



## The Philosophical APPROACH

*A little bit of philosophy goes a long way in coping with the frustrations of modern living. It goes even farther in thinking clearly about public affairs. People today could do worse than to refer to the precepts of homespun wisdom. Those who don't know them by heart, as most folks once did, can always look them up.*

**N**ewspapers lately have been carrying stories about "road rage," which occurs when one car driver offends (to put it mildly) another. The aggrieved party is liable to bump the offending vehicle from behind, try to run it off the road, or even shoot at its driver with potentially fatal results. The growth in the number of incidents of people going berserk while moving at high speed has become a public menace. "At least 1,500 men, women and children are seriously

injured or killed each year in the United States as a result of senseless disputes and altercations," an American study on the subject said.

Though road rage is relatively new, experts on it have urged the driving public to cultivate an attitude towards it that reaches back to antiquity. They say, in effect, that motorists should turn the other cheek. Ignore horn blasts. Always let tailgaters pass at the earliest opportunity and give them lots of room thereafter. If someone is harassing you with a car, get out of his or her way by turning off on a side road. In short, suppress your anger and pride.

That message is, when you think of it, an example of pure philosophy. It tells human beings to subdue their primitive instincts, and it is only by everybody doing so that they can hope to live in a civilized way. It suggests that it sometimes takes more fortitude to back off than to engage in confrontations. And it teaches that "it is better to suffer wrong than to do it," as the great English thinker Dr. Samuel Johnson said.

Most people today might think of philosophy as an airy-fairy thing, but in its traditional role as a guide to behaviour, it is packed with practicality. The advice on averting road rage is as practical as can be. A British study notes that bursting out in abusive language or gesticulating rudely distracts attention from driving at a time when all of one's faculties should be concentrated on manoeuvring out of danger. The aggressive drivers who provoke such situations may be so aggressive by nature that they will act with furious violence when they feel insulted. One expert summed it up in a classically philosophical manner: "Remember that it's better to get there late than not at all."

Road rage is a sign that we in the urban western world are becoming almost self-destructively impatient. Most flare-ups on streets and highways involve people wanting to move faster than the general run of traffic, and breaking the rules or flouting common courtesy to gain way. Psychologists relate this to the fact that affluent urbanites are accustomed to near-instant gratification. Most of us enjoy quick meals from microwave ovens, quick entertainment from multi-channel television, quick cash from automatic banking machines, etc. Thus we become extravagantly annoyed when we cannot get things done quickly and easily.

The very speed and convenience of modern technology compounds its ability to frustrate. It can be maddening to know that you are sitting at the wheel of a powerful and speedy car and yet not able to move because it is hemmed in by a steel phalanx of other vehicles in a traffic jam. Or to have an amazingly capable computer which suddenly seizes up in the middle of a big and urgent job, leaving you staring helplessly at a blank screen.

When faced with such tribulations, we all might ease the psychological wear and tear on ourselves by following the lead of those road rage experts and consciously adopting a philosophical approach to our problems. The philosophical approach to life is based



on the standard stock of logic that has been built up over the lifetime of literate humankind. It enables us to see things in proportion, like the aforementioned Dr. Johnson. One day Johnson's friend and biographer, James Boswell, became hot and bothered because of a mix-up over a room in which to throw a party. Johnson put the situation into philosophical perspective: "Consider, Sir, how insignificant this will appear a twelve-month hence."

#### *A political lesson for our times*

A philosophical statement in English is usually prefaced by the words, "Oh well," as in, "Oh well, this can't last forever." A typically philosophical approach for an able person to take towards being delayed or thwarted might be to think about how much more frustrating life would be if he or she were handicapped. Here again, the philosophical approach follows the path of practicality. For if you think of all the ills you do not have, you will be better able to bear the ills you do have.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) experienced a full portion of physical ailments, disappointments and rejections in his life, but he turned them to his mental advantage with the thought that "a man used to vicissitudes is not easily dejected." His ideas on impatience were rooted in straight utilitarian logic. Impatience should be avoided, he said, because "it wastes that time and attention on complaints which, if properly applied, might remove their cause."

On the other side of the coin, the great man wrote that patience was "sovereign o'er transmuted ill," which may be taken to mean that the patient working-out of problems tends to eliminate or at least ameliorate them. A lack of patience leads to hasty actions which are likely to be in error because they have not been thoroughly thought out.

Johnson's musings on this score hold a lesson for our times in politics. In our instant-reaction age, voters seem to favour candidates who promise quick, sweeping and final cures to public ills. The winners of elections are perforce inclined to take actions which are as ill-considered as they are swift and decisive. Not

only do these often fail to correct the situation, but they leave the tax-paying public worse off than before.

