



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Philosophy for all

Duration: 0:15:16

START AUDIO

Female: Welcome to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast.

Interviewer: I'm talking to Dr Angie Hobbs, associate professor in philosophy at the University of Warwick and the UK's first senior fellow in the public understanding of philosophy.

Angie, thanks very much for joining us this afternoon; thanks for your time. Let's start in at the deep end: do the public want or need to understand philosophy?

Angie Hobbs: Well, I think the lives of everybody from sort of seven to old age can be hugely enriched by philosophy for ways which I'll explain in a moment. And I think it's my job to try to persuade people that their lives will be so benefited, and that they do need philosophy. And I hope that after I've done that, people will then come to want philosophy. I can't impose wants on people; all I can do is try and point out some of the fun of doing philosophy and some of its benefits and hope people will then want it for themselves.

So, in terms of what these benefits are, well, firstly, I would say it's just enormous fun. It's – I'm very big on pleasure, so philosophy is fun. And you can just – you don't have to take it to a very high level; you don't have to have a very high level of educational attainment yourself, but people of all ages, from seven onwards, right through to old age, I think, can dabble their toes in philosophy, if that's all they want to do, and they can still get a lot

out of it. If you do want to take it higher - as I'm sure we'll get on to - that can bring even more benefits. But, whatever you want, you can get a lot out of it.

To start with, I think it can just increase our range of options when we're dealing with current problems and future problems, because it gives you more tools in your toolbox for how to tackle difficulties. You've got a problem; you can look at what past thinkers have said about that problem, the kind of solutions they've come up with. And that increases your range of possibilities when you're thinking about your own problems. You're not trapped in the current mindset, which might be quite narrow. So, I think that's hugely important.

And then we've got the whole range of what are now called transferable skills: it - philosophy can help you to analyse a concept with clarity and with rigour, so you can work out whether you and the person you're debating with are even talking about the same thing. You may be using the same word, but do you mean the same thing by love, for instance? You may not. Then, in terms of an argument, it can help you both deconstruct and analyse other people's arguments and work out whether you think their premises really do lead to their conclusions. And it can also help you, through various techniques of inductive and deductive argument, construct your own argument. So, again, it can really help with that. It can help you work out what tensions and clashes are really essential; what are merely contingent, i.e. you can solve at a higher level.

And then thirdly, I think I really want to talk about the whole social nature of philosophy, because although it's true that in history some philosophers have been loners and hermits and have hidden in their caves like Heraclitus, on the whole, philosophy works best when it's done either in dialogue with one other person or in groups. Again, so what you're learning out of that; you're learning how to listen as well as to talk. You're learning how to understand different points of view, to empathise with somebody who might have a very different take on something from yours. So, you're not just increasing your understanding of truth, you're increasing your

understanding of other peoples' ideas and their emotions and their needs and their thoughts, and that, I think, can only be beneficial as well as very enjoyable.

And then – finally – I think it's positively a good thing that philosophy can get quite challenging. Because though I've said that it's – there's benefits in philosophy for people who even just want to dabble their toes in the subject, and though that's true, it's also true that beyond a certain level philosophy does get pretty difficult and pretty challenging. But that's not a bad thing; that's a good thing because that can stretch people a bit; it can stretch children a bit. It can give anybody, of any age – but perhaps particularly children – some confidence, some self-esteem, knowing that they can tackle something a bit more difficult than perhaps they thought they could. And I think it's very important to give people challenges. So, for all those reasons, I think philosophy can really be enjoyable and be very beneficial.

Interviewer: You're an expert in ancient Greek philosophy. I wonder if you could give us a couple of examples of what the ancients have to tell us about some of the things that really matter to us in our everyday lives?

Angie Hobbs: Okay. Well, something I've been working on recently have been ancient conceptions of physical and mental health and illness, and I think we've got a lot to learn from that. They have very rich – value-rich - conceptions of what it is to be a healthy, flourishing human being. In a lot of the modern debates, the accent is very much on illness and sickness and how to avoid them and how to fix them, but without really any deep understanding of what being ill or being sick means. How are they to be defined in terms of loss of function, in terms of loss of activity? Who's going to say what a really healthy, functioning body is or mind is? So, what we've lost, I think, in the current debate to some extent, is a willingness to engage with the concepts of what it really means to be healthy in mind or body. I think we're frightened, because we're frightened

that the answer might be too prescriptive or authoritarian, and it's true that, with people like Plato and Aristotle, you can go down an authoritarian route that we might find unacceptable today. But I don't think you have to. I don't think that it's inevitable that, if you're trying to work out a value-rich conception of mental or physical health, that that has to lead to a very rigid, prescriptive, paternalistic notion. So that would be one area.

Another area I'm really interested in, and which is of course pertinent to us all at the moment, is that of money. You know, why did humans invent it? We invented it to help us, to assist us gain more leisure and reduce our stress. What's happened now; we've got a system of capitalism, in the western world at least, where money is making a lot of us – even those of us who are still fortunate enough to have jobs and have some money – it's still making us very stressed and quite miserable, and we're spending a huge amount of our conscious hours trying to make it. So I think we need to kind of rethink our whole relationship with money and how it's made, how it's maintained, how it's invested, how it's spent and work money in and the whole business of making, spending and investing money as part of a bigger debate on the quality of a flourishing life. And kind of put money back in its place where it belongs really; it's there to serve us, not the other way round. So that, again, I think is where the ancients can teach us quite a lot, because they think – Plato thinks - quite hard about why humans invented money. The ancient economies, for instance the Roman economy, was only partly based on money, so they have other ways of running their economy to do with the transference of goods and reciprocity and so on.

