

# To Philosophize or Not to Philosophize?

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Surely the mere inspection of a subject can profit us but little.  
Every act of seeing leads to consideration,  
consideration to reflection,  
reflection to combination, and thus it may be said  
that in any attentive look on nature we already theorise  
Johann Wolfgang Goethe<sup>1</sup>

## ***Abstract***

This paper outlines an understanding of philosophy that is based on the argument that human beings are far more philosophical beings than they are usually aware of being. Philosophizing is not merely an activity of professional or academic philosophers but something most human beings do regularly to some extent or degree. The paper substantiates this thesis by a variety of observations and thoughts referring not only to the fields of theoretical and practical philosophy, but also to Aristotle's philosophical anthropology.

## ***I. Introduction***

Goethe's remarkable quote, from the preface to his *Theory of Colours*, expresses the insight that human beings are far more theoretical beings than they are usually aware of being. To theorize is not just an activity of professionals or scientists. If we observe the world in a mindful way, we are mentally active, we analyze and synthesize, and relate what we perceive to our concepts, experiences, and to what we believe is true about the world. Such beliefs might be prejudgments and prejudices or successful theories that allow for reliable predictions.

The claim of this paper is that what Goethe points out is not only

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Lock Eastlack, trans. and ed., *Goethe's Theory of Colours* (London: John Murray, 1840), xx.

true for theorizing in general but also for philosophizing. Human beings are far more philosophical beings that they are usually aware of being. Philosophizing is not merely an activity of professional or academic philosophers but something most human beings do regularly to some extent or degree. This is true whether people are aware of it or not. Even when one does not have to philosophize, one still philosophizes. This phrase illustrates the concept of philosophy that will be outlined in this paper.

## *II. The Beginnings of Philosophy*

According to Aristotle, philosophy began when the Greek city-states had developed to the point that sustinment was no longer a problem, and citizens enjoyed some comfort and leisure. In such a state they were puzzled and started wondering about the moon and the stars, and about how the universe came into being (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b12–28; cf. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 115d). In the famous opening sentence of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle generalizes the intellectual curiosity of the Greeks and claims that “all men by nature desire to know” (980a22). From the perspective of contemporary research, it is unlikely that philosophy actually began in ancient Greece as Aristotle claims. Rather, the roots of philosophical thinking lie in the Orient.<sup>2</sup> But the problem of the historical beginnings of philosophy is not relevant for the main thesis of this paper: that to philosophize is not mainly an activity of professional or academic philosophers.

To be puzzled and to wonder about the riddles of existence or the universe has in all times been a key motivation for doing philosophy. Probably the greatest riddle of all is expressed by the basic question “Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?”<sup>3</sup> To wonder about such questions presupposes ignorance about the subject one wonders

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<sup>2</sup> Martin L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, “Was ist Metaphysik?” in *Wegmarken*, second edition, (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1978); Martin Heidegger, “Einleitung zu: *Was ist Metaphysik?*” in *Wegmarken*; Martin Heidegger, “Nachwort zu: *Was ist Metaphysik?*” in *Wegmarken*. Cf. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Principes de la Nature et de la Grace fondés en Raison*, 1714, § 7: “Ce principe posé, la première question qu’on a droit de faire sera: pourquoi il y a plutôt quelque chose que rien?”

about. To do philosophy is an attempt to escape this ignorance and to achieve knowledge. Almost every human being has the capacity to wonder and to desire to know. The original strength of this capacity is already seen by the questions almost all children keep repeating in all kinds of different contexts: Why? Why not? Children usually want to know the reasons for things and thereby express their natural ability for philosophy. To do philosophy means to ask questions and to think in a focused and rational way about the things one wonders about. In order to this, philosophers must create concepts and develop arguments.<sup>4</sup>

According to Aristotle, Greek philosophy starts with Thales (*Metaphysics*, 983a24–984a3). There are good reasons to question this view. The Swiss classicist Olof Gigon argues convincingly that Greek philosophy already began with Hesiod. He gives three reasons for this claim. First, Hesiod does not want to say “many false things similar to genuine ones” like Homer, but “proclaim true things” (*Theogony*, 27–28; cf. *Works and Days*, 10).<sup>5</sup> Second, Hesiod wants to talk about the beginning or the first things that existed. In his *Theogony*, he gives a genealogy of the gods which is as well an account of the origins of the world. This is rather, as Gigon rightfully comments, a philosophical aim than a poetic one.<sup>6</sup> Third, Hesiod does not only want to talk about the gods of his religion but about all the gods and the origin of the world as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

