

Further Explorations – Search for Meaning

The sixth session of the course is to be a time to reflect on what was covered, and what might have been covered. If class participants didn't volunteer enough material, I needed a backup that would provide a reasonable final session. My plan was to offer a gentle guide to current political philosophy. The book, *Communitarianism and Individualism*, edited by S. Avineri and A. De-Shalit (Oxford University Press, reprint 2002), was going to be my primary source.

The more I thought about it, the less comfortable I became. The important question is: What next? This course touched on a wide range of topics. Any single topic could have been the focus of a senior level university course. The question for me, and I hope for some of you, is what should I investigate next. In what follows, I attempt to lay out the background subjects that were touched upon. My hope is that this will suggest what you might explore if you want to go further.

I'm not all that comfortable with possible additional readings. To get behind the surface in most of the areas we touched, you need to read academic authors. Unfortunately, many academics write for other academics – it's how they win recognition in their field. For the rest of us, i.e. those not steeped in an academic specialization, the resulting texts can be formidable. They assume background knowledge and understanding, offering subtle refinements of questions and concerns of current interest in their specialized academic field. The lay reader can often feel very much at sea. Be forewarned and plan to spend extra time figuring out with the academics really mean.

One way to move towards answer the question of what comes next is to start with a few Basic Questions:

- What is it that we can know?
- What's the nature of what we know?
- How does the “I” get formed and develop?
- What are the important forces driving us?
- How to best describe our social reality?
- What's the right role for the community?
- What would give personal meaning?

What is it that we can know?

I'm persuaded that the phenomenologists are onto something important. All knowledge starts with our lived experience in what has been called the life-world. That's the base from which we must all work. The importance lies in how we go about understanding. A very healthy place to start is with our experience. We build up or leap to theories based on that experience. The resulting knowledge is grounded in real, immediate, human experience.

Martin Heidegger is perhaps the best known of the 20th century phenomenologists. One interesting place to start might be Adam Sharr's *Heidegger for Architects*, Routledge, 2007. Heidegger and many phenomenologists have strong feelings about architecture, especially the abstractly designed “towers in a park” model that was so popular after World War II. The lived experience was never an important part of such designs, and we have seen the negative social consequences, especially for publicly assisted housing.

A more conventional introduction might be *Heidegger: A Guide For The Perplexed*, by David Cerbone, Continuum, 2008. In many ways, that's a fitting title for an introduction to Heidegger's thought. Heidegger was famous for saying that philosophy should not be easy reading, ... it's important to require a hard struggle to understand. He did not write for the masses (except for his brief flirtation with the Nazi cause in the early 1930s).

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu>) has a substantial entry on Heidegger – it runs to some 103 printed pages. Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) has a more modest 33 page entry on Heidegger. Both of these sources are good places to start if you're interested in a philosopher. I point to them as reasonable places to start, not as a final destination.

What's the nature of what we know?

The evidence continues to mount that we don't really think in cold, clear logic. We think by clumping related things together (or at least things we suspect are related). We then build stories or narratives using these conceptual clumps. The winning argument is the one which tells the best story. Cold, abstract analysis is a good way to confirm an idea, proposal, or plan that resonates internally. But a proposition whose only justification is based on an “objective” set of quantitative metrics is very unlikely to win in any public forum.

There are a significant number of thinkers who support, in one way or another, this qualitative (and context sensitive) view of thinking. I find the work of George Lakoff particularly appealing, e.g. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, University of Chicago, 1987 or *Philosophy in the Flesh*, with Mark Johnson, Basic Books, 1999. Those so inclined can find multiple lectures by George Lakoff on YouTube (<http://youtube.com>). He's entertaining and enlightening both as an author and as a lecturer. I see this body of work as a big, healthy step beyond the Gestalt Psychology that arose at the beginning of the 20th century.

A different way into a similar body of thought is provided by the work of Tim Ingold, who's Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen. *Lines*, Routledge, 2007, is a fascinating, and frustrating, book. He sees almost everything of importance as interpretable as lines, individually and collectively. A life or a culture or a journey can be seen as a line extending through time, space, and the life-world. His *The Perception of the Environment*, Routledge, 2000, is a more

conventional treatment of much the same material. I have the feeling that I ought to be getting far more from his work than has yet happened. He's a tantalizing author, ... who can also be found on YouTube.

How does the "I" get formed and develop?

My starting point was with Cooley's looking glass self. This way of approaching psychology and understanding of self arose from what I view as the Chicago school of social science. The University of Chicago aimed to attract the brightest and best academics at its founding at the end of the 19th century. John Dewey is perhaps the most prominent academic in philosophy and education attracted to the "new" University of Chicago in 1892 (there was a predecessor land-grant University of Chicago).

George Herbert Mead provides a most useful bridge between the early work at the University of Chicago (and the University of Michigan) and modern scholarship on the self and its formation and development. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu>) has a good 26 page introduction to his work. Mead is an interesting character in the history of American social science. He published no books during his lifetime, but several posthumous publications of his writings are still being actively studied. One useful place to start is with David Miller's *George Herbert Mead: Self, Language, and the World*, University of Texas Press, 1973.

Quoting from Miller's preface:

Regarding *The Philosophy of the Present and Mind, Self, and Society* [the two most important posthumous Mead texts], Alfred North Whitehead said, in 1934, "I regard the publication of the volumes containing the late Professor George Herbert Mead's researches as of the highest importance for philosophy. I entirely agree with John Dewey's estimate, a seminal mind of the very first order."

Herbert Blumer studied with Mead at the University of Chicago and remained on the faculty for several years after winning his Ph.D. His *George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct*, AltaMira Press, 2004, provides a useful view of Mead's work and a view of some of the work in psychology and sociology which flowed from Mead's writings and lectures.