#### *'Slow and steady wins the race'*

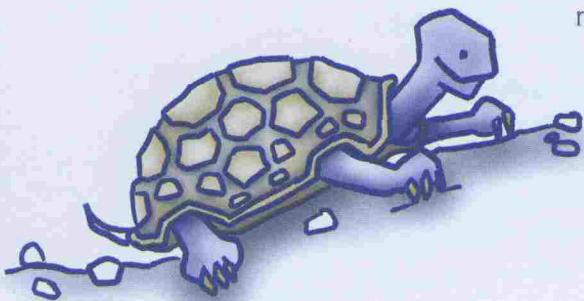
A philosophical approach to contemporary politics might adopt the saying that "Rome wasn't built in a day," meaning that ample time must be taken to get things done properly. Anyone with a philosophical turn of mind must have observed, indeed, that it usually takes roughly twice as long to get the proper results than one thought when starting out on a task. And no matter how much time is taken, political questions are seldom resolved conclusively. There are always loose ends left hanging, and interests left dissatisfied. "You can't please everybody" is another old saying that could be usefully applied to politics today.

Still, in this fast-lane modern world of ours, public frustration with the intractability and messiness of some issues gives rise to a kind of political road rage. Like impatient drivers in slow-moving traffic, some citizens want to arrive at a resolution of issues by any means, regardless of the collateral damage their proposed actions might cause. One might wonder if anybody out there in public affairs remembers Aesop's fable of *The Hare and The Tortoise*, the moral of which is "Slow and steady wins the race," according to its author. To arrive at the most satisfactory resolution of some complex political issues, that race may prove to be a marathon.

One failing of contemporary politics is that it tends to be mired in the past, cherishing old grievances and disinterring memories of past wrongs and errors. Opposition parties are in the habit of attacking the record of the party in power, instead of concentrating on what it is doing at a given time. This defies the old philosophical precept that it is fruitless to worry about things that can no longer be changed: "It's no use crying over spilt milk," as the folk saying has it. That saying does not mean that anyone is free to repeat or perpetuate the evils of the past; "let us learn from our mistakes" is another common piece of folk wisdom. It does mean, however, that anyone who wants to make progress must look forward, not backward. A philosopher once prayed for the vision to recognize those things that cannot be changed and the strength to change those things that can.

If public impatience is a characteristic of our times, so is private impatience, especially in the pursuit of happiness. "I want it all and I want it now" is a cry that has been heard too often in the past few years. In most cases, "it" means money and power, with a measure of fame to round out the rosy picture. But these are only the means to the end which people of all kinds are essentially seeking, namely happiness. A philosophical

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approach to life can make all the difference between succeeding and failing in the quest.

### **Transforming objects into feelings**

The starting point for a philosophical approach to happiness is that it does not come out of a magic lantern. Indeed, fables and fairy tales from different cultures dwell on this theme: the hero magically has all his wishes fulfilled, and finds that it makes him unhappier than ever before. "Life contains but two tragedies," Aristotle wrote. "One is not to get your heart's desire; the other is to get it." That giant of homespun philosophy, Benjamin Franklin, put a similar thought in characteristically practical terms. "If a man could have half his wishes he would double his trouble," he wrote.

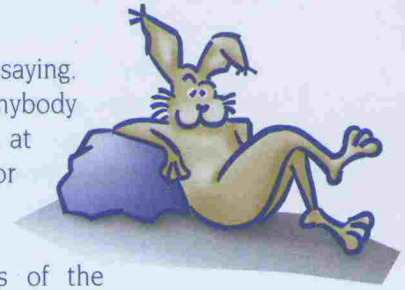
With particular reference to the society in which we live, attention should be drawn to the saying that "money isn't everything." Some people will work themselves into a state of nervous disorder, do things that torture their consciences, and destroy loving relationships in defiance of this old but reliable saw. There is no question that money is good to have – but there are cases in which, to paraphrase another saying, the game of acquiring it is not worth the candle. Yet another saying holds that money can't buy happiness. In this society, we are given the impression that it can.

This impression is enhanced by a commercial system which strives to transform objects into feelings. The implicit promise of an advertisement for an expensive car is: "If you buy this, it will make you happy" – and so it may, until the euphoria depreciates in line with the car's worth. Celebrity TV shows and magazines feature people leading idyllically happy lives, and we are given to believe that they have reached this wonderful state by enjoying the possessions they can so well afford.

Maybe these glamorous figures really are as happy as they appear to be – anything is possible. The philosophy of the ages would argue otherwise, saying that fruits of wealth jade a person's taste, and that the high life soon palls. The wretched personal histories of some rock stars would seem to confirm this argument. "Cocaine is nature's way of telling you you have too much money" might qualify as a valuable proverb for our times.

In any case, the rich and famous are extremely scarce, even in our mainly affluent society. For the rest of us, basic philosophy says that happiness, or the lack of it, exists not in the things around us, but in ourselves. "He is happy that knoweth not himself to be

otherwise," to quote another old saying. That lucky person could be anybody who resists the urge to look at another person with envy. As for lavish possessions, the philosophical approach to them may be found in the words of the American author Frances Rodman: "Just think of how happy you would be if you lost everything you have right now, then got it back again."



