

What is philosophy?

- what does it mean to philosophise?

by Mogens Lilleør

According to the American philosopher Thomas Nagel (in 'What does it all mean?' from 1987), philosophy is about dealing with fundamental questions about the world, nature and man, raised through man's encountering the world. Where the physicist would go directly into the process of examining the world's building blocks, the elements which the world is made of (e.g. atoms and gravity), their characteristics and so on, the philosopher would hesitate, and instead ask 'how can we really know that there is a world which can be examined, i.e. a world beyond our mind?'. And he continues: Many people might ask whether moonlighting is wrong or to buy hot stuff, but the philosopher would rather ask 'what is it that makes an action right or wrong?'. A great many persons would most certainly think it is worthwhile to strive for a good life, but the philosopher would ask 'good with respect to what?' and if the answer is that it is welfare, so in which sense of welfare? Welfare as 'absence of pain and suffering' or is it welfare 'as the fulfilment of wishes'? In addition, the philosopher would consider whether welfare is something that can be directly targeted and strived towards. Nobody comes through life without taking concepts such as 'world' or 'knowledge of the world', 'right or wrong' and 'welfare' for granted. But in philosophy, it is precisely such notions, which are examined, claims Nagel.

These philosophical questions, and all the many others we could ask, are basically expressions of an intention to understand how humans fit into the universe. A coherent global response represents an idea of world, society, man and his relationship with nature and perhaps even the meaning of life. The questions are philosophical but thus also practical. They are practical, because the answers influence on how we live our lives. The responses provide of course an understanding of what the world and mankind are. And how we choose to equip ourselves, i.e. how we choose to build up society, will depend on how we think world and man. Many philosophical questions or concerns are common to all mankind because they arise from certain conditions that all human beings are subjected to, e.g. birth and death, demands for food, heat, confidence, creativity and care. But the answers do not need to be common to all mankind because people in a number of other areas are living under very different conditions, e.g. geographical and climatically. The answers vary from people to people, from culture to culture, and a comprehensive response represents a philosophy. As such, the philosophy of a particular culture consists among other things of the assumptions that opinions and actions are based on, but often in a manner quite unclear for the individuals living in and with the culture daily. Each individual uses so to speak philosophy without knowing it. The philosophy is transparent as a spectacle you look through without being aware of it, just like the dentist that senses the hole in your teeth through her probe without focusing on the probe. Philosophy works as the overall perspective and understanding, as a framework, but it does this tacitly.

To philosophise is to articulate this 'tacit knowledge'. Successful philosophy results in a clarification of the philosophical assumptions, and thus in a better, more motivated anchoring of our opinions, but by doing this it also often forces us to abandon opinions we thought were safe. To philosophise is in this way often self-searching. In this, it is wonder, curiosity and fascination,

which inspire the scrutiny; often it is a practical problem that is the catalyst. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss describes in his *Philosophy of History* from 1963 a range of problem types, which can illustrate this. They are characterized by what Martin Hollis calls for 'closed questions':

- 1) Daily life problems that give rise to specific questions whose answers do not require any particular approach or specialization. Example: What time is it? When do we eat?
- 2) Problems of technology, which raises specific questions whose answers require special method or approach and specialist knowledge. Example: How do we make a clock? How do we make a meatball?
- 3) Science problems, resulting in the general question of principles of method and function. Example: How does a clock work? How do a meatball function? (Meaning its nutritional value and how a body absorbs nutrition).

What is the 'closed-ness' of closed questions? This question answers Martin Hollis in the book *'Invitation to Philosophy'* from 1985. The border case for a closed question (of life, technology and science) is when the answer is already known: Which year died Descartes? John F. Kennedy? Olaf Palme? These are questions which taps from a store of information; they should be considered 'attacks' on the memory. This sort of issue is totally closed because the answer is known beforehand. Other issues are closed in another way: What is the result of 2900100,273 divided by 82043,369? The answer is not known immediately. Perhaps it has never been figured out by anyone yet, so it is not known at all. But with the right technology, the answer is soon found. The fact, that we already have developed the technique implies that the question is to be considered a closed question.

