An Interview with Peter Singer

Can Robots Feel Emotions?

Reincarnation & the problem of the nature of mind

Animal Ethics
When we look at Western philosophy, we can somehow get to a broad generalisation of its main characteristics through the recurrent themes and motifs woven into its history - from the pre-Socratic philosophy on the Ionian coast to the 20th century analytical Philosophy across the European continent. Argumentation, attention to semantics, and of course the use of logic have always been high on the list. On a broader scale, western thinking in general can be seen bent towards critical assessment, analytical thinking, and a moderate dash of skepticism, sometimes bordering on cynicism.

Mainstream scientific thought and practice has also been birthed and raised by this general view. The masthead of modern scientific thought is in fact rational and analytical thinking complemented by strict methodologies that aim at excluding subjective bias, lack of sound empirical observation and theories that are immune to falsification by logical arguments or further data.

All in all, both modern science and western philosophical thought have performed fairly well over the last couple of centuries and have undeniably built a decent track-record for informing and guiding other areas of thought such as economics, technology and social policy making, to just name a few. Yet both of them have at the same time fallen victims to their own success by getting locked into a rigid framework or paradigm that is becoming increasingly inadequate at dealing with a fast-changing world that is constantly churning new problems of an unprecedented global scale.

The global warming debate, ongoing for years now, is a pertinent example. On one side of the debate is the moderate to outright denial of the climate change phenomena, often backed by the far-right end of the political spectrum, multi-billion corporate lobbyists, and a mixed crowd of academics, skeptics and opinion leaders in general.

The Philosophical Climate Change
On the other side of the debate are the ‘alarmists’, or those who argue that the climate change phenomena is not only a real threat to our immediate survival, and increasing at an alarming rate, but one that has been exclusively created by our shortsighted greed and mindlessness over a short period of time.

The main bone of contention in the argument seems to be global warming and climate change - and this I believe is where we are all getting it wrong and some philosophical climate change (if I’m allowed the pun) is needed. Once again all this is a symptom of the paradigm lock in the Western way of thinking that even Philosophy is trapped in and needs to transcend.

The heart of the matter is that following only an analytical thinking approach makes us lose sight of the bigger picture. Analysis is about breaking down the whole into the parts so we can zoom in closer to seeing only a particular aspect of the problem then work our way bottom-up, if at all. This creates a narrative of ‘separation’ and ‘reductionism’ where we see ourselves, or the object under investigation, as being separate to everything else and can be analysed in isolation without seeing its relation to the whole. Consequently its values might be reduced to numbers, values or data points on a boardroom screen.

This is clearly the case with the environment. We can for instance reduce the value of trees to a price in dollars for planks of wood down a global supply chain instead of seeing how intricately linked they are to, for example, the forest top soil, shelter for pollinators, the symbiotic exchange of nutrients and information with other organisms, and all the other important functions connected to a vast ecological web. The same thing goes for the global warming and climate change debate. Even governments, green NGOs, and activist groups themselves are falling prey to the reductionist way of thinking by proposing measures and policies aimed at satisfying some metrics such as carbon offsetting, CO2 emission per capita, etc, but lose sight of the larger picture.

Carbon offsetting is good and should be commendable, yet we cannot talk about saving ourselves and the planet through the use of a few metrics.

Then there is the other bone of contention. Scientific data shows that global warming is cyclical over periods spanning thousands or hundred of thousand years. This means that not only we had global warming before, but we had ones way before the industrial revolution, that were warmer than this current one. To add further controversy, it also shows that a surge of greenhouse gas emissions had followed global warming and not preceded it. This of course gave a strong upper hand to the ‘denialists’ who use it to further confirm that the planet will be fine even after we squeeze all its resources for making more money for the few in a failing economic system, and it will still be there after we have eaten ourselves into extinction.

The thing is that both are right or wrong and discussing over data points or whether global warming is human-induced or not will not solve our current debate, even less our ecological crisis. Western Philosophy needs to get out of its comfort zone of analytical, argument-based thinking and start contributing to the debate in a more inclusive and holistic way, for instance lending from other philosophical traditions and ideas.

One crucial one is the systems thinking approach, that would look at the planet more from a living system point of view. Earth would be seen as a complex whole made up of highly interconnected systems in a synergistic and dynamic equilibrium such as in Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis, or as seen in certain animistic or shamanic cultures, among others. It’s easy to discard such notions as flakey, unrealistic thinking from ‘tree-hugging enviros’ or ‘leftist hippies’ when in fact there is a solid rational ground to support such ideas that need to be explored while at the same time moving away from looking at the problem from just a narrow reductionist and purely analytical point of view.
In Bicentennial Man, a science fiction drama film from 1999, Andrew starts his life as a robot whose job is that of performing household chores for a family. However, as the years go passing by, Andrew reaches a stage when he becomes capable of feeling sensations and expressing emotions. The latter is plainly depicted when at one point he falls in love with Portia, the great-granddaughter of his original owner.

Moreover, unlike the human beings that Andrew is surrounded with, he never ages nor dies, but since he has acquired human-like emotions, he has to endure the pain of building and losing relationships as his friends around him perish one after the other.

