

Are We, As Philosophers, Merely Playing a Game?

Abstract

The underlying question that has prompted this paper asks why are we doing philosophy? Is it to discover an ineffable truth? Is it for self-enlightenment? Or, is it to persuade others of our arguments? Do philosophers really believe that their work will have any practical consequence?

This paper adopts Wittgenstein's view that philosophy doesn't explain or deduce anything: it simply allows you to rearrange what you already have and ultimately leaves everything as it is. If this is the case, then does it follow that we should all resign and become police officers, social workers or accountants instead? Furthermore, if I accept Wittgenstein's pessimistic conclusion, then why am I still doing it (philosophy)? The simple answer is that, fundamentally, it is enjoyable. We get our kicks from formulating arguments; criticising others; thinking of examples, anecdotes, and analogies as their justification; and using others' thoughts as a stimulus for our own. Moreover, if our primary motive is that of enjoyment then should philosophy be considered like many other leisure pursuits: as a game to be played? I will explore the similarities between the way in which philosophy is undertaken and the ways in which we play or practice games and sports: considering examples that include, specific sporting and philosophical skills, the concepts of defence, attack, and counter-attack, organisation and rules, and point scoring and competition. I will argue that language is the primary tool that allows us to play the game of philosophy, in the same way that a football enables us to play football, chess pieces allow us to play chess, and golf clubs enable us to play golf. In doing so I will be revealing the game that I am playing with my listeners and how they tacitly consent to their involvement in it.

Main Paper

Many who view professional philosophy from the outside, as it were, see it as an easy life, and are scornful of such an academically hedonistic lifestyle, when they are 'working' for a living, doing 'useful' things for society. Ultimately, they criticise philosophy for being pointless. There are various arguments as to how philosophy can be useful and its skills transferable, but this doesn't address the question as to why one would do it professionally. I doubt that there are problems that after my critical philosophical analysis will be of benefit to the wider world or that I will have any profound effect on philosophy or society. Instead, perhaps I am doing philosophy because there are issues with which I struggle and occupy all my waking life so that I can not function or consider doing anything else. But this simply isn't true. There are issues that I find interesting to think about, there are philosophical concepts that I want to be able to get my head around, but this does not mean I am unable to get on with my life in another capacity. I do not wrestle with metaphysics when I am navigating corners at speed on my motorbike, or

consider the ethics of violence in sport when someone stamps on me in a rugby match. Philosophical questions do not overwhelm me in my general, active, life. The truth may be that I *am* a hedonist when it comes to philosophy; I do it because I enjoy it. So one may not be a professional philosopher because one is able to reach a stable concrete conclusion, or even a revelation or indication about how one can get to such a conclusion. Rather, it is a hedonistic activity purely because it is a game to be played.

This view stems from Wittgenstein's conception that philosophy is ultimately a pointless and dangerous pursuit of which one needs to be cured; one shouldn't undertake philosophical activity as a means to solve unanswerable problems, because as is explicitly stated, they are by nature unanswerable. In the end, as Wittgenstein writes, you are resigned to *leaving everything as it is*¹. Wittgenstein's intention is for us to be able to altercate a change in our attitude so that we are able to see the same things in a different way and no longer be mesmerised (or as he uses, *bewitched*) by particular problems. Philosophy can only be used as a tool in itself to be able to break out from the cage in which we find ourselves, the cage created by our inclinations to think philosophically.

