beyond :”Boo Hurrah”. This was particularly true of the first speaker on the empire: it was a bad thing and no possible merit in it could be countenanced. That said, more positive views can lead to a hubristic view of the superiority of the British. One point well made was that there have always been empires: perhaps questioning their morality is a category mistake? It might be better to analyse history and compare other empires and alternative possible scenarios and learn for the future. The first speaker on post-Covid told us to be sceptical of experts. We thought this showed a woeful lack of understanding of expertise and the languages and frameworks of different experts in science, economics and politics. The next speaker differentiated local communities from global, and balancing our responsibilities to each could be a good debate. The discussion on healthcare and individual liberties versus state intervention again could have been better - indeed we did better!

20th November 2020: Coursera Moral Foundations of Politics - Review

Shapiro’s project in The Moral Foundations of Politics [here](#) is to show you “can’t wring the politics out of politics”. This is because power is monopolistic, and things change. So at present no world government could prosper. No scientific solution to turn government into administration exists, and there is no way to find or sit down and shape the general will. To control that power, democracy with its faults is still better than a benign dictatorship, because it won’t remain benign. A key problem with democracy is the tyranny of the majority, so minority interests need protection. This may be addressed by ensuring there are checks and balances through institutions, though he says this doesn’t really work, or by an effective opposition strong enough to be a government in waiting. Further key properties of a good democracy are decisions based on simple majority voting, representation of all parts of society that are affected and non-dominance over the minority. An acid test of a democracy is that the governing party has stepped down - twice! We could note that certain classes of issues are not determined by simple majority vote (change to a constitution, proportional representation) and contest or at least test the effectiveness of democracy around the world, but while his message is disappointing to idealists, it is helpful to understand how politics works.

16th October 2020: Coursera Moral Foundations of Politics - Democracy

We discussed Democracy, the topic of week 8 [here](#). We noted that it is difficult to define Democracy beyond there being a Wittgenstein “family resemblance” between democracies. Some litmus tests are that there should be a recognised effective opposition, and ruling parties must have lose elections and ceded power. Democracy has been more criticised than praised. Plato’s metaphor was a wild animal: you have to know what pleases it and what annoys it - an emotivist stance. Also the majority in a democracy can become tyrannical. These criticisms were said to be addressed by (American) Republicanism, where a constitution and higher institutions (such as the supreme court) can limit the power of the government. A Republican strategy to counter the tyranny of the majority is to create many split lines in the population, so that losing in one sphere of interest may well be compensated by winning in another. We discussed how far these ideas hold up in the SA now - and indeed here. We were attracted by the debate about Habermas’s enlightenment / Kantian theory that people could / should

debate and reach agreements and even agree on the rationale - but that this again denies "politics" that just, hopefully, reaches a decision and moves on.

18th September 2020: Coursera Moral Foundations of Politics - Anti-Enlightenment Theories

We discussed Anti-Enlightenment theories of Politics [here](#). The criticisms of Enlightenment theories are that there is disagreement on which teleological direction is the right one; that these theories are not scientific - perhaps a case of The transition from "ought" to "is" in this case; and that the world is complex and radical changes can lead to dire consequences. Conservatives are distinguished from Reactionaries: we agreed that Lord Devlin's appeal to "the man on the Clapham omnibus" would stifle change - what liberals see as progress - whereas Burke's recognition of the need for change, coupled with his concept that any "contract" we have is with our forebears and our children, seems very apposite to the current climate - literally. MacIntyre's argument that we learn our values from our social group, so cannot have the ethical outlook enlightenment theorists claim to be in our nature makes sense, but this does perhaps legitimise nationalism, tribalism and gang culture. His stance that the emphasis of Enlightenment theories on the individual had taken out the moral core of the long standing Aristotelian mindset is compelling, and it is at first sight disappointing he did not advocate a return to Aristotle's ideas such as moderation between extremes in ethics as a counter to the "Boo-Hurrah" mentality that has destroyed debate, but perhaps he has precluded advancing yet another goal for politics through his attack on earlier theories.

21st August 2020: Coursera Moral Foundations of Politics: Modern Social Contract Theory

We will discussed the modern take on Social Contract theory [here](#), focusing on Nozick's critique of Rawls. Nozick is a champion of individual freedom and a minimal state. He acknowledges the monopoly nature of power which means the state must swallow or destroy all dissenters within its sphere of influence, and it may (but never actually seems to) compensate them for their loss of independence. He does not believe the state should redistribute power or wealth, indeed even if it did, freely entered transactions would soon corrupt the distribution. We felt that this was a very American viewpoint and challenged his assumption of transactions being freely entered into. Money is power, and the state even according to Hobbes exists to protect its citizens, so protection from the rich is important as well as protection from the physically strong. His theory of the disparity of views on redistribution does help emphasise the tension between protecting the weak while discouraging the freeloaders and taxing the privileged without risking them burning their crops.

10th July (on Zoom): Indian Philosophy: Knowledge & Causality - Jain Theory of Knowledge

Less well known outside India than Hinduism (which it may well predate) or Buddhism, Jains are fewer in number but influential through their ethic of duty and works, and through similar pressures to the Quakers, they are active in business. Knowledge may be direct or transcendental (unless mired by Karma) and their theory of knowledge premises that the object is viewed from many perspectives. There are seven standpoints; three are about the range: non-distinguished, generic, particular (like the Carvakas), in time it is of the moment (like the Buddhists), and may be verbal, etymological (through experience) or actual (by use). Thus knowledge is tempered or qualified by the standpoint taken.

12th June (on Zoom): Indian Philosophy: Knowledge & Causality - Induction

We learnt about the Nyaya logic of induction. In Western philosophy induction was exposed by Hume as logically insupportable and Kant's solution was that causation was something we

impose on the world to make sense of it. What we saw was another approach, a logic of establishing and verifying a cause and effect inductively.

14th February 2020 Indian Philosophy: Buddhism

We looked at Buddhism. From the Khan Academy video [here](#) we learnt the history of Buddhism and the story of Prince Siddhartha and then the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (273–232 BCE) under whom Buddhism gained royal support and spread across India and further East, though it was later prohibited in India. We noted the Four Noble Truths: there is suffering (dukkah), it has a cause (our craving for the impermanent), this suffering can be stopped - by following the eight-fold path. Buddhism asserts that everything is impermanent, but, unlike other religions, also asserts that there is no permanent self or soul in living beings. This follows from the idea of momentariness in the five aggregates (skandhas). This conveys that nothing is permanent, everything is in flux. Heraclitus captured this for the material world but Buddhism goes further. One metaphor offered is that reality is like a movie: each frame is only visible for an instant, but it follows from the previous frame and “causes” the next frame, constrained by, for example, not only physical laws but the intent of the director (though there is no director, no God). The momentary dharmas evolve in response to karma, ethical causation, which may be wholesome or unwholesome. The enlightenment of the third noble truth is that karma can be eradicated, leading to the cessation of suffering and the cycle of rebirths.

24th January 2020 Indian Philosophy: Paths to Enlightenment

We were to look at the ethical theories of Carvakas, Jains and Buddhists. From a remark that these theories seemed to belong to an earlier age, we got into a discussion of the effort it takes to disengage from contemporary culture to examine a different world view - it possibly helps to consider that future ages will look back on our beliefs and ethics as strange and incredible. One stark example was the difficulty of comprehending “soul” resulting from the concept of dualism, which is harder to accept now. The Carvakas were simple to understand (perhaps they are closest to our current ethos!). They are pure materialists. They believe and accept only what their senses tell them. There is no soul, no karma, so they are sceptics and hedonists. Priests are charlatans making an easy living. That said, they seem to be more cited by other sects and schools to be criticised than advancing their own philosophy. Jains accept perception but also testimony from a reliable source. Indian philosophy considers other sources of knowledge : inference, analogy, presumption, reductio ad absurdum, non-cognitive, tradition, rumour and gesture , and we will study these further. Jains are also non-violent, to the extent of wearing masks to protect insects and sweeping in front of them. All things, down to ecosystems and stones. All souls are capable of consciousness, which cannot be material and is necessary to animate matter. The desires of souls attract matter and that weighs them down. Souls may be freed from desires by three things: right belief - in the teachings of Jain saints; right understanding of these teachings; and right conduct - abstinence from injuring life, lying, stealing, sensual indulgence.

29th November 2019 Indian Philosophy: Paths to Enlightenment

We learnt about the different Indian Philosophical Schools. There are nine of them, six being Orthodox, meaning they accept and follow the teachings as well as the rituals and sacrifices of the Vedas (the Vedantas are more speculative and their texts are the Upanishads); and the other three being Heterodox, that is they do not follow the teachings of the Vedas. All the schools developed before their philosophies were written down in the Sutras. The Heterodox schools include the sceptical Buddhists and the Jains and the materialist Carvakas. The Orthodox Schools all share common beliefs in Rta, the cosmic laws governing not only the physical universe but Karma, the consequences of our actions - i.e. cause and effect. They all recognise Brahman as the ultimate reality. They all believe in that life is suffering and repeats

through reincarnation, but there is a path to salvation or release. Release comes through realised knowledge and is approached by good actions, devotions or yoga. All believe in the existence of the soul in some sense, and in re-incarnation, which is a difficult concept for us to accept, but maybe it can be a simile for passing on our genes and more importantly our memes to our unborn descendants, leaving the world a better place than we found it? That said, space is boundless and time is cyclic through improving and deteriorating times.

18th October The Bhagavad Gita (Critical Analysis)

In reading this epic, it must be understood that one's duties or Dharma, assigned by caste must be carried out to the best of one's abilities without regard to the outcome (win or lose). Lord Arjuna as a Kshatriya or warrior prince is obliged to fight those who have wronged him (we infer his princely Dharma makes war inevitable); but his dilemma is that the fight is against his relatives. Krishna's debate with him serves as a metaphor for the path to true knowledge. Enlightenment includes the realisation that the material, including our bodies, is just a temporal housing for the spirit - and unlike the christian soul, for example, there is but one Brahman in all. In this story, enlightenment may be achieved by turning one's energies, the inevitability of always doing, to prescribed duties, and a path to this is karma-yoga.

27th September The Bhagavad Gita (Chapter 2)

This is a (25 min) summary, and This is a background to the story (along with a bit of 'advice' at the start!). We recalled some aspects of the Vedas especially Rta the inviolable law of the cosmos. We discussed the development of the idea of rebirth from the immortal aspect of Brahman; the body is merely temporary. We discussed the nature of Karma as any action; physical, mental, small or large that exerts a causal effect on our future lives, just as our current life has been determined by our past actions. We further discussed Dharma as 'doing what is right' but the nature of how we should act is multifaceted and depends on our individual class, stage of life and our position in society; indeed it changes as we progress in our life. Rta has changed into karma and dharma and these support the individual, the family, the social class, and society, keeping it well ordered. The Gita involves a family feud which has resulted in the two branches of the family facing each other in a war. Arjuna facing his family and honoured teachers loses hope and falters in his duty as a prince and warrior and refuses to fight. He points out his dilemma in carrying out his duty as a warrior to fight and the his duty to avoid evil in killing his family and so disrupting the order of society. Krishna (the material incarnation God and Arjuna's charioteer) engages him in dialogue and explains why he should fight. Krishna says he must carry out his duty as a warrior and gives him four reasons.

- 1) The body is a manifestation of Brahman; 'embodied self' is immortal and is not destroyed when the body is destroyed (12-25);
- 2) what is born must die and what dies must be born again (26-29);
- 3) it is the duty of the warrior to fight in a just war (31-33);
- 4) Arjuna would lose face in backing out of the battle at the last moment and would be accused of cowardice (34-37).

It is only by fighting this can Arjuna take the steps to escaping the cycle of rebirth. In the Gita Krishna further offers three different ways of escaping rebirth: by the path of action (fighting) by the path of knowledge and by the path of devotion.

20th September BBC Radio 4 "The Moral Maze "The Morality of Fashion"

We discussed the issues raised in the BBC Radio 4 "Moral Maze" episode on The Morality of Fashion [here](#). Three main issues emerged: the exploitation of workers in the industry

particularly in contrast with the low prices of their products; the effect on the environment; and the values we put on clothes and our self image. On exploitation there is a case that the sweat shops do provide a step towards a modern economy and improved prosperity for less developed societies, but consumers should demand reasonable and progressive working conditions. Perhaps a solution as happened with coffee could be a “fair trade” label? The fashion industry’s impact on the environment is enormous - causing pollution, using water in cotton production and contributing to land fill with polyesters that take 200 years to decay. A family in the western world throws away an average of 30 kg of clothing each year. Again perhaps a labelling of products as “responsibly sourced” may help. Our discussions of the effects of climate change took us to social and external costs. We recognise that clothes are an essential part of our appearance and how we present ourselves, but that this is corrupted by consumerism and a fear of failing to be on trend.

16th August 2019 Indian Philosophy: Consolidation

We watched the two Khan academy videos on the Vedas and Hinduism. We discussed the structure of the vedas being split up into two sections which are further split into two. The first two have prayers and sacrifices and the final two (forest treatises and Upanishads) move from prescriptions to greater degree of philosophical speculation. Prayers are to the many gods of nature. There is thought to be a match between the our life (parts of the sacrificial horse) and the observed cosmos and sacrifices enable repair of any faults in the natural order. There is a cosmic law (Rta) that governs all aspects of the cosmos as well as normative aspects of our lives. Society is divided into four castes and members of the castes are required to carry out their duties and their worldly actions will determine their status of rebirth in future lives. Reincarnation will continue and our goal is to achieve escape from this (moksha) by realising that our worldly perceptions are erroneous. In the Upanishads there is a shift from polytheism of the vedas to monism. The central message of the vedas is that there is an ultimate reality (Brahman) and we are simply material aspects of that reality. We watched a part of the video ‘who am i?’ and considered the idea that unlike western concept of being conscious (when we are wide awake) we are truly only conscious in deep sleep.

