



Philosophy Lives

Gareth Morgan – a philosophical journey

Stephen Hawking famously declared that philosophy is dead. Maybe he's right.

I remember attending my first philosophy lecture at university. The professor told us that he was astonished to learn that some students had opted for philosophy in the belief that it would somehow help them to cope with life better: that it would teach them wisdom. Nothing, he said, could be further from the truth. We would simply be reading about various ideas that had occurred to people and discussing them. He then spent the rest of the semester reading out loud to us from Plato's "Republic".

Maybe philosophy is dead. Let's do a quick recap.

The story so far

Four thousand years of Eastern philosophy goes something like this: - "The Universe is the product of two classes of things: those that are 'yin' and those that are 'yang'. Yin corresponds to female, passive, dark, while yang corresponds to male, active, light and so on. Every aspect of reality may be understood in terms of the interaction of these two basic principles."

Those who have explored this point of view sooner or later find that some yin phenomena have yang characteristics and vice versa. Thus passivity can be the most effective action, females can be aggressive, light can be dark, yin can be yang. Everything can be anything, nothing is anything – it's all an illusion.

Four thousand years of Judeo-Christian philosophy goes something like this: - "The Universe is the product of two classes of things: those that are 'good' and those that are 'evil'. Every aspect of reality may be understood in terms of the interaction of these two basic principles."

Those who have explored this point of view sooner or later find that some good things can have evil characteristics and vice-versa. Thus good actions can have evil consequences, evil people can do good deeds, "Fair is foul and foul is fair". Everything can be anything, nothing is anything – it's all an illusion.

Four hundred years of Western philosophy goes something like this: - "The Universe is the product of two classes of things: those that are 'matter' and those that are 'energy'. Every aspect of reality may be understood in terms of the interaction of these two basic principles."

Those who have explored this point of view sooner or later find that energy can be created from matter, matter is made of energy, everything is uncertain. Everything can be anything, nothing is anything – it's all an illusion.

Or is it?

Despite their convictions as to the illusory nature of, say, a door, it is remarkable that Lao Tzu, Bishop Butler and Werner Heisenberg would all invariably open doors before attempting to walk through them. Could it be that reality exists after all?

There is an entity that has had six hundred million years to consider the matter. Let's look at it from the point of view of Life-as-we-know-it.

Pure philosophy...

That goes something like this: "The Universe consists of two classes of things: those that are alive, and everything else. These two principles are quite distinct. Everything Else is subject to the law of entropy – it decays – cooling down, slowing down, breaking down. Life, uniquely, also has the temerity to grow."

Since this is a clear demarcation it is reasonable to consider reality in terms of the interaction of Life with the entropic universe – growth vs. decay.

...and applied

From this starting point we can attempt to apply Life's perspective to answer some perennial philosophical questions. How about "What is the purpose of life?"

Well, Life only exhibits two types of behaviour – growth and decay. There may once have been life forms whose greatest wish was to decay, of course, but, even by doing nothing at all, they could easily achieve their hearts' desire, and are therefore long extinct. For the remainder, including ourselves, the purpose of life is, universally and incontestably, to grow.

Well, that was easy. Let's try another one.

When they asked the parents of school children in the US and in the UK what they wanted their children to be taught at school, top of the list was "the difference between right and wrong." You might wonder why the parents themselves didn't tell the kids what the difference is. The inescapable conclusion is that they didn't know.

In fairness, nobody knows. No one has ever been able to think of an action that is right in all circumstances, nor one that is always inherently wrong. No one has ever come up with a meaningful definition of 'good' or 'evil'. We all feel we've got a pretty good idea, and Eve got a lot of stick for 'eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil', but if she did, she never thought to pass the information on to her kids.

Chambers Dictionary offers over forty different synonyms for *good* but none of them really helps. They consist mostly of variations of the word *good*, like *benevolent*, or *well-behaved*, or terms like *desirable* and *commendable*, which are very much matters of opinion.

What would Life say? Something like this maybe: - "Anything that tends to lead to the development of the maximum potential of living things is good, and anything that tends to limit or destroy that potential is bad. More life – good. Less life – bad."

The Big Questions...

So how would that apply in the real world? If more life is good, what does that tell us about, say, 'overpopulation'? It seems that all the world's great thinkers since Thomas Malthus agree that the more people there are, the worse off we will all be. More people – bad. Less people – good. Let's see.

