



Jan Sokol

Thinking about Ordinary Things

A Short Invitation
to Philosophy

KAROLINUM

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Introduction

*For the study of philosophy is not that we may know what men have thought, but what the truth of things is.**

This book is based on a series of lectures for an Introduction to Philosophy course, primarily aimed at students of other subjects which share some common ground with philosophy. But it can serve equally as an introduction to the colourful world of philosophy for students and teachers of that subject, as well as for the general reader.

Like many other subjects, philosophy today is a multifaceted and diffuse subject. No one person can possibly read all the journals and publications that exist and as a result philosophical discussion has broken off into various schools and circles, becoming more opaque, and harder to teach, in the process. For that reason, I have sought to avoid the traditional 'history of philosophy' approach, preferring to come at this introduction to philosophical problems from a different angle. Although I am sure that the history of philosophy will continue to occupy a fundamental place in the teaching of philosophy *per se*, I believe it does not serve especially well as a method of introducing the subject to the student of today. I will try to explain why this is.

The history of philosophy represents a tremendous amount of valuable positive knowledge, which can be taught, interpreted and examined. But this can lead the beginner to suppose, falsely, that philosophy is, like other sciences, basically a volume of knowledge. As the botanist is concerned with plants, the philosopher is concerned with philosophers, the development of their thought and their disputes with each other. If, in the exposition of the enormous bulk of the

* Thomas Aquinas, *De Coelo, Commentarius*, 1.22.

historical material, no place remains for the opinions and convictions of at least some philosophers, the whole point of philosophical research and discussion will be lost. All that will be left is a list of names, biographical data and wise sayings ('You can't step into the same river twice', 'Know thyself', 'I think therefore I am', 'God is dead') which may serve well as rhetorical flourishes, but which have no value as a tool to help us think critically about life and the world. In this way, philosophy could easily become a closed discipline for experts who have learned it all and who simply carry on their investigations along these closed lines. But then why would we bother students of other subjects with it?

Encouraged by some positive recent developments, I have attempted an introduction to philosophical thought which is based on philosophical topics and themes. Its method is a sort of phenomenology, by which I mean a close-up analysis of our experience, but as far as possible expressed in plain language, without resorting to jargon. Let me nail my colours to the mast straight away: I named the Czech version of this book *Malá filosofie člověka*, which would translate as *A Short Philosophy of Man*. As we shall see, it does not deal solely with man or woman *per se*, but human experience, actions, knowledge and thought are the starting point. As opposed, for example, to the philosophy of science or the philosophy of language, our focus here is on humans as physical beings in the world, as historical, social and moral persons.

In this way, we shall be able to point to the relations between philosophy and other branches of human intellectual effort – mainly science, but also art, technology, law and religion. The goal which I have followed throughout is to show the omnipresence of philosophical questions and to encourage students of other subjects to *think philosophically*. For this reason I make only limited reference of such classic philosophical themes as being and consciousness, or spirit and matter. I hope that I have not lost sight of the heart of these themes in my lectures; it is just that they may appear under different headings. On the other hand, I have been bold enough to include several excursions into the realms of other subjects, such as linguistics, history, sociology and law; although naturally my work in these areas is that of a mere dilettante.

After many years of teaching, it has become clear to me that the danger of a relatively accessible text is that it can be read without a great deal of thought, so that the content of the book flows over the reader like water. For this reason I have included several questions at the end of each chapter. They relate to the preceding content, but the reader cannot find the answer in the text alone – he has to think for himself.

I need hardly add that I will be sincerely grateful for any criticism. That the book continues to need it after six Czech editions is not in doubt. On the contrary, to the extent that the book has any value, this is largely down to the contributions of others – most of all Zdeněk Pinc, who inspired me to attempt this book – to colleagues and students who read through the book patiently, pen in hand, and many others, alive and dead, who have through the years offered me the pleasure of philosophical conversation and also much food for thought. If I attempted to name some of them, I would certainly forget to name others.