Since the release of the film, artefacts which in the past could be only imagined and represented in movies of the same genre, have nowadays become mainstream technology. Nevertheless, this is not yet the case as regards to robots expressing emotions. Whether or not such a feat will ever become reality is highly debatable. However, it must be noted that a great deal of research is taking place in this area and there are many reasons as to why companies in the field of robotics are seeking to build robots who can feel and express emotions. Indeed, apart from the fact, that humans are always intrigued by ingenuity, more practical reasons come into play.
For instance, if we take the case of service robots (robots that perform personal tasks for humans), there is a pressing need for these to both feel and to express emotions in their day-to-day dealings with human beings.

One motive for such a need is the loneliness experienced by those aged 65 and over, an age group which worldwide, is growing much quicker than all other groups. In this regard, Nikhil Churamani et al. (2018) have proposed a method through which a robot companion for the elderly is pre-trained to assist the latter while they play a puzzle game. In this particular case, the robot should be capable of providing suggestions to the elderly on the best move required to succeed in the game.

However, such suggestions should not be given arbitrarily. Rather, these shall be determined according to the person’s emotional state. Thus, if for instance the elderly person is feeling positive and performing well in the game, the robot would need to focus on further improving the elderly’s performance by actively providing positive feedback. Conversely, if the same person is feeling irritated, the robot would be capable of recognising that and use a strategy whereby the elderly is encouraged to improve his or her emotional state.

Scenarios like the one just described, are most of the time being tried in test environments, since present-day technology only allows for experimentation. However, thanks to a renewed interest in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML), there are hopeful signs that the required technological progress will be now realised at a faster pace than ever before.

For instance, certain experiments are being conducted to understand whether robots with the same level of self-awareness as human beings can one day be manufactured. However, results attained so far confirm that currently we can only build robots which can be trained (pre-programmed) beforehand to be self-conscious in specific situations.

On the other hand, for a robot to possibly be able to experience consciousness we still require a massive improvement in the field of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI or Strong AI) which takes the human brain as its reference.

Thus, for a robot to be like Andrew from Bicentennial Man, what is termed as AI is simply not enough. Rather, what we really need is a breakthrough in AGI, something which various experts predict will happen sometime between 2030 and 2060 (Joshi, 2019). As already stated, the current state of technology allows experimentation but certainly it does not allow us to reproduce the working of a human brain inside a robot. Nonetheless, the idea certainly exists for one day to have an entire human brain emulated in a robot via a concept termed ‘mind uploading’. The latter is a theoretical technique through which the memory, personality and consciousness of a human being are entirely moved or copied from the human brain to a computer. If that computer is then placed inside the robot and used to control all of its functions, we will perhaps then be in a better position to create conscious robots that will be able to express authentic emotions.

Nevertheless, the above postulation rests on the premise that consciousness is a brain process, which is essentially the standard materialist position. On the other hand, the dualist perspective states that conscious mental states are fundamentally different from anything in the physical world. Thus, for the dualists, the process of mind uploading shall not lead to the creation of robots with emotional states of consciousness, since for them consciousness is not found in the brain of a human, ready to be moved to a machine.

By taking inspiration from the phenomenological movement (which studies the structures of experience and consciousness), I have confidence in the notion that human consciousness primarily invokes a relation with or an attitude towards the Other. Moreover, consciousness also provides a response of the Self to the presence of the Other while transcending the world and its objects.
Thus, seen from this perspective, our brain is to be perceived as a physical mediator that provides the invisible link between the Self and all that it transcends. Hence, from such a standpoint, I am very sceptical as regards the possibility of uploading consciousness to a robot. Therefore, robots built with ‘mind uploading’ technology, would certainly not be exact replicas of human beings but they will nonetheless possess human-like traits.

Thus, to sum up my position, if one day the technology to attain mind-uploading is perfectly implemented and this is supplemented by Artificial General Intelligence, that would most possibly be the best that humanity will ever achieve as regards producing robots that can express something which to some degree is similar to human emotions. Essentially, that means that the best that we can ever hope for is the construction of a state-of-the-art simulacra.

References


Godwin Darmanin is a Philosophy graduate of Sofia University St Kliment Ohridsky, Bulgaria. An Internet search for his name and the word ‘emotions’ will yield links to a paper which discusses the subject matter in more detail.
In moral philosophy, sometimes moral theories are put forward which are suggested to be unrealistically demanding, in the sense that hardly any moral agents in the real world will actually be willing to conform to their demands. For example, Peter Singer and Peter Unger have argued we have strong moral obligations to give assistance to those in need of help, even at great cost to ourselves. Another example is David Benatar's view that procreation is morally wrong. It is controversial whether unrealistic demandingness is a decisive objection against a moral theory. In what follows, we seek to examine the arguments for or against the proposition that any non-speciesist deontological moral theory will be unrealistically demanding.