Right now there are more people in the world than there have ever been – nearly enough people to cover the Isle of

Wight, if we all stood close together. Yet, for the first time, we can produce enough food to feed ourselves twice over using less than five percent of the workforce. The housing stock is in the best condition it's ever been. Levels of education are higher than ever, incidence of epidemic disease is at an historic low and life expectancy is the highest it's been since records began.

Economically we have the most advanced manufacturing capacity and the most efficient distribution infrastructure we've ever had. We also have the best qualified workforce while the global market has never been bigger.

At the same time there are also more nature reserves, national parks, conservation areas, protected species, ecologists, environmentalists and conservationists than ever before.

If Malthus was right, then it should be easy enough to say that things were better at some time in the past when there were fewer people: Victorian times maybe? mediaeval times? the dark ages? the stone age? the ice age? When was the population low enough that the quality of life was better than it is now? It certainly seems that more is better all round when it comes to population growth. This would be obvious to people if they could tell the difference between good and bad. This is the good times; the best of times.

Does it matter if people know the difference between right and wrong; good and bad? Well it kind of does. If you think more people is a bad thing, for instance, then genocide can seem like quite a good idea. Or if you decide that some people are evil, then it makes sense to rid the world of them. Since they are probably of a different opinion though, they may resent being killed and might even think that you are a bad person/tribe/nation as a consequence. This sort of disagreement can often lead to conflict and, whenever there's a conflict of any kind, both sides always lose – which is a bad thing.

...and the not so big

What about on the individual level, then? How can we apply the principle of growth most effectively in our own lives?

First of all we need to understand the nature of the individual. It is useful to consider a person as having four distinct, interactive aspects.

Physical development

First and foremost there is the physical body. That is the entire person. None of the person exists outside of that physical form. The physical body can grow in terms of strength and fitness, in improved health, immunity and the healing of injuries, in the experience of physical sensations and, without limit, in the development of physical skills and abilities.

Intellectual development

Secondly there is the mental or intellectual aspect. Intellectual growth is obvious. Learn stuff. Think.

Emotional development

The third item is emotion. Now here's a force that can exert absolute control over every thought, word and deed of everyone who has ever lived, yet science has only very recently condescended to consider it at all. What kind of person we are perceived to be is very much about our emotional profile – kind, grumpy, timid, miserable and so on are words we use to describe people who are disposed to feel the emotions of compassion, anger, fear or sadness.

Emotions are also the product of six hundred million years of selective evolution, so it might be a good idea to pay attention to what they have to teach us. That would be a book in itself, but in the meantime we can consider that, for optimum emotional growth and development, it is worth checking that all one's emotions are in working order, that they occur in a form and manner appropriate to the circumstances that generate them and that we can, at least, tell them apart.

There are over a hundred named emotions (in English) and it can be easy, before some important occasion, say, to confuse excitement with nervousness – they both cause 'butterflies in the stomach'. Equally it is easy to misread another person's frustration as anger, for example.

For those who are already in tune with their emotions the next stage would be to acquire the ability to turn any particular emotion on or off, at will. It's not so hard.

To be happy...

I was giving a talk at Bath University on the subject of human emotions when, in response to a comment I'd made, every single person in the lecture theatre broke spontaneously into speech. The students were a bright lot and had realised that I had just told them the secret of happiness.

My comment had been this: "You can generate any emotion simply by taking thought. Every one of you in this room has, on occasion, generated the emotion of lust, to the point of manifesting signs of physical arousal, just by thinking about things that stimulate you."

The students immediately made the mental connection that it is also true that brooding on depressing subjects can make you miserable and thinking happy thoughts can cheer you up again. Like I say, it's not so hard.

It gets more interesting. Many people – maybe most people – believe that what everybody wants is happiness; that the pursuit of happiness is what it's all about. Well, it's not.

...or not to be

Somewhere in our brains there is what scientists call the 'pleasure centre'. If this is stimulated then we feel happy. When rats have had electrodes inserted into their pleasure centres so that, when they press a lever, they get a shot of happiness, they keep pressing that lever till they die of thirst and starvation. They die happy, but they die nevertheless.

You could have one of those electrodes fitted, wired up to a dial on your wrist and feel as happy as you want at any time, but no one I've ever asked has said they would like to have such a device fitted. Curious, that. Turns out people don't really want happiness after all.

Quite right, too. Who would want to miss out on all the other emotions? Love, for a start; then there's mirth, ecstasy, rapture. As a Celt I also quite enjoy *hiraeth*, which translates as something like a romantic longing or nostalgia and I do have to admit to being quite fond of smugness as well.