So, those are just two areas: mental and physical health and the financial system, where I think we have lots to learn from the ancient debates.

Interviewer: What about major debates around, for example, the environment and our relationship between the local and the global and so on. Do we have anything to learn there?

Angie Hobbs: Oh, completely. I mean, what philosophy can help us with is just not giving the easy flip, rather lazy, rather fashionable answer. A desire for a human community – a sort of a global community, a cosmopolis, as the Greeks called it – we've seen that from the time of Alexander the Great, from the writings of Greek stoics. We see it again in Kant who, to some extent, anticipates the League of Nations: we get the actual League of Nations, of course, and now its current embodiment in the United Nations. So, aspirations of humans to work together and live together and try and tackle world problems to do with the environment together: not necessarily a bad thing! Now, it may be that you have to think globally and then come up with some local solutions.

But even then, I think one has to think carefully. For instance, is it always good to buy local food? Should you always prefer the local food at your supermarket? Does that – what happens to the economy of New Zealand if that happens? I mean, apart from other New Zealanders and a few Pacific Islanders, they're not even near to Australia. So, there are a lot of things to think through here. Is it even true that the carbon footprint of a product from New Zealand is higher than the carbon footprint of a product from Europe, or even the United Kingdom? You don't necessarily know that: it might not be. So I think we just have to be very careful of just taking the fashionable, easy answer. Philosophy is saying, "No, let's think a bit more deeply about these questions."

Interviewer: One of the things that's exercising us particularly at the moment at the AHRC is the – is what Arts and Humanities researchers have to say to government and policy makers; and our view is that they have an awful lot to say and to influence policy makers in. I know you have some strong thoughts on the role of philosophy in educating very young children, and I just wonder if you could put forward those views now?

Angie Hobbs:

Oh, I do. I think that children are natural philosophers, they're born philosophers. They have that curiosity and zest of spirit and openness of mind, which inclines them to ask the huge questions. I can remember my daughter, when she was very, very young – I mean, only two or three – getting very cross with me when I tried to wipe her face and hands after a meal, and pushing me away, and saying, "My hands! My face! I am me and you are you!" You know, she already had a grasp of personal identity! And then they get a bit older and they start – six or seven – asking what exists beyond space; what happened before the beginning, you know? These huge questions are very natural to them to ask and we need to harness that zest and enthusiasm. Not necessarily in a formal exam structure, because, though I'm very happy for secondary school students to choose to take philosophy in exam if they so wish, what I really want to see is philosophy brought into both primary and secondary schools also, in a non-examined way: just purely for the pleasure of it, for the benefit of it, for the – all the benefits that we've been discussing in the ability to analyse ideas with clarity; to construct and deconstruct arguments; to discuss things with other people; to listen to their ideas; to gain in confidence through increasing your own powers of rational analysis. All those benefits, I think, can be wonderful for children. I don't think we have to kill the joy by putting too many exams on them. I think we probably need fewer exams and tests in education at the moment, not more.

But yes. Bring philosophy into school, make it fun. Just show how life enhancing it can be.

Interviewer:

You obviously have a very involved, pro-active sense of public engagement, of the need for the academy to talk to the public at large. What would you say to those academics who don't share that view, who actually think that their research or their work is really just for a few other academics maybe or – not for the public?

Angie Hobbs: Okay, well I certainly wouldn't want to be prescriptive. Of course, not all academics are going to want to go and do all the public outreach work that I do and which I love doing. I completely accept that. Everybody's going to be different.

However, I do feel that if you're accepting public money for your research and your work, then you should at least be able to say why you think it is important for your society to have the work that you are doing. You don't necessarily have to spend a lot of time going and explaining the details to people. You don't even need to make everybody understand exactly the finer points of what you're doing, which might not be possible in some of the more abstruse cases. But you do need to be able to say, "Look. This matters, and it matters because..." Now, the answer to that because can be quite rich: it doesn't have to be based on purely quantitative monetary terms. You don't have to give an immediate, short-term, cost-effective benefit to justify your research, but you do need to say, "I think it matters," if only because the pure pursuit of truth really matters, because this is a value that civilised societies will always want to stand up for. "It matters because, further down the line, my theoretical discoveries may turn out to have amazing applications, which may not be done by me – I might not be the person to do them – but they could in the future."

So, I think you need to be able to justify why you're accepting public money if you want to go on accepting it. That doesn't mean that everybody has to go out and spend lots of time doing public understanding work; that I think is a matter of individual choice. I, of course, have chosen to do it and I love it, but I do accept academics are different.

Interviewer: Finally, what is the ultimate goal, would you say, of your role in terms of public understanding? What do you want to achieve at the end of it all?

Angie Hobbs: I would like the achievement to be what I hope the students in my lectures achieve. I go in at the start of each lecture course and I

say that, "I hope, at the end of this lecture course, you will find the world a bit more interesting than you did at the beginning." That's what I hope my work in public understanding of philosophy will achieve. I want to help people make their own lives a bit more interesting, a bit richer and more full.

Interviewer: Angie Hobbs, thank you very much.

Female: Thank you for listening to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast. To find out more, please go to www.ahrc.ac.uk

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