If one comes to accept this argument, a wise person would argue that one might as well get on with doing something else, in the same way that Wittgenstein, who after writing the *Tractatus* believed he had solved all philosophical problems, had nothing else to say, so became a school teacher. This is what might be considered the sensible and useful option. So why do so many philosophers who have reached the point of recognising the ultimate fruitlessness of their task, continue in their work? Why was I, a philosophy graduate who managed to break free from the cage by training to become a PE teacher, unable to resist the urge of returning to philosophical study and voluntarily stepped back inside? Perhaps simply because philosophy is enjoyable. We participate in the activity of philosophy as we would a game. Comparisons can be made as follows; the act of doing philosophy is a challenge both to oneself and to others. It enables the testing of one's limits, the limits of thinking or rationalising. For instance, you propose an argument and explore it further, leading you to think 'this is very good stuff, I like this analogy, this is coming together nicely', or after consideration, 'actually this isn't going anywhere, this example doesn't work, perhaps if I try going down this track instead...' You are testing your own skills of critical thinking in the same way that one may go out on to a rugby pitch to practice goal kicking, testing the limits of one's ability, increasing the range, distance, and angle of kicks. Yet, one is inclined to feel philosophy is a little deeper than that, it isn't merely going through the motions like a hockey player practising penalty flicks so it becomes natural when faced with one in an important match. Perhaps philosophical reading, writing and thinking provides a similar enlightenment and self-satisfaction to the solving of puzzles or crosswords found on endless racks at newsagents or in the Sunday paper supplements. These brain-teasers and conundrums

¹ Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations* (translated by G.E.M. Anscombe) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), §124

have no greater purpose than to occupy the time and exercise your intellect. In a similar vein, philosophical enlightenment doesn't always occur through hard and laborious work. It isn't necessarily a process like a calculation that though monotonous at times, if you follow the correct procedure you'll get there in the end. Sometimes, philosophy can be a revelation, with thoughts leading to unexpected places leaving you to wonder how you didn't see *it* before. One may remember times spent staring blankly at a crossword clue, to leave it for a while, return to it later and 'see' the elusive word immediately, leaving you to scorn yourself for missing the obvious.

But philosophy undertaken alone will only be fun and challenging for a time. If you sat in a room contemplating answers to philosophical questions with no external stimulus, you would either begin to get bored or believe that you have reached your limits in thinking about problems and that there is nothing more to add. That is where the interest and interaction with others comes in. It may be imprudent to argue but philosophy *is* often about scoring points and the best and most interesting philosophical work has been done through heated debate and argument between philosophers who propose, attack, defend, counter-attack, and so on. Really good philosophy ends up getting a number of philosophers on one side trying to score at one end, and a number of philosophers on the others side, trying to score at the other end. Then add a couple of philosophers in the middle acting as referees or touch judges who are not really taking a stance on either side but keep the game going. Unfortunately these games aren't as well structured or organised as a game of hockey or football; for when a team scores the opposition claim the goal should be disallowed because of an earlier infringement, previous spectators decide to become involved in the action and storm the pitch, there is the suspicion that the referee has started to side with a particular team, players defect to the opposition, or decide they've had enough of this game and go and join the one next door. It would perhaps be better to think of philosophy not as a world-cup finals match but rather the gathering of a few youths for a kick around in the local park, or a PE lesson at school. And the similarities continue; both children and philosophers don't play the game forever, but go home for their tea or surf the internet or suddenly develop a love interest.

Perhaps philosophical conferences can be likened to a game of cricket; philosophers get ready for their turn 'to bat', presenting their arguments, thoughts, proposals, facing other philosophers who bowl against them trying to get them out, be it, clean bowling them with a googly, forcing them to make a dangerous shot at which they are caught, or quick fielding to run them out just when the batsman thinks he's made another run.

The behaviour of philosophers indicates that many of them enjoy the game of philosophy in showing off their skills and competing against other philosophers through publication of their work. If philosophy was simply about the struggle to solve the interminable questions of life, then those that undertook it would be content to hide themselves in their offices working on their own answers to the puzzles, only to appear to teach undergraduates about the history of philosophy and philosophers.