Especially the commitment to find out and to tell the truth is a central feature of philosophy. The search for knowledge and truth is as well an activity that most human beings do habitually and regularly. However, of course, not all subjects and issues people investigate are philosophical ones. There is a distinct difference between trying to find out the truth about what happens to us after our death and about the love life of our neighbors. However, almost all people strive to find out the truth about the majority of subjects and issues that count as philosophical ones.

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<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define philosophy mainly as the art and discipline that creates concepts (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Q'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Olof Gigon, *Der Ursprung der griechischen Philosophie. Von Hesiod bis Parmenides*, second edition (Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co, 1968 [1945]), 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

### *III. Religion and Philosophy*

From a contemporary perspective, Hesiod's philosophical poetry has the flaw that it does not give rational justifications or demonstrations for its interpretations of the world. Rather, Hesiod relies on the authority and knowledge of the divine muses of the origins of the cosmos. However, studying Hesiod is not only interesting because it makes apparent some important features of philosophy. The study of his work and its influence on Greek culture also reveals one of the main reasons why the natural ability for philosophy in general gets reduced or almost lost in so many people. This is simply the case because Hesiod provides answers and explanations. Many of his contemporaries stopped wondering about the origins of the cosmos after Hesiod assured them—based on the authority and knowledge of the divine muses—that first chaos, and then the earth (*gaia*) and love (*eros*), were generated. Later there were Uranus, Cronos, Zeus, and the other Olympic gods. Together with the account of Homer's epics, Hesiod's later genealogy of the gods constituted Greek religion. Herodotus tells us about Hesiod and Homer that "these are they who taught the Greeks of the descent of the gods, and gave to all their several names, and honors, and arts, and declared their outward forms".<sup>8</sup> Homer's and Hesiod's explanations also allowed their contemporaries be to less afraid because the causes of their fear became identifiable and even capable of being influenced. Human fear of nature and the power of natural forces were main motivations to start the process of thinking and philosophizing.<sup>9</sup>

At this point, it is necessary to briefly address the relation of religion and philosophy that can take different forms. While Thomas Aquinas tried to substantiate his religion with philosophical arguments and proofs, Voltaire, the French materialists, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche used philosophy to criticize the truth content of religion. The relation of religion and philosophy is a highly disputed subject among professional philosophers. However, for the majority of people, religion provides a set

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<sup>8</sup> Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, Vol. 1, Books I and II, trans. A. D. Godley, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975 [1920]), II. 53, 440–41.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 10–11.

of answers to the questions they wonder about. If they start truly believing in these answers, they often lose the habit of wondering and of being critical about the contents of their belief. To some extent religious beliefs are the enemy of philosophical thinking in the sense of being continuously inspired by the riddle of being. Often believers don't see any necessity to keep philosophizing because they suppose that they have already reached knowledge.<sup>10</sup> However, belief is usually accompanied by doubt, and doubt is a strong motivation for doing philosophy. Religious systems are more or less the fruit of past philosophical activity. If such systems are adopted at an early age, people's natural capacity for philosophy and their ability for critical thinking often stop growing.

#### ***IV. Theoretical and Practical Philosophy***

Aristotle's famous account of the beginnings of philosophy, and Gigon's interpretation of Hesiod's philosophical poems, equate philosophy with the effort to achieve knowledge and truth about the cosmos and the world, and about their beginnings. Since Aristotle, the subdivision of philosophy that investigates such subjects is called "theoretical philosophy." However, human beings, of course, do not only wonder about nature and the cosmos. People also wonder about how they should behave towards other people, how they can obtain a good and happy life, what a good political order looks like, and how it can be realized. Since Aristotle, the field of philosophy that deals with these questions is called "practical philosophy." While the knowledge that is specific to theoretical philosophy is, for Aristotle, mainly an end in itself, practical philosophy aims at realizing its knowledge through actions. Knowledge about the good life is not an end in itself, but a means to lead a good and happy life. We do not study the characteristics of a good and virtuous person merely for the sake of knowing them, but because we want to be-