19th July 2019 "The Moral Maze": The Policing of Humour [here](#)

We started with the example of Jo Brand's joke about throwing battery acid over Nigel Farage. Our discussions soon brought out the importance of context in delivering and understanding humour. Does the audience understand they are hearing humour, not an incitement to violence? Are they culturally “in tune” with the performance (Americans don’t get pantomime), and does the performer understand the audience and its diversity (a small club is very different from a national radio broadcast)? Some humour may be purely gentle entertainment, some may be a way to provoke or shock (as is the case with other genres of theatre and other art forms): but while humour may challenge convention, it has its own rules: it may “punch up” but not “punch down” at less empowered individuals or groups. That said we noted that subgroups may be less empowered, as the example of Les Dawson’s mother-in-law jokes being insulting to women, yet perhaps OK at a time when young men had to live with their wife’s parents and under their rules. And the butt of the joke can be the apparently more powerful character: we all agreed that Alf Garnett’s situations were always targeting his discomfort, rather than the gays or immigrants he railed against - but we recognised that this could be too subtle for some. We noted that laughter can be a response to fear. The comic’s intentions are important, and a professional should understand the make up of the audience, their customers. We agreed there should not be policing of humour as such - but is it right that comedy or any other art may set itself above the law against incitement to violence, for

21st June 2019 "The Moral Maze": Compromise and Climate Change

We discussed episodes from “The Moral Maze” from BBC Radio 4. We selected The Morality of Compromise [here](#) (this focused on Theresa May’s Brexit deal), and Climate Change [here](#). Our discussions were wide-ranging, but we did identify some relevant ethical approaches and philosophical issues. The core question on compromise is identifying where concessions erode fundamental principles. But principles are simple in isolation: the dilemma arises when they conflict. It is necessary if difficult to identify and ensure the decision looks beyond short term self interest. This issue recurs in the problem of climate change. Utilitarianism would point to the greatest good of the greatest number, but how should we (if at all) measure and balance the good of the privileged of the developed world, the poor of the Third World, the yet unborn generations - and the wider world? John Rawles’ Difference Principle may help: it only permits inequalities that work to the advantage of the worst-off. We recognised the problem of the aspirations of the poor and the unwillingness of (most of) the rich to make sacrifices (an example of The Prisoners’ Dilemma), and while we were optimistic that there are technological solutions, we were less confident that there will be sufficient directed political will to empower governments to tax carbon out and enable these developments.example?

7th June 2019 Eastern Philosophy 3; Upanishads

We discussed the changes from the Hinduism of the Vedas to the philosophical approach of the Upanishads. We also watched Swami Sarvapriyananda explain the concept of self and consciousness in this mode of thought.. The transformation of Hinduism from the Vedas to the Upanishads in many ways mirrors how other religions (e.g. Judaism) have matured away from the primitive norms of polytheism, sacrifice and a priestly caste. What is striking about Hinduism is the shift of the concept of a God “out there” to the Brahman within - recognised but perhaps less openly declared by sages and scholars of other religions. Swami Sarvapriyananda explained the concept of Brahman as the true consciousness that we struggle to see yet must seek beyond our waking, dreaming and deep-sleeping selves.

19th April 2019 Eastern Philosophy 2

We discussed the vedas and acquainted ourselves with salient relationships of the texts. We noted that there were many parallels with other world religions. The vedas are taken to be revealed to the sages and then orally transmitted but were finally written down in Sanskrit. These are taken to be infallibly true and contain an inviolable cosmological law (Rta) that covers all aspects of the universe. They comprise four sections which include recitations, methods for sacrifice as well as philosophical speculations in their later sections (arayankas – forest treatises) and most importantly the unpanishads. There seems a grey area between religion, theology and philosophy. The vedas are a basis for religious aspects worshipping gods originally based on nature earth, wind, fire, etc., as well as gods from the older civilisations. They include details of recitations and rituals such as sacrifices and the metaphysical aspects of the vedas are seen in these sacrifice: the various parts of the horse representing the four castes of people (scholars or priests, kings and warriors, merchants and labourers) and separate parts of the universe. These sacrifices are performed by the priests on behalf of the kings, warriors and other members of society to repair or rebalance the order of the universe as well as allowing the sacrificers to gain victories, wealth, health, large families and so on. A further importance is that the rituals and sacrifices must be performed correctly as laid out in the vedas, and in Sanskrit. The language is taken to correctly describe the external world. In addition, it enables us to connect the self with the ultimate reality, that according to the vedas is brahman, the foundation for all existing things, through the word Aum. They tell us what path to follow and how to live life; our duties and obligations. They prescribe the correct paths to follow a life that is separated into four parts: of learner, householder, ascetic and renunciant. According to the vedas, we live a life of suffering, and on death we are returned to this life in a cycle of rebirth. The aim of life is to overcome this reincarnation by following properly the injunctions of the vedas and achieving and

enlightenment. We also briefly read the 'hymn of creation' and noted the many aspects such as existence, causation, a sense of curiosity, and the lack of a specific God.

15th March 2019 Eastern Philosophy 1

We met to start and shape the course on Eastern Philosophy. We looked at The Khan Academy on early Indian history [here](#) and a general introductory article into Indian philosophies in the New World Encyclopaedia [here](#). We first noted the extent of the Sanskrit vocabulary we need to differentiate Periods, Schools, Scripts, etc. Noting Bloom's Taxonomy, if we want to be able to understand and compare Eastern Philosophy with Western Philosophy, then first we must start by remembering, and it is recommended we all make our own list or mind map to try to fix this. In trying to make comparisons, we must remain aware of the pitfalls of looking at a different culture (Postmodernism says this!) and we will attempt to get to this level of appreciation while seeking a broad understanding of the topic.

15th February 2019 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 2) Week 9: Postmodern Pragmatisms

We discussed the final week of Coursera's The Modern and the Postmodern Part 2: "Postmodern Pragmatisms" looking at Richard Rorty, Cornell West, Anthony Appiah and Bruno Latour. Our response to Richard Rorty was mixed: we appreciated his pragmatism, and, yes, we cannot access the raw data of reality through perceptions and language. He chooses the coherence theory of truth and rejects the correspondence theory, but does this mean rejecting any idea of correlation of truth with reality? His project leads to scepticism - but he proposes we just work within our society - in his case (American) liberalism - with no logical justification for this leap and a suggestion of complacency. Bruno Latour's initiative that scientists stop insisting that they pursue truth but rather they pursue matters of concern seemed a good way to prevent conspiracy theorists and the like from using postmodern deconstruction to refute science. His constructivism seems to give a more optimistic way forward to achieving Rorty's goal of leaving the world a better place for our great-grandchildren. We agreed that the course has been well constructed and presented and a success.

15th January 2019 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 2) Week 8: Late Term Review

We discussed Week 8 of Coursera's The Modern and the Postmodern Part 2: "Postmodern Identities" - a review of the course. We appreciated Michael Roth's comparison of Modernist and Post Modernist Architecture, we noted that function is distinct from Subjectivity - making a statement. Art as a way of saying something different...but the different becomes the norm? In response to the challenge to come with "three things from the course that have made me think", as well as this we noted:

Darwin removed the idea of design and teleology and Nietzsche all values are social constructs. We now have to question our value set, can't just say "that's a given".

Zizek (& Adorno) claim we are destroying ourselves through "Modernist" rational (capitalist) thinking. Theirs is a critique of Marxism too. Foucault pointed out our complicity in this as did Wittgenstein with the language games we play.

The course raised contradictions: Freud on happiness - all theses / new norms still leave incompleteness. Zizek says efforts to find the real answer leads to discomfort. That said, we still seek "the really real" - In Art (Flaubert, Baudelaire, Woolf)? In God? In discussions we felt that there was evidence of these ideas around us. The claim that Capitalism and self interest helps the community; the cult of Individuality and individual rights. This impacts education and employment, norms change and we witness consumerism rather than investment. The culture is anti-intellectualism, anti expert, and equality versus equality of opportunity.

14th December 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 2) Week 7: “Postmodern Identities”

This is about two contemporary thinkers, Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek. Judith Butler was discussing Gender, so we also watched three crash course videos on Sex and Gender. Basically, sex is biological but gender is a social construct (think skirts versus trousers!) Butler studied under Gadamer who pointed out that our understanding is always from our upbringing - the beliefs and prejudices of our particular point in history. She says that gender is a way of culturally configuring a body, and open to continual remaking. Further, she sees gender as a performance rather than as a descriptor. She is certainly challenging the conventional binary understanding of gender and asking that we recognise it can be played differently. Slavoj Žižek builds on Foucault's theme that conversations reflect power relationships: doctor-patient or judge-prisoner. He follows Marcuse as a critic of the totalitarianist democracy. His example is the father not just ordering his son to visit his grandmother, but to want to go because she wants him to. Our examples included loving political correctness or health and safety practices in their own right.

9th November 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 2) Week 6: Paintings 2

This was billed as "a very brief consideration of how artists are responding to the loss of foundations to produce work that redefines art". Key features of modernist art include depictions of the new classes of society - the bourgeoisie and working classes, engagement of the viewer - the way the women in Manet's Olympia and Dejeuner sur l'herbe seem to look out from the painting, new ways of painting including capturing the light, and the attempt to capture and present "the really real". Postmodernism rejects the principle that there is a "really real", and is perhaps a critique of modernist art. We discussed the link to tradition in art, and whether the elitism implied in recognising these links was necessary to appreciate the work, or whether the work stands alone to be appreciated in itself. We discussed artistic skills and the recognition of artists and art, and when and when and whether commercially driven productions were art.

19th October 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 2) Week 5: From Critical Theory to Postmodernism

The learning objective was "Confront the philosophical effort to escape from totality in order to understand the politics of control." We studied Horkheimer, Adorno & Foucault in the Coursera course on Modernism (Part 2): "From Critical Theory to Postmodernism". We found YouTube posts by John David Ebert and by Jeff Nicolas helpful additional material. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that The Enlightenment, which through reason gave the capability to control nature and reject myth has been appropriated to dehumanise the individual in politics, economics and culture: authoritarianism (fascism) capitalism (subjugation to machines and consumerism) and mass culture (spoon-fed stereotypes and opinions) What the Enlightenment aimed for was the realisation of the fully autonomous individual, but these calamities collapse the individual into a two-dimensional caricature. In Foucault's consideration of the asylum, he argued that this demonstrated how differences in individuals are oppressed, and the accepted bourgeoisie culture demands conformity. He did warn that even rebellion can slip into a stereotype culture and postulated that we should behave to allow the possibility of something new.

21st September 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 2) Week 4: Postmodern Everyday

We discussed the continuing Coursera course on Modernism (Part 2): "The Postmodern Everyday" on Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ludwig Wittgenstein. There was Further material

[here](#) (Searle), and [here](#) (Grayling). Emerson was - and is - the great sage, maybe even prophet of America. He stressed self-reliance, and that people should think for themselves, unconstrained by the expectations of others or even by their own past and memories, treating every day as a new day. He saw life as a journey - and influenced the likes of Jack Kerouac.

Wittgenstein early on studied with Russell and focused on logic and that which could be demonstrated to be true or false. Other issues were outside the realm of philosophy: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." But later he changed his mind, and we discussed his Philosophical Investigations, specifically his linking of language to the way we live everyday life. One of his illustrative language games was a builder and his labourer where "slab!" was not just the label for a particular object (as he claimed St Augustine said), but a command to fetch a slab. "To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life."

27th July 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 2) Week 3 - "Intensity and the Ordinary: Art, Loss, Forgiveness".

We discussed the continuing Coursera course on Modernism (Part 2) on Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse". We watched a Crash Course on the book. We saw that Modernism differed from the logic of Empiricism and also from Romanticism in that multiple fragmented views gave a view of the world, and that eternity can be captured by surrender to particular moments of emotional connectivity. It will never be possible to understand everything, and there are different viewpoints. In the novel we identified the "stream of consciousness" style typical of Modernism and also the "indirect third person discourse", particularly in the use of the house as narrator, delivering a powerful metaphor for the coming of The first World War and the profound changes it brought to the world view of the time. Woolf also conveyed much of her own experience and values, and showed the emerging social changes in attitudes to class and to women.

15th June 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 2) Week 1.

Freud is irreligious and does not understand the "oceanic feeling" but believes that religion is central to how societies function. Freud isolates the individual's ego, superego, and id – the self (how we act), the regulating self (best we can be), and basic desires (instinct) – as the three forces on the personal level. He relates these ideas to the wider society where the super ego is the moral aspect of society. The religion provides a selflessness and love, the Christian Golden Rule, which supports the society and notices that this love is present even where religion is not. For Freud humans form groups by sexual love within family groups. Children have "interrupted" sexual relationships with their parents, which cannot be consummated.

