

Introduction

In and Out of Eden

Our story begins in Eden, where else? In that garden of natural contentment, man knew of no problems. Accordingly, there was no need for thought, let alone for tools to support thought. Adam and Eve could spend all day on innocent recreation. Thus Adam took a keen interest in an apple tree, the tree bearing the most seductive fruits of the whole garden. Funnily enough these fruits, just as they were ripe for picking, would fall from the tree and into a small stream that threatened to carry them away, out of Adam's reach. Adam found it quite a sport to try and fork the apples with a stick towards him. But somehow he never quite managed. As soon as he poked the stick into the water, it would break. Which wasn't much of a problem, since he would just amble off to find another stick: longer, thicker, more flexible...

Eve, meanwhile, stood watching this scene from some distance, and with increasing irritation. Which, incidentally, marked the very first problem on earth, hence the beginning of the end of Paradise, and on top of that misery the start of the battle of the sexes. Eve failed to understand how somebody could act that dumb. In the end she definitely lost her temper and called out to Adam: "Man, can't you see that when you poke your stick into the water, it only *seems* broken, but that it *really* isn't?" Obviously, Adam was none too pleased with this reproach, and things would never be quite the same between them since.

Adam's Lamentable Position

Philosophers describe good old Adam's position as 'naive realism'. In this position, the way in which reality presents itself is accepted as a simple fact. No questions asked, no doubts expressed. Naive realism is not so much a philosophical option as the absence of any critical stance. To ascribe a deliberate viewpoint to Adam would be giving too much credits to this unphilosophical creature, but just as we tend to project complex deliberations onto animals - "Well if I never, this dog here thinks too highly of himself to even lift a paw!" - let us assume for the sake of argument that Adam subscribes to a point of view.

We can then contrast Adam and Eve's respective positions as follows:

- For Adam, things are just the way they appear to us. A whale is a fish, the sun revolves around the earth, and everyone looking like your grandma *is* your grandma (rather than a vicious wolf, which will of course also *look like* a vicious wolf). Eve, on the contrary, distinguishes between phenomena on the one hand - that is things and situations as they appear to us - and on the other hand things and situations as they really are. She knows that appearances can deceive us, and she views the world with a healthy dose of suspicion accordingly.
- Adam cannot but think that the world is immediately accessible to him. He enjoys an intimate and unmediated contact with the branch on which he sits.

That's how he *knows* the branch: it reveals itself to him, without any reservations. Eve, on the other hand, is aware that a branch, in its full reality, cannot actually be part of her knowledge. In fact, any attempt to literally insert the branch into one's knowledge system is quite likely to destroy it. Operation successful, patient deceased. What we perceive of the branch are sensory perceptions, no more and no less. Our senses are always and inevitably positioned between the world and our experience of the world. All knowledge is indirect knowledge, according to Eve.

- If reality presents itself to us, to each of us, just as it is, then everyone will of course have an identical view of reality. In Adam's world, communication in the sense of understanding each other is no issue at all. It's not that easy for Eve. She is aware of the fact that people often form very different pictures of reality, depending on their own perspective. Effective communication is all but evident, it is a permanent challenge.

Eve introduced critical thinking into our mental makeup. 'Critical' should not necessarily be understood as something negative here. Critical thought boils down to the need to judge, to assess the quality of something or other. Human beings are no detached passengers in their own lives: they have an interest. They rejoice and detest, approve and reject, enjoy and annoy.

Generally, critical thinking requires no deliberate effort. All the time, thoughts flash across our mind. Some of these thoughts are prompted by sense experience, some issue

naturally or even logically from thoughts that went before, whereas still others are somewhat creative associations sparked by whatever. It happens that you really have no idea how or why a certain thought pops into your head.

Recently in a British airport restaurant, a few tables away from mine, four women were engaged in a lively conversation. I was not spying on them, but suddenly, I don't know why, I noticed that none of them had a ring on any finger: a score of 0 out of 40. This struck me as a rare coincidence, unless some logical explanation would apply, in relation to a common occupation, hobby, religion or whatever. I overcame my shyness and asked them. They assured me, very friendly, that this was purely by chance. In their view, this was not as exceptional as I seemed to think. I confess that this may be my imagination entirely, but I felt some resistance underneath the friendliness of the ladies. Frankly, I thought they made a fool of me. So, afterwards, I asked the waitress, and she consulted her colleagues, about how many women in Britain wear at least one ring. We concluded that it must be well over 80%, so that, if we calculate with a conservative 80%, the chance of finding out of the blue four women together without a ring on their fingers would be less than 2 in a thousand. I did not witness a miracle, but was it really expecting too much of the ladies to have expressed at least some astonishment?

This innocent anecdote illustrates some of the features of how we think. At first glance, there does not seem a lot of method in it. An idea comes up, it may intrigue you, you rub your eyes wondering if you saw it well, different interpretations of the fact seem to be possible, you choose one, check it and, in this case, even when refuted you stick to it. For good reasons, of course, according to you! All the way, various emotions accompany your thoughts.

Here is the point I want to make: in actual practice, thoughts come to you together with an emotional significance. We immediately link our ideas to a certain valuation, as an answer to questions such as:

- Is this a nice, pleasant thought?
- Is this thought comprehensible to me, now that I think about it?
- How does this thought relate to thoughts I've had before?
- Is it an important thought? Does it, for instance, have any 'cash value'?
- Would the Pope agree?
- How would I be able to defend this thought, if required? And so on and so forth.