But, what about an issue like whether there are small blue men somewhere in our galaxy? Here the answer is not known, and the appropriate technologies to respond to it not developed. We cannot yet fly through the whole galaxy because we are not able to build a suitable rocket. Despite of this 'openness', it is to be regarded a closed question. This answer is based on the fact that in principle it is possible to settle the question with a yes or no. In principle, we can calculate and formulate the conditions that must be met for a hypothesis about small blue men can be said to be either true or false. The issue could theoretically be settled because we know something about the chemical conditions that can be observed in the galaxy, on the principles and laws that govern, and therefore also something about the possibility of certain forms of life. In theory, though not in practice, we can say that it is possible to develop the right technique to create an answer to the question. In that sense, the question is closed.

All closed questions have something in common. They are well defined. Seeking answers to closed questions are in a manner similar to creating a 'map'. The geographer arrives to an uncharted territory with a blank piece of paper, but his problem is well defined namely, to reproduce on a map the things or the landscape he meets - there are mountains, valleys, trees, lakes and perhaps dragons. Exploring the human genome is a well-defined mission insofar there is an agreement on what a gene is. An issue is closed, if the words and concepts contained in it are well defined, i.e. they are neither ambiguous nor vague. If this clarity is present, it is because the issue is raised within a framework of philosophical assumptions, which are taken for granted. A closed question asks for information inside an existing conceptual framework: The assumptions, values and principles that determine what one should think and believe, the set of concepts and rules which

govern what we get out of our experience and determine the content of what is meant by for example words like world, welfare, rights and wrongs, etc.

But at an indefinable point a question might be a threat to the frame itself, namely if it opens. This takes place in the very same moment one has to consider how the question can be answered, i.e. at the very moment one no longer focuses on what the answer is, but on what conditions must be met for an answer to be given. The openness is due to a prevailing confusion about the meaning of one or more of the concepts involved in the question. Everyday concepts, but also technical and scientific closed concepts, can in this way open up and give way for reflection: When, for example gene therapy allows for treatment of severe diseases much early in the embryo stage, but also treatment of less significant genetic defects cosmetic of nature, then it raises the issue of what are of most importance: consideration for the fetus, the parents or the society.

A question in this context could go on when the fetus acquires legal personality? The answer depends on what the term 'person' means. What are the essential characteristics, which is relevant in this context, what are the criteria? An answer to that might be the existence of consciousness. But again, what does consciousness mean? Does it mean that the fetus is able to detect external influences? That it is able to perceive? That it is able to suffer? Or does it imply the existence of self-consciousness? The answer to the original questions may be given only after there is an agreement on the necessary conditions a 'something' must meet to be a subject of law. A satisfactory reply then turns the open questions into a closed one with solid conceptual features that make it useful in everyday contexts. Open questions are philosophical questions!

Is there a conscious life elsewhere in the universe than on earth? It sounds like a closed question asked in a single conceptual framework. But it can quickly become an open question since the answer requires a clarification of what is meant by 'conscious life'. Neither the answer nor the technique to produce it is given, and the latter can hardly be developed if there is ambiguity about the meaning of the central concepts 'life' and 'conscious' involved in the issue. We do not know the truth conditions of the question, i.e. the conditions that must be met for an answer to be given.

Really, what should we look for if we assumed that it was possible to search through the whole universe? We can together with Martin Hollis ask whether cube-shaped gas can be conscious life? Or what about planets? Does consciousness only appear integrated with physical bodies or organisms? Should there be a nervous system, as we recognize in mammals, for awareness to be? In this way, we are forced to think over how the question can be answered. We have to determine what we mean by 'awareness'. But then we are philosophising. Open questions threaten the conceptual framework within which they are raised, and thereby threatening the very foundations of posing and answering the question. This is the mark of philosophy.

The closed questions of everyday, technology and science can open up and give rise to philosophical reflection. Technological innovations or new relationships between people may force us to open up previously closed issues. Meeting a technology like the PC, the Internet or the strange culture of a refugee might provoke me to consider more carefully who I am. In teaching philosophy, the important work of analyzing the concepts included in the questions and theories is

to work with open questions. And when the closed concepts we use daily during this work open, it is the way we look upon and understand the world that becomes problematical. Open questions may directly or indirectly result in a change of our metaphysical and epistemological understanding, i.e. our perception of what is and hence what we know and do not know and our way of 'mapping'. But thereby our understanding of 'who we are?' is confronted and this is affecting our philosophical and ethical understanding of our life. In a nutshell, therefore: To philosophise is exploring one's self.

References

Thomas Nagel, 1987: What does it all mean?

Arne Næss, 1963: Philosophy of History.

Martin Hollis, 1985: Invitation to Philosophy.