

Does Philosophy have a Future?
Andrea Nye

“Is there any reason why my children should study philosophy?” That question, put to Socrates by Crito in Plato’s dialogue *Euthydemus*, could easily be asked today. Now, also, there are many ready to agree with Crito’s lawyer friend that philosophers “talk nonsense and make an unworthy fuss about things worth nothing at all.” And Socrates’s advice —“ Don’t worry about those who practice philosophy whether they are good or bad, but put the thing itself to the test carefully and well”—can seem something of an evasion. What, after all, is philosophy if it is not what those who call themselves philosophers do and teach? And parents checking out articles in the *Journal of Philosophy* or sitting in on a session at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association might be no more enthusiastic than Crito listening to Euthydemus’s mind-bending refutations at the Lyceum.

The case against philosophy is not hard to make. In several thousand years has it made any progress? Has a consensus been reached on any issue? Have correct methods of inquiry been laid down as in the physical sciences? With much of its former territory ceded to the various sciences—philosophy of mind to psychology, philosophy of man to anthropology, ethics to sociology, political theory to political science, and so on—philosophy can seem a relic of the past. Given the uncertain results of attempts to mark out for philosophy some logical or phenomenological territory of its own, even some of its most eminent twentieth century practitioners were ready to announce the “End of Philosophy.”

At one point in *Euthydemus* Socrates suspended his joke of pretending to want to learn the art of fighting with words and posed the question directly. What would attract a young person to philosophy? In what way could he (or she) be convinced that philosophy had something to offer in helping obtain the good things of life? He and Crito spelled them out: wealth, health, good-looks, power, honor, things most parents want for their children. And if one can learn from lawyers how to write and defend a brief, from physicians how to cure disease, from politicians how to persuade voters, and from geologists where to dig for gold, what place is left for philosophy? Nor are “good things” parents want for children cited by Socrates very different today. Knowing where to dig (or drill) for valuable substances, the ability to win over lawmakers or voters, the “general’s art” of military science, and -- put on the table as a joke by Socrates but taken seriously in some quarters today —“knowing how to make a human being immortal”: all continue to be sought after, as are the courses that teach these practical skills: — physical science, political science, law, medicine, computer science?

What place there might be in such a curriculum for philosophy courses is a subject of current debate. Might a philosophy have some use as *history of ideas*, giving students a sense of human progress from the fantasies of myth, visions of Platonic Form, dogmas of theology, to laws of physics and the truths of empirical science? Might philosophy provide epistemological *critique*, making sure that scientists do not slip up in reasoning from evidence to conclusion? And with their familiarity with abstract reasoning perhaps philosophers could offer some positive *help to science* in areas of cognitive psychology, computer programming, or game theory. Even if the sciences insisted on going their own way and conducting their own critiques, philosophy might still have a role to play as *interdisciplinary forum* creating a space for dialogue and conversation between different sciences and between the sciences and the liberal arts.

Socrates’s claim in *Euthydemus* was more radical. Not only does philosophy have something to offer, without philosophy it is impossible to be sure that the good things students

learn to make and do will benefit to themselves or their communities. We can teach young people how to extract wealth from the ground, win public office, devise lethal weapons, even perhaps download their brain onto a computer, but, Socrates pointed out to Crito, there is no guarantee any of these skills will insure “good fortune.” Something crucial is missing, something essential to realizing the benefit of “good things.” If the extraction of natural gas from shale contaminates ground water and contributes to climate change, if the ability to “charm” crowds leads to a docile mesmerized populace, if lethal weapons contribute to unwinnable wars with thousands killed and millions displaced, in what way are these “good” things beneficial. What is needed, insisted Socrates, is the kind of knowledge that combines both how to make something and how to use it. There are questions science is able to answer. Will it work? What are the long term results? There are other questions--Is it right to make it or do it?—and even more important--Is it “wise?”—that are not in science’s provenance.

Who might have such knowledge? Socrates considered some of the possibilities. Generals? Military men? Hardly, he pointed out. Just as a hunter knows how to hunt down and kill animals but must hand over the carcass to chefs for cooking, a general who conquers a city must hand that city over to politicians for governance? Politicians? Are they any better? They may know how to make a state richer, or freer, or less sectarian? But the benefit and proper use of wealth, freedom, or uniformity may still be in question. Wealth can be in the hands of a privileged few, freedom may be badly used, uniformity of opinion may be accomplished by manipulation of public opinion. What is missing is the wisdom to know how wealth, freedom, and the power of persuasion should be used. So Socrates’s challenge to Crito: In thinking of what your sons should study, look at philosophy and see if you do not think it is essential if they are to have a chance of living well.

We live in different times. Socrates was free to roam the streets of Athens, posing questions to teachers, lawyers, political leaders, priests, and visiting dignitaries. Although a few contemporary philosophers have found a voice in popular media, as an “academic “discipline” philosophy goes on behind closed classroom doors where its lack of approved subject matter and established methods causes suspicion.. How can such a thing as the love of wisdom and “wise practice of virtue” be taught? Shouldn’t such topics be left to religious authorities or to parents? Shouldn’t Universities concentrate on practical marketable skills? Socrates’s audience was men of a privileged propertied class. There was no need for Crito to ensure that his sons learn a trade or skill that could earn a living. Classes at the Lyceum focused on success as a citizen, on being able to speak in the Assembly, lead battalions, deliberate on councils, serve as judges. A young man would learn rhetorical eloquence, and bits of literature, history and religion to give interest and authority to his speeches. He would learn to argue and debate so as to refute the arguments of opponents. He might even learn to confuse and embarrass a rival and win the applause of enthusiastic audiences like the one that clapped and shouted after Euthydemus and his brother’s performance at the Lyceum.

. Still, I would argue that Socrates’s defense of philosophy is as relevant today as it was then. Yes, philosophy does not teach a trade or skill in ready demand by employers, but it might help to insure that a trade or skill is practiced with a degree of wisdom. And yes, the problems that concerned Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant and other thinkers regularly on philosophy reading lists have not been or ever will be decisively put to rest. And no, there is no line of research that could resolve them for all time: What is it important to know? How can people live together in peace? What does it mean to practice virtue? If wisdom on such matters is important in family life and in the work place, I would

argue that it is even more important in life as a citizen today, not only the casting of a vote, but in discussions between family and friends, disputes on city councils, participation on school boards and labor unions. .

In insuring that some sort of wisdom results from these discussions, philosophy offers essential resources. In philosophy there is attention paid to words and their meanings, not only care in defining what you talk about so that you and others refer to the same thing, but sensitivity to the emotive force of words and the obfuscating “clouds of etymology” they often carry with them. In philosophy there is willingness to come to terms with contradiction, both in one’s own thinking as well as between one’s own thinking and the thinking of others. To “love wisdom” is to worry about being wrong. It is to be open to having certainties questioned. It is to go home after a heated discussion and turn the question over and over in one’s mind. Philosophy from its beginnings with Socrates has been dialogical, requiring skill in listening, understanding, responding to other points of view. When writing a *Meditation on first Philosophy*, or a *Critique of Pure Reason*, philosophers respond to other philosophers and thinkers, working out in their writing more complete understanding and submitting that understanding to readers for judgment. Truth is on-going, work in progress, and even when the matter in question is the “nature of man” or “true knowledge” or “good-itself,” if that “nature” “truth” and “good” is to be of any use it has to be interpreted for a changing world. Is health care a basic human right? Should there be controls on campaign finance? Should war be waged with un-manned drones? Is military intervention in Syria a good idea? Should the human genome be altered? These, I submit, are philosophical questions, and as Socrates noted, human good fortune may depend on giving them wise answers.