These relationships depend both on the love-drive (eros) and the death-drive (thanatos) – a combination of deep, powerful sexual attraction, and a desire, too, to destroy that which is closest and most important to us. Similarly because societies consist of the family unit, and groups, they themselves must behave according to these love- and death-drives. They are thus held together both by selfish desires for liberty, on the individual level, and selfless desires for protection and group stability, on the broader social level. Mature societies have a sense of the 'aesthetic' which replaces the spirituality of religion. We live in a tension between our desires and the tradition in which we have grown up but we must regulate ourselves according to society's ethics. To do so we must sublimate our instincts of love and aggression and direct them towards other ends. Government reinforces this regulation of our own behaviour and limits the freedoms of the individual. We work together and feel secure within our own groups and notice the differences of others. This, ultimately, leads to a feeling of guilt; as a consequence of we have a feeling of neurosis. Freud, who was writing in a time of wars and oncoming threat of Communism and Fascism, further wonders about the similar 'sickness' of societies and feels that there is no consolation to be found here. We noted the similarities between Freud and Nietzsche as well as and the current tension and power exerted by

corporations and leaders in infringing upon individual liberties by imposing demands, excessive regulations or ignoring social and ethical norms.

18th May 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) Week 7.

We looked at the paintings of various artists, specifically Delacroix, Courbet and Manet, to see the development of modern art. Delacroix was a romantic and painted the violent and the exotic - and his "Liberty leading the People" shows a propaganda scene of the apparent unity of the classes in the revolution. Courbet was a realist, but also interested in showing ordinary people as they were. Manet provides examples demanding the viewer meet the eyes of the subject in "Olympia" and in "A Bar at the Folies Bergere". Looking at the economic basis of modernism, it was suggested that the rise of the bourgeoisie set the artist free of traditional patronage and led them to paint what they chose. This freedom led to new subjects - different and intermingled classes of society - and usually with a challenge to the viewer of the artwork or to other artists. They painted in a different way too, catching the mood of the subject, painting the light more than the subject itself, consciously producing a painting and asking the viewer to get involved in the scene. There is a "message" It is possible to infer the rise of the self-consciousness (preciousness?) of the artist through this period.

20th April 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) Week 6.

We looked at at Week 6 of Coursera's The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) - "From Struggle to Intensity" - Baudelaire and Nietzsche. Baudelaire and Nietzsche are anti foundationalists rejecting the established hierarchies and set up new structures outside of them. As Paris developed and expanded there was an intermingling of the classes from different quartiers there was a development of the new. This modernity allowed Baudelaire new exciting and intense experiences, which he used, with his new prose-poetry, to show a reality that we don't usually see. At the same time this was reflected in art in new representations of bridges, buildings, rich people, etc. in cafés. Nietzsche, in contrast to Plato, Kant and Hegel, questioned why we should accept the morals of the society. His claim that 'God is dead' is a statement that there are no intrinsic moral values, rather they are just conventions imposed upon us by ruling groups. For Nietzsche there was a natural tendency for people to exert their wishes onto others. This is the 'will to power' which, not only persons, but groups, societies and states exerted over others. This, for the subjugated, leads to a feeling of resentment: a feeling of resentment along with the inability to do anything about it. Nietzsche further situated the development of morals in the creditor-debtor relation in which society was the creditor. The society would punish the debtor for infringements of the morals (conventions) form a variety of reasons. This prevents the intensity and the animal nature of persons being expressed. And, because people are unable to express it, there is a loss of freedom, they feel weakened as humans. Finally, because people cannot express their will to power they internalize it; this leads to nihilism. We noted the changes that occur in work and social groups which seem to mirror the 'will to power'. A criticism of this model was that a society would become unstable, even chaotic, if all people acted out their animal nature and exerted their will to power over others. We noted however some authoritarian societies / states that do exert an influence over citizens and prevent degrees of freedom.

23rd March 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) Week 5.

We discussed the fifth "week" of Coursera's The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) on Darwin, "Re-Imagining the World", and an article on Stephen Pinker's defence of the Enlightenment. We accepted Pinker's argument that the Enlightenment had at least facilitated the advance of science and the benefits that has brought, but noted the fragility and problems of sustainability of those benefits. We debated whether we were in the good frame of mind claimed to address and solve these problems. Linking to the Coursera material, the Enlightenment has made us more (cold-blooded?) utilitarianists and through the emphasis on

the individual more selfish. The Coursera material discussed Darwin from a long introduction through the empiricism of Locke, and the British tradition (contrasted with the continental view) of a respect for custom and a social contract by consent. We contrasted the Utilitarianism concept of measuring pleasure with the Romantics' drive to go and make pleasure happen, and the highly personal conflicts Utilitarianism bestowed on John Stuart Mill and his resolution of such issues and his legacy. Darwin's observations of nature destroyed the idea that species were distinct and constant and showed that there is no teleological purpose to creation with man at its summit, and no intrinsic morality. We are just another species. The simplistic "survival of the fittest" headline has been invoked to justify individualism, capitalism, imperialism and racism, ignoring the evolution of such super-organisms as the ants' nest, the beehive and the Portuguese Man-of-War. For science, Darwin's was the first step to the greater understanding reached of genetics and the origins and nature of life.

2nd March 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) Week 4.

We continued Coursera's The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) :) We discussed the fourth "week" on Flaubert: "Art for Art's Sake". Art is an important aspect of Modernism and Post-Modernism, dare we say attracting the reverence once paid to religion? We debated whether the enlightenment enhanced leisure time and the opportunity to make art and agreed it was an essential drive in humanity. We discussed the emergence of art from decoration of ritual: perhaps art is what's left after any function or purpose has been accounted for: timeless beauty of the expression of values. We eventually agreed that this expression may be negative: in Madame Bovary, Flaubert attacks both the enlightenment rationalist and the "cliché romanticist", attacked as a nihilist stance by Nietzsche - confessing himself to be another nihilist. Perhaps both of them contributed something to the present day focus on the individual rather than society or the community. We also briefly looked at a defence of the enlightenment by Stephen Pinker in The Observer - maybe we can return to this next time.

19th January 2018 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) Week 3.

We met to discuss the third "week" of Coursera's The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) on Marx. We started on his economics and predictions for the future, and the alienation of paid labour right now, and it was interesting to look at Peter Singer's list of unfulfilled prophecies from the 1980's and wonder if some might not yet prove right. There is still a spectrum economies between communist and capitalist. There is a strong case that money is a driver of our social structure and our world view, as Marx said. Marx contributed several ideas that have influenced the modern and the postmodern and become part of the way we think: his idea of creativity as part of our "species being"; and the materialist dialectic - thesis, antithesis, synthesis - encouraging the seeking of alternative belief systems and lifestyles.

17th November 2017 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) Week 2.

We met to discuss the second "week" of Coursera's The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) We had read Rousseau's "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences" for Week on the negative influences of knowledge the arts and sciences. While we could agree that "the more you want, the more you suffer", the advances in science today show benefits Rousseau could scarcely imagine - at least he could no longer claim that the life expectation of man in the "natural state" was no shorter than the of civilised man. There were some issues with accessing Week 2 material, but we discussed what we had read. Rousseau's exposition of the evolution of inequality reads as a myth, and in a pre-Darwinian age appears to owe more to Genesis than scientific anthropology. But his three terms: laws and the right of property differentiating rich and poor; magistrates leading to the powerful and the weak; and the change from legal to arbitrary power making masters and slaves makes a plausible route to the state of affairs he observes. We could appreciate the significance of the right to property by considering the

aborigine and Maori approach to land as a common resource. Hence we appreciate the New Zealand government's legislation to prevent speculative land purchase. It was suggested that the accepted concept of money represents a law governing property rights. It is unfortunate that the French revolution - and later Marxism and communism - failed to demonstrate Rousseau's model as a way forward.

15th September 2017 The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) Week 1.

We discussed the first "week" of Coursera's The Modern and the Postmodern (Part 1) : Philosophy, Modernity, and Intellectual History, which asked why is philosophy relevant to modernity? We were asked to read Rousseau's "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences" to feel the fear at the time of the negative influences of knowledge the arts and sciences, but Kant in "What is Enlightenment?" took the opposite and very positive view that we should "dare to know" and throw off our self imposed immaturity. He recognised this was in process and sought evolution not revolution. The method was to conform and obey in "private use" of reason, that is in one's job as an army officer or clergyman, but one should speak out in "public use" to point out ills that needed consensual redress - through the sovereign, of course. He believed this freedom was in the interest of a strong ruler, and we noted that this was written in the Prussia of Frederic the Great. (Frederic is as ever brilliantly portrayed by Lord Macaulay, and "Evening in the Palace of Reason" by James F Gaines also tells his story and more in the age of enlightenment). We were able to relate Kant's writings here to the categorical imperative of his ethics, and in this work and others we see great optimism from Kant that the enlightenment is an advance in the ascent of man.

15th September 2017 Knowledge as True, Justified Belief: Scientific Knowledge

We continued the topic of knowledge and to discuss Karl Popper on Science, and Pseudoscience from Crash Course Philosophy video #8. We thought that the term pseudoscience could less judgementally be replaced by descriptive science to distinguish it from predictive science. There is a place for just observing without bias and forming associations of ideas. We noted the importance of teamwork in reviews and in challenging theories and getting to robust falsification tests. We noted teamwork has been discouraged and that there is a pressure to prove promising ideas rather than to disprove them. We noted that there are "irrefutable" axioms in the midst of falsification and provisional truth. We went through some descriptive statistics - mean, standard deviation, standard error of the mean - to explain how scientific testing seeks to falsify the "null hypothesis", that is that the test results show some apparent effect is not real, but just random variations in the data. We also looked at the large sample sizes necessary for discrete (pass/fail) data. Roger Scruton holds in his curmudgeonly way that debating what we know is fruitless and the strength of our justification is what matters. He does also point out that knowing what to do and feel has to be learnt to achieve moral competence.

25th August 2017 Knowledge as True, Justified Belief

We discussed Crash Course Philosophy which states Gettier's problem. We also read a paper from the New York Times suggesting that "the vaunted human capacity for reason may have more to do with winning arguments than with thinking straight. While we noted that Gettier's argument that you can have true, justified belief and yet not knowledge complies with the logic and methods of analytical philosophy, the paradox led us to consider the meaning of justification, truth & belief. Belief must be sincerely held (is Pascal's Wager a true belief?), and we noted from the New Yorker article that a strong belief can survive evidence that it is not true. Truth may be absolute, relative or pragmatic, analytical (resting on axioms) or synthetic, encompassing scientific, and the type of truth affects the acceptability of the justification. If we reject Hume's "is-ought" gap and accept that there are moral truths, the

justification of our religious or moral beliefs will be different from the justification of scientific beliefs.

14th July 2017 Care Ethics

We watched the Crash Courses 43 - Family Obligations and 44 - Poverty and our response to it. Both link reasonably to personhood, poverty (and lifeboats!) and are saddeningly topical. The obligations that we have to parents (real or adopted) can be seen as unconditional, conditional or friendship. We felt that it was a mixture of all three. This obligation arises from our love for our parents and the shared experiences. We have similar duties to our friends, however duty towards parents is more demanding. We note that the home environment is not necessarily idyllic and so sometimes there are fewer (or no) obligations towards parents. We noted that the state (and sometimes neighbours) provides care, but we recalled that we do have a special connection with parents. Even though we change throughout our lives our home environment grounds us. The approach to the care for our parents is not entirely a logical one but is infused (for the above reasons) with our feelings and emotions. It was noted that saving the drowning child from the pond was probably a reflex action; any further considerations would come later. The basis on which we decide to give to the poor or stranded from other nations depends on a range of things. Some reasons that we give are: proximity of the observed distress, if we have a connection with the persons, if we are emotionally engaged, if we think it should be done or we feel that we can make a difference. Duty is to the group for up to 150 persons, beyond this the morals given to us by religions guide our duties and our moral compass. We discussed whether we as individuals should take the responsibility rather than allowing the state to act for us. We wondered if the state, when giving aid, acted truly altruistically or in its own interest. Perhaps the state should support institutions of other nations that support the wellbeing of the population. However it was noted that the nation is an arbitrary delineation, why not smaller groups down to the family?

26th May 2017 Identity & Personhood

We discussed Identity and Personhood, based on the Crash Course in Philosophy videos on You Tube numbers 18-21. The first one is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TFCMK4i2lo&index=18&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtNgK6MZucdYldNkMybYIHKR>. We discussed the conflict between the approach from Leibnitz' theory - Indiscernibility of Identicals - and Heraclitus' assertion that you cannot step into the same river twice. Like the ship of Theseus, things do change while remaining the same thing - it is a matter of essential versus accidental properties, and these depend on the context - David Wiggins "Sortals" make some sense. Personal Identity could be no more than your name, if Hume is right, but we considered continuity in the same body and psychological connectedness as criteria. We were in agreement that a teleported reconstruction of a person, no matter how perfect, is just a clone - and Aristotle's Efficient Cause could be cited as an essential difference. We note friends go over the changes since their last meeting to recognise changes in a person, and the idea that marriage vows are renewed every day sits well with staying married to a spouse who has changed. The props of identity read over to personhood, and we discussed the problems that psychological connectedness raises on abortion, euthanasia and capital punishment. The idea of a continuous variable of degrees of personhood helped with some of these dilemmas, an idea similar to "phi" measuring interconnectedness in the brain to correlate with consciousness.

21st April 2017 The 2016 Reith Lectures: Colour and Culture

On BBC Sounds We now know that the genetic difference between races is insignificant compared with the genetic differences within races and it's unfortunate that this difference shows itself in the biggest organ of the body - the skin. It is easy to say race shouldn't matter, but it does provide a ready discriminator between "us" and "them", and an easy target for

those economically threatened or needing to feel successful in a competitive world. We discussed the need to feel part of a group, adopting badges and symbols to say who we are, and noted that 150 is a norm for a social unit, and recognised Eric Byrne's "I'm ok, you're ok" theme.