A moral theory is said to be non-speciesist if the criteria it offers for what beings are the proper objects of moral concern, and the degree of moral consideration we should give to their interests, are not based on biological species. Such a moral theory will hold, for example, that the degree of moral consideration that we should give to a permanently radically cognitively impaired human should be similar to that which we give to a non-human animal at a similar cognitive level. Those who insist on an obligation to protect the cognitively impaired human but not the non-human animal, such as Tibor Machan or Carl Cohen, are considered "speciesists" for the purpose of our discussion (although not necessarily in a pejorative sense). For reasons of space we cannot give a detailed account of the distinction between deontology and consequentialism and will simply assume the reader is already familiar with this.
Let us now consider the reasons why it might be thought that any plausible non-speciesist deontological view will inevitably be unrealistically demanding. Non-speciesist deontological views have been defended by Tom Regan, Gary Francione and Joan Dunayer among others, and are usually taken to entail an obligation to be strictly vegan. Someone seeking to show that principled adherence to such arguments leads to unrealistically onerous demands might now go on to point out the following aspects of modern civilisation. Plant-based agriculture, in its current form, foreseeably causes accidental deaths to non-human animals (in the form of collateral deaths from tilling and harvesting the crop fields, for example, or from the use of pesticides). Many forms of electricity production foreseeably cause premature deaths, for example coal-fired power plants kill large numbers of fish when extracting cooling water from local water systems. Timber production obviously usually involves harm and foreseeable premature death for animals. There is at present usually no possible way of getting access to any kind of medication which has not been tested on animals. Bryan Caplan, in his discussion of non-speciesist views, has questioned whether anyone willing to include insects in the protected moral circle can consistently go for a drive in a car for reasons of trivial personal convenience.

Thus, one might be led to conclude that principled adherence to a deontological non-speciesist view will require total withdrawal from modern technological civilisation, or possibly may not even be consistent with keeping oneself alive. This, then, might lead us to think that such views are unrealistically demanding.

In an attempt to rescue non-speciesist deontology from the charge of being unrealistically demanding, we might naturally think of Derek Parfit’s recent work seeking to formulate a synthesis between Kantianism, contractualism, and rule consequentialism, deriving rule consequentialism from certain versions of Kant’s Formula of Universal Law and also from contractualist views like those of Scanlon about the foundation of morality. If this approach can still reasonably be characterised as a deontological view, then this may provide the foundation that the ethical vegan wants for strict deontological veganism while placing some limits on the extent of the obligations one takes on over and above that. An advocate of such a view could plausibly claim that one could allow oneself some consumption of goods and services whose production processes foreseeably cause harm, while still holding the total elimination of such production processes as an ideal state of human
civilisation to be advocated for in the future. Gary Francione or Joan Dunayer may be able to happily accept such a foundation for their views, but since Tom Regan’s “Case for Animal Rights” contains a strong critique of rule utilitarianism, it is less clear that he could have found this an acceptable foundation.

The advocate of non-speciesist deontology might also raise the following considerations. Some chocolate and coffee companies currently make use of slave labour, and it is not at all uncommon for those who would presumably consider themselves advocates of human rights to continue consuming those products despite not being certain that they are not thereby supporting rights violations. We previously mentioned the issue of electricity production foreseeably causing fish deaths, but of course air pollution from electricity production does foreseeably cause human deaths, even ignoring the issue of contribution to climate change. Since people who consider themselves principled human rights advocates don’t usually see good reason to refrain from these forms of consumption, the defender of veganism might argue that this doesn’t necessarily suggest they don’t really believe there is no coherent ethical foundation for the practice of veganism in its usual form. This suggests the project of a detailed analysis of the various harms caused to humans and animals by production processes for various products in modern society, and seeking to formulate detailed sets of principles regarding which forms of consumption should be seen as ethically permissible both on speciesist and non-speciesist views. The outcome of such an analysis may have some surprising results, perhaps.

These considerations have led us to the conclusion that there is work to be done in clarifying the details of how deontology, whether with a rule-consequentialist foundation or not and whether non-speciesist or not, applies to the complexities of modern life. Non-speciesist deontologists are not the only ones who have work to do in working out a detailed principled moral foundation for their actual practice.

Rupert McCallum completed his PhD in mathematics in 2009. He has written on the philosophy of set theory. He also takes a keen interest in many areas of philosophy, including philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of physics, meta-ethics, and normative ethics.
The idea has undoubtedly inspired mavericks, free-thinkers, writers and philosophers to ponder about this possibility outside the very exclusive domain of peer-reviewed science and quantum theory, but more importantly, outside a language understood only by the few. Cutting-edge neuroscience and consciousness researchers have also been captivated by this notion and got inspired to adapt that model of thinking to theories of mind and consciousness. What if the mind is also non-local and operates at a quantum level with the physical brain acting as the receiver that ‘tunes’ into or resonates to certain ‘frequencies’ equivalent to states of consciousness or information in the quantum field? This question itself can give offspring to countless other wild conjectures and ideas.

