

# Bertrand russell: the value of philosophy

Philosophy



Consider a man that looks to material needs as the necessities of life. He moves through his world in a twenty-four hour cycle of the mundane, never reaching for a less ignorant existence. Bertrand Russell believes that these “practical men”, as society deems them, are wrongly named. A meaningful life to this “practical man”, certainly does not include the understanding of a need for knowledge. Russell states, “It is exclusively among the goods of the mind that the value of philosophy is to be found; and only those who are not indifferent to these goods can be persuaded that the study of philosophy is not a waste of time” (page 9).

The value of philosophy can be found when anyone chooses to step over the line between things and ideas. I am claiming, in this instance, that philosophy is valuable for being a source of knowledge and understanding, among other things. Those that attempt to gain these are in turn going to benefit from their efforts. A man does not necessarily need the ability to comprehend the entire universe, but just to be open to thought. In the past, men that worked towards this task of thinking, such as Newton, were able to take philosophy and evolve it into a separate science.

This reasons that philosophy’s value is largely in the possibility of a greater enlightenment that has yet to be determined. There is value in the fact that a deeper reality exists. That life does not just run blindly through time, but streams around reason and thought. Knowledge should alone be enough of a value for philosophy to be an appreciated source of gaining exactly that end. Thomas Nagel writes, “...humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed...” (page 23).

This realization is one of the reasons that philosophy contains value for the society at large.

Everyone, through examining and doubting their choices, can gain knowledge. And knowledge is the primary aim of philosophy, according to Russell and my own opinion. Socrates summarizes it best in Plato's, Apology: Defense of Socrates, when he stated, "...an unexamined life is no life for a human being to live..." (page 40). Humans were given the capacity to have thought processes and go beyond the routine existence of lower level life forms. To let this possession go unused would be neglecting the possibilities of the mind. However, the value of philosophy for society at large is limited by self-assertion.

The masses will find themselves looking for knowledge but being blocked by the view that the world is of less worth than themselves, or the Self. This will be the downfall of the instinctive man; he is contained in his private interests. It is almost like a trap, man fills his life with family and friends and believes that he has found his place in life. A true student of philosophy will have a want of knowledge that is free and pure. This want contains no concerns of Self, but rather of the not-Self. Knowledge arrives when man lets go of trying to fit the universe into his world and instead fits his world into the universe.

In order to be a philosopher, one must overcome the narrow circle of the Self and of private interests. Therefore the largest value of philosophy is for the philosopher, for he is able to completely be open to the acquisition of knowledge. Most of the value of philosophy is then sent indirectly to the

larger society. The fact that philosophy, as a subject, is prone to uncertainty can arouse disbelief in its value. It can be argued that no knowledge can possibly be gained by studying a field in which there are no definite answers.

Russell agrees with this point when he maintains that even if answers are determined, none of them can be proven true without exception. The subjective areas of thought, those dealing with opinions and differences in beliefs and practices, would hold no basis in practicality. " Practical man" will continue to waste away in his secluded reality, convinced that being materialistic is the most important quality to possess. Russell himself mentions, "...many men, under the influence of science or practical affairs, are inclined to doubt whether philosophy is nything better than innocent but useless trifling, ...and controversies on matters concerning which knowledge is impossible" (page 9).

However, Russell contradicts his own statements on purpose with the idea that people have the wrong view of philosophy. The uncertainty in philosophy is what makes the subject intriguing and worth arguing for or against. So what if there are no definite answers? The process of coming to the conclusion that nothing is set in stone is where the knowledge lies in wait to be learned. The questions of life make for intellectual freedom in the search for the unfound answers.

Philosophic contemplation best works when the desire for knowledge is unadulterated. This would then deal mainly with the area of the not-Self; it must be in union with the Self to create the rightenvironmentfor the intellect. Russell helps to confirm my statement that knowledge is the value of

philosophy when he writes, "...free intellect will see...without traditional prejudices...in the sole and exclusive desire of knowledge-knowledge as impersonal, as purely contemplative, as it is possible for man to attain" (page 11).

J. J. C. Smart believes that we should never assume that we have found the ultimate and final truth about anything. But that having a condensed view will bring us closer than not pondering it at all. Then, any attempt to push beyond that line between things and thought will create a positive end. Knowledge, the total range of what has been perceived and learned, is the absolute value of philosophy in my opinion. Philosophers, as well as man, can only benefit from the scrutiny placed on thought.

Without the knowledge that philosophy can provide, the world would be a very simple place based exclusively on materialistic views. The old saying that ignorance is bliss would unmistakably be true. Man would continue in his everyday life, unaware of the chance that he is missing. Think about what a waste such a world would be, when the possibility for undiminished intelligence and open mentality is right beyond the baggage that man carries around with him. Philosophy's value in knowledge is that it makes man's life worth not just surviving but truly living.