

***COPING WITH REALITY:
Can Philosophy Help?***



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Coping With Reality

The title of this series is already provocative. Many (most) philosophies, world-views, and ideologies in the 21st century say either:

(A) NOTHING IS REAL

or, if there is a reality:

(B) IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO 'KNOW' REALITY

or that we, individually or as a society, can:

**(C) 'REMODEL' REALITY TO CONFORM TO OUR OWN
DESIRES**

Après nous le déluge?

- ❑ Many people think or sense that there has been a degeneration of the culture over a period of decades – rapidly accelerating in the present century?
- ❑ What we plan to do is to see if the old remedy, the idea of ‘**thinking straight**’ can somehow be revived, and if systematic attention to, and discussion of, philosophical concepts can be of any use.

2023-24 PPS Program

Session 1: *Why Philosophy? What is It? What is it For?*

Session 2: *The Philosophical Order.*

Session 3: *Get Real: What do we Mean by This?*

Session 4: *How do we Know What we Know? The Critique of Knowledge.*

Session 5: *What is Ethics? Self-Realization or Deference to Others?*

Session 6: *What about Equality, Equity, Social Justice, ‘Wokeness’, etc.:
Relevant Ethical Norms?*

Session 7: *Politics (Political Economy): ‘Capitalism in one Country’ versus
Globalism.*

Why Philosophy? What is It? What is it For?

❑ Philosophy is literally the ‘**Love of Wisdom**’ derived from two Greek words *philos* meaning friend or lover, and *sophia* meaning wisdom.

❑ The rest of the heading is inspired by a famous article by **Ayn Rand**: ‘**Philosophy: who needs it?**’

❑ Ayn Rand was a controversial novelist/philosopher of Russian-Jewish origin, and an influential figure in the popular culture of the USA in the mid-twentieth century. But controversial, or not, it is hard to disagree with what she said. The answer to who needs it, and what is it for, is **Everyone** and **Everything**.

[Rand A. 1982. **Philosophy: who needs it?** In *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, 1-13, Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill.]

Cards on the Table?

- ❑ A note by **John Smithin**, based on a conversation with **Ronen Grunberg** and a person who has written an interesting book on ancient religions, biblical exegesis, *etc.*, but with a **very** distinct point of view.
- ❑ Writing style and content? Ronen & I discussed the latter with you. Our basic point was that, as philosophers, we wouldn't address questions of religion, monotheism, polytheism, *etc.* by textual analysis, or by history, as you do - but directly through **metaphysics** (an 'art' basically missing in today's world).'
- ❑ 'Personally (I cannot speak for Ronen) I would rule out any kind of religion, the supernatural, mysticism, the transcendental, *etc.*, and **idealism** in general, on grounds of '**metaphysical realism**'.

G-d is Dead' (cf. Nietzsche)?

- ❑ Not really – rather, **G-d** should probably quote **Mark Twain**, ‘The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated’.
- ❑ This does *not* mean we should disrespect/disregard people who have religious beliefs. We should engage with, say, Jewish philosophers (**Maimonides**), Christian philosophers (**Aquinas**), or Muslim philosophers (**Avicenna**, **Averroes**) when they have interesting things to say. The Greeks were polytheists, as were the Anglo-Saxons who invented **common law**. The same applies to Hindu philosophers, *e.g.*, **Shankara**.
- ❑ This attitude does *not* reduce to **materialism**. There are beings that exist, are real, and have causal effects, without being material (*e.g.*, **social facts**). In the end all religions or cults, ancient or modern, *themselves* reduce to **social constructs**.
- ❑ A viable system of **ethics** does *not* need to depend on religion/the supernatural. This can be done more effectively by the correct application of the Aristotelian notion of **eudaimonia** or **'human flourishing'**.
- ❑ There is certainly an important social and cultural component to religion. (Sense of community, and so on). But what if it becomes intolerant and exclusionary?

Metaphysical Realism

□ According to Douglas Rasmussen & Douglas Den Uyl (2020, xi):

‘**Metaphysical realism involves both an ontological and an epistemological thesis ... namely, there are beings which exist and are what they are apart from our cognition of them ... and that we can know the existence and nature of these beings**’.

[Rasmussen D.B. & D.J. Den Uyl. 2020. *The Realist Turn: Repositioning Liberalism*. Cham, Switerland: Palgrave MacMillan.]

Definitions

□ From **Leonard Peikoff** (1982, 15):

Metaphysics: ‘... (t)he branch of philosophy that studies existence ... [it] ... identifies the nature of the universe as a whole. It tells ... [us] ... what kind of world we live in.’