Let’s leave aside the itching skepticism for a while and allow ourselves to entertain the thought of this possibility. Throw in a curve ball and suppose that everything is a matter of which frequency you are in whether a thought, a belief, a feeling or a perception. In other words, you are like a radio tuner and depending on which frequency you dial in, it changes your view on reality. It sounds far fetched I know, but in reality it’s only a far-reaching concept and one which challenges our everyday view of the world and the nature of mind.

Equipped with this conceptual toolbox we can explore the idea that our states of mind, and the thoughts, beliefs and feelings they include, are not just the product of neuro-chemical transactions or synaptic connections only but also ‘resonant frequencies’ to a non-local field of information.
Biologist and researcher Rupert Sheldrake had for instance put forward the theory of 'morphic resonance' that would explain non-local phenomena such as in a decades-long experiment that started in Harvard in the 1920s. Rats learned to escape from a water-maze and eventually consequent generations learned how to do it faster and faster. The striking thing was that when the rats in the Harvard lab learned how to do it something like ten times faster, rats in other labs around the world started doing it ten times faster from first generation. It seemed then that this kind of information is not just transferred bio-chemically, genetically or spatially, but through a kind of non-local field which other physically separate entities can 'resonate' with. This kind of phenomena was also observed not just in rat labs but across a variety of experiments, including ones in humans although some skeptics would brush aside as belonging to the domain of pseudo-science, metaphysics or parapsychology.

It might show, among other things, that there is yet another channel of how we build knowledge apart from our direct sense perception, language and rational thinking.

Despite its critics, the idea and its manifold ramifications, still enjoy strong support in many fields of research, not the least in mainstream ones such as theoretical physics, quantum theory and neuroscience. But let’s go back to entertain the thought that there is something like morphic resonance and that it operates in the human world way more commonly than we dare suspect. What could be the implication of this in terms of philosophical thought? What fundamental notions would need to be revised or perhaps solved? What would it have to say on perception and epistemology, that is the study of how we acquire knowledge? It might show, among other things, that there is yet another channel of how we build knowledge apart from our direct sense perception, language and rational thinking.

It might reveal a lot on what we call intuitive or implicit knowledge, such as those a-ha moments when for example a scientist or an artist, or philosopher, comes up with a great idea that has not yet been supported by evidence or social approval. It might also be revealing as to how is it that certain ideas and changes in humanity came to physically disconnected cultures within the same period of time - it's as if, just like the Harvard lab rats, when the first person or culture exceeded a certain threshold, then that threshold was automatically surpassed in others too.

Interestingly, we could also perhaps start seeing philosophical viewpoints as belonging to certain bands of 'frequencies' in a non-local, trans-generational field of information or 'memory'. Stoicism, idealism, existentialism, cynicism, etc, could possibly be seen as such. You are not born a Stoic or a realist, but maybe certain thoughts, influences and experiences, have 'tuned' you in to certain non-local information leaning towards these ideas, which then got you to read more in-depth about the subject, reinforcing these ideas into beliefs and way of thinking. Sounds totally wacky and bizarre, but which great idea ever wasn’t? What would it say about discord, arguments and endless unresolved debates on seemingly opposing points of views? Wouldn’t it go on to show how ultimately futile arguing and trying to be right all the time is? There is no ultimate universal right or wrong, but age-old wisdom and knowledge that transcends time and space and seemingly opposing points of views are nothing more than tuning into different aspects of the same timeless wisdom. The list of possibilities could keep on going forever and we would find ourselves riding on a parallel world to ours, in which we could explain many of the phenomena around us in terms of frequencies and vibrations. The questions above would suffice for now to give us a small clue and perhaps a teaser for some mind-bending possibilities to ponder on that could very well shed some light on and uncover other philosophical gems along the way.

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Philosophy helps people to question and challenge established orthodoxies. If many people were to grasp and follow philosophy, couldn’t it lead to problems if the majority of people lose faith in authorities and find many of life rituals meaningless?

The problem with having faith in authorities is that faith is usually seen as an alternative to critical thinking. Hence – and in this age of faith-based terrorism, it should hardly be necessary to say this – faith does not differentiate between authorities who make well-founded and beneficial judgments, and those who make baseless and disastrous judgment. So even if most faith-based authorities are very far from endorsing terrorism, we really do need to encourage people to think for themselves, and not to rely on faith.

On the other hand, philosophical thinking is not necessarily opposed to rituals, because some rituals can survive critical examination. On the one hand, they may do no harm, while at the same time they may serve a psychological purpose, and provide a structure for living that some people find helpful.

Our readiness to cooperate seems to be part of our nature. But experience shows us that human cooperation is very difficult to sustain over time. Self-interest seems to be more ingrained in human nature. Don’t you think that the future of humanity is eventually doomed, given this scenario?

Cooperative relationships are not opposed to self-interest. They are part of our nature because they provide mutual benefits for those who are part of such relationships. It is usually misguided, short-sighted self-interest that leads people fail to cooperate with others who are willing to do so.
I am no better at seeing into the future than you are. So it may eventually turn out to be true that our failure to take a long-term view will lead to the extinction of our species. Or we may — as I fervently hope — overcome the problems we face, and survive for billions of years. None of us know.