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<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, Nietzsche declares: "'Faith' means not wanting to know the truth" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, transl. Judith Norman, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 51 (n. 52)

come good and virtuous persons ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

The questions subject to practical philosophy illustrate once more that philosophy is not merely an activity of a group of professionals or academics. Almost everyone wants to lead a good life and to be happy, and the question which path one has to take in order to reach this goal is of utmost importance. Though almost everyone wonders and philosophizes about this question to some extent, everyone usually has to make practical decisions about which way to take before he or she has finished theorizing. Furthermore, our natural capacity to philosophize about a good and happy life is often impeded by powerful enemies. One major enemy is the conventional morality that tells us what to do, where to go, and what desires to suppress. Usually a specific morality is an important part of a corresponding religious system and of the values it promotes. Such a morality gives orientation for making practical decisions, but claims a serious authority over our lives. It is one important merit of Friedrich Nietzsche that he questioned and criticized this authority. Nietzsche especially focused on Christian values and the Christian interpretation of this world that he called the “ascetic ideal.”<sup>12</sup> However, some of his criticism of religion and morality could be universalized.

Other enemies of our natural capacity to philosophize about a good and happy life are ideals about a specific form of life or type of career. Like moral ideals, these ideals hold us back from finding our own way, but tell us where to go and how to live. Such kinds of ideals change over history and from society to society. In the societies of the era of the Greek polis a prevailing ideal was to be respected as a citizen and to achieve honor in political life. In the European Middle Ages, one main ideal was to lead a pious life and a life of religious contemplation. Since the rise of capitalism and a protestant work ethics, the most valued human activities have become technical and economic ones.<sup>13</sup> The capital-

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomason, revised H. Tredennick (London: Penguin, 2004), 6, 33; 1095a4–6, 1103b27ff.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Caro Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

ist societies of today are societies that attach an enormous and unhealthy value to work and productivity. In such societies, of course, it is especially the ideal of the successful business man or woman that appeals to many young people. The promise that a successful career in the corporate world and a focus on making money will lead to a good and happy life prevents many young adults from using their natural capacity to philosophize about the path in life that is fit for them individually.

### ***V. Professional and Lay Philosophers***

In Chapter I.2 of his *Politics*, Aristotle claims that man is the only animal who possesses speech and reason (*logos*) (1253a9–10). Because men and women possess *logos*, they have a natural ability for philosophy. By nature they can wonder, ask questions, discuss with others, contemplate the riddle of existence and what to do with their lives. Obviously, as individuals people have different talents and skills, and therefore do not possess an equal capacity to philosophize. Evidently, how humans are able to develop their different potentials also depends on their individual education, on their social class, and on the education system of the country they live in etc.

Aristotle is right that a certain degree of leisure is required in order to cultivate the human capacity to philosophize. The early Greek philosophers who were wondering about the cosmos were usually privileged citizens who did not need to work all day. Most of them possessed slaves. Of course, also the citizens who needed to work had some leisure in which they could wonder about how this world came into being. However, looking at the social background of professional philosophers throughout history shows that most of them came from more or less privileged families. Such a family background, and the financial or material security that comes with it, are often a necessity for those who would like to pursue a professional career as a philosopher. Before philosophers could find jobs at universities, they had to be rich and privileged or find some other way to sustain themselves, such as becoming a member of a religious order, etc.

Though most human beings have a natural capability for philosophy, they don't all get the chance to develop and actively realize this capability. Though professional and lay philosophers often wonder about the same things and try to answer the same questions, one main difference between them is the time they can afford to devote to them. People

who become professional philosophers usually already spend years studying philosophy in College or University. Lay philosophers typically find time to discuss philosophical issues when they sit together with their friends in a moment of leisure. However, a full day at work hardly leaves enough time and energy to study the whole philosophical debate that has been going on in the different fields since the early Greeks. It rarely leaves enough time to say something new and original on a philosophical topic like free will or the epistemological problem of how much and what kind of knowledge humans can gain and where this knowledge comes from.