What are the important forces driving us?

The class notes drew a distinction between the needs hierarchy of Maslow and the existential model of motivation (as presented by Yalom). A more or less convention view of motivation is presented by Donald Laming in *Understanding Human Motivation – What Makes People Tick?*, Blackwell, 2005. The interesting questions, for me, all focus on deep motivational factors. Yes, I will be motivated to get in out of the rain, but that kind of motivation isn't all that important to me.

What is important are the motivational forces shaping my broader vision of myself. Irwin Yalom is the most published, and most read, psychotherapist writing on the subject. "Key Thinkers in Practical Philosophy: Dr Irvin D. Yalom" by S. J. Minton (Practical Philosophy, March 2001) provides a short, readable introduction to Yalom's work. Yalom himself has written extensively. His *Existential Psychotherapy*, Basic Books, 1980, is still used as a working text on the subject.

I found the title of his *Momma and the Meaning of Life: Tales of Psychotherapy*, Pitakus, 2000 intriguing. This work of fiction reads well, but didn't move me much closer to understanding the meaning of life. His psychotherapy text did help. It provides a solid existential explanation for some of the significant motivational forces shaping our important behaviour. Much of our everyday behaviour has little to do with Death, Freedom, Isolation or Meaning, but the tensions around these four themes can have an important impact.

How to best describe our social reality?

My sense is that we're at a major inflection point. Over half the human population now lives in cities. The traditional benefits of industrial production are less and less in evidence. Great blue collar manufacturing jobs have been significantly reduced. The path upwards is blocked for many of those entering the work force. There are parallel concerns about energy supply, climate change, and our level of public debt. Out there the world has become an increasingly chaotic place.

Ronald Wright's 2004 Massey Lectures – *A Short History of Progress*, House of Anansi, 2004 – is a readable description of the trauma that we are likely facing as a society. That chaotic external reality is enhanced by an almost parallel chaotic internal reality. We came from a stable social reality with a place for everyone and with everyone in their proper place. I, for one, would have been profoundly unhappy in that world (assuming that the "I" of 2013 could have existed back then).

Charles Taylor in *his* Massey Lectures – *The Malaise of Modernity*, House of Anansi, 1991 – provides a readable explanation of what modernity has wrought. For a considerably expanded treatment of the same subject, see his recent (2007), substantial (887 pages), *A Secular Age* which provides a "complete" picture of our age, from the perspective of a distinguished Catholic philosopher, who ran four times as an NDP candidate in a Montreal riding (always unsuccessfully).

I would add one other interesting writer to my short list of those to consult next. Stephen Toulmin's *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, University of Chicago, 1990 was described by Robert Bella as "Simply the best discussion on modernity and post-modernity available today. ... He has given us a wonderfully hopeful book" (dust jacket quote). He's optimistic, but does insist on a view of

reality that no longer pretends that we know “objective” reality.

What's the right role for the community?

There is a large communitarian literature. Granted, many labeled as communitarian would reject the label, but still see the central importance of community for us and how our world(s) ought to be organized. I already pointed to *Communitarianism and Individualism*, edited by S. Avineri and A. De-Shalit (Oxford University Press, reprint 2002). That's a relatively recent treatment of the subject. There are some excellent older treatments.

Habits of the Heart – Individualism and Commitment in American Life, Robert Bellah et al, University of California Press, 1985, is oft cited in this context, and for good reason – it provides a justified political agenda for communitarians. They discuss “Finding Oneself”, “Reaching Out”, “Citizenship”, “Religion”, and “Transforming American Culture”. Amitai Etzioni is one of the more visible North American communitarians. His *The Spirit of Community – Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda*, Crown, 1993, is an explicitly political book (by a distinguished sociologist). He has been one of the more vocal communitarian advocates. Interestingly, he studied with Martin Burber (see Ronald Arnett's *Communication and Community: Implications of Martin Burber's Dialogue*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1986). Burber was a major figure at the founding of the state of Israel (and Etzioni was a minor figure in the same struggle).

One last book needs to be mentioned. *Bowling Alone – The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, by Robert Putnam, Simon & Schuster, 2000, was recognized as important when published. It's still seen as an important analysis of American social life. Most of what he presents applies across the developed world, and certainly in Canada.

What would give personal meaning?

In many ways, this is a question that must be answered by each individual for herself or himself. Here's an unordered list of possible places to look:

Landscapes of the Soul - The Loss of Moral Meaning in American Life
Douglas V. Porpora, Oxford 2001

Dawkin's God – Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life
Alister McGrath, Blackwell, 2004

Beyond the Dream – Lifelong learning and the search for meaning in the postmodern world, Charles Hayes, Quality Books, 1998

Philosophical Ridings – Motorcycles and the Meaning of Life
Craig Bourne, Oneworld Publications, 2007

All Things Shining – Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age,
Hubert Dreyfus & Sean Dorrance Kelly, Free Press, 2011

What It's All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life
Julian Baggini, Oxford 2005

The Death of God and the Meaning of Life
Julian Young, Routledge, 2003

There's no limit to the number of books that claim they can help you find the meaning of life. My sense is that we seek to understand the world (our world) and use that understanding in our personal search for meaning. And it's very unlikely that we will ever find *the* meaning of life. We may, if we're lucky, find steps we can take which we can use to add meaning to our lives.

For me, it comes down to a twin test. Can I *justify* the act as contributing to the meaning of my life, given who, what, and when I am? Next, do I *feel* that the act is meaningful – is it the kind of undertaking that I feel good about emotionally? For me, contributions to communities I value meets both of these tests. Given our natures as social and cultural beasts, contributing to community is *justified*. And it *feels* like a positive, meaningful step – on an emotional level.

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