

Who Needs Philosophy? Everyone!

“Words are a lens to focus one’s mind.” This is an often quoted aphorism from Ayn Rand, among numerous other words of wisdom and philosophy of hers (such as some collected here <https://quotefancy.com/ayn-rand-quotes>) The idea of words being a lens and the idea of focusing one’s mind are central to Ayn Rand’s work as a novelist and a philosopher. Further, she demonstrates that focusing one’s mind, concentrating one’s power of reason, is the beginning and source of wisdom, serenity, and happiness. So it’s with focus that one looks through the lens of the word, “philosophy”. What is philosophy and who needs it?

Philosophy, what’s that? Isn’t it just academic logic/word games, unrelated to everyday life? Who needs philosophy? What good is it? It doesn’t bring food onto the table. It has no practical value. Who needs a philosophy to get in the way of fun, of doing whatever I want? Philosophy? I already have my religion, which requires little thought, just faith. There’s no need or time for philosophy. These are among the views most people have regarding philosophy.

But, the belief that philosophy is useless and unnecessary is itself a philosophy. Those who believe this are among those most helplessly in philosophy’s power – in the philosophy implicit in their religion and/or in the prevailing culture around them. Since they don’t have a philosophy of their own, they default to the philosophies in power.

As a human being, each one is born naked and ignorant, without innate knowledge of how to live. As one grows from infancy onward, the needed, vast knowledge of the world and of oneself is gathered into diverse and evermore complex ideas. The accumulation of all these concepts is sorted and integrated into a systemized whole of fundamental abstractions and essential principles – which is philosophy, “the love of wisdom”.

Philosophy provides this knowledge: 1. the essential nature and reality of existence and its identity (metaphysics), 2. the conscious method of finding truth (epistemology), 3. the moral way to obtaining goodness (ethics), 4. the ideals of creating beauty (esthetics), and 5. the requisites and conditions for a free and prosperous society (politics). Philosophy is the foundation and source from which comes one’s core certainty, inner confidence, and moral courage.

If one’s philosophy is an explicit, integrated, comprehensive philosophy true to reality – it can help one to live better and happier, with meaning and purpose. Without this philosophy, one will disintegrate, fall apart, fragment into pieces. With it, one will keep it all together, be whole, possess the widest context and deepest understanding of the world within and around oneself. One will know what all things are, and what all causes are. One will be a full human being.

One needs philosophy to live and a good philosophy to live well. One's choice is not whether or not one needs philosophy. The choice is whether or not one's philosophy is within one's knowledge and control, whether it's explicit or implicit, and whether it's consistent and corresponds to reality. If one doesn't know what one's philosophy is, then one is easily bewildered and confused, very susceptible to influences and manipulation by the philosophies that are around and/or the philosophy one grew up with, for better or worse.

Which philosophy and how does one acquire it? A philosophy that is consonant with reality, acquired by the use of one's own mind, and based on sensory evidence integrated by logic, not on feelings, faith, intuition, revelation, or tradition. The right method will lead to the right philosophy.

How much philosophy does one need, how much time and money to spend on it? As much as one can afford, the more the better. It's like deciding how much to spend on health, or how much on wisdom, or how much on happiness. Only each one can decide for oneself in accordance and in affordance with one's own, discriminated hierarchy of values. Not as much as a professional full-time philosopher employed in studying and presenting ideas of philosophy. But at least enough to know the basics, to at least know the essentials of who one is, to be in purposeful control of one's life, to not be a voluntary fool, to be smart and be able to refute and resist tyranny.

(In a world dominated by various forms of the philosophies of mysticism, altruism, and collectivism, mass deception and consensual tyranny is justified and made legal by that philosophy and is perpetrated out in the open. As presented in previous posts, the root cause of the Covid pandemic deception, and the consequent medical tyranny, is philosophical. Among the people most responsible for the pandemic tyranny, along with the medical, political, and religious authorities, are the professors of philosophy at universities.)

Where to start (or restart) one's understanding of philosophy? The best place is from the best philosopher (novelist-philosopher) of our times, Ayn Rand – best because she's clear and concise, bold and direct, consistent and wholly integrated. She offers a way out of the deeply-troubled condition of most people, whose philosophy is, in her words, “a kind of mongrel philosophy and fused into a single, solid weight: *self-doubt*, like a ball and chain in the place where [their] mind's wings should have grown”. So it's for the wings of one's mind that one thinks with focus about Ayn Rand's essay, “Philosophy: Who Needs It”.