Prague, October 2012

1. Philosophy: between Science, Art and Myth

Art, religion and philosophy differ only in form; their purpose is the same. (Hegel)

When we are hungry or in dire need of something, we can hardly talk or think about anything else. When we have toothache, when we are scared, or rushing somewhere, conversation stops altogether. But occasionally it might happen that we are in no dire need of anything, and we are in no particular rush to get anywhere, and in those moments philosophy may become possible. Or then again it may not – such free moments can be used in various ways. Often our first thought is to just ‘kill time’, perhaps by reading a newspaper, solving a crossword, or watching television. And before we know it, it is gone. Why do we seek to ‘kill’ this free time? For exactly the same reason as we would kill a lion or a snake: we are afraid of it. After all, free time is not as straightforward as we might think. We find ourselves alone with our own company. And this can quickly become intolerable for those of us who do not know how to deal with our own company. We are like a chain-smoker who runs out of cigarettes on Sunday evening when the shops are shut; we feel something akin to withdrawal symptoms. It is a blend of anxiety and boredom. So we bite our nails or drum our fingers on the table. We would dearly love to kill that time – but we don’t know how. If only it could be Monday already.

The ancient Greeks had a word to describe this stretch of free time, when we do not have to be anywhere and are lacking nothing – they called it *scholé*. The Romans adopted this word, and everyone else in turn from the Romans, until from *scholé* came our modern word *school*. So *school*, however ironic it may sound, ought to be a place we enjoy going to, where we don’t need to hurry, or be afraid of anything, a place where we have the time and leisure to think. But have you ever seen

a school that looked like this? I certainly haven't. And yet this is how every school should be. How is this possible? How could it happen that from free time devoted to thinking, from *scholé*, we could end up with *school* – a place where pupils and teachers irritate and bore each other, or worry about exams? If we were to look for a modern equivalent of *scholé* it would be our holidays, the opposite of *school*. How did we reach this state of affairs?

Most likely it has something to do with the fact that there is an art to handling the free moments in one's life. To handle them in such a way that they are not lost to leisure pursuits, while at the same time ensuring that they are not empty, dull or irksome. The people best equipped to manage free time are little children, who are able to take pleasure in the most mundane things: a car passing by, an insect flying through the air, a stone lying on the ground. For the child, each one of these is an event. But over time, as they grow older, children become more used to such things – 'I've seen that, I've done that, it's no big deal'. And we adults provide them with powerful support in this direction: 'Not that car again,', 'OK, so there's a fly buzzing around – so what', 'Stop asking all those silly questions and watch where you're going or you'll fall over!'

And so here we are – 'watch where you're going or you'll fall over.' However strange it might sound, the history of philosophy begins with just such a trivial story, about the Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus. The story tells how he was walking across a courtyard looking so intently at the stars that he tripped over and fell into a well. He had to be rescued by a servant-girl, who mocked him for being so concerned with what was in the sky that he could not see what was at his feet. How Thales answered her, the story does not say. Most likely he was unable to think of a suitable response at that moment and was just glad to be out of the well. But he does not seem to have learned anything from his mishap. After all, if he had abandoned his interest in the stars and the mysteries of the world and simply learned to walk safely across courtyards, it is very unlikely that we would know anything about him today. There have always been plenty of people who know how to walk safely across courtyards.

We will most likely never know what Thales said to the girl. But an answer of sorts is to be found, two hundred years later, with the greatest Greek philosopher, Plato. The answer Plato gives is very surprising and may on the surface appear to be nonsense. He wrote that all philosophy begins in wonder. Now Plato was certainly a great philosopher, but did he not perhaps go a bit overboard here? Surely philosophy is the

realm of kindly old eccentrics with long beards who have little interest in (or aptitude for) ordinary, practical things, people who puzzle their heads over questions which nobody else worries about. Is philosophy not something we associate with wisdom, and wise men? And are wise men not men who have seen it all, lived through it all and who can no longer be shocked by anything? And they should be expected to fall over themselves with wonderment and amazement at every little thing, like children? Surely not.

And yet is quite certain that Plato made this statement in all seriousness. Indeed it is possible that he was thinking of Thales' amazement at what was going on over our heads in the sky. Wait, something is going on in the sky? But isn't it just the same thing over and over again, day after day, year after year? Yes it is, and this is precisely what puzzled Thales, and his student Anaximander. From the dawn of time people everywhere have known that the sun comes up in the morning and goes down in the evening, that from sunrise until evening is day and after evening comes night, that evening comes after day and, after night, day again. People have always known that this is simply the way it has always been and always will be and that we have to arrange our affairs accordingly, so we do not end up stranded somewhere in the wilderness when the sun goes down. This is all so simple and natural to us that when we want to say that something is certain we use expressions like 'as sure as night follows day.'