One may reject the analogy between philosophical arguments and a children's kick-about in the local park where both philosophers and children alike at the end of the day go home and have their dinner. The criticism is that arguments are evolutionary, building upon what has gone before and aren't something that can be viewed in isolation in the same way a game can. Arguments don't finish at 2-0 and then start again from 0-0 the next day. And in some respects this criticism may be justified; philosophical games go on indefinitely, but so may many children's games. These go on until the participants become distracted or bored. Arguably, history and context does play an important part in philosophical argument, especially when one is providing a critique or elaboration upon someone else's writings. But the central proposition is that underneath the surface of any philosophical discussion even if they are fairly new issues such as the ethical implications of genetic technology on athletes, there is a volatile bed of concepts and premises that have been dissected, deconstructed and analysed since the beginning of philosophical thought; what is it to be human, the mind/body distinction, and the liberty/equality dichotomy. Concepts that are no more stable now than when they were first discussed millennia ago. There is nothing that philosophical argument can be put up against and measured in terms of its validity. It is purely the persuasiveness of one person's words against another's. It is one person playing with and against another.

So one may see that to be able to partake in the game of philosophy requires the skill of language and the ability to manipulate language well. Illiterate and ineloquent philosophers are an oxymoron, not necessarily because they are unable to have interesting philosophical thoughts, but because they are unable to express these thoughts through language. If language is viewed as an instrument as Wittgenstein expressed², it may be an instrument that enables the game of philosophy just as kings, rooks, and pawns, are instruments that enables the game of chess. Take away the skill of using language in philosophy, reduce everything to logical symbols, and you become a mathematician.

There may well be those that are unwittingly part of this game of philosophy and do not see it for themselves (indeed, one may currently think one is playing one particular game in philosophy when in fact, one is unwittingly taking part in another larger game). There are many philosophers who believe that they are getting somewhere in philosophy, that they are providing answers to questions that have so long been unanswered. These philosophers may be deeply depressed and disappointed when they are subject to counter-attack, or see that their arguments are flawed. Rather than suffering great angst and depression they would be far better off if they saw the game for what it was, took a shower, laughed about the match with others, and said 'I'm going to change my strategy and I'll beat you next time, just you wait!' To view philosophy as a game gets over the problem of accepting the pointlessness of doing philosophy to solve things, and yet not wanting to do anything else because actually it is quite enjoyable. There may be times when one forgets it is merely a game; there are times when one

² *Ibid.* §569

is illuminated or persuaded by a piece of literature, an article, a conversation. That is when philosophy can become painful and suffocating. But as Wittgenstein urged us to see, these feelings arise when one becomes overwhelmed by the power of language and is drawn into the mesmerising but illusory pictures it can sometimes present.

When I wake up the day after a hard rugby match feeling bruised and sore, I often ask, “Why am I doing this to myself?” But I play again next week. There have been times when I think perhaps I should go back to being a PE teacher and I won’t have time for incessant, philosophical thoughts. But as I’ve proposed, generally it is an enjoyable way to spend one’s life. Perhaps it will become boring or monotonous but for now it is worthwhile. And for now, despite all the knocks and bruises, and the big scar I’ve got running along my forehead, I enjoy playing rugby – nothing else gives me the same buzz.

My skills as a philosophy player may not be particularly good, you may be able to see large flaws in my argument, examples, and analogies, and you may be able to attack them without putting in too much effort. You may be drawn into my game of philosophy and then think that it is a stupid game or not challenging enough, and wish to occupy your time with other more interesting games. And if you do this, then I can justifiably argue that you are only illustrating my point and actually are taking part in my game whether you want to or not. And it’s 2-0 to me. Then you could turn around and say, ‘but I’m not playing your game, it’s not worth expending the effort.’ And I would argue that ‘but you are playing my game simply by arguing that you are not, just acknowledging my argument gives me someone to play with’, much like the child that continually aggravates and niggles her sibling, until her mother says, ‘just ignore her and she’ll get bored and go away.’ And this is true, ignore me and my argument that philosophy is merely a game and say nothing about it and after my initial excitement and belief at having won the game and defeated my opponent, I will be bored and go in search of my next opponent. Eventually, if everyone I meet ignores me and my argument I will not feel I have won at all, they are hollow victories, and there will be no-one to show my success to. Ultimately, in order to get any more games, I will have to pretend that philosophy isn’t a game; that it is something profound through which I undertake serious and meaningful argument probing paths to discover ultimate enlightenment.

Though secretly I will know at this, I am just playing.