On March 6, 1974, Ayn Rand addressed, by invitation, the US Military Academy at West Point, with the speech, “Philosophy: Who Needs It?” She received a standing ovation from the over-packed audience who attended, including civilians from the nearby town and elsewhere.

The following are the essentials excerpted from the full speech – the complete essay and an audio-recording of her speech is at <https://courses.aynrand.org/works/philosophy-who-needs-it/>

-*Monart Pon*

Philosophy: Who Needs It

By Ayn Rand

(Excerpted from Address to the United States Military Academy at West Point March 6, 1974)

...

Most men spend their days struggling to evade three questions, the answers to which underlie man's every thought, feeling and action, whether he is consciously aware of it or not: Where am I? How do I know it? What should I do?

By the time they are old enough to understand these questions, men believe that they know the answers. Where am I? Say, in New York City. How do I know it? It's self-evident. What should I do? Here, they are not too sure — but the usual answer is: whatever everybody does. The only trouble seems to be that they are not very active, not very confident, not very happy — and they experience, at times, a causeless fear and an undefined guilt, which they cannot explain or get rid of.

They have never discovered the fact that the trouble comes from the three unanswered questions — and that there is only one science that can answer them: *philosophy*.

Philosophy studies the *fundamental* nature of existence, of man, and of man's relationship to existence. As against the special sciences, which deal only with particular aspects, philosophy deals with those aspects of the universe which pertain to everything that exists. In the realm of cognition, the special sciences are the trees, but philosophy is the soil which makes the forest possible.

Philosophy would not tell you, for instance, whether you are in New York City or in Zanzibar (though it would give you the means to find out). But here is what it *would* tell you: Are you in a universe which is ruled by natural laws and, therefore, is stable, firm, absolute — and knowable? Or are you in an incomprehensible chaos, a realm of inexplicable miracles, an unpredictable, unknowable flux, which your mind is impotent to grasp? Are the things you see around you real — or are they only an illusion? Do they exist independent of any observer — or are they created by the observer? Are they the object or the subject of man's consciousness? Are they *what they are* — or can they be changed by a mere act of your consciousness, such as a wish?

The nature of your actions — and of your ambition — will be different, according to which set of answers you come to accept. These answers are the province of *metaphysics* — the study of existence as such or, in Aristotle's words, of "being qua being" — the basic branch of philosophy.

No matter what conclusions you reach, you will be confronted by the necessity to answer another, *corollary* question: How do I know it? Since man is not omniscient or infallible, you have to discover what you can claim as knowledge and how to *prove* the validity of your conclusions. Does man acquire knowledge by a process of reason — or by sudden revelation from a supernatural power? Is reason a faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses — or is it fed by innate ideas, implanted in man's mind before he was born? Is reason competent to perceive reality — or does

man possess some other cognitive faculty which is superior to reason? Can man achieve certainty — or is he doomed to perpetual doubt?

The extent of your self-confidence — and of your success — will be different, according to which set of answers you accept. These answers are the province of *epistemology*, the theory of knowledge, which studies man's means of cognition.

These two branches are the theoretical foundation of philosophy. The third branch — *ethics* — may be regarded as its technology. Ethics does not apply to everything that exists, only to man, but it applies to every aspect of man's life: his character, his actions, his values, his relationship to all of existence. Ethics, or morality, defines a code of values to guide man's choices and actions — the choices and actions that determine the course of his life.

. . . You cannot know what you should do until you know the nature of the universe you deal with, the nature of your means of cognition — and your own nature. Before you come to ethics, you must answer the questions posed by metaphysics and epistemology: Is man a rational being, able to deal with reality — or is he a helplessly blind misfit, a chip buffeted by the universal flux? Are achievement and enjoyment possible to man on earth — or is he doomed to failure and disaster? Depending on the answers, you can proceed to consider the questions posed by ethics: What is good or evil for man — and why? Should man's primary concern be a quest for joy — or an escape from suffering? Should man hold self-fulfillment — or self-destruction — as the goal of his life? Should man pursue his values — or should he place the interests of others above his own? Should man seek happiness — or self-sacrifice?

I do not have to point out the different consequences of these two sets of answers. You can see them everywhere — within you and around you.