You are to be commended for your thinking and efforts on tackling extreme poverty and inspiring effective altruism. But don’t you think that unless we change radically the world economic system which is based on the ethos of capitalism, we will never get rid of poverty, inequalities and injustice?

Although I am very far from thinking that capitalism is an ideal economic system, we all ought to recognize that under the present economic system, the world has made great progress in reducing the number of people living in extreme poverty. I had an occasion to take stock of this very recently, when I was revising my 2009 book The Life You Can Save in order to bring it up to date for the 10th Anniversary Edition, which was published last December — and is, incidentally, available free online from www.thelifeyoucansave as an eBook or audiobook. In the 2009 edition, I quoted what was then the most recent World Bank figure for the number of people living in extreme poverty: 1.4 billion. I also quoted the most recent UNICEF figure for the number of children dying before their 5th birthday (most of these deaths are related to extreme poverty): 9.7 million. Ten years later, the figures were 736 million people in extreme poverty, and 5.4 million child deaths. That’s remarkable progress, and it happened under capitalism. Indeed, it could be said that it happened in large part because of capitalism, because a large part of the progress took place in China, where poverty has been dramatically reduced since the loosening of restrictions on private enterprise. Of course there is no guarantee that under capitalism we will continue to make progress in reducing poverty.

But then, there is also no guarantee that we will find an economic system that works better, in practice and on a large scale, than capitalism. Up to now, the search for such a system has not had conspicuous success.

Your book Animal Liberation published in 1975 is considered revolutionary as it ushered the concept of ethical obligations towards animals. Looking back, are you happy with the progress achieved on animal rights to date?

How could I be happy with that progress when today there are more animals leading miserable lives in factory farms than there were in 1975?

It is true that there has been some progress in Western countries, with veganism much more common, many active animal rights organizations, and some legislative changes. The European Union now has laws to eliminate some of the worst forms of confinement, which I criticized in my book, and so does California and several other U.S. states. But the increasing prosperity of China and other Asian countries, though good for the people it has lifted out of poverty, has led to an increased demand for meat, eggs and dairy products, and the result has been an enormous increase in factory farming. Moreover, in China there is still no national animal welfare law, and not much public concern about animal welfare either, except perhaps for dogs and cats.

So no, I am not happy with the progress made, and as long as tens of billions of animals are being reared in factory farms each year, I won’t be happy.
Some might say that ethical respect to animals cannot be fully achieved unless we become vegetarians or vegans. Isn’t this considered to be an impossible task to achieve when the love of meat seems to be part of our carnivorous animal nature?

We are not carnivores, we are omnivores, and personally, after almost 50 years as a vegetarian and now mostly vegan, I don’t miss meat at all. But for those who may have a stronger desire for meat than I do, I hope that over the coming decades, the development of plant-based analogues to meat, and perhaps also of real meat, but grown at the cellular level, without ever being part of a whole animal, will make it much easier to be respectful to animals while satisfying the desire for something that tastes like, and has the texture of, meat.

You are known for your strong stance on utilitarianism when you present many of your philosophical arguments. But don’t you think that utilitarianism on its own has severe limitations on ethical behaviour when the end could be used to justify the means?

You are already taking an anti-utilitarian view when you assume that the end cannot justify the means. I accept that often it is best to have strict prohibitions of some kinds of conduct, like torture, because otherwise people in positions of power will justify doing bad things when they are not required. Torture is an example – it is used far too frequently, as we saw with the torture of prisoners by U.S. army and CIA personnel in Abu Ghraib prison. But if there is enough at stake, and no other way of saving a large number of people, even torture can be justified. Suppose that a terrorist has hidden a nuclear bomb somewhere in a major city, and torturing him – or even torturing his five year old child in front of him – is the only way to get him to reveal the bomb’s location in time to defuse it before it kills a million people and injures millions more. Wouldn’t the end of saving all those people justify the means, of using just enough torture to obtain the information?

Many contributions to philosophy came from the religious field. I think of Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas More, Kierkegaard, Luther. But many of the great philosophers such as Hume, Nietzsche, Sartre, Russell are also well-known atheists who reject the concept of God. Can there be a bridge between religion and philosophy? If so in what way?

Philosophers can, and do, discuss arguments for and against the existence of God. In ethics, we discuss ethical theories that have their origin in religious thinkers. So yes, there are bridges between philosophy and religion. But as you pointed out in your first question, when religion depends on faith, it goes against the critical reasoning that is at the core of the philosophical enterprise.
What is the most important challenge in world issues that you think philosophy must address imminently? And what needs to change in the next decade?

Climate change is the great moral challenge of the next decade, but philosophy has already addressed it, and generally, addressed it very well. And so have scientists in the relevant areas. The problem is that politicians, and voters too, are not listening. I could say that that is what needs to change over the next decade, but I do not know what will bring about the change that is so urgently and badly needed.

What advice would you give to anyone interested in philosophy?

Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. I don't entirely agree with that, but philosophy will certainly help you to examine your life, from the ground up, and so can contribute to making your life more worth living. But don’t rely on philosophy to put bread on the table. I feel very lucky to be able to earn a living doing philosophy, especially because nowadays there are hundreds of applicants for the few long-term positions in philosophy.

Who is the philosopher (living or dead) you have great respect for, but strongly disagree with?

I have respect for all those who make the effort to understand my views, and present them fairly, whether or not they agree with them. For example, when I teach Practical Ethics at Princeton University, I invite Professor Charles Camosy, a Roman Catholic philosopher, as a guest lecturer to discuss abortion. Professor Camosy has published a book called Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization. I respect Camosy because he never stoops to polemics – he always tries to present my arguments at their strongest, and then tries to show why they are mistaken. Camosy and I agree on some things – that we should do more to help the poor, and that it is wrong to eat animals who have been raised in factory farms – but we strongly disagree on abortion and euthanasia.

Are you worried with a world that is moving more to populism, nationalism, and erecting walls and border controls to keep out immigrants?

Yes, I am very concerned about populism and nationalism. The world has many problems that require global institutions, and we are not going to be able to solve them by retreating into silos filled with people like us, who do not care about people who are not like us. At the same time, I don’t think open borders is a practical possibility. It is unrealistic to expect rich nations to accept every would-be immigrant who reaches their shores. We need to deal with the causes of large flows of refugees, and try to provide safe, decent, and meaningful lives for them within their own regions.
THE NOTION OF REINCARNATION AND THE PROBLEM OF THE NATURE OF THE MIND

By OBOHBOR, SYLVESTER A.

Since time immemorial, there has been the belief that man is made of material and immaterial substances. The material substance is believed to return to dust after death, while the immaterial substance which is said to be atemporal, transcends death and decay. This material makeup of man is known as the body, while the immaterial element in man is said to be the soul, or spirit, or mind. There is not only a belief that man has an immaterial and immortal element in him, but also a belief that this immaterial and immortal part of man takes up a new body, coming back to life after the demise of the body. This idea of a return after death is called “Reincarnation.” The belief in reincarnation is bequeathed with problems and criticisms mostly because it cannot pass the verifiability test. The doctrine is problematic in that it inheres in the discrepancy inherent in the idea of the mind regarding its nature and relationship with the body. It is built upon the idea that there is an element in man that is not susceptible to the natural laws of birth and death.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is a war against the bewitchment of our intellect by means of words as posited by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Things are not always the way they seem, that appearance deceives is a well-known fact, hence, we are caught up in the web of separating knowledge from what is not knowledge, of separating facts from speculation. This work therefore seeks to expose and evaluate the possibility of reincarnation and its relationship with the mind. In this work, terms such as mind, soul, and spirit will be used interchangeably.

EXPLICATION OF TERMS

The ‘mind’ is here used to denote the seat of consciousness of a person or an individual. It is also employed to imply the principle of reason, or as “the part of a person that makes them able to be aware of things...” It is not to be mistaken to be synonymous with the brain. Reincarnation is employed here to denote “the coming back, embodiment, or rebirth of the soul or the immaterial part of man’s nature.”

THE MIND AND THE NOTION OF REINCARNATION

The belief in reincarnation is sequel to the idea of the nature of the mind. The branch of philosophy known as Philosophy of Mind asks questions such as “…is there a spiritual element in man, is the human mind spiritual...?” These questions are further made necessary by the fact that what takes place in the mind finds expression in the body and affects the body. If
then, there is a spiritual element in man, how does it interact with the physical body? Where is their point of convergence or departure? What happens to this spiritual or immaterial element in man when the body is no more? For the idea of immortality bequeaths this spiritual substance in man a never ending existence which transcends the death of the body.

The idea of reincarnation then emanates from this stage or level of thought. For if there is an immortal element in man, then it must have a continued existence, maybe taking up new bodies when the old one dies away. “It is interesting to trace the history of the doctrine among the ancient peoples, back into the dim recesses of the past. It is difficult to ascribe to any particular time, or any particular race, the credit of having originated the doctrine of reincarnation….” The doctrine of reincarnation as a new and distinct doctrine is not thought to have ever originated anywhere, rather, it is believed to have sprang into existence at a time and place where man arrived at a more sophisticated level of thought to comprehend such ideas.

EVALUATING THE NATURE OF THE MIND AND THE BELIEF IN REINCARNATION

If the mind is material, then it disintegrates at death and this negates or makes nearly impossible the doctrine of reincarnation. But if the mind is immaterial, and the soul, or mind, or life principle of the individual comes back to life, is it the same person that is back to life or a new person? This will be better answered when we have agreed as to whether what makes a person or distinguishes a person from others is the body or the mind. Since the body is material and subject to mechanical laws, it cannot be said to be the essence of a person or the distinguishing feature of an individual, but rather, the mind which is the seat of consciousness and repository of experiences. Another pertinent issue to be noted is that, it is not explicitly delineated anywhere as to whether minds are subservient to gender classification. Minds are not said to be either male or female, hence, a mind as present in the body of a male in its past life can take up a female body at rebirth. Then, if this is the case, can the new female person be said to be a reincarnation of the once ‘male body occupied mind”? What is named in a person?

