

Pre-Session Notes 3 – March 22, 2022.

Philosophers:-

Previously,

Session 1 - Thales & Spinoza;
Session 2 – Anaximander & Aquinas.

To continue

Epicurus (341-270 BCE) founded the Epicurian schools of philosophy which actively survived for some 800 years. As did Aristotle before him he considered happiness to be the greatest good of humans and was to be obtained through the pursuit of pleasure, friendships, the attainment of tranquillity of mind, and the avoidance of pain. He warned, however, against overindulgence – pleasures should be taken in moderation. The pain of anxiety can be avoided by learning to trust in the future.

The gods, he believed, were supremely happy but had no concerns for, or perhaps had no awareness of, humankind and so played no part in human affairs other than to serve as an example of the high state of happiness that humans should strive for.

He said that fear of gods and of death were the greatest barriers to happiness, but should not be feared because the mind and body terminate on death and the eternity that follows is no different to, and as painless as, the eternity that existed prior to birth.

Francis Bradley (1846-1924), the son of an evangelical clergyman, held that a goal of philosophy was to understand reality and to find a way of thinking about it that is not contradictory. He said that appearances can be inconsistent and contradictory and that, although ‘real’ to the observer, they are real only in a relative sense and only in a matter of degree. He opposed individualism (the social theory favouring freedom of action for the individual over collective or state control), holding that morality was essentially social and that our moral duty was to cultivate our ideal ‘good self’.

He was a leading member of the philosophical movement known as ‘British idealism’ which largely developed from the philosophies of Kant and Hegel – it included belief in an absolute concept of reality – a single, all-encompassing and coherent system.

Bradley published “Appearance and Reality” in 1893 and, in 1914, “Essays on Truth and Reality”.

The hold of British idealism in the United Kingdom weakened when Bertrand Russell (and others) turned against it. It only ever held a limited influence in the United States.

Truths, Proofs, Beliefs, and Reality.

What is Truth? An age-old question. Does it have an answer?

A quotation from the Bible: John 18, verses 37 & 38:

“(Jesus said) I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth”
Pilate said to him “What is truth?”

An argument can be put that there are two kinds of 'truth' - 'objective truths' and 'subjective truths'. Objective truths are related to things that exist, whereas the existence of objects referred to in subjective truths can be open to doubt.

Plato took the objective stance, saying that truth relates to things that 'are'; Aristotle agreed saying "To say of something that actually exists, that it exists, is truth; to say of that same something that it does not exist, is false."

A philosophical problem in this is whether or not the existence of the subject item is actually known or can be acceptably established (proven) by some other means. This is where subjective truths come into play. The most obvious and widespread examples of subjective truths are to be found in religious beliefs where adherents of every faith proclaim that their particular faith is the one and only true one.

Objective truths can be difficult to prove. In science, black holes and sub-atomic particles, among many other things, are thought to exist, but whilst experimental observations may give support they do not prove existence.

Subjective truths do not need proof – they are true to the believer. If I believe 100% in a particular god then, to me, that god does exist and I may well be prepared to sacrifice my life rather than change that belief. There are plenty of martyrs as examples – Thomas More (1478-1535) being among them – he held as truth that the Pope was God-appointed and was beheaded for refusing to accept Henry VIII instead.

Belief in God is subjective but many hold as truth that God exists and, in many countries, that belief is not only accepted in the culture (perhaps along with numerous contradictory beliefs) but supported and even defended by the ruling authorities.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) formulated an analogy to illustrate that the burden of proof for an unfalsifiable claim (one that cannot be disproved) should lie with those making the claim rather than shifting the burden of disproof to others. He asserted, without offering proof, that a teapot, too small to be detected by telescope or any other means, was orbiting the sun out in the vicinity of Mars. He then asked whether anyone would believe him solely because he could not be proved wrong.

The distinction between the two types of truth is not necessarily clear cut. Bertrand Russell's undetectable orbiting teapot is an example. If it actually exists and you say it exists without having any proof you are stating a subjective truth – on the other hand according to Aristotle you are stating an objective truth.

Beliefs. How do we come by our beliefs?

It is fair to say that our beliefs begin and take their first forms from the circumstances of our births and upbringings. The brain develops rapidly in the first years of life and Aristotle once said "Give me a child until he is seven and I will show you the man."

Like truths, beliefs can be objective and subjective – they can relate to what is, or to what is thought to be. Objective beliefs are not subject to persuasive argument – if I say I believe the Brandenburg Gate is in Berlin (because I've been there and seen it) no amount of smooth-talking by another person will cause me to relocate it to Paris. Subjective beliefs are another matter – they are susceptible to change but the force necessary to effect a change can vary over a wide range, depending upon the individual and how deeply a particular belief is ingrained.

The beliefs of those born in Germany in the 1930's were formed by subjection to strongly and forcibly stated teachings that, to give two examples, the Russians were sub-human and the Jews were responsible for all ills in the world. That these were calculated lies made no difference – any lie, or unproven claim, repeated often enough by persons of perceived authority will, in time, become accepted as fact. This is a tactic adopted in TV advertisements – repetition of claims leads many of us to prefer brand name products. To further increase the effectiveness of Nazi indoctrination in the 1930's contradictory teachings were banned under penalty of death and non-conforming books were publicly burned.

More examples will readily come to mind but, along with a more in-depth treatment of reality, we will leave them for in-session discussion.

In explanation:-

Black holes are regions in spacetime where the force of gravity is so strong that nothing, not even light, can escape from one. Black holes can't be seen but their existence is deduced from visible and other detectable effects they theoretically can have on nearby celestial bodies such as galaxies.

Sub-atomic particles are the self-contained units of matter or energy currently understood as being the fundamental constituents of all matter. In the more than 200 so far detected by scientists are electrons, neutrons, photons and alpha-particles. They are smaller than atoms but in various combinations make up everything that is or can be – a little bit like leggo pieces I guess.

Looking forward to your attendance next Tuesday, March 22.

Convener – Keith Ashfold.