We may regard (anthropological) culture as the attitudes, norms and skills endowed on an individual by the family and community into which they are born. This is fitting for that community, but the world gets ever smaller, and conflicts arise when the individual encounters a different society. The individual has to make choices about what of her culture she can jettison to fit in with the new group - and also the receiving society has to decide which cultural differences demand respect and which are unacceptable: we discussed burqas as an example. Appiah extends this argument to "the west" as a whole: we cannot just rest on the laurels of having "the best" culture, but we need to recognise which of our norms and values are relevant to the world and which need to be dropped in favour of better approaches. Have we clarified Appiah's "project" or the question he is addressing: What does he mean by "Identity" or "Mistaken Identity"? Perhaps a better title for his lectures would be "Heritage": what we are born and raised with that shapes us, and perhaps we should regard that as a start point for identity, not an end point.

24th March 2017 The 2016 Reith Lectures: Country

We discussed the second of last year's Reith Lectures by Kwame Anthony Appiah: Mistaken Identities - "Country". We started by considering the scale of allegiance to place: from a region (Mercia?) through England, the UK and Europe. We thought of India and the partition of 1947 and of the Balkans. The basis of national identity was traditionally "Blut und Boden", or "Blood & Soil", but with growing international migration we thought language was a very important factor. This led to a discussion of multiculturalism. Apparently alien attitudes of other cultures should be examined with the principle of charity: Imams who stress the need for women to wear the burqa are perhaps trying to protect their virtue in a strange land where the dress code appears immodest. That does not mean the acceptance of customs that offend what we see as essential human rights. As ever education is a crucial need. One seemingly vital point made by Appiah about allegiance to country is that it should be - and is in many ways seen looking forward: in what country, i.e. territory, sovereignty, people and government - do we see ourselves co-operating, being justly treated and prospering best? Once alienation occurs, rebellion may well follow.

24th February 2017 The 2016 Reith Lectures: Creed

We discussed the first of last year's Reith Lectures by Kwame Anthony Appiah: Mistaken Identities - "Creed". We also noted Smart's 7 aspects/dimensions of religion & further references on defining religion and on indigenous religions. Appiah emphasised the importance of behaviour resulting from religion rather than beliefs. He stressed that to stay relevant, religious beliefs had to be re-interpreted as civilisations and communities change. We noted that failure to do so would lead to a religion lagging the society it was meant to hold together setting up stresses and perhaps becoming irrelevant. The established religion could then be displaced by de facto religions, and examples satisfying Smart's seven aspects / dimensions such as "Football" and "Britannia" were advanced. These examples also illustrated a riposte to Scruton's postulate that "religion is the affirmation of the first person plural": this entails that "religion is the discrimination of the third person plural" - the infidel - and this gives rise to the divisive effects of religion and maybe explains the desire for a world-wide religion and Appiah's apparent "pick and mix" attitude. We also noted that Smart didn't specifically need a God, and we debated the possibility or otherwise of religion without God. We also agreed that such analysis of religion failed to capture its phenomenology - "what it feels like" to believe. Comforting or not, the desire for such a belief was recognised, and

philosophy cannot tell us which of utilitarianism or Kantian ethics is right, so in practice perhaps we have to make Kierkegaard's leap of faith to decide how we should live.

13th January 2017 Aesthetics - Defining Art

We continued with Aesthetics and the Oxford Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art lectures by James Grant. We looked at the last lecture: [Defining Art](#). We agreed the presentation style again left much to be desired, but we addressed the question. We considered whether a definition of art was required to underpin its value as a commodity. This and the (circular) definition that art was what was declared to be art by the artist and the aesthetic community led to a discussion of the qualifications to be an artist, and to what extent being an artist was just an occupation. We tried to differentiate art from natural beauty (the sublime) and from functional objects that are beautiful (architecture is classed as a fine art). It was generally agreed that a definition of art is impossible - and Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" concept that he applied to games is more helpful. Roger Scruton advances some criteria that may describe art and quotes Kant and Fichte - Kant's idea of disinterested interest and Fichte's that art relates the world to the self. The idea of Maslow's hierarchy of needs includes self actualisation and makes art an important aspect of being human. We agreed we were privileged to be able to discuss and appreciate this.

16th December 2016 Aesthetics - Musical Expression

We continued with Aesthetics and the [Oxford Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art](#) lectures by James Grant. We agreed that lecture 7 which is about the musical expression was quite tedious and it seemed rather more psychological - how music affects the emotions - than philosophical. Taking a semiotic approach and regarding music as a sort of "sign" leads to supposing that the attribution of emotions corresponding to music could be random. We also suggested that we bring our experiences to the music, and debated whether the linkage between music and emotions is learnt, culturally dependent, or possibly "hard wired". Music could be related to song or dance. We agreed that music can help mindfulness - helping with focus on a task - and soothes babies. It is used in groups - marches, hymns and anthems bind groups together. It can also be used to lull you into buying things! Music may be composed for a purpose - e.g. film music, but can transcend these limitations into art. We discussed the music making process from composer to listener via the performer, the listener's role and that of the critic.

18th November 2016 Aesthetics - The Author's Intention in Literature

We continued with Aesthetics and the Oxford Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art lectures by James Grant [here](#), with a discussion of his lecture on Literary Interpretation. We all found the lecture somewhat dull and nit-picking, but it did lead us to some deeper questions: Should you look for the author's intention to find the meaning of a work? Does the author's intention matter, and is that the meaning we should seek, or should we favour the postmodernist stance that the reader takes responsibility for seeking the meaning in their own context? Is it a "Category Mistake" to claim that a literary work has meaning at all - does it rather have a "theme" - or what? On the author's intention, we looked at whether this was conscious or unconscious, and what if the author changed their mind? We considered changes of meaning or cultural context over time, particularly recognising the relatively recent emphasis on sole authorship and demand for personal experience in a work. On the categorical error, we compared literature with other more mundane written communications, like technical reports. We could see why the latter were written, but why do authors write? We perhaps could've asked why readers read, and we did explore art versus entertainment.

14th October 2016 Aesthetics - Kant

The judgement of the beautiful as a mode of perception (an aesthetic judgement) is purely subjective and universal. The beauty is not a property of the object not rather it is to do with

the observer. There is a difference between something that is beautiful and something that is either good or pleasant. A knife is good (because it is sharp and works well) and food is pleasant because we desire it. With beauty, there is no 'end' or 'property' of the object; rather beauty is free of concepts and an end in itself. However this does not mean it is relative (that is, beauty is not in the eye of the beholder; when we judge, we each do it personally, but there is a universality to which each appeals). What guides our judgement is the sensation of pleasure or pain.

We have four moments of the aesthetic judgement. It must be disinterested, so for a painting, we don't have any desire for the painting, who painted, it what genre it is, have a bias towards it, so, because anyone else could be making this disinterested judgement, it is universal. It must be purposive without purposiveness, that is, it (the object) has no concern in existence or a purpose (no 'end'). The final moment of necessity is linked to the disinterest; because anyone can make the judgement it becomes necessary (we 'ought' to find something beautiful). We found much difficulty with these concepts. We noted that Kant was elucidating this in a particular era and that many views have changed with time, and we are also informed by the history. We wonder if it really is possible to have a completely disinterested approach as this would seemingly require a blank slate when looking at an object. We also wondered whether the judgement would be 'necessary'; is it the case that someone from a completely different cultural (or temporal) stance 'ought' to find an object necessarily beautiful. It is also clear that objects of aesthetic judgement do often have a purpose but why should they then be exempt from being beautiful. Finally we wondered if art really has to be beautiful if it is associated with some purpose. Whereas in the beautiful we feel pleasure in the object, in the Sublime there is a response of awe before something infinite, beyond comparison or the overwhelming. The feelings of awe or fear result in some sort of tension, but this tension is released through the faculty of reason and we have the feelings of awe or are overwhelmed. We have a feeling of sublimation of the ego. We become aware that there is something in us that transcends the overwhelming power or infinity outside us.

16th September 2016 Aesthetics - Hume

We continued our studies of Aesthetics and the [Oxford Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art](#) lectures by James Grant. We discussed lecture 3 on Hume. It is interesting that Hume, who famously claimed that you can't deduce an 'ought' from an 'is' in ethics is exploring taste, what we 'ought' to find beautiful. Hume identifies good taste as the consensus or "joint verdict" over time of "true critics", who are "free of certain obstructions" They must be healthy, delicate, practiced at looking at the object of attention and with other objects of beauty, free from (cultural) prejudice and capable of judgement. This proposal could be seen as a circular argument, and Hume's counter is that there are universally beautiful objects. We discussed whether this was necessarily true, or whether beauty was- maybe broadly recognised – but essentially culturally dependent. We discussed the subjectivity of beauty, and the idea that beauty is not a property of the object.

15th July 2016 National Identity?

We met to discuss what it means to be English / British / a Citizen of the World. As well as reading papers on the nation state and [national identity](#) and "[what does it mean to be english?](#)" several of us had heard Roger Scruton on "A Point of View" on Radio 4. He stressed the importance of the accountability of the government to the electorate and of the nation state, which, he argued, since the treaty of Westphalia had provided a framework for stability in Europe. We looked in some more detail on the treaty and some of its wording, which sounded impressively progressive and relevant. That said, there are many other levels of authority and "the first person plural" from the family through the parish, the city, and beyond to the federation and the global community, so the question of what constitutes nationality

comes under focus. Wikipedia lists tradition, culture, language, politics and symbols. The role of a common language was stressed, though India provides a counter example. From "Blut und Boden" ("Blood and Land") the idea of having capital in a country was put forward (or an inheritance through being born there). This would include the emotional capital of culture built up through facing threats and hardship together. This gives some explanation of resistance to immigration, unless the incomers can show they are likely to add to the capital rather than draw on it (we didn't get to refugees). We discussed the difference between an individual's self identity with a nation and how that may differ from the perception of others.

24th June 2016 Aesthetics: Plato & Aristotle

The scope of the lectures in the podcasts [Oxford Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art](#) was noted: Definition of Art, Understanding and Appreciation of Art, and the Value of Art. Plato addresses the third question and we explored why he was hostile. On moral grounds he thought art, particularly poetry, could arouse the wrong emotions in the audience and the performers. On epistemological grounds he thought that for example a painter produces a representation of something which is in itself a copy of an ideal form, which he is not in a position to understand. We discussed art itself as a source of knowledge, and while for example King Lear says something about the hazards of ageing, can a fiction give justification to a belief to make it knowledge? We considered the view that art may not teach but it may re-articulate knowledge in an engaging way: "True wit is nature to advantage dress'd, What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd" (Pope). Our discussion of Aristotle's Poetics centred on the problem of how we can enjoy the depiction of tragedy. What is meant by catharsis, its purging effect? We considered Guernica – a distorted image depicting pain and suffering – and this led on to a discussion of whether the appreciation of art is influenced by culture and education and how much is common across humanity.

20th May 2016 What is Art?

We discussed some of the questions being addressed about art. These included "What kind of thing is a work of art?" "Is art essentially connected with emotion?" or should there be an appeal to the intellect? Is art appreciation essentially subjective, and does it depend on education or explanation of the work? And what qualifies a critic to educate others? Can art be found in something useful, or is all art essentially useless? We distinguished art and craft or skill, and asked whether a forgery or reproduction is art. If not, how does the reproduction and interpretation of a composer's score by a musician stand? One answer to "What is Art?" is that it is propaganda for the good life. The history of ideas [video](#) on The Renaissance argued that the Medicis redirected art from its glorification of God to propaganda for beauty truth and wisdom. The propaganda idea was also propounded by Alan de Botton [here](#). Art also keeps us hopeful, makes us less lonely in feelings of pain, rebalances us filling in what's missing in our world, helps us to see true glamour.

15th April 2016 What is Beauty?

Roger Scruton's "Very Short Introduction" was somewhat useful. Beauty is an ultimate value together with Truth and Goodness, but beauty can be immoral, even if Thomas Aquinas argued not? Beauty is subjective: judgement has to be personal. Beauty is the subject matter of the judgement of "Taste", which is about the object not the subject. We discussed attempts to set rules to achieve beauty, including golden means and Hogarth's [Line of Beauty](#). Taste is culturally dependent: natural beauty has been accessible to all. Here we distinguished the comfortably beautiful with the awe-inspiring sublime – and also compared the lesser "pretty" and "elegant". We discussed what makes a good critic and one principle is "disinterested interest": As Wilde said, "All art is essentially useless" and Plato explored erotic love as the tension between desire and the transcendence to the contemplation of the eternal idea. Perhaps that is one way to contemplate how "Beauty is Truth and Truth is Beauty".

12th April 2016 Truth

We had watched a presentation by David Makinster of three theories of truth: Correspondence, Coherence and Pragmatic. Correspondence theory works for a “state of affairs”, Coherence perhaps better for more abstract truths ($1+1=2$), Pragmatic truth meets the purpose of the statement. The usual objections to each theory are to challenge what correspondence means (just pointing seems circular). A set of propositions could be coherent, but all false. A pragmatic “truth” may be a lie (Santa Claus persuades children to behave). Makinster presents Russell’s arguments for Correspondence theory, citing his theories of knowledge by acquaintance versus knowledge by description. He demands that truth be anchored in reality, arguing that the further away we get from direct sensory experience, the more chance there is we will be in error. CS Peirce originally applied pragmatism to the ability of a theory to enable good predictions. William James applied it to the moral sphere, and Makinster says it can have applications in moral philosophy, while being mindful of its pitfalls. We briefly looked at non-propositional truths – how a beautiful work of art can convey something fundamental – and considered in what sense “truth is beauty and beauty is truth”

18th March 2016 The Good Life?