The answers given by ethics determine how man should treat other men, and this determines the fourth branch of philosophy: *politics*, which defines the principles of a proper social system. As an example of philosophy's function, political philosophy will not tell you how much rationed gas you should be given and on which day of the week — it will tell you whether the government has the right to impose any rationing on anything.

The fifth and last branch of philosophy is *aesthetics*, the study of art, which is based on metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Art deals with the needs — the refueling — of man's consciousness.

Now some of you might say, as many people do: "Aw, I never think in such abstract terms — I want to deal with concrete, particular, real-life problems — what do I need philosophy for?" My answer is: In order to be able to deal with concrete, particular, real-life problems — i.e., in order to be able to live on earth.

You might claim — as most people do — that you have never been influenced by philosophy. I will ask you to check that claim. Have you ever thought or said the following? "Don't be so sure — nobody can be certain of anything." You got that notion from David Hume (and many, many others), even though you might never have heard of him. Or: "This may be good in theory, but it doesn't work in practice."

You got that from Plato. Or: "That was a rotten thing to do, but it's only human, nobody is perfect in this world." You got that from Augustine. Or: "It may be true for you, but it's not true for me." You got it from William James. Or: "I couldn't help it! Nobody can help anything he does." You got it from Hegel. Or: "I can't prove it, but I *feel* that it's true." You got it from Kant. Or: "It's logical, but logic has nothing to do with reality." You got it from Kant. Or: "It's evil, because it's selfish." You got it from Kant. Have you heard the modern activists say: "Act first, think afterward"? They got it from John Dewey.

Some people might answer: "Sure, I've said those things at different times, but I don't have to believe that stuff *all* of the time. It may have been true yesterday, but it's not true today." They got it from Hegel. They might say: "Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." They got it from a very little mind, Emerson. They might say: "But can't one compromise and borrow different ideas from different philosophies according to the expediency of the moment?" They got it . . . from William James.

Now ask yourself: if you are not interested in abstract ideas, why do you (and all men) feel compelled to use them? The fact is that abstract ideas are conceptual integrations which subsume an incalculable number of concretes — and that without abstract ideas you would not be able to deal with concrete, particular, real-life problems. You would be in the position of a newborn infant, to whom every object is a unique, unprecedented phenomenon. The difference between his mental state and yours lies in the number of conceptual integrations your mind has performed.

You have no choice about the necessity to integrate your observations, your experiences, your knowledge into abstract ideas, i.e., into principles. Your only choice is whether these principles are true or false, whether they represent your conscious, rational conviction — or a grab-bag of notions snatched at random, whose sources, validity, context and consequences you do not know, notions which, more often than not, you would drop like a hot potato if you knew.

But the principles you accept (consciously or subconsciously) may clash with or contradict one another; they, too, have to be integrated. What integrates them? Philosophy. A philosophic system is an integrated view of existence. As a human being, you have no choice about the fact that you need a philosophy. Your only choice is whether you define your philosophy by a conscious, rational, disciplined process of thought and scrupulously logical deliberation — or let your subconscious accumulate a junk heap of unwarranted conclusions, false generalizations, undefined contradictions, undigested slogans, unidentified wishes, doubts and fears, thrown together by chance, but integrated by your subconscious into a kind of mongrel philosophy and fused into a single, solid weight: *self-doubt*, like a ball and chain in the place where your mind's wings should have grown.

You might say, as many people do, that it is not easy always to act on abstract principles. No, it is not easy. But how much harder is it, to have to act on them without knowing what they are?

Your subconscious is like a computer — more complex a computer than men can build — and its main function is the integration of your ideas. Who programs it? Your conscious mind. If you default, if you don't reach any firm convictions, your subconscious is programmed by chance — and you deliver yourself into the power of ideas you do not know you have accepted. But one way or the other, your computer gives you print-outs, daily and hourly, in the form of *emotions* — which are lightning-like

estimates of the things around you, calculated according to your values. If you programmed your computer by conscious thinking, you know the nature of your values and emotions. If you didn't, you don't.

Many people, particularly today, claim that man cannot live by logic alone, that there's the emotional element of his nature to consider, and that they rely on the guidance of their emotions. . . .Man's values and emotions are determined by his fundamental view of life. The ultimate programmer of his subconscious is *philosophy* — the science which, according to the emotionalists, is impotent to affect or penetrate the murky mysteries of their feelings.