### **Absorbing wisdom unconsciously**

To return to the magnificent Dr. Johnson, he was a highly sophisticated man, but he had great respect for homely wisdom. Besides being a splendid wit, Johnson was a scholar, a champion writer and the compiler of the first true English dictionary. In a less systematic way, he also compiled items of folk wisdom and the dictums of the ancient philosophers. His detractors accused him of passing these off as his own original sayings, but in fact he often attributed his pronouncements – or parts of them – to proverbs and the like.

What is a proverb? Not so many years ago, it would have been unnecessary to ask that rhetorical question, because most people knew the answer. Now, one cannot be too sure. Anyway, proverbs are pithy sayings passed down through the generations which are either observations on life or guides to behaviour. Originally composed by wise but simple folk, the earliest of them predate written philosophy. Indeed, to a large extent, they are the stuff of which early written philosophy was made.

In any case, "the study of proverbs may be more instructive and comprehensive than the most elaborate scheme of philosophy," as the Scottish poet William Motherwell commented. Certainly many of them contain more truth and wisdom than some formal philosophers' mental pirouettes. They are drawn, after all, from real life experience, not made in ivory towers. "Collect them and learn them," advised William Penn, clergyman-founder of Pennsylvania. "They are notable measures of direction of human life; you have much in little; they save time in speaking; and upon occasion may be the fullest and safest answers."

Dr. Johnson had his own words to say about proverbs and their anonymous authors: "We frequently fall into error and folly, not because the true principles of action are not known, but because for a time they are not remembered; he may, therefore, justly be num-

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bered among the benefactors of mankind who contracts the great rules of life into short sentences that may early be impressed on the memory, and taught by frequent recollection to occur habitually to the mind."

It could be that we fall into error and folly in the present time precisely because we do not remember those "true principles" and "great rules" of life, and no longer possess the means to keep them in a prominent place in our thinking. There was a time when they were a normal part of conversation in the home, and children absorbed them unconsciously. At school they were made to copy proverbs into their notebooks and commit them to memory.

Nowadays a saying like "two wrongs do not make a right" or "the more haste, the worse speed" are unlikely to be known to every schoolchild – or every adult, for that matter. Or if they are known, they are likely to be dismissed as being too old and hoary to be applicable to a society which seems to give its highest regard to everything (and anything, regardless of its social value) exciting and new.

### *An absence of philosopher kings*

On the evidence, people today do not have a good grasp of the great rules of life, or else they would not violate them so freely. For instance, the wisdom of the ages deplores aggression, and yet we make heroes of aggressive individuals in business and politics. Wisdom also urges modesty, and yet we the people evince approval of egregious blowhards in the media by helping to make them famous and fabulously rich.

One of the reasons that philosophy is not much in the popular mind these days is that people have stopped going to church on a regular basis, and taking their children with them. The pulpit once served as a prime medium for spreading a philosophical view of life. Also, proverbs and inspirational messages are considered trite and corny in our super-smart society. The entertainment media once promoted the philosophical approach with sentimental movies and popular songs – "Counting My Blessings," "The Best Things in Life Are Free," and so forth. Now pop and rap "artists" deliver messages of rebellion and self-indulgence instead.

Meanwhile, formal philosophy, too, has been in decline. At the turn of this century, every educated person had at least a passing

knowledge of the high principles expounded by the likes of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Later, philosophy as such was dropped from the curriculum. It has now been relegated to the role of an arcane academic specialty.

Still, philosophy, whether simple or complex, lived on in poems, novels and other literary works until well into our own century. The rule in literature today, however, is to avoid tried and true philosophical principles lest the author be accused of the grievous offence of moralizing. The name of the writing game today is intellectual freedom, so the reader is required to make up his or her own mind without coaching as to what is right and wrong.

Where does all this leave us? In his 1989 book *Why Leaders Can't Lead*, the American management scholar Warren Bennis deplored the lack of moral vision and public spirit among the dominant classes in the United States, once the most idealistic of countries. He searched in vain for philosopher kings. Instead, he wrote, he found that "cheatings, evasions, cover-ups, half-truths and moral erosions" had destroyed public confidence in the people who were once expected to set the ethical standards for the general citizenry.

The lack of inspired political leadership is a common topic of conversation these days, but it should be remembered that, in a democracy, leaders are a reflection of the people who elect them. If the voters have grown so cynical that they tolerate shady and slippery behaviour in those they have placed above them, then they get the leadership they deserve.

Bennis says in effect that we in the western world need a guiding philosophy that clearly distinguishes right from wrong in terms that can be understood by everybody. Given the rampant amorality that now prevails, re-establishing a moral consensus might not be an easy task. But it would certainly help if ordinary people were to learn, and give more thought to, the simple philosophical principles that have guided humankind through the centuries. People could start the process by looking up the proverbs and precepts to be found in books of quotations. As a side-benefit, they may find that the philosophical approach outlined therein may help them to lead happier lives.