An article: “The search for happiness is all Greek to me” by Oliver Moody appeared in The Times 6 February. The article raises the questions “what makes for a happy life?” and “what makes a good life?” Is there a difference? We started by looking at the Office for National Statistics Measure of Well-Being. This has direct measures of our subjective feelings of well-being, and also measures of factors that might influence this – our health, personal finances, relationships, the environment, what we do. Our responses were that the measures were somewhat self indulgent and reflected middle class values. We discussed the Epicurean equation of pleasure with happiness – and consumerism, and John Stuart Mill’s hierarchy of pleasures. and discussed other factors, particularly attitude, the effect of norms and our acceptance of aspirations, and the place of service to others and altruism. This latter pointed out we are social animals as well as individuals. Does not John Rawls principle of justice – that social & economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to be of the greatest benefit to the least advantaged – goad us to help others more? We have an existential choice to make. We discussed the transcendental good life and how this might be approached by meditation.

12th February 2016 Existentialism

We discussed Jean-Paul Sartre’s Essay “Existentialism is a Humanism”. We also had Nigel Warburton’s critique of this text. There was universal agreement with the sentiments of the essay – that existentialism denies determinism and asserts that we always have a choice and must take responsibility for our actions. That said, there are some logical shortcomings in his argument. “God is dead” as Nietzsche said, but that does not justify his argument that humanity has no designer. Evolution, though a blind watchmaker has given us certain very effective survival mechanisms, including social organizations and cultures. Ok, we should not just accept these, but they are our heritage. If we can make choices, why should we act with responsibility? We discussed the role of religion and also the existentialist response of Kierkegaard. Sartre’s declaration that the only truth is “I think therefore I am” led to a discussion of Cartesian dualism and Platonic Idealism versus the monism of Spinoza, for example.

22nd January 2016 Liberty

We discussed Isaiah Berlin's essay "Two Concepts of Liberty". We sought the question he was addressing and found it to be that of obedience and coercion: “Why should anyone obey anyone else?”, and “May I be coerced?” His two concepts of liberty are negative and positive

freedom. Negative freedom would allow anyone to do whatever they wish, but immediately realizes that the freedom of each must be constrained so that others are not oppressed. The difficulty is in defining which freedoms are at an inviolable core. Positive freedom has a solution to the good life, and tries to persuade, even coerce men to do those things they would choose for themselves if only they already saw the light. But he quotes Kant: paternalism is “the greatest despotism imaginable.” He also categorizes another type of activist as seeking status or recognition for his country or culture, but is at pains to distinguish this from the fight for freedom. An attempt was made to look at ISIS / Daesh and our response from Berlin’s standpoint. Daesh can be identified as seeking status or recognition, albeit they see themselves as fighting for the positive freedom of Islam. Our response to take action is justified insofar as we are sure we are defending negative freedom for ourselves and others outside and within Daesh, but we should be sure we are not imposing the positive freedom of democracy or oppressing others with our economic strength for our own needs.

20th November 2015 Tools for Conceptual Distinctions

We discussed topics from the second half of Chapter 4 of Baggini & Fosl. We looked at 4.11 Knowledge by Acquaintance & Description and how we know descriptors, at 4.16 Sense & Reference, including trying to follow Frege’s argument that sentences reference only “the true” and “the false” (we will have to look at Truth again sometime), and at 4.17, Syntax and Semantics - and we also got onto Quantum Entanglement!

23rd October 2015 Tools for Conceptual Distinctions

We discussed sections 1-10 of Chapter 4 of Baggini & Fosl. We looked at Internalism and Externalism, firstly on motives. this lined up well with the argument about Utilitarianism in the Refugees paper: just because you see some action as logically correct, are you bound to take that action? We moved onto a discussion of personal responsibility. On whether ideas are internal or external, we returned to the debate whether pain is just a feeling or a concept in language. This led to a debate of the range of language – not just words but body language and emotional intelligence. On Essence / Accident we first checked the definition of Accident here. We noted that “philosophers have moved on” from essence and looked at the path from essence moving to language and then being targeted by existentialism for its power to constrain. Is there still a notion of the soul in philosophy? We briefly looked at Modal Logic and Biconditional, just to check these concepts and their definition. We struggled with De Re / De Dicto – not so much the concept as Baggini’s examples. The idea of Indefeasible / Defeasible links to the concept of Falsification in Science, and here we found “Corrigible” to be a better word than Defeasible.

25th September 2015 Refugees: a Moral Question

We were scheduled to discuss more sections of Baggini & Fosl, but instead we addressed Ed Link’s challenge to apply moral reasoning to the current and pressing refugee problem. Julian Baggini’s “Ethics The Big Questions” has chapters on “Should we favour our families and friends?” and “How much should we give to charity?” that directly address Ed Link’s questions. Baggini sets out some arguments to justify why we fall short of the self-sacrificial demands of utilitarian morality. We do not serve the best interests of everyone by treating them the same. We may see ethics grounded in the need to co-operate, or as the outcome of feelings of empathy, and these motives are more easily directed at those closer to us. We noted that it took the picture of a child’s body on a beach to trigger any groundswell of empathy for the plight of the refugees. We agree with Baggini that all that said we could do a lot more than we do. We recognize that while we (mostly!) have behaved responsibly & prudently, we are still a most fortunate generation in a functioning community of choice. We recognize this good fortune goes with high aspirations, tempting us to see as necessities many luxuries that are beyond the desires of most people in the world. Maybe too we see the democracy we

evangelize through the rose tinted spectacles of those it favours. It was agreed we would attempt a paper in response to the challenge, remembering and applying eight(?) moral frameworks.

28th August 2015 Conceptual Distinctions - Analytic / Synthetic

We started with 4.3 Analytic / Synthetic and spent most of the meeting on the topic. It took some discussion and examples to understand the concepts and how to distinguish them. An analytic sentence adds nothing to its subject: it defines or expands on the subject – whether the proposition was known or not. A synthetic sentence adds something that can be shown to be true or false empirically. These concepts are different from a priori / a posteriori and are part of Kant's project to demonstrate that we cannot know "things in themselves", but we do have the capacity to make sense of impressions using our inbuilt faculty to structure them with space, time and causation. So for Kant, as quoted in 4.1, "all experienced events have causes" is a synthetic statement, but we know it a priori. The discussion led on to knowledge : that which is "Justified True Belief". We considered whether revelation is knowledge which took us towards modal logic, and we will discuss that further next meeting. During the meeting we were referred to the ["History of Philosophy without any Gaps"](#), by Peter Adamson – 236 episodes going through the classical to mediaeval periods; and a MOOC on [The Science of Everyday thinking](#) covers Stephen Pinker, Daniel Kahneman & others.

14th July 2015 Philosophers Toolkit - Necessary & Sufficient Conditions

The discussion of necessary and sufficient conditions occupied the whole of the meeting. We started with considering the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a person. Does someone become a person at conception when the gametes fused to form the embryo or was it when they became intellectually capable? If we are not intellectually capable at conception, when does this capability "arrive"? Does the intellectual capability question exclude babies and children or people who are asleep? Having the 'normal' physical properties (two arms two legs two eyes etc.) of a human might be a sufficient condition for being a person but again we would be confronted with people who have the necessary conditions for being human (intellectual capability) but not sufficient ones. This would include groups such as amputees, The idea of sufficient and necessary conditions was then applied to the NHS and the conditions for receiving health care. Should anything be included - cosmetic surgery, fertility treatment? What duty or obligation is there to follow a healthy lifestyle to reduce the burden of healthcare provision? At the end of life, what could be the necessary & sufficient conditions to allow assisted suicide?

22nd May 2015 More Tools for Assessment & Conceptual Distinctions

We started with 3.23 Saving the Phenomenon. this led back to ideas from the Science studies and Richard Feynman's observation. In 4.13 necessary / Sufficient we discussed the conditions for knowledge: we need to believe x is true, x to be true and there to be justification for the belief. The last condition was illustrated with the example of a stopped clock which we look at when it happens to show the correct time. We noted the need for testability in science and the idea of falsification. Again we discussed Islam and the case of religious belief: is the Quran a justified reason, containing as it does the word of Allah and at the least the best of ancient scholarship? If we accept that it depends whether you are a believer or not, we then get to 4.10 Internalism / Externalism and ask whether or not there is absolute knowledge to be discovered. If there is external reality, but some part of it is hidden from us, then maybe the limit of ultimate reality is God to some? In 4.14 Objective / Subjective, Nagel's idea that these are not opposites but ends of a scale was noted. In 3.22 Regress we noted the argument against Relativism, and this led to a discussion of 4.2 Absolute / Relative. It is possible to be an absolutist in some situations and not others – thinking of "poverty made this clear.

24th April 2015 Tools for Assessment - continued

We discussed more topics from Chapter 3 of Baggini & Fosl: Tools for Assessment, but we actually started with 4.7 Defeasible / Indefeasible. The example of the argument against capital punishment does show the distinction the terms try to make: there is that possibility that a conviction for a capital crime could be overturned: the guilty verdict is defeasible. It is generally accepted that all a posteriori knowledge is defeasible, so only a priori knowledge can be indefeasible – but is it? To examine this further we turned to 4.1 A priori / a posteriori. The main problem identified was that even learning that $1 + 1 = 2$ is a posteriori. But the point is that once learned it is recognisably an abstraction from the real world. Even so, such knowledge has its own concepts and axioms and we could have revisited 1.9 here.

3.22 Regression. From [Wikipedia](#) The Regress argument is that any proposition requires a justification. However, any justification itself requires support. This means that any proposition whatsoever can be endlessly (infinitely) questioned. This can be countered by Foundationalism - claim that some things (basic beliefs) are true in and of themselves. Or by Coherentism.. In one form the chain of reasoning may loop around on itself, forming a circle. In this case, the justification of any statement is used, perhaps after a long chain of reasoning, in justifying itself, and the argument is circular. Alternatively, Coherentism denies that justification can only take the form of a chain. Coherentism replaces the chain with a holistic web. We also mentioned Pragmatism: William James suggests that, ultimately, everyone settles at some level of explanation based on one's personal preferences that fit the particular individual's psychological needs. People select whatever level of explanation fits their needs, and things other than logic and reason determine those needs.

3.15 Is / ought Gap. This perhaps originates with Hume's writing, where he points out the disjoint between what is and what ought to be. We discussed the logic aspect – the missing premise in the jump from is to ought. The suggestion that many concepts express elements of value as well as fact ("proficient", "murder", "philosopher") was useful.

13th March 2015 Tools for Assessment

We discussed topics from Chapter 3 of Baggini & Fosl: Tools for Assessment.

3.24, Self-defeating arguments are charges leveled at relativism and logical positivism. The discussion took us to genes via Plantinga's criticism of "natural" evolution. 3.3 Bivalence and the Excluded Middle showed how rigorous logic is a different "language game" in Wittgenstein's terms from common speech. We looked at examples countering the excluded middle and discussed Sorites paradox (how many hairs have to be lost until a man is "bald?") as well as vagueness, and we touched on fuzzy logic.

3.13 The Genetic Fallacy, that it is not valid to cite the origins of an argument as a refutation, though it may be helpful to use the origins as an explanation. The genetic fallacy is a common method of attempting to influence opinion.

3.6 Circularity quoted some interesting examples: Descartes argument that God give us clear ideas and we have a clear idea of God so he must exist; the inductive fallacy and Popper's idea of falsification – and we took in 3.25, the concept of sufficient reason here. The discussion then touched on some of the history of scientific ideas, and a maxim that scientists should "treasure the abnormalities" in experiments.

3.18 The Principle of Charity seemed one subset of 3.1 Alternative Explanations. As well as respecting the views of someone proposing an idea that seems biased or wrong headed, the principle of maximizing the soundness of others' arguments may well lead to a more effective refutation or middle ground. The wisdom of this principle was appreciated.

13th February 2015 More Arguments and Fallacies

In Chapter 2 of Baggini & Fosl we looked at logical constructions, e.g. “The Internet”, “The average Briton”, “The Catholic Church”, and recalled Gilbert Ryle’s “category mistake”. We discussed reduction and Occam’s razor and whether it might not sometimes be better to prefer a more complicated explanation. We started fallacies by comparing the valid arguments *modus ponens* and *modus tollens* with fallacies with similar looking forms: assuming the consequent and denying the antecedent. In the “Red Herring” fallacies we noted *argumentum ad hominem* and appeals to authority, and discussed the conditions justifying the latter. Amphiboly or double arrangement is pulling the meaning of a sentence through ambiguity (“two pizzas for one special price”) or which word is stressed (“all men are created equal”). We noted begging the question and circular arguments, and applied the “slippery slope” to euthanasia and mitochondrial transplants (three parent babies). We recognized the historian’s fallacy – assuming people living in a different age have the same thoughts and outlook as we do. We looked at some probabilistic / statistical fallacies – the gambler’s fallacy and some from Daniel Kahneman – failing to recognise the underlying *a priori* probability in a situation (is a “Goth” more likely to be a Satanist than a Christian?), overestimating very small probabilities, and being conservative in taking risks (two to one ratio regularly observable in “deal or no deal”).