The quality of a computer's output is determined by the quality of its input. If your subconscious is programmed by chance, its output will have a corresponding character. You have probably heard the computer operators' eloquent term "gigo" — which means: "Garbage in, garbage out." The same formula applies to the relationship between a man's thinking and his emotions.

A man who is run by emotions is like a man who is run by a computer whose print-outs he cannot read. He does not know whether its programming is true or false, right or wrong, whether it's set to lead him to success or destruction, whether it serves his goals or those of some evil, unknowable power. He is blind on two fronts: blind to the world around him and to his own inner world, unable to grasp reality or his own motives, and he is in chronic terror of both. Emotions are not tools of cognition. The men who are not interested in philosophy need it most urgently: they are most helplessly in its power.

The men who are not interested in philosophy absorb its principles from the cultural atmosphere around them — from schools, colleges, books, magazines, newspapers, movies, television, etc. Who sets the tone of a culture? A small handful of men: the philosophers. Others follow their lead, either by conviction or by default. For some two hundred years, under the influence of Immanuel Kant, the dominant trend of philosophy has been directed to a single goal: the destruction of man's mind, of his confidence in the power of reason. Today, we are seeing the climax of that trend.

When men abandon reason, they find not only that their emotions cannot guide them, but that they can experience no emotions save one: terror. The spread of drug addiction among young people brought up on today's intellectual fashions, demonstrates the unbearable inner state of men who are deprived of their means of cognition and who seek escape from reality — from the terror of their impotence to deal with existence. Observe these young people's dread of independence and their frantic desire to "belong," to attach themselves to some group, clique or gang. Most of them have never heard of philosophy, but they sense that they need some fundamental answers to questions they dare not ask — and they hope that the tribe will tell them *how to live*. They are ready to be taken over by any witch doctor, guru, or dictator. One of the most dangerous things a man can do is to surrender his *moral* autonomy to others. . . .

Now you may ask: If philosophy can be that evil, why should one study it? Particularly, why should one study the philosophical theories which are blatantly false, make no sense, and bear no relation to real life?

My answer is: In self-protection — and in defense of truth, justice, freedom, and any value you ever held or may ever hold.

Not all philosophies are evil, though too many of them are, particularly in modern history. On the other hand, at the root of every civilized achievement, such as science, technology, progress, freedom — at the root of every value we enjoy today, including the birth of this country — you will find the achievement of *one man*, who lived over two thousand years ago: Aristotle.

If you feel nothing but boredom when reading the virtually unintelligible theories of *some* philosophers, you have my deepest sympathy. But if you brush them aside, saying: "Why should I study that stuff when I *know* it's nonsense?" — you are mistaken. It *is* nonsense, but you *don't* know it — not so long as you go on accepting all their conclusions, all the vicious catch phrases generated by those philosophers. And not so long as you are unable to *refute* them.

That nonsense deals with the most crucial, the life-or-death issues of man's existence. At the root of every significant philosophic theory, there is a legitimate issue — in the sense that there is an authentic need of man's consciousness, which some theories struggle to clarify and others struggle to obfuscate, to corrupt, to prevent man from ever discovering. The battle of philosophers is a battle for man's mind. If you do not understand their theories, you are vulnerable to the worst among them.

The best way to study philosophy is to approach it as one approaches a detective story: follow every trail, clue and implication, in order to discover who is a murderer and who is a hero. The criterion of detection is two questions: Why? and How? If a given tenet seems to be true — why? If another tenet seems to be false — why? and how is it being put over? You will not find all the answers immediately, but you will acquire an invaluable characteristic: the ability to think in terms of essentials.

Nothing is given to man automatically, neither knowledge, nor self-confidence, nor inner serenity, nor the right way to use his mind. Every value he needs or wants has to be discovered, learned and acquired — even the proper posture of his body. In this context, I want to say that I have always admired the posture of West Point graduates, a posture that projects man in proud, disciplined control of his body. Well, philosophical training gives man the proper *intellectual* posture — a proud, disciplined control of his mind.

...

Complete essay in title essay of book, *Philosophy Who Needs It*, by Ayn Rand. Also: Audio recording of the speech and complete essay <https://courses.aynrand.org/works/philosophy-who-needs-it/>
