

Session 11 – Report – August 9, 2022.

Imagine yourself to be a passenger on the Titanic who two days before it sank had a convincingly vivid dream foretelling the tragedy - how might you decide to spend the few hours you now believe to be left to you? Would your behaviour be the same as it was prior to the dream?

Now, consider, as we ourselves age, our approaching mortality needs to be faced in a somewhat similar fashion. How best to prepare ourselves is a question for which answers may be found in the ideas of the post-Socratic philosophers – and it is these ideas and their beliefs that discussion ranged around in this session.

The Epicureans, so named after the school's founder Epicurus, taught to fear neither gods nor death, believing the former either not to exist or, if existing, had no interest or involvement in human affairs. Death was dismissed as an ending of being, beyond which was nothing – so the only knowledge we ever would or could experience is that of being alive. Hence their striving for a life free from mental stress and physical pain.

Cynicism was more a way of life than an established school of philosophical thought. Its adherents believed that nothing natural was shameful and therefore living a simple natural life, free from excessive possessions and the pursuit of fame and fortune, was to be preferred,. Some limits were recognised as necessary to prevent this process moving to ridiculous or offensive extremes.

The Stoics acknowledgment that the senses could be deceived was modified by a belief that a high degree of correspondence to external reality could be achieved by calm reasoning and reflection. They formulated an argument from design for the existence of gods; a concept which reverberates today in conflict with Darwin's evolution theory. A strong theme for living was to accept life as it comes the while developing self-reliance and assuming responsibility for one's actions.

Scepticism had numerous branches of thought some in parallel with Stoicism, others at variance. One main divergence was an insistence that nothing could be known with certainty and that serene peace of mind could be obtained by suspension of judgement. Dogmatism is an opposite of scepticism. The message coming to us today is to apply an appropriate measure of doubt to important aspects of our everyday dealings – there can be danger in too-freely accepting everything at face value.

As usual time constraints ended discussion whilst much remained to cover.

Keiyth Ashfold - Convener

Next Session is Tuesday, August 23.

The small group at this session engaged in lively discussion about:-

Robots & Artificial Intelligence
Consequentialism was revisited
Two of Zeno's Paradoxes were briefly examined.

Artificial Intelligence:

How far towards equalling or surpassing human reasoning and decision-making capabilities can we expect robots to go? Are there limits? Should limits be set? What ethical questions are there?

Robots can only carry out instructions in an internal program so the question is – can (should) humans design a program enabling robots to not only respond to external stimuli in the same manners as do humans but to also have the capabilities to reprogram themselves, self-determine their objectives and how to achieve them, without necessarily having regard to the effects for good or ill upon the human species? Only time will tell.

In the film “2001” such a computer is tasked to control a spacecraft but decides to ignore the commands of its human ‘master’ thus starting a battle of wits between the two. For how this turns out you will have to watch the film yourself!

At this stage though, the programming required is very complex for a robot to perform even some relatively simple action (for a human) such as to select and pick up an egg without breaking it, and/or to clean up the resulting mess should a breakage, because of some programming glitch or unforeseen circumstance, actually occur.

Consequentialism:

The Australia Day commemoration and celebrations of the First Fleet's landing at Botany Bay on 26-1-1788 is currently attracting adverse comment and action from groups who label the event an 'invasion' – an event to be despised, not lauded. An opposing view is that it was the only event which could have started that special process of development which has led to Australia being what it is today. It is naïve in the extreme for anyone to suggest, let alone to believe, that such a defenceless and resource-attractive land would not have been 'invaded' sometime in the past 200 years, perhaps by more than one foreign power, with an end-result arguably much more detrimental to the indigenous peoples, the event's effects on whom has spawned the most opposition..

From a philosophic 'consequentialism' point of view that landing by the English illustrates a difficulty inherent in deciding any course of action. Firstly, what future time frame should be considered and how accurately can the future effects of any action be predicted? Secondly, what will be the likely consequences if the intended action does not proceed?

The English decision in the late 18th century to settle Australia was based on short-term requirements – to rid England of those citizens the laws then in place deemed 'undesirables'. Therefore the decision was able to be deemed by them a 'good' thing.

Fifty years later, with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, the homesick and near starving English settlers and convicts, as well as the suffering indigenous peoples, would doubtless have deemed the landing a 'bad' thing.

Finally, the present-day assessment, again with hindsight, is being judged 'good' or 'bad' by individuals and groups from differing personal and group standpoints.

In summary - when considering an action from the 'consequentialism' point of view it is of value to consider also the consequences of alternative actions or even of doing nothing. The likely effects in the short-, medium- and long-terms, may also have relevance, each of these possibly favouring different choices.

Session attendees initially leaned both ways on the Australia Day subject but all agreed that to look forward and to work together to achieve unity among our peoples is preferable to backward-looking complaints about a past that simply IS and can't be altered.

Zeno's paradoxes:

Two of his paradoxical 'proofs' were briefly examined:-

1. That the faster Achilles could never overtake a slower tortoise
2. That an arrow in flight is not moving.

These paradoxes should be checked outside of session for a complete exposition of them.

Paradoxes generally contain interesting and challenging problems of reasoning. Those above are just two of several proposed by Zeno to show that absurd conclusions can come by apparently logical arguments.

A difficulty in solving paradoxes can arise from our common-sense experiences, which can motivate us to reject a paradox out-of-hand rather than to examine it carefully to discover where the 'proof' goes wrong. Paradoxes provide an excellent opportunity to develop good logical reasoning processes.

Check the three main parts of the above paradoxes:-

The initial premise(s) – the starting assumption(s) – which may or may not be valid.

The argument itself – is it based wholly and only on the premise(s)?

- is its logic flawless?

- Does it contain other assumptions? Perhaps hidden ones?

The conclusion – does it really follow from the argument?

Keith Ashfold - Convener.

Next session is Tuesday, August 8.

Discussion on the Pre-Socratic philosophers, though short, focused on the chronological development of their ideas in a climate where most people believed that not only was the cosmos created by supernatural forces but also that their own daily lives were controlled by the capricious whims of immortal gods. To voice contrary opinions could be very dangerous, so the birth of such ideas leading to the search for natural reasons was a huge step.

Because the earliest known philosophers started virtually from scratch and had not the advantage of the scientific method to test assumptions, conclusions based on observation and reasoning differed but there was a central question – what was matter made of? Water was one 'element' proposed,

being the only material observed existing in three forms, but all ideas were basically reasoned guesses - even the 'atom' theory of Democritus – and none could claim superiority over the others.

Due to its importance in evaluating the flood of information and misinformation which is our daily lot the subject of **logical reasoning** continued to hold centre stage and no doubt will remain with us in coming sessions. The advertising industry, for example, in its attempts to persuade us to buy things we don't need or which can't possibly meet the claims made on their behalf, use many tricks to pervert the course of better judgement; to be able to detect these is a desirable skill.

Another discussion area was **how to handle ideas and beliefs different to your own**, especially those which are so 'left-field' as to be, from your point of view, totally unacceptable. One way suggested, and not necessarily an easy one to follow, is to go 'stand in the other person's shoes' – that is, consider the situation from the other's viewpoint, taking into account as best you can the other's background experiences and forces in play which could, in all probability, be behind the views in question.

A benefit in so doing is not necessarily that you may be persuaded that the other's views become acceptable but rather that, in widening your understanding of why things are as they are, you put yourself in a better position to determine the personal philosophy most suited to your perceived needs.

Session 10, July 26, pre-notes are to follow later this week.

Keith Ashfold - Convenor