Is it the body or the mind? If it is the body, then names do not matter after all since the body is not the essence of a person. But if it is the mind, is the name retained at reincarnation? And when the name is changed, can the reincarnated individual be said to be the same person as in former life? But if we are to postulate consequent upon the Africans ideology on the notion of coming back to life again christened reincarnation, we would have to begin by viewing from an African perspective. If the life principle in man is rightly seen as vital force as conceptualized in African philosophy, then the idea that the term “reincarnation” encapsulates, can be christened “Regeneration” as given by Echekube in his Theory of Regeneration, which implies that it is the traits, and or characters of an individual that are regenerated to ensure continuity of family ties and affinity.

CONCLUSION

Thus far, it seems we are not making any headway towards postulating answers to the questions posed. For us to be able to do so, we first have to know that the mind is not an entity, rather it is a faculty, the cognitive faculty, the power to think and know, the repository of experience, and the seat of consciousness. The doctrine of reincarnation shares close ties with, and is borne out of religious sentiments and bias. But when brought under scrutiny and the explicating gaze of philosophy, it is dissected whole and entire as much as possible. If we are to strictly follow the laws of thought and examine phenomena the way they are, then we cannot possibly allow the doctrine of reincarnation to enter the domain of reason. This is because, following some of the reasons stated above, sequel to the nature of the mind, its accidental relationship with the body, the question of personal identity, and some others, reincarnation does not make too much of a sense. Nevertheless, while we do not completely overrule the idea of reincarnation, we are to be cautious about what we believe concerning it. We do hope that with time, the idea of reincarnation will be properly dissected and investigated by science and philosophy alike, in order to enhance a better understanding of the concept.

Obohbor Sylvester Asuelimen is an undergraduate student at the Spiritan School of Philosophy, Isienu -Nsukka in Emu, Edo State, Nigeria.
I can imagine myself floating in the middle of somewhere, in space, facing the still glorious mother Earth and at the same time ignoring everything else around me. Enchanted and in awe, my mind would probably start to wonder off at a tangent about the ethereal vision I am experiencing. It would be unavoidably held captive to witness in silence the game of lights in front of my very eyes, the passage of the night to day and the day to night. I will see clues to life reflected in the slow movement of the clouds as I enjoy their contortion above the blue sea and keep on wondering, imagining what is hidden behind that veil. Quite probably, I will become aware that there is something more beyond all this, that there are distinct units of life behind that screen which somehow coexist with each other, and that the outcome of that synergy is reflected in front of me. There are the ones that dwell among these clouds, others that inhabit the seas and there are these that roam on the dry-lands, and that I am just a cell of one of these units, the one that walks on two legs on the surface of these dry-lands and that we are known between us as humans. And I wonder about what role we all play, consciously or otherwise, in this big unfolding drama of life.

And then I took a closer look at all these units of life below me and again asked the same question, what is the reason for all this? And from the depth of my soul I heard a whisper in my ears telling me that the reason for life is life itself. It’s the preservation and the perpetuation of its existence.

And then I turned myself in the void to take a look at the infinity that surrounds me, returning my view back to mother earth, and asked myself again what is the reason behind all this? No answer came forth.

And then I asked, again and again, the same question to myself and my brothers and sisters and again there was silence, a shy silence of resignation hidden behind the noise of confusion because there isn’t any objective reason out there that explains the reason of my existence here except existence itself. It was then that I realized that I am suspended in the middle of nowhere, lost in an existential void between ‘reality’ and ‘illusion’, that now I confess, I didn’t know which one is which. In that void I was confused and lost, I felt dizziness and I was petrified with fear facing this unknown all alone, and with this new
awareness, I felt my mind spinning on itself. I realized that there isn’t any objective reality outside the human dimension and that everything is subjective to the human will.

And with that feeling of helplessness in me, I flashed back my memories in search of that something that can give me that something ... I recalled moments lost in time that now seem just dreams, and brought them back to life. I recalled my first memories of those sensations of that first smell, of that first touch, of that first kiss. I recalled my childhood memories of that carefree life protected by my loved ones.

I recalled memories of that forest, of the birds singing in these trees, and of the clouds playing hide and seek with me behind these leaves. I recalled that big blue sky above me and the sensations of freedom I had. And I felt that all these memories started to dissolve my confusion. At that point, my mind stopped spinning and I found myself standing there on the dryland. I am alive. It’s these memories and these experiences that we have and share that connect us and make us what we are.

We are the only true architects and builders of our reality, and it seems that we are also the only ones that have the power to shape and reshape the world that we perceive. That delightful smell of the grass after the first rain and the sound of the sea, and that feeling of that salty water on my skin, it’s here that I realised that I am aware that I am conscious of my existence and that this existence is the only objective reality I can acknowledge. I can recognise that existence is everywhere and that we are all just a cell, a small insignificant part of that totality, but I can’t acknowledge its external manifestation as an objective reality because all is subjective to my will.