16th January 2015 More Arguments

We reviewed the exercises on deductive and inductive logic from last meeting and went through the remaining questions together. The exercises showed we are reasonably competent at spotting the different types of argument and really good at questioning premises – and aware of the difference between spin and commercial / self-interest and academic logical argument! We then checked what we had covered in Baggini & Fosl Chapter 1 and talked through refutation, axioms and tautologies and the law of non-contradiction. In Chapter 2 we looked at Abduction and compared it with Induction. It was illuminating to look at the debate as to which of these is more basic. The hypothetico – deductive method showed how Popper tried to get round the induction problem in science (and will be discussed again in philosophy group 2!). We examined dialectic and we discussed analogies and their closely related Intuition pumps, thought experiments and useful fictions. Throughout it was good to revisit particular philosophers’ ideas as illustrations.

28th November 2014 Arguments

Our preparation was to read Chapter 1 of *The Philosopher’s Toolkit* by Julian Baggini and Peter Fosl and to look at an [on-line](#) Introduction to logic. We went through some notes and exercises at the meeting. We looked at the difference between arguments and explanation – and questions, commands, etc. We distinguished deductive from inductive arguments, and worked on the difference between validity and truth. (By the way, here is a [further example](#) of the dangers of not spotting an assumed premise). We differentiated categorical and truth-functional deductive arguments and learnt that the latter involve logical operators – negation, conjunction, disjunction (or – this conventionally means inclusive unless specified as exclusive or) and conditional (if....then). There are three kinds of inductive arguments: analogical, inductive generalization and causal.

17th October 2014 Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein’s first book was the *Tractatus*. The world is the totality of facts (rather than things). The possible interaction of things constitutes a state of affairs and the obtaining of a state of affairs is a fact. We make a representation or (possibly auditory) picture of a state of affairs. So our language reflects the world and propositions are true if they correspond to facts. If we cannot make a verifiable picture of something – because it is transcendental, mystical, etc., then it cannot be discussed. For example, we can picture “God in Heaven”, but we cannot picture “I believe that God is in heaven”, so that is something we cannot discuss.

This thinking influenced the Logical Positivists, the emphasis on the necessity of discussing only that which can be verified is the scientific approach. The question was raised how far science has since advanced and the effect on this line of thought. This gave rise to a comparison with the modern "Scientism" of Richard Dawkins and similar thinkers. It was noted that Wittgenstein himself did not reject the mystical or transcendental as later thinkers have, he just thought such things best contemplated in silence. The meaning of Wittgenstein's work is still debated, and a text of the *Tractatus* with two parallel translations shows how difficult it is to capture Wittgenstein's ideas. Wittgenstein rejected his own ideas, and his only later work published posthumously was *Philosophical Investigations*. The meaning of a word is not the thing it stands for. Language is a tool we use working for what we want to achieve, and the rules depend on what sort of "game" we are playing. We have to know what game we are playing to "let the fly out of the bottle". The idea of language games may be expanded. The whole language is a game, but there are subsets: essays, conversations, jokes, poetry, religion. We need to know the game to understand and use language gainfully. The Private Language Argument, according to Roger Scruton is an attack on the Cartesian "I think therefore I am" (begs the question anyway), by casting doubt on whether we can claim knowledge of our own subjective experience: we cannot assume a sample for comparison. Apart from the "beetle in a box" game (or the call my bluff definition of a "stulg"!) we may consider pain: I am or am not in pain, but unless I am a zombie, I cannot not know I am in pain. Therefore it makes no sense to say "I know I am in pain", unless to emphasise that I am in pain. We understand pain and maybe calibrate our pain in a public language, not a private one. So similarly, I can say "I am thinking", but not "I know I am thinking" ("I have a mind"). Scruton says that this approach works towards a Kantian "philosophical anthropology", which denies the sceptical position not by trying to prove we can know the real world, but just by asking questions like "what kind of being could have knowledge of an objective world?" through to a conclusion that only beings of a certain kind can have such sceptical doubts. The meeting concluded with some thoughts on Chomsky on the structure of language and truth. This led to further discussions and more references to Steven Pinker!

19th September 2014 Language

In the DK book we looked at de Saussure, Wittgenstein and Quine, and on the internet or elsewhere at Chomsky and Steven Pinker. Here is the definition of semiotics: semiotics is the general theory of signs, and is usually divided into three fields semantics, syntactics and pragmatics. We didn't discuss semiotics, but perhaps it offers one possible framework to describe some aspects of what we did discuss, C S Peirce whom we studied under pragmatism apparently worked in this field, and classified signs as icons (naturalistic pictures), natural signs (clouds signify rain) and conventional signs (red for danger) as well as "the majority of words". In our discussions of language we did consider both the spoken and the written word and language beyond words, such as body language and indeed sign language – and also the deep meaning of silence! Semantics is the study of meaning: its pioneer de Saussure pointed out that, for example, there is nothing particularly "doggy" about the word "dog", but that any message is a system of signs, a system of relationships and concepts. We noted that the relationship is not constant – the same words are used in many different ways. We discussed Quine's assertion that language is a social art, and his example of "gavagai", that might mean rabbit, dinner or pest in a different culture. Pragmatics is the study of language that focuses on users and contexts, and Quine is in the pragmatism tradition. On syntactics, which is grammar and the structure of language, we noted Chomsky's development of a generative grammar to explain how children learn their native language to such a sophisticated level in a very short time. Stephen Pinker takes the idea that such an ability to learn language must be innate in his book "The Language Instinct. We discussed some aspects of Wittgenstein's life and work, but will return to him next time.

29th August 2014 Pragmatism

As Aristotle said, “To say of what is, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not, is to speak truly.” So why would anyone want to abandon the idea of the truth of a statement and just consider whether it is practical? Scruton (in “Modern Philosophy”) explains that the difficulty with this and other Correspondence Theories is that in identifying a proposition with a fact, it is impossible to avoid using a proposition – the very proposition to be validated. Philosophers who dismiss Correspondence Theory say that the best we can do is ensure all our truths are coherent: no truth is contradicted by another. CS Peirce, the founder of Pragmatism cut through this academic debate and declared a statement useful if it provide valid predictions – an idea in alignment with Popper’s explanation that scientific method sets out to falsify a theory: in both cases an idea found lacking is to be rejected for a better one. Pragmatism was taken up and broadened (Peirce said corrupted!) by William James. He was interested in behaviour rather than physics, and looked to pragmatism for how to live. This does not permit us to act on just any idea: to be true there must be evidence in its favour and it must withstand criticism – a universal property of truth. This shift caused our discussion to cover right versus wrong as well as true versus false. John Dewey built on these ideas and emphasised learning by doing and involvement, thus to support democracy – again a practical rather than theoretical approach. William Du Bois applied pragmatism to the civil rights movement, urging beliefs that facilitate the “eudaemonia” of human flourishing. This led to a discussion of the rise and fall of communism, touched on by Scruton in his appraisal of Rorty, who takes pragmatism firmly into the Coherence Theory camp – rejecting the possibility of relating truth to an external reality. One consequence is that truth is a function of the society we live in “what society will let us get away with”, though Rorty is seeking to make society as inclusive as possible. Scruton does not resolve the conflict between Correspondence and Coherence theories, though he does offer Kant’s theory that while we cannot know “things in themselves”, the phenomena we work with do correlate with reality. This seems to help the Correspondence Theory in the world of Physics, but perhaps a Coherence Theory makes more sense in the sphere of Ethics. Then again, he presents the redundancy theory (used by Blackburn): any proposition may be asserted, and to add “and that’s true” does not get the debate any further, except perhaps to assert that pursuance of the proposition and its truth conditions would lead to agreement to accept the proposition. As Blackburn says, maybe important ideas do need to be treated specifically and argued through. Our considerations of the practical versus the academic perhaps suggest that philosophy may not provide many direct practical answers, but it does make us aware of a range of concepts and viewpoints we can bring to bear on issues.

25th July 2014 Phenomenology

In a wide ranging discussion, we started us off with a compilation of notes from various sources on Phenomenology. As a reaction against the quest for knowledge of things as they are (Noúmena), Phenomenology brings philosophy back to the first person experience of everyday life, and this was well illustrated by the “girl meets boy” narrative – though it was later pointed out that “Queer theory” would require us to ignore (bracket?) the assumptions of gender, romance, etc. Heidegger points out that rather than thinking about a hammer, we need to use one. We were led to consider the sensation of the colour red as distinct from its explanation as a response to a particular frequency of electromagnetic radiation, and noted we experience everything through such filters. Some discussion whether we could achieve knowledge of any general theory of subjective experience, and some parallels with science were drawn (relativity); but as Heidegger (again) said, when we think scientifically, we are just using the tools for “doing science” and our experience is still of phenomena. The topic brings out the difference between continental philosophy and its search for interpretation, meaning and value; and analytical philosophy with its logical and linguistic approach to truth

and knowledge. From an analytical view, we touched on the nature of the mind – whether it is like a computer (Turing test, Searle's Chinese room) even as a neural network; and whether artificial intelligence can learn "common sense". We questioned the use of phenomenology and it was identified as the basis of psychiatry, where diagnosis may be through the nature of hallucinations. It was interesting to learn that psychosis – and also sex – are more of a continuous variable than either / or discrete states! Heidegger's direction to study ourselves means we consider the "otherness" of others, and we traced how this leads through the ideas of choice and alienation through Sartre to Existentialism and then through Simone de Beauvoir to Feminism. We considered whether we were a single self, or whether we rather select the appropriate "mask" for the situation. We considered consciousness and the mind / body problem, and it is perhaps more helpful to think of awareness rather than the ambiguity of consciousness. We discussed meditation and the attainment of different levels of consciousness, whether used therapeutically or to focus on the divine.

20th June 2014 Existentialism

Kierkegaard is regarded as the first existentialist, because of his response to Hegel's world view that history was proceeding by dialectic to an end point of one spirit, perhaps the collective human mind. Kierkegaard objected that this took no account of the individual, and that each individual is responsible for their own choice and actions. He used the story of Abraham being called on by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, and described the anguish attached to having to make our decisions and take a leap of faith. A lighter take on the (impending) angst came from the plight of our mythical ancestors the Gollumfrinchans! The idea of choice is linked to our capacity for self consciousness and reflection on the cause and effect of our actions, a faculty perhaps not unique but certainly far more developed in man than in any other species. We questioned how much choice is really open to different people – Maslow's hierarchy of needs helps here, prioritising the need for food, shelter and security before love and self fulfilment, but we heard from Frankl's "Man's search for Meaning" of concentration camp prisoners who would give what little they had to others, showing the power of the existential position. We recognised that the environment for an existentialist view was favourable at the end of WW2: society had been literally shattered, but there was some freedom for intellectuals to develop theories and new ideas of a politics of protest and individual freedom and sufficient education for people to respond to these ideas. We noted that the ideas spread so that so many things are called "existentialist" that it is hard to track the meaning of the term. Sartre claimed that Existentialism could still be a position for the religious or the atheist, and we debated whether our "choices" would depend on our view of our existence as transient or eternal – but then that in itself is an act of faith for each of us to examine and embrace or reject. In his essay he claims to be a humanist, and suggests that we should create ourselves as we believe all mankind must be – but what is the basis of this, when there is no external purpose or rule? Presumably Kierkegaard would be pleased when people chose faith in God. Are there rules or at least some assumptions guiding this subjective approach? There is opportunity for the Existentialist to be – or to be seen as – selfish. Scruton discusses the problem of alienation (a Marxist concept) which for the existentialist is to avoid objectifying or being objectified by others ("Hell is other people", he quotes from one of Sartre's novels). The Existentialist's freedom is dearly bought if it means keeping everyone else at arm's length. We discussed this postulate that there is no purpose - no essence. Perhaps there is no discernible goal for the universe, but we can argue that evolution has given us a "revealed strategy": to survive and to propagate our genes. Is it better to ignore this possibility, as Camus proposes? If not to the degree of ants, we are a social species, and maybe Alain de Botton's "Religion for Atheists" gives a possible way out of these issues. Nevertheless, Existentialism gives a very positive message that our lives are what we make of them through our actions, and an encouragement to question the objectification of ourselves or others.

16 May 2014 Politics.

Some questions:-

1. What are the questions asked by political philosophers? How do they go about finding answers to these questions?
2. What is democracy? What are the strengths of the democratic system? Why are they strengths in your opinion? Clarify the criteria by which you are making your judgments.

Where political power comes from, and what makes it legitimate? The first answer was simply that a strong individual or group could simply seize and hold power, but we also saw it could be consent of the ruled – a social contract. This led to thoughts that this justified universal suffrage, and we discussed the “Putney Debates”, when the victorious Roundheads got together to talk out how they were going to run the country. A paper by Gilens & Page suggests that while we might think we live in a “Majoritarian Electoral Democracy”, the model is more probably “Biased Pluralism”, ruled by the struggles of interest groups and powerful corporations. We recognised that the legitimacy of power can be called into question: we could have cited Thoreau’s option of civil disobedience, but we didn’t – though we recognised that the more extreme step of revolution could be the outcome.