But long ago, even before Anaximander, there were those who realised that there was nothing certain about it whatsoever. And it is those who think that there is any certainty in it who are the foolish ones. Of course, there is a stone lying on the path, it was there yesterday and no doubt it will still be there tomorrow, unless someone picks it up and carries it away. But the sun does not simply lie there like that stone. It is in constant motion, every minute somewhere else. It moves around like an animal, a living thing. It appears somewhere in the east each morning, then climbs higher up in the sky (even higher in the summer) then starts coming down towards the earth again until it finally sets in the evening, disappearing without a trace beyond the horizon. How does it manage to appear again the very next morning – and at the other side of the sky? Where has it been in the meantime? What happened to it? And will the same thing happen again tomorrow? Does it have to happen this way? And what if the sun fails to rise again tomorrow?

If the sun failed to rise again tomorrow, it would be the end of us all. And that is why, thousands of years ago, people started to concern

themselves with why it rises. And because the sun's rising was a matter of some importance to them, they also concerned themselves with what needed to be done to ensure it continued to rise. The outcome of their observations and thoughts were the ancient myths. According to the Greek myth the sun is the fire chariot of the god Helios, who travels in it every day across the sky before going down into the sea and the underworld for the evening, where the fiery horses rest before Helios harnesses them to the chariot and rides them out again across the sky. And so that people don't come to take this for granted, the myth also tells of how Helios lent the horses to his son Phaeton. He was not able to control them, however, and the horses took fright, killing the boy. From this time on, Helios knows that he must not lend anyone else his chariot, and so it is certain that he will ride out with them tomorrow, just like yesterday and every day for thousands of years. However, if people were to cause any kind of offence to Helios – who knows what could happen?

Thales' servant most likely heard a story like this in her childhood, and remembered that as long as she behaved respectfully towards Helios, he would come out with his chariot every day, and that there was no need to worry her head about the sun coming up tomorrow. Thales himself probably heard this story as well, but for some reason it struck him as unsatisfactory. Perhaps this was because he had also heard other myths which explained the rising of the sun in some other way. Or perhaps it struck him as peculiar that such an important function should be dependent on one individual – even if he was one of the immortal gods. Does the very regularity of the sun's course through the sky not suggest that something else will be behind it?

We today are unable to read the myth of Helios and Phaeton as anything other than a fairy tale, a more or less entertaining story for children, but one which we would be foolish to take seriously. Like Thales' servant, we do not concern ourselves with whether the sun will rise again tomorrow. And when our own children ask us about it, we will tell them something very different. It will be less entertaining and harder to understand, there will be all sort of difficult concepts and words like 'gravitation', 'momentum' and 'planetary system' involved. We will have to explain to them that it is actually the earth, not the sun, which is moving, although it doesn't seem like that. The servant would laugh heartily at this account, just as we laugh at the story of Phaeton.

But there is a certain difference between the two. These days we have far more knowledge about the stars, the earth and the sun; we have a level of detailed knowledge that would have made Thales' jaw drop. Even

those of us who paid no attention to astronomy at school know that there are whole books about it, and that there are people who devote every waking hour to studying, measuring and contemplating the sun. We call these people scientists. And these scientists would perhaps be able to explain to Thales and Anaximander why the sun comes up every day, and even predict to the second when it would occur. They would be able to tell them the life span of our sun, where it gets its energy from, how old it is – a whole host of incredible, and more or less useful, information.

But would they be able to explain all this to people like Thales' servant? Hardly. They would most likely dismiss the scientists outright before they even had a chance to speak. Anything they tried to teach them about the sun would go in one ear and out the other. So a good astronomer, able to give understandable explanations, could have useful conversations with Thales and Anaximander, with Plato and with the youngest children – but they would draw a blank with the people like Thales' servant. Scientists, philosophers and little children – is this not a peculiar group? It might seem so at first sight. But we need only remember Plato's statement about the beginning of philosophy and it all falls into place; these are all people who are capable of experiencing wonder.

There is another, fairly simple, connection between philosophy and science. Just as Thales' interest and uncertainty gave rise to astronomy, much of what we call science has grown out of questions which were originally philosophical in nature. Throughout its whole history philosophy has been a kind of seed-bed of the sciences, a kind of 'Technology Park' dedicated to cultivating the conditions in which science can become possible. In the modern world, science constitutes an entire branch of human activity, employing millions of people. And like any other type of work, it is possible to view it as just work, a way to earn a living. But in our consideration of the dialogue between Thales and the scientist, we of course had in mind a scientist for whom science is something more than just a job. Only such a scientist could understand the questions of a child (or of a philosopher) and answer them in a way that they would be understood. They are able to do this because their science retains inside it something of the philosophy from which it sprang: the ability to understand and the ability to experience wonder.