Again, metaphorically speaking, these units of life that we observed from up there, are like ghost ships adrift on the water, and if we take a snapshot of that view, most probably it will look like a mosaic where each piece is locked with the other in what looks like a chaotic pattern always in flux in a river we may call time. And again if we walk on the bridge of our imaginary ship, most probably we may find similar dynamics at work where our ships are replaced by ants, like creatures walking on two legs playing their games to survive.

We may watch their chaotic activities in their attempt to give meaning to their life and their surroundings. And we may also observe the structure and the webs we build with our activities, which stretch across time and space. And I wonder what will happen if one of these pieces will not fit anymore in that picture. Most probably we will be expelled from that pattern and replaced by another one and we will just perish in the current of time.

Alfred John Zammit is a self-taught thinker and bibliophile. Though his interests in philosophy are varied, they mostly gravitate around existentialism, very often branching off into areas of human interest and social living which are unconventional or sometimes simply endearing. At the moment he is preparing to publish his very first book.
MONTHLY TALKS

DATE: 6TH MAY 2020
SPEAKER: MR. EMANUEL ATTARD CASSAR
TITLE: DIN L-ART HELWA - SATIRA

DATE: 3RD JUNE 2020
SPEAKER: PROF. PETER MAYO
TITLE: HIGH EDUCATION IN GLOBALISING WORLD

DATE: 1ST JULY 2020
SPEAKER: MR. ADRIAN SCERRI
TITLE: WAVES OF TERROR: A BRIEF HISTORY OF TERRORISM

DATE: MAY 2020
SPEAKER: PROF. PETER MAYO
TITLE: PHILOSOPHY OF GRAMSCI

PHILIP CARR GOMM IN MALTA

EMBODIED AWARENESS AND SENSE OF SELF

16th October 2020
reserve the date
The Foundation had a very active year in 2019. With its monthly talks, it covered philosophy in various subjects such as tourism, health, economics, art, Buddhism, the mind and reality, Gramsci’s philosophy, liberation theology, law and justice and God and suffering. Attendance at the talks have increased considerably during the year so much so that the Foundation had to move the venue from the Valletta Volunteer Centre and alternate locations at the Ministry for Education and the German Maltese Circle to cater for a larger audience.

In the courses, the Foundation offered philosophical insights into the study of emotions, Malta’s colonial history and its effects on our national identity, the link between faith and science, the philosophy of perceptions and the philosophy of yoga.

The Foundation has already a packed schedule for the talks and courses in 2020. The first course on the political philosophy of Manwel Dimech delivered by Rev. Dr Mark Montebello registered a very high turnout of 30 participants.

The talks by Dr Michael Briguglio in January on the environment and Dr Marius Zammit in February on pain also registered very good attendances above 20 people that surely encourages us to keep on going.

Mr. Valdei Pereira delivering a talk about “Liberation Theology” on the 2nd October 2019.

The Foundation will be covering the following topics in its philosophical talks and courses in 2020 – The Maltese character, Artificial Intelligence, terrorism, Pink Floyd, political ideologies, free will in relation to criminality, law and Gramsci. The focus of the Foundation activities will be the annual philosophy lecture to be delivered by world renowned philosopher Peter Singer at the Grand Hotel Excelsior on two of his favourite subjects – Ethics and Animals and Global Poverty and Effective Altruism. The Foundation will also be having another foreign speaker for its monthly talk in October – Philip Carr Gomm – a psychologist and writer – who will be delivering a talk on Embodied Awareness and Sense of Self.

Judge Emeritus Silvio Meli delivering the talk “The law, the Justice and the Muses” on the 6th November 2019.

Mr. Valdei Pereira delivering a talk about "Liberation Theology" on the 2nd October 2019.

Prof. Oliver Friggieri delivered the talk “Id-Distanza bejn Alla u l-Tbaitija" on the 4th December 2019.
Dr. Mario Zammit contributed with two events:
A course on “Introduction to Yoga” between 8th November and 6th December 2019 and a Talk “The Other Side of Pain” on the 3rd February 2020.

Rev. Dr. John Avelino delivering the course “Philosophy of Perception” between 1st and 29th October 2019

Dr. Michael Briguglio during the talk “Effectiveness of Environmental Movements” on the 8th January 2020.

Rev. Dr. Mark Montebello delivering the course “The Political Philosophy of Manwel Dimech” - between 6th January and 3rd February 2020.
The Gozo branch of the Philosophy Sharing Foundation will be presenting its next public talk at the Arthall gallery in Victoria on Friday 6 March at 7:30 pm. The title of the talk is ‘FEAR’.

“Everything you’ve ever wanted is sitting on the other side of fear.” - George Addair. The subject of fear has always been of great interest to the artist Sergio Muscat, mostly due to its constant presence throughout his life, and his battle to overcome it, or at least become more aware of it.

He approaches the subject through psychology, attempting to understand the reason why fear exists in the first place, through philosophy, trying to understand what we are afraid of, and through spirituality, trying to understand how to live a life devoid of (if ever possible) fear, and transition to a place where love becomes the dominant force in our life.
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