We recognised the acceleration in the development of political philosophy from the Renaissance and its threat to sovereignty. The shift in ideas and growth and transition from compact city states to nations meant some re-thinking and some problems. Hobbes set out the obligations on the citizens and also the ruler of the state and enshrined the right to defend one’s life. Lock, Adam Smith, Rousseau and others developed the idea of the Social Contract (we liked Edmund Burke’s idea that the contract was with our forebears and descendants, not just those living now) and rights to liberty – and Marx pointed out that property can give one class liberty at the expense of the un-propertied proletariat. It was interesting that Abraham Lincoln seems to have shared Marx’s sentiment that capitalism oppressed the capitalist as well as the worker when he said “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master”. We briefly noted Isaiah Berlin’s observation that one man’s freedom is another’s oppression, and John Rawls’ proposal that the rules of society should be drawn up before considering one’s place within it.

We learnt of Aristotle’s scientific approach to politics: he collected 158 constitutions of various states of the then known world and compared them. He concluded that the best form of government depended on the state being governed (which does make some sense!). Comparing Aristotle’s democracy with other possibilities, we proposed that democracy would work better where there was a reasonable uniformity of views. Consideration of this further brought out a concern that a majority could impose its will on a minority, and we asked whether it was possible to run different legal systems within one society (e.g. Sharia law for Muslims).

Steven Pinker asks two questions to categorise political thinking: 1. Do you think of the state as something more than the individual members – with Plato, Hegel and Marx; or do you think of the state as a social contract between individuals for their common benefit – with Rousseau, Hobbes, Burke, etc.? 2. Do you take the “tragic” view of human nature with Hobbes and Burke; or do you take the utopian view with Rousseau, Mill, Marx (after the revolution), etc.? Pinker chooses social contract and tragic view, and cites several issues of human behaviour to show why democracy is best – but these issues do need to be addressed by democracies too. He includes:- -The primacy of family ties leading to nepotism and inheritance -The limited scope of communal sharing and the concept of reciprocity (example – disdain for “scroungers”) -The universality of dominance and violence. Individuals use violence and states make war: i) because they can take something by force ii) in self defence – as a pre-emptive strike iii) for “honour” -The heritability of capability leading to inequalities and the need to trade off

freedom -The prevalence of defence mechanisms and self-serving biases by which people deceive themselves about their autonomy, wisdom and integrity Several of the philosophers in the D-K book pick up on this last point: -Said says that every empire is convinced it is bringing civilisation to the world -Fanon agrees that the winners set the norms, so that the escape route for the black man is to adopt the white culture. - Perhaps Chomsky is right to say we should be on our guard: cut through the rhetoric and look at the evidence to see how a state actually behaves. Apply the principle of universality to the state as well as to the individual.

11 April 2014 Feminism.

Does Mind have No Gender? Is it all about domination?

We had studied a list of questions and a list of potential (proto-) "feminists". After some debate about the meaning of the word "feminism" (advocate / philosopher or icon), we debated the contributions of Elizabeth 1st which helped to make her a successful and powerful Queen. [We also mentioned and compared Bess of Hardwick]. Marie Curie was single minded in her focus on her work and defied the social conventions of her time by pursuing her career in Science. Malala Yousafzai is the young Pakistani girl who was shot by a member of the Taliban because she had spoken out for the right of girls to receive an education. Simone De Beauvoir stressed it is a mistake to judge women insofar as they are like men. This ignores the fact that men and women are different. Her book the Second Sex was placed on the Vatican's index of forbidden books. Mary Wollstonecroft in 1792 stressed that women should be given the same education as men and they would acquire the same good character and rational approach to life. However, "The hand that rocks the cradle cannot rock the board room?" was the topic for discussion at the International Womens' day in Hong Kong recently. It was recognized that present day women who are very successful have to have excellent child care, which is unfortunately not available for many working women. We also mentioned Gertrude Bell, Oonah King and Theresa Wallach , who with Florence Blenkiron was the first person (male or female) to ride a motorcycle across Africa north to south. She reportedly said she would rather grapple with the sands of the Sahara than contemporary society.

A discussion of why and when there should be women's events in sport led to discussions of equal pay and economics. Gerda Lerner has applied the Marxist concept of Exchange value versus Use value of women (mother virgin & prostitute). Evolutionary biology (Steven Pinker) suggests there is a genetic difference between the sexes rather than a totally social construct. He strongly notes that this is no justification for discrimination, and that variation within the sexes means there is overlap in ability. He does point out that men are stronger than women and are able to physically dominate them. Jo quoted Jean Genet - The prisoner accepts the language of the aggressor, and pointed us to Sojourner Truth "Ain't I a woman?" and bell hooks who took the phrase as a title of one of her books on the historical impact of sexism and racism on black women.

Overall we recognised despite some progress that there is a long way to go to the proper right of women to equality of opportunity, and men and women must be encouraged to take it. Looking at a quote from Sheryl Sandberg: "A world with more females leading it could be more productive, more peaceful and happier."

7 March 2014 Continuing into Modern & Contemporary Philosophy

From the Dorling Kindersley Philosophy Book:-The Interaction of History and Culture and the Way We Think - second session.p259 Marcuse p260 Gadamer p292 Midgley p298 Lyotard p302 Foucault p306 Habermas We discussed History and Culture further. Starting to

discuss Mary Midgley, we soon realized we needed to define Culture. She said (according to the D-K book) that culture is not of a different order to nature, but that we have evolved to be the kind of creatures who have cultures. Perhaps we can think of culture as the “muscle memory” of a group – the unconscious notion of who we are and how we solve problems collected from the experience of the past, i.e through our history. While we can be aware of different cultures in today’s world, our culture has been so ingrained into our minds, it can be very resistant to change. The culture versus genetics debate rages – we looked at a newspaper article suggesting we are born with moral values –and see below- but again perhaps we could look on Human Nature as a similar outcome over a much longer timescale: early humans also had problems to solve, and those with better solutions – and minds and brains better suited to addressing these problems – are the ones more likely to survive and pass those genes on to us. We looked at Gadamer’s contribution through Hermeneutics. We discussed this mediaeval approach to the interpretation of religious texts at the four levels: literal, allegorical, moral and transcendental; and compared it with the protestant fundamentalist approach. Then we noted Gadamer’s contribution: our understanding is always from the view of our point in history. Lyotard gave us two thoughts: one was the externalisation of knowledge, and whether the internet has brought us closer to his concern that knowledge will become a commodity – and this led us to revisit Habermas’s emphasis on the need for public spaces. The other idea was Lyotard’s caution against meta-narratives, which we could keep in mind as a caution against the neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School philosophers we have read, but also leading into Steven Pinker’s attack on *The Blank Slate*, *The Ghost in the Machine* and *The Noble Savage* (perhaps we should not have been so surprised at the Anthropology of the tribe described as being brought up to be suspicious and regard everyone as a possible enemy. But then again, is Pinker a white American male liberal, or a self-promoting academic – or does he have a point? We read a critique of Pinker - and no doubt we will return to this debate in the next meeting on Feminism!

21 February 2014 Continuing Modern & Contemporary Philosophy

from the Dorling Kindersley Philosophy Book:-

The Interaction of History and Culture and the Way We Think.

p259 Marcuse p260 Gadamer p292 Midgley p298 Lyotard p302 Foucault p306 Habermas and p242 Ortega y Gasset

The meeting showed that studying modern and contemporary philosophy is a fair bit trickier than older philosophers where we have a longer and more stable historical perspective. We discussed the impact – or otherwise – of philosophy on aspects of contemporary life, particularly responses to modern warfare and genocide and on community versus self interest. (we noted a paper on the advantages of co-operation –and *The Prisoners’ Dilemma*. We picked up on Adorno’s attack on the media as degrading our critical faculties, and the power of the owners of the media as highlighted by Lyotard. We debated the feeling of political powerlessness – and related that to Habermas’s emphasis on the need for public spaces. Despite that feeling, we can relate to Ortega y Gasset’s call for philosophers to expose the assumptions that lie behind our beliefs, look at our own existence and change the world. We did get the idea that history shapes us and our culture, and that it is difficult to break free from our culture when the world changes – at it does at an accelerating pace. We are aware of other cultures – we looked at a diagram showing a study of cultural differences across nationalities. discussed

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Prisoners' Dilemma. We picked up on Adorno's attack on the media as degrading our critical faculties, and the power of the owners of the media as highlighted by Lyotard. We debated the feeling of political powerlessness – and related that to Habermas's emphasis on the need for public spaces. Despite that feeling, we can relate to Ortega y Gasset's call for philosophers to expose the assumptions that lie behind our beliefs, look at our own existence and change the world. We did get the idea that history shapes us and our culture, and that it is difficult to break free from our culture when the world changes – at it does at an accelerating pace. We are aware of other cultures – we looked at a diagram showing a study of cultural differences across nationalities.

17 January 2014 The last topic from the Warburton menu - "Politics":-

Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau & Marx.

We did well to get through this agenda in the morning as there seemed to be so many important elements in each philosopher to cover. We must be getting good at this, because as the discussion progressed you brought out issues the group had noted I found I was ticking off the points that I had in mind and the questions Rosa sent (we checked at the end that we had addressed them). Hopefully you agree we are achieving this skim through, and getting a grasp of the subject across its range.

Machiavelli comes out as a an experienced politician who had lost his job who used the basis of the classical writers to produce a manual of how to achieve the aims of a Prince or a Republic. He's set aside any ethical ideals of "virtue", to put it mildly, and it is therefore perhaps a wrong question to ask if he is evil – though his methods are calculated to minimize strife, so could be seen as a political utilitarianism. Some of his maxims and advice were quoted: to Princes - "Know when to be brave as a lion, when to be cunning as a fox". "Treat fortune like a woman" (i.e. roughly!), "It is better to be feared than loved", "Do the harsh dirty work early"; to Republics – "you needed a strong founder", "Use good religion and good laws", encourage some strife between balanced factions" (e.g. patricians & plebs), "have strong laws against slandering the leaders", prevent citizens from getting over-wealthy", keep (military command) appointments short-term", "encourage immigration", "in your quest for empire, have short, big wars". Some of these still resonate, and we discussed the currency of the need for a dirty side to politics in the real world.

I learnt this time round the consistency of Thomas Hobbes Philosophy and the way he built his political theory on one underlying assumption. He was a Renaissance man, a scientist, materialist, empiricist and atheist. He noted that we cannot know what the world is really like, we have only our sense perceptions. Extending these ideas to ethics, again, we don't have a fundamental set of rules, only what we each believe to be true – he was a relativist. One concept he thought universal was that we all have the right to protect our own continuing existence – though even here he thought we would all respond differently to any possible threat. therefore best to give up our freedom to "the sovereign" (we might say "the government", or "the state") to decide on the rights and wrongs of everything. And that includes religion and beliefs as well as when to go to war and the law. This sounds totalitarian, but it is tempered because the sovereign is bound by the same contract, and can act only to protect the life of his subjects. So wars must be defensive, not to aggrandize the monarch; welfare for the poor is desirable to prevent riots and revolution (what was George Osborne saying about raising the minimum wage?), but the imposition of equality of wealth or the abolition of property would be beyond the sovereign's rights.

Rousseau seemed to attract the greatest collective suspicion. OK, we could see that man in the state of nature would be well content – conflict shouldn't arise when there is an abundance of territory and resources. It was observed that his theory that citizens should be educated to

understand and be free within “The General Will” could lead to state control, and the Cultural Revolution in China is still in our minds.

It is difficult to see how we could deal with Marx in a short session (and we can't – see below for the next session). It was good to look at his philosophy: how he adapted Hegel's idea of the progress and inevitability of history to demonstrate the inevitability of the revolution of the proletariat; his challenge to liberal ideas of freedom, encompassing the “free market” by his economic analysis and argument that capitalism pushed wages to starvation level. We examined reasons why communism has failed (so far?!). It was noted that both Russia and China missed out capitalism, going straight from feudalism to communism. We read an article from The Times on Bangladeshi clothing factories. We read Peter Singer's list of where Marx was wrong written in the 1985 (another in the OUP Very Short Introductions series), and thought that maybe the jury is still out on some: “The income gap between capitalists and workers will increase”, “More and more independent producers will be forced down into the proletariat”, “Workers' wages will remain at subsistence level”, “The rate of profit will fall”, “Capitalism will collapse because of its internal contradictions”, “Proletarian revolutions will occur in the most industrially advanced countries”.

15 November 2013 “World Views”

- from Warburton: Voltaire & Leibnitz, Hegel, Schopenhauer

“World Views” would seem to involve rational thought plus something else. Up until the age of reason, the extra factor was god, a given part of belief who was always there to complete the picture. Leibnitz was a great mathematician as well as a philosopher, and as a rationalist he conceived a system whereby it should be possible to know everything through reason, but the human mind was limited, so we have to fall back on empirical knowledge. God of course knows all. Voltaire shows a healthy scepticism, rejecting certainly authority and also even looking for flaws in scientific reasoning. The problem of evil and disasters in the world led him to attack Leibnitz's suggestion that we live in the best of all possible worlds, caricaturing him as Dr Pangloss in “Candide”. Kant's philosophy making it impossible to appeal to God to complete the picture may be looked at as an example of Hegel's dialectic process. The debate whether reality is mind (thesis) or matter (antithesis) goes back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle. Kant's synthesis is that there is a real world out there (noumena), but we can comprehend the world only as phenomena through our senses and conditioned by our mind's inherent concepts of not only colours, say, but space, time and cause and effect too. His corollary is that concepts such as God and morality are noumena, and therefore cannot be comprehended through reason. As Hegel suggested, this apparent solution itself became a new thesis, and could be seen as the starting point of the great schism in philosophy between the “Analytical Philosophy” of the English speaking world, focusing on reason and logic, and “Continental Philosophy” looking to refute or go beyond Kant to continue metaphysics through interpretation of the world.