We have seen that philosophy also developed out of something. The questions that philosophers asked – like, for instance, if and why the sun will come out tomorrow – had previously been answered by myth.

And so as science is the child of philosophy, philosophy is the child of myth. As we know, relations between parents and children are often confrontational; the fifteen-year-old child seeks to break away from his parents, to be different from them, to stand on his own two feet. There are similarities to this in the relationship between myth, philosophy and science. Science, which came last, often seems like it wishes to disown its mother. Her wise old words sound hollow. Just leave behind all this philosophy, it seems to say, and try for once to invent something, measure something, prove something – like us scientists.

And so, by a process of historical justice, philosophy has received the very same treatment it once meted out to myth. This adolescent rebellion against myth is represented by the great flowering of Greek philosophy. The Greek philosophers were merciless in their exposure of the shortcomings of myth. According to them, myth was simply spouting nonsense, and was completely unable to provide reasons for the conclusions it drew. Myth was incapable of distinguishing between the truth and mere fancy. It forced a certain view of the world on people and prevented them from understanding how things actually are. This is what led Heraclitus to the judgement that Homer ought to be expelled and flogged.

And yet, true as all this may be, there is a certain superficiality to it. It hides a far deeper similarity, the fact that there is something very profound that connects myth, philosophy and science: wonder and amazement about the world, about the way things are. This fundamental ability, to see things that the majority of people do not see and to feel wonder in the face of them, is common to all three – myth, philosophy and science – and it is also shared by art. Along with philosophy, art has its wellsprings in myth. Unlike philosophy, however, art has never been ashamed of this origin. But unlike art, philosophy and science have made one significant step forward. After all, it is not enough simply to wonder at the world in which we live; man has also been endowed with the power to think, to contemplate and to evaluate – what we traditionally call reason. Therefore it behoves man to attempt to somehow understand, and communicate, what he has seen. And it is this attempt at understanding and explaining, in a way that others can understand, that separates philosophy and science from art and myth.

And so it is in the space between science, art and myth that philosophy has found its home. There have been entire periods in history where people have got by without philosophy. These were calm times, when nothing much was changing in the world, and people made do with the

wisdom that had been passed down from their grandparents. When they could happily walk about their courtyards, devote themselves to running their farms, and the only thing to watch out for was that they didn't go falling into wells. However there have also been other periods in history, when everything seems to be changing, when suddenly children no longer understand their parents and parents no longer understand their children. At such times we have no option but to think, and to find new questions to ask, and new answers to these questions, because the old answers no longer tell us anything. Not that we no longer understand them, but they no longer interest us. Not that we regard the old questions as incorrect, but they are no longer our questions. It was in precisely this kind of period that myth first arose, before giving rise to philosophy and philosophy in turn to science. And it is in precisely this kind of period that we find ourselves today. We do not know where we are meant to be headed. And people who do not know where they belong on this earth are easy prey for demagogues, who will tempt them with all sorts of 'answers' and who can drive them to commit the most awful acts. In the 20th century we saw this over and over again. And it was in part because, in all their rushing around to keep themselves comfortable, people did not find time to think.

And it is for this reason that we need to learn to think, so that we do not fall for false promises in this way again. Now, one can learn to think in two ways. One can learn in the way one learns history; that is, to listen and read about all the interesting things that have happened in the world. Or one can learn in the way one learns to swim or play the piano – that is, by actually doing it. Thinking, by which I mean philosophy, can be done in both ways. One can learn about what the ancient (and not so ancient) philosophers have had to say – that is, learn the history of philosophy. This can be extremely worthwhile and interesting, but it has one shortcoming. The history of philosophy can all too easily become no more than the mindless accumulation of facts – names, dates, mottos and 'famous thoughts'. And in the process the most important thing gets lost – one does not learn to think. It is for that reason that we will attempt the other route here. We will learn to think by thinking about things. We have chosen many important themes that we will learn to ask questions about. All these themes are fairly plain and straightforward, and at first glance may not even appear to be worth talking about. We will aim to prove that this is a mistaken belief. It is in the most ordinary, everyday things that the greatest mysteries are hidden. You would have to be a dull and unobservant person to think that life's mysteries can

only be gleaned by exotic travel or the ingestion of certain drugs. If you cannot see secrets and mysteries in the here and now, you will not find them in Tibet either. But if you have learned to see them, then you have learned to think philosophically.

