

Session 7 – Report – June 14, 2022.

In this session discussion flowed freely and touched upon both previous and newly introduced philosophical concepts. **Much initially was about Consequentialism**, a subject flowing on from the ad-hoc meeting on May 24th.

The necessity for experience, education, and clear thinking was stressed when endeavouring to predict the consequences of an intended action, and many other factors can be involved – for example and as a general rule, the further a prediction ventures into the future the less reliable it is likely to be.

To help us in clear thinking, attention was drawn to the availability on the internet of books on Common Sense

[My brief look after the session provided these titles by various authors:-
Common Sense is Uncommon / Common Sense about Uncommon Wisdom
Common Sense of an Uncommon Man / Uncommon Common Sense /
Uncommon Sense – Common Nonsense].

Peter Singer’s continuing campaign for animal welfare brought focus upon the ethics involved in practices which adversely affect the lives of countless animals farmed for human food consumption. A question here is whether the raising of concerns is, as it often so appears, dependent upon the numbers of animals involved being many, and ignored when the bad practice affects relatively few.

Mention was made, too, of the American animal behaviourist, Mary Temple Grandin, a prominent proponent for the humane treatment of animals for slaughter. A highly acclaimed biographic film was made of her in 2010.

“Free Will” came up in discussion. Are we responsible for the choices we make or is ‘free will’ an illusion? Opinion was divided among attendees, which aligned with a similar diversity of opinion among philosophers generally. Finding and agreeing on a definition of ‘free will’ seemed to us to be pivotal to one’s stance.

Support for ‘free will’ can perhaps be based on this definition:- If we face two or more alternative [and perhaps opposing] actions, and there is no immovable or unreasonable barrier to their performance, we exercise our ‘free will’ [and thereby demonstrate its existence] by making an unfettered choice to follow one course rather than any of the others which we correctly understand to be available. If ‘free will’ exists it logically follows that we are fully responsible for our actions and can justifiably be held to account. The concepts of ‘sin’, ‘guilt’, and ‘punishment’ co-exist with that of free will. If we offend our gods or break laws in force to constrain us then we rightly deserve the applicable penalties.

A case against the existence of ‘Free Will’ may follow these lines:- Whatever ‘choice’ is made among alternatives on offer results from a conscious and/or unconscious evaluation in the mind of the individual of the merits of each course of action, of how these compare, and of which among them appears to be the most beneficial to his particular current interests. It will be understood that such evaluation will differ between individuals so that, faced with identical sets of choices, different people can, understandably, make different choices.

However, the ability to evaluate depends upon the person’s mind-set at the time of decision-making, and this in-turn depends upon prior-in-time upstream ‘causes’ – that is, the mind-set used in the

evaluation is already in place and unalterable; thus the preference for a particular ‘choice’ is also in place; thus only one particular ‘choice’ will be judged superior in that person’s evaluation process; thus it is impossible that he will choose anything different; thus ‘free will’ is an illusion.

This stance seems to remove from us any responsibility for our actions, which is contrary to the widely-held ‘common-sense’ view that we do have some degree of responsibility; otherwise surely it would lead to chaos and anarchy. Also, it does not seem ‘right’ that people should be able to do as they like regardless of the consequences.

There may be other arguments for and against which are more logical, better presented, or more persuasive. Whether any of these affect your present stance is entirely up to you, but perhaps it is not sufficient to retain a belief without also defining exactly what it is that is believed, and without giving reasons why such is held.

Be prepared – the subject of ‘free will’ will be far from exhausted, nor is its impact on other philosophical concepts.

Descartes – Although on the meeting agenda [again!] our time ran out before he could make a proper entrance. Will he be always a bridesmaid and never a bride? Time will tell!

One of his significant areas of concern that did dash briefly across our stage though was the difficulty of proving anything. I made the comment [tongue in cheek] of not believing in Berlin – because I had not actually been there to verify its existence.

[As a parallel aside:- In Michael Palin’s book and television series ‘Pole to Pole’, he remarked that he had ‘never quite believed in the existence of Estonia’, until he passed through it on day 24 of his journey from North Pole to South Pole along longitude 30-degrees.]

Why are so many ‘facts’ believed without our having personal knowledge of them? One answer is that the capacity and time for amassing self-knowledge is so limited that reliance on external evidence about ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’ is essential if we are to efficiently steer a course through life.

But then comes the question, how do we evaluate the different kinds of ‘evidence’ assailing our senses? How do we ensure the evidence is sufficiently convincing to form a belief? Something to think on – evidence is susceptible to flaws and manipulation. Another subject to consider in future sessions.

Sadly for us Nola advised that she is shortly to leave Bright so this will be her last in-person session. Email contact will be maintained however so as not lose the benefits of two-way participation on philosophical matters. Our best wishes, Nola, and our thanks for your open and lively inputs to discussion

Keith Ashfold – Convener.