Epistemology: ‘... (t)he branch of philosophy that studies knowledge ... [it] ... identifies the proper means of acquiring knowledge ... which mental processes to employ as methods of cognition ... which to reject as invalid.’

Ethics: ‘... (t)he branch of philosophy that studies values ... [it] defines a code of values ... [and] ... tells ... [us] ... the purpose of life ... (i)t ... provides the standard by which to judge good and evil, right and wrong’

Politics: ‘ ... (t)he branch of philosophy that applies ethics to social questions ... [it] ... studies ... social systems and the proper functions of government.’

[Peikoff, L. 1982. *The Ominous Parallels: The End of Freedom in America*. New York: Stein & Day Publishers].

Definitions (continued)

Idealism is ‘... (a)ny doctrine holding that reality is fundamentally mental’ (Blackburn 1994, 184).

Materialism is ‘... the view that the world is entirely composed of matter’ (Blackburn 1994, 233).

Ontology is ‘... that branch of metaphysics which concerns itself with what exists’ (Blackburn 1994, 269).

❑ Typically in philosophy the main dividing line is held to be that between materialism and idealism. Religious thinkers tend to subscribe to this view - with the fundamentally important mental element taken to be supernatural - but it is false. **Realism** is not co-extensive with materialism. Idealism and materialism both fail. The genuine struggle is between realism and idealism. Materialism fails because there are being in existence that are factual, real, and have causal effects, without being material. *E.g.*, **social facts**, such as money. The same example shows that the non-material does not have to be supernatural, spiritual or transcendental.

❑ It will be important to find out exactly how these real (but non-material, non-supernatural) beings come into existence. This is the field of **social ontology**.

Do we Have a Leg to Stand On?

❑ The title of this section refer to a scene in the 1999 biopic, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. In the film, Rand was challenged, at a talk at the Nathaniel Branden Institute in New York, to provide a quick summary of her philosophy ‘standing on one foot’. Egged on by the audience, she actually did this. The answers were:



Metaphysics: OBJECTIVE REALITY

Epistemology: REASON

Ethics: SELF-INTEREST

Politics: LAISSER FAIRE CAPITALISM



❑ The first two entries correspond to the theses of Rasmussen & Den Uyl. Like them, Rand does not defer to either **idealism** or the Kantian **critique of knowledge**. Beyond that, given that Rand was always a controversial figure, one does not have to go far on the internet to find attacks on her views, often of an *ad-hominem* nature, She is disliked by Marxists, socialists, and generally those left of centre, for obvious reasons. However, almost equally so by some thought to be on the same ‘side’ politically. Why?

Fair Comment?

Chambers (1958, 1):

The news about this book ... [is] ... that any ordinarily sensible head could not possibly take it seriously, and that, apparently, a good many do. Somebody has called it: ‘Excruciatingly awful’. I find it a remarkably silly book.

Chambers (1958, 2):

From almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged* a voice can be heard ... commanding: ‘To a gas chamber-go!’

Chambers (1958, 3):

Like any consistent materialism, this one begins, by rejecting God, religion, original sin, *etc.*, *etc.* The ... aggressive atheism and ... ‘higher morality’ ... result inevitably from its underlying premises ... Randian Man, like Marxian Man, is ... the center of a godless world.

Bloom (1987, 62):

There is always a girl who mentions Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, a book, although hardly literature, which, with ... sub-Neitzschean assertiveness, excites ... eccentric youngsters to a new way of life.

[Chambers, W. 1958. Big sister is watching you. *National Review* (reprint): 1-5.]

[Bloom, A. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*. New York: Simon & Schuster.]

Cancel Culture?

- ❑ Ayn Rand would be ‘cancelled’ today, no question.
- ❑ But what about others from both the right and the left?

Martin Heidegger?

Karl Marx?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau?

John Searle?

- ❑ Should we dismiss their views, not read them, ignore them, because of their alleged behaviour or character?

Eudaimonia or ‘Human Flourishing’

Eudaimonia is ‘... [a Greek word] ... [meaning] ... happiness, well-being success’ (Blackburn 1994, 127) ... [it was] ... the central goal of systems of ancient ethics ... [cf.] ... Aristotle ...’

Human flourishing is the modern equivalent, but it does *not* play much of a role in (most) modern ethical systems, which tend to stress **altruism**, equity, and suchlike ... service to others.

[Blackburn, S. 1994. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press]