It is the rock-solid belief of all philosophers throughout history that philosophy is the most beautiful thing in the world. But like any meaningful human activity, it cannot be done in a sloppy, cack-handed manner. It demands time, and it demands it all to itself. You cannot philosophise while watching television. You have to dedicate yourself to it. To think philosophically calls for a clear head, concentration, honest endeavour, stamina and curiosity. But, as philosophers will tell you, it has never let anyone down.

Questions:

- Do you know any myths? What are they about? What are they trying to tell us?
- What is the difference between myth and fairy tales?
- How is myth connected to poetry and literature and theatre?
- How did philosophy separate itself from myth and what did it criticise about myth? Was something important lost in this separation?
- How does science differ from philosophy? What questions does it ask? What do these questions deal with? Is there anything these questions ignore?
- Try to compare a philosophical account and a scientific account of the same thing, for example the sun, the earth, or man.

2. How We See and Hear

To comprehend what is, is the task of philosophy.

(Hegel)

We have said that it is possible to philosophise anywhere and about anything. So where do we start? With whatever happens to be in front of us at this moment? We will get to that soon enough, but let us go back one step further – what is it that we have in front of us, and how do we see it? How do we see? Surely that is no kind of question at all. We have two eyes that function like television cameras, giving us a stereoscopic picture of our surroundings. We have ears and we hear sounds, pressure waves in the air. Then we have smell and taste, which in humans do not play as great a role as they do for animals, except when we are eating, and then finally we have touch, with which we experience the surfaces of objects. We have a certain sense of orientation, we know up from down, we have a sense of balance – and that is about it. We have a nervous system which carries information through the body, and finally we have the control centre, the brain, which processes all this information like a computer.

This is roughly what we learned in school and this is how we think of it ourselves – if we bother to think about it at all. For the most part we are too engaged in the business of living to devote much time to such things. But at this moment we are attempting to philosophise – that means that we do have some time. Let us start with the most common and least mysterious of all the senses – sight. We know a great deal about how the eye works and we also know something about how visual information is received, transported to the brain and processed there. We know that for human beings sight is the most important of the senses, the one that receives and processes the most information. It is for this reason that

the verb 'to see' has such a wide range of meanings. We can say 'I'd love to see Paris' rather than having to say 'I'd love to travel to Paris'. And if we argue with somebody about something and we turn out to be right we can say 'See? I was right.'

But what is it that we actually see? That is another question. We see what we have in front of us, what we look at. We notice multi-coloured dots as the lens transmits images to the retina. But wait – something is not right here. What the lens transmits to the retina can certainly be described as multi-coloured dots of various shapes, some lighter, some darker. But when we open our eyes we do not see dots, but rather things, objects. Even when we look at an inkblot on paper, we have a tendency to see things in it – one person may see an animal, another may see a car, a third may see a pear, and so on. There are various psychological tests which are based on this. It is only on those rare occasions when we find ourselves looking at something that we know nothing about and which, unlike our inkblot, does not seem to fall naturally into any kind of shape, that we can say that we see nothing but dots or smudges. This may happen if we are looking at an X-ray or a complex electrical schema. In such situations we could just as well say that we see nothing at all. What are all these dots and smudges for? Can we learn anything from them? Are we able to say anything about them? On the other hand an experienced doctor would not see dots but perhaps a spinal fracture. This is not because his eyesight is so much better than ours – he sees the same dots and smudges that we do – but because he has been trained to see fractures in them. Probably in the same way that we learned to see things in our bedroom when we were children.

So from coloured dots on the retina all of a sudden we have objects. We also see them in two-dimensional photographs. Where did they come from? Let us use another example. I walk into the kitchen and I see that the table is set for dinner. On the table are plates and I can see immediately that they are round – even though the retina sees them as elliptical. The table in front of me is a right-angled oblong, even though I see it as a trapezoid. You may well say that this is simply due to the distortion caused by perspective. But if nobody had told me that, I would always have had the impression that I am really *seeing* it as right-angled. I cannot possibly be removing perspective distortion as in projective geometry – anyone who has tried that can tell you how much work is involved. So we are not carrying out any such correction, at least not consciously, but we see the plate as round and a piece of paper as oblong.