On a practical level it is inappropriate to be happy all the time. "I've stubbed my toe. I'm still happy. " "I've got diabetes. Happy, happy, happy." "My child was killed in a car crash...." We have appropriate emotions for different circumstances.

People need to get their emotions sorted. In some philosophies, feeling the emotion of lust is, in itself, a deadly sin, which inevitably turns it into guilt. And in some societies people often feel unable to express their feelings at all through fear of what others might think. If perfectly healthy emotions have, through conditioning, been warped into other, inappropriate emotions then, in physical terms, that would be like: every time you tried to walk, you found yourself sitting down and every time you tried to speak you felt compelled to yawn instead. These forms of emotional dysfunction can be quite crippling.

Emotional growth is important. How do you know how you are if you don't know how you feel?

Spiritual development

On to the next item – the fourth and last aspect of life – the creative/imaginative/spiritual aspect. I consider creativity to be a spiritual faculty on the grounds that, if anything characterises divinity then it is the creative principle. The term 'Creator' is in fact synonymous with the divine and any creative act begins in the imagination of the creator.

Spiritual growth can be nurtured in many ways; through prayer and meditation, also by means of mantras, yoga and fasting, but music, dance, literature, laughter and simply letting your mind wander can all be equally productive.

Balance...

I won't dwell on either spiritual or intellectual growth since the Network Review consistently provides ample material for guidance in these disciplines, but I would like to look further into the implications of the vitacentric perspective for balanced growth.

It is easy to become a spiritual giant. Simply ignore all physical sensations, cease all rational thought and switch off all your feelings and desires. Having no other way to grow you will soon transcend the physical plane and merge with divine consciousness. Equally, if you do nothing but study and try to understand every aspect of every academic discipline, dismissing all trivial pleasures and ignoring any personal preferences, you can become an intellectual giant.

Alternatively, if you concern yourself only with your own feelings, you can eventually become the most empathetic and sensitive of beings, beloved by everyone. Likewise, if you practice physical skills on a full time basis, to the exclusion of everything else, you will, in due course, achieve Olympic standards of excellence.

The world certainly need giants, if only to inspire the rest of us, but to become a complete human being it might be wise to try for some kind of symmetry – some equilibrium – a balance of development in all four aspects.

...and Checks

Take the time, occasionally, to consider your life. Have you learned something this month? Have you read a work of nonfiction, looked up information on something that interested you or started to learn Spanish? Have you done anything creative? Have you redecorated the lounge, written a poem or planned a holiday? What about the physical things? Did you learn to knit or drive a car or dig a trench or join a gym? And, importantly, how have you been feeling? What new emotions have you felt? What is the dominant emotion in your life recently? What is the source of that emotion?

If you can identify some progress in each area then you're probably feeling pretty good about your life. If you're not, it should be easy to see which aspect of your life could benefit from some attention.

The process is not without its discomforts of course. Growth is impossible without moving into new spaces and there will always be growing pains. That's what they mean when they talk about being outside your comfort zone. It's uncomfortable. When you first learn to play the guitar the strings will cut painfully into your fingers and when you first learn to use an iPad your patience will be severely tested, but when you look back you'll wonder how you ever survived without those skills.

Some activities combine two or more aspects of growth of course, because each affects the others. The only activity I can think of that uses all four faculties simultaneously is jamming – using your manual dexterity and your knowledge of music theory to create a work of art that you compose as you go along, which expresses the mood you choose to create. A fabulous experience, and, if you are jamming with friends then you also have this *gestalt* thing going on, where you are as one with other creative beings. Fabulous. It's even better than sex, which, I have to say, isn't very intellectually demanding as a rule.

The bottom line

So which of these four aspects of life is the most important? Or are they all equal?

Well it seems to me that you can live a full, satisfying and productive life without any significant emotional involvement, and there are plenty of people who have been very happy and successful without ever going to school or reading a book. There are certainly a great many unimaginative people as well, who have no interest at all in matters spiritual, but anyone without a physical body will be finding their choices severely limited and any kind of growth will be pretty much out of the question. It follows that the physical body is the most important part of us and the most important issues are to do with those things that may deprive us of it.

These, and other weighty matters deriving from the vitacentric perspective are dealt with at some length in my book, *The Art of Science*, but the beauty of it is that it's a handy pocket-sized philosophy that leads to something very like wisdom.

Maybe there is some life in it yet.

Gareth Morgan, author of *The Art of Science*, quit university "in order to gain an education" and now lives quietly in Greece, enjoying the benefits of his philosophical perspective. In between, he acquired many practical and intangible skills and experienced many interesting ways of life. He is a freelance philosopher by trade.