### ***VI. Conclusion***

To philosophize is not only an activity of professional philosophers but something most human beings do regularly to some degree. Human beings possess *logos* and therefore are philosophical beings who philosophize by nature, even when they don't have to philosophize. In his famous human function (*ergon*) argument, Aristotle claims that because the *logos* is specific to humans it is their preexisting goal (*telos*) in the natural order to develop and actively realize it. If they reach this goal, they achieve what is most essential for human flourishing (*eudaimonia*).<sup>14</sup> Today it is hard or impossible to defend the teleological concept of nature that Aristotle links with his argument. However, the argument still works without teleology. If the *logos* is an essential part of human nature, it is obviously good for humans to develop and cultivate this part. In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle investigates the intellectual virtues that should be interpreted as the virtues of the *logos*. In order to achieve their flourishing and to live a good and happy life, humans should develop and practice their intellectual virtues in two forms of life. As citizens, they should practice the intellectual virtue Aristotle calls prudence (*phronêsis*) in combination with ethical virtues like justice, temperance and courage in a political life. As scientists or

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 15–16, 1097b22–1098a20; cf. John L. Ackrill, *Aristotle on Eudaimonia* (London, Oxford University Press, 1975); and Manuel Knoll, *Aristokratische oder demokratische Gerechtigkeit? Die politische Philosophie des Aristoteles und Martha Nussbaums egalitaristische Rezeption* (München: Fink, 2009).

philosophers, they should practice their other main intellectual virtues—wisdom (*sophia*) as a combination of science (*epistēmē*) and intuition (*nous*)—in a life of contemplation.<sup>15</sup>

Aristotle's view of human flourishing is too narrow because he only acknowledges two forms of life and two types of activity. From a pluralist perspective, he fails to recognize the life of the artist, the art lover, or the sports professional, to mention only some other forms and activities. However, his praise of the life of contemplation and his claim that humans need to develop and actively realize their specific intellectual virtues is convincing. If Aristotle is right, all those people who have the intellectual capacity should try their best to realize their philosophical potential through learning and studying. In order to do this, several good books and some leisure could already be enough. Of course, it is better to have also good teachers and friends who share an interest in philosophical questions. However, for economic reasons most people, even if they are talented, will have to stay lay philosophers forever. Even if they will never be able to study all the past arguments of the philosophers and the whole history of the discipline, lay philosophers can still individually realize Kant's famous "motto of enlightenment": "Have courage to use your *own* understanding!" To use one's own understanding essentially means to use it "without the guidance of another".<sup>16</sup>

The powers that want to guide our understanding are manifold: parents, grandparents, educators, priests, esoterics, scientists, writers, politicians, and friends. And as Kant rightfully observed, human cowardice and laziness play in their hands.<sup>17</sup> Probably there is also such a thing as a herd instinct that drives the vast majority of people to prefer to follow moral and religious leaders than to think for themselves. Even those who desire to reach their own individual conclusions through reflection and argument always have to struggle with the power of the moral and religious dogmas that proved to be successful in the culture

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<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 8–9, 30, 147, 153; 1095b14–1096a5, 1103a1–7, 1139b16–17, 1141a19.

<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" in Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, transl. H.B. Nisbet, second enlarged edition, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54–60, 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

and the part of the world in which they are living. In order to resist the power of these dogmas and the pressure their followers exercise on free spirits one needs strength, self-confidence, and a critical mind. However, people will never be entirely free from the prevailing dogmas and beliefs; but through philosophy and critical thinking they can achieve a higher degree of freedom.

In order to reach this goal, it also helps to be aware of the fact that until today in the world there have existed not only hundreds of irreconcilable religious systems, but also hundreds of incompatible moral and philosophical systems. Often the followers of these systems insist on the truth of their interpretation of the world and its value. However, in view of their irreconcilability and their contradicting claims it is highly probable that most of them and maybe even all of them are wrong. Likewise, most of the prescriptions and commands such systems offer and impose do not lead to a truly good and happy life of the individual. Therefore, it would be unwise and even dangerous to follow the intellectual leadership such systems claim. Rather, everyone capable should try to find her or his own conclusions about what to believe and how to live. In the light of the enormous threat that we fail to live our own individual lives, and that we do not achieve happiness, the question “To philosophize or not to philosophize?” reveals its existential significance.