Hegel was an idealist and refuted Kant's theory that our way of seeing the world was fixed and given. Hegel gave philosophy a dynamic and the dialectic was a way of working through understanding everything to reach the unifying “Spirit” he also believed history followed the dialectic (an idea taken up by Marx) – culminating in his ideas and the ideal of the Prussian state!

If Hegel was an optimist, Schopenhauer was a pessimist. Instead of the unifying spirit, he could see just a blind will – which struck a chord with the scientifically disposed amongst us as sounding very like energy. Influenced by eastern philosophy, Schopenhauer the Buddhist concept of asceticism leading to Nirvana, but seems to have missed the compassion and content. he did promote the arts and particularly music as a consolation.

11 October 2013 “Scepticism & Epistemology”

:- from Warburton: Pyrrho, Descartes, Locke & Berkeley, Kant

We agreed that Pyrrho took radical scepticism beyond the bounds of sanity. Descartes was not advocating such a lifestyle, but going through the thought process to address the question "Do I have any grounds for believing anything?" We followed the Method of Cartesian Doubt and tracked how he applied the principle of not accepting anything as true if there is the slightest possibility it isn't to the unreliability of the senses, dreams, and the fiendish demon who deliberately sets out to deceive him. He concludes that "Je pense donc je suis," (apparently he really did say that!) – whatever is being done to him, he must be a thinking mind. His argument for reconstructing a real world about him through the ontological argument for God (plus God leaving his "trademark" in us), and that God is good, so He would not deceive us we found less convincing. We acknowledged that the Mind-Matter dualism he propounded has been and remains entrenched in our thought processes and culture.

Berkeley we found problematic. Locke as a realist had acknowledged that we cannot know the reality of matter, but matter did exist and carried various properties we could sense. Primary properties include shape and extension, secondary qualities like colour interact with our senses. Berkeley's response has been admired by many "professional" philosophers because of its logic: Locke, he says, postulates this "matter" you can't know – and he already said you can only get knowledge through the senses. So, given God created everything, "matter" is a superfluous concept – we just get sensations straight from the mind of God.

Kant set out to counter such arguments. The "rose coloured spectacles" refers to his theory that those properties Locke attached to matter are actually a priori innate in us: whatever we sense is in the parameters of extension; we deduce causation, etc.

We finished up with concepts from Roger Scruton's "Modern Philosophy". First, a problem with Descartes' conclusion that he exists is shown by Wittgenstein's "Beetle in a Box" concept we discussed last session. The first person's "Mind" is the beetle: Ok I know I exist now, but who can verify that "I" am who I was ten minutes ago?. Also, a counter to scepticism is found in the anthropic argument: it is only an entity that thinks and is aware of its own thoughts that is able to doubt the validity of knowledge.

20 September 2013 "Logic & Language"

:- from Warburton: Pierce & James, Russell, Ayer, Wittgenstein, Popper

I was a little concerned the group might find this section a bit dry and impenetrable, and was therefore pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm, both of those present and expressed in the apologies of other members. In fact there is enthusiasm and enough left to consider taking the subject further in due course.

As ever looking for the question the philosopher was addressing, we started with "What is 'Truth'?" to discuss Pierce & James. There was some discussion of James' view that truth is what is useful, perhaps later mollified by limiting its application to those metaphysical propositions that Ayer and the early Wittgenstein said were "meaningless". Hunters circling squirrels led us to logic and definitions and how language works.

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy entry on Wittgenstein says that his views changed between his two major works. The Tractatus is along the lines of Ayer's Logical Positivism, limiting philosophical discussion to propositions that could be demonstrated or shown by deduction. Then his Philosophical Investigations refuted all this and found that language was much more complex. We noted the arguments demolishing "private language" and discussed the influence of culture on language with interest and at some length. Discussions on meanings followed. Jo brought us quite a few thoughts from French philosophers, and we could explore a lot more material here that has had such an influence on at least the literature of the later 20th century. [If you have any awareness of Structuralism and Deconstruction, do

have a look for Malcolm Bradbury's "My Strange Quest for Mensonge, Structuralism's Hidden Hero" – a hilarious demolition of the theory, and incidentally a simpler to follow explanation & history than many more serious tracts.

Looking at inductive logic led us to Popper and then to Kuhn and Feyerabend's "paradigm shift". For a simple presentation of this concept, see Bill Bryson's "A Short History of Nearly Everything". This part of the discussion provided a healthy scepticism of the fashionable perception that science captures the truth about reality. On deductive logic, I went through a slide show on Aristotle's Logic as an introduction. Again, this is just skimming the surface, and Sharon has watched and commends Marianne Talbot's series on Critical Reasoning for Beginners. We looked briefly at Russell's contribution – he is described by Roger Scruton as contributing "perhaps the most famous paper in the whole of modern philosophy.....Its primary subject matter is the word "is".....

Anyway, we now understand the "present King of France is bald" paradox and why Anselm's Ontological Proof might be flawed.

16 August 2013 "God"

:- from Warburton: St Augustine, Anselm & Aquinas, Pascal, Spinoza, and Hume

St. Augustine was especially interested in the problem of evil. The fact that the world contains evil is an argument against the existence of God; as God is seen as "all powerful and all good." Augustine focused on moral evil. Why did God allow evil to happen? Augustine used the "Free Will defence" Evil is the result of Adam and Eve's choice to turn away from God in the Paradise story in Genesis. This led to Original Sin and the result that humans all pay the price for the Original Sin committed by the first humans. The discussion focused on the meaning of evil and original sin. The Genesis story is interpreted literally by some people, whereas others acknowledge that it is a Myth. The definition of myth used here, is not an idea or explanation which is widely held as untrue or unproven; instead the definition is a myth is a story about super human beings of an earlier age, or usually how natural phenomena or social customs came into existence. The Genesis story deals with the deep" question of why man, God's creature, refuses to acknowledge the sovereignty of his Creation, with the result that history is a tragic story of man's banishment from the life for which he was intended." (Ref: The Living World of the OT – B. Anderson) The problem of an imperfect world was not answered by St. Augustine, but it was generally acknowledged that in most circumstances, humans do have the freedom to choose between right or wrong, and to choose whether there is a God or not.

Anselm was keen to show that God's existence could be proved by rational argument. Anselm invented the Ontological argument.

Anselm argued that the fact that we have an idea of God proves God exists. This argument was disputed by the Monk Gaunilo- just because we can imagine something i.e. the perfect island does not mean it exists. Our discussion raised the idea of Transcendence- that some experiences are beyond description with words, and included powerful emotional experiences such as when listening to music.

Thomas Aquinas used the First Cause Argument – Where did everything there is come from? Everything that exists has a cause. He was convinced there could not be a never ending series of effects and their causes – infinite regress. At some point there was a beginning. God uncaused cause of everything there is. The question asked in the group was: What caused God? Answer God is infinite. God existed before time existed.

Blaise Pascal, famously known for "Pascal's Wager." A betting person would choose to live as if God exists, thus avoiding the risk of going to hell. In return the person would go to church, and pray etc. In our discussion it was suggested that this could result in time wasted going to church, praying etc and that it was not possible to make oneself believe just by thinking about

belief. Pascal contradicts himself when he admits that belief in God comes from the heart and not a false gamble as to whether God exists or not.

Baruch Spinoza

He had a Pantheistic belief in God – God exists in everything. He was excommunicated from the Jewish faith. His view of God was strange – God is nature – impersonal and does not care about anything or anyone. He was a Determinist – he denied that even our intentional actions are freely chosen, believing that all our behaviours are causally determined by the laws of nature and situation. It was pointed out that Spinoza was very influenced by his own life experiences, and that he was very much a unique and controversial thinker of his time.

David Hume argued against the Design argument – this argument suggests that the complexity of the human eye, for example, would indicate that there was a designer. Hume thought the design argument was based on bad logic. i.e. the eye has design faults; why one designer and not a team? It was difficult to be openly opposed to religion in the 18th century. It is unclear whether he was an agnostic or an atheist?

19 July 2013 "The Ancients"

:- from Warburton: Socrates & Plato, Aristotle, Epicures, Stoics

This was an ambitious package, but we went through:-

Socrates' campaign against the rhetoric* and moral relativism and his method of Socratic dialogue;

Plato's justification of Socrates' search for meaning and on the immortality of the soul through his theory of forms;

Aristotle's rejection of the separate existence of forms, but his incorporation of them into his theory of causation;

Epicurus' campaign for the pleasure principle – but it's much easier if your pleasures are simple;

Stoical self management and unemotional response to what fate throws at you.

There is a lot more to study here: I had taken the opportunity to re-read W.K.C. Guthrie's "The Greek Philosophers from Thales to Aristotle" (160 odd pages). Also, there is probably no philosopher easier to read than Plato: maybe look at a dialogue – perhaps the similes of the sun, the line and the cave from "The Republic" which illustrate the theory of forms?

21 June 2013 "Justice"

:- from Warburton: Bentham, Mill, Arendt, Dilemmas, Rawls, Singer

The chapter on Bentham revisits Utilitarianism, but he is also noted for his famous quotation that "natural rights is simply nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense – nonsense upon stilts". Simon Blackburn "the Big Questions" page 178 is one reference. Mill had a lot to say about freedom as an aspect of justice. Hannah Arendt found that evil deeds often come not from deliberate malice, but from failure to think – the banality of evil. We have looked at "Dilemmas" before – should you kill two people to save seven? Rawls is one of my favourites – you can't look at his theory of how a just society should work too often! The chapter on Singer is a neat attempt at rounding off of the book by linking him right back to Socrates – a philosopher who asks annoying and uncomfortable questions!

Today's discussion from the start was filled with examples to compare with some of the ideas we had read: were the examples different in nature or just in degree? We started off comparing Peter Singer's challenge that we ignore the starving in Africa with Arendt's condemnation of Eichmann for not thinking about what he was doing. Just maybe that is

stretching a point comparing uncaring inaction with efficiently mechanising ethnic cleansing, but we await with interest the explanation of how those responsible for upholding standards in hospitals were “just doing their job” when they destroyed unfavourable reports. We discussed the mind game of diverting the train to prevent five workers being killed – but unavoidably killing some other worker, and was it really different to push a fat man onto the track to bring about the same consequence. A good argument was advanced that the workers would be aware of the risks when they signed up – so maybe we should consider what they would think of such action. This led on to thinking about acts of self sacrifice and heroism, and whether there could be any “duty” to behave beyond reason in such a way.

We attacked & defended Bentham: ok his measures and definitions of “pleasure” can be challenged, and do lead to such dilemmas as discussed, but he was an early egalitarian and the first champion of animal rights, driven by his principle of minimizing pain. And he did try to quantify the consequences of a course of action. We moved on to John Rawls’ idea of looking at the worst off rather than the average effect. This led inevitably to bankers’ bonuses (ok only if they incentivise and deliver better job opportunities and benefits to the poor) and then to a justification of unionisation to fight the exploitation of labour in times of unemployment: but wait – in today’s global economy, don’t the even worse off of the developing world have a right to these jobs?

We covered most of the ground if thinly – Mill’s idea of maximising freedom on the “no harm” principle, but it is still worth reading Simon Blackburn on rights.

17 May 2013 “Mind and Evolution”

:- from Warburton:- Locke, Darwin, Freud, Turing

and Simon Blackburn Big Questions “Am I a Ghost in a Machine”

We started on Darwin and discussed the meaning of “Survival of the Fittest”. Individual or species? Does evolution have a goal? We also noted the difference evolution made to thinking: man is a development from other creatures, not specially and differently created to have dominion over nature. So Mind and Consciousness have evolved too. We discussed dualism and monism: are Mind and Body two different things, or is Mind inextricably linked to matter? Could we possibly make any valid analogy between humans and computers: the Mind is the brain loaded with software?? Computers have a long way to go to approach having some consciousness, and it is very difficult to get the concepts even to consider whether this is ever going to be possible. It was argued that Locke’s assertion that it is the continuity of memory that gives us our identity needs to add in continuity of body: if we could transfer the “software” of a mind to another brain, then doesn’t that demand a dualistic theory? Are we not transferring “the ghost in the machine”? We also examined Locke’s assertion that the mind of a child is “a blank slate” – i.e. that knowledge is empirical. Perhaps that can be modified: we are born with some inherent abilities. (Hume would argue that knowledge of matters of fact must be empirical, and that seems right.) We discussed Freud and the influence of the subconscious mind on our actions and we touched on the point that his theories are “Unfalsifiable” – a term we will return to when we read about Karl Popper. This summary hardly does justice to a discussion that also wondered whether you could “think like a bat”, and there is a lot left in the topic of the philosophy of mind.

19 April 2013 “The Consolations of Philosophy”

:- from Warburton:- Boethius, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre.

The topic very loosely linking these four was “Consolation”: is belief in philosophy or religion a consolation to us? Clearly it was for Boethius, Kierkegaard found the religion demanded that we make difficult choices, often beyond the comforting rationality of Kant’s analysis. Nietzsche said that when we lost God, the personification of good, we lost good and evil with

him, and traced the development of our value systems. The Existentialists have nothing at all to give consolation: your life is what you make it. This was our first session working from Warburton. It seems to work as a “shallow” pass through the history of Philosophy. The analogy of a jigsaw was suggested for Philosophy, and we should perhaps regard these studies as getting the pieces out of the box and looking at their shapes and colours. Maybe a few pieces will fit together, but that’s a bonus!t