Critical thought means thinking, ruminating, fantasizing, worrying, accompanied, consciously or not, by - perhaps even weighed down by - such assessments. You can try, if you like, to keep alive a thought in your mind while refraining from any assessment of that thought. You will notice that it's far from easy to accomplish that. To the extent that you do succeed, you will wonder whether you were thinking at all. Is all thought not critical thought? Supposing that uncritical thought can exist, would we be able to distinguish it from pure reverie?

Characteristic of (critical) thinking is that any thought that pops up is immediately put at a distance. You take a step backwards so as to see it better, as it were. What you see, then, is like a snapshot of your own mind. It is like looking in a mental mirror; which is why, of course, the process is known as reflection. All people I know do this without even

trying. If, conversely, they wish to turn off this critical thinking once in a while, they sign up for special lessons, for instance in meditation. Real people are not naïve realists. That's why I ascribed this position to Adam: a mythical figure of a mythical time. Real people don't just think, but also think about their thoughts. I see a small bird land in my garden and think, "hey, a finch!" And right away I think, "How can I be so sure? How does one distinguish a finch from a sparrow?" - I am aware of the fact that I may be mistaken, that there may be a significant difference between what I think and what is, in fact, reality.

The Arrangement of the Toolbox

The fairly basic ability to distinguish between my thinking about something on the hand, and that about which I think on the other hand, makes critical thinking possible. In philosophical jargon, we meet here the distinction between subject and object. Subject and object are the two sides of an intentional relationship. This jargon deserves some explanation, for if we clarify the three just-named concepts of 'subject', 'object' and 'intentional relationship', we will have a framework, or an elementary theory, with which to efficiently arrange the philosophical toolbox.

We express our dealings with reality through sentences such as:

'I am in love with Charles.'

'I have a serious inkling that it's about to start raining cats and dogs.'

'My intuition tells me that you paid too much for that car.'

'I've had such an incredibly wonderful dream..'

'I believe God created the world in six days and then felt the need for a day of rest.'

'No need to tell me that jogging is bad for your health, I can see that myself!'

'Of course I'm aware that I just like to gripe'.

All these utterances establish a connection between two elements. On the one hand we have the I-figure: the strolling, longing, knowing, hallucinating entity. This side of the relationship we call the subject (S). On the other hand we have whatever the subject is focused on, the receiving end of the subject's activity: the person you're in love with, the content of your dream, the thing that you manipulate, and so on. This side of the relationship is termed the object (O). The connection between these two, that is, the way in which the subject relates to the object, is known as the intentional relationship:

S — O

For daily use we could keep it simple and say: the subject is you, the object is something out there in the world, and the intentional relationship is the way you relate to that thing. This is not entirely accurate, however, since you may be that thing yourself. In self-knowledge you appear at both ends of the relationship, but in the same quality: once as a subject and once as an object. This shows that the object is not necessarily something out there in the world. Intentionality doesn't even require the object to exist: the issue of truth or reality is irrelevant here. Anything that can be dreamt or imagined can be the object of an intentional relationship.

The exact nature of this relationship is fiercely debated in philosophy. Some philosophers even doubt whether we can

actually speak of a relationship between two elements here. For how are we to conceive of a relationship with something that doesn't exist, or perhaps even cannot exist for fundamental reasons? I may once have dreamt of a square circle, but to say that I, as a subject, maintain a relationship to square circles would be pushing it. Fortunately, for our practical purposes we can leave this theoretical issue unresolved.

More accurately put: we recognize that fundamentally different perspectives on the nature of an intentional relationship are possible. We use the concept of intentionality neutral with respect to all possible interpretations of the concept.

Indeed, we will describe eight different ways in which the relationship between subject and object can be conceived. In other words: eight variations on the elementary S-O diagram shown on the previous page. Indeed, these different concepts constitute the kernel of this book. It offers the reader eight different modes of thought, about... anything.

Fundamental Tools For Thought

Let's suppose that I'm in love with someone: an intentional and, specifically, an amorous relationship. How to understand this being-in-love? What interests me here is not some psychological explanation for my infatuation; what I'm after is something more fundamental, namely the right way of conceptualizing being-in-love. How, in this relationship, do subject and object relate to one another? If I can introduce some conceptual clarity here, it might also help me get a better grip on my feelings. Indeed, it can make quite a difference whether I see my infatuation e.g. as a personal

flight of fancy, or as an actual relationship between me and another person.

We will see that there is not just one right way of understanding intentional relationships. In this book we explore eight different approaches to understanding them. We should not view any particular understanding as either truth or (self-)deception. Each tool has its particular character and purpose, useful in some situations but less in others.

Let's start with a quick look at each of the tools, and briefly try them out on the issue of infatuation. In the chapters that follow, each of the tools will be explored in greater depth.

First Tool: Hammer and Chisel

This is the tool wrought by Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, in the fourth century BC, to serve the purpose of describing what really, essentially, is the case.

Essentialism directs our attention to the object of infatuation as presented to us. But if the effort were to stop there, it would be just another case of naïve realism. Instead, the method uses the hammer and chisel to chip away all incidental aspects and elements, in order to discover the essential core of the object. By grasping the essential quality of our infatuation's object, we can come to understand what it means to be in love.

Second Tool: The Try-Square

Immanuel Kant's philosophy, towards the end of the 18th century, is the undisputed pinnacle of Enlightenment thought. It is the philosophy of mankind waking up to the power of its own mind. Through his 'transcendental method', Kant focuses attention not on the object, as essentialism does, but on the

subject. Kant considers the subject as the source of all intentional relationships. As the saying goes, appropriate to our illustration: 'Love is in the eye of the beholder.' I find the try-square an apt metaphor for this point of view, because man uses that simple tool to impose his measures, norms and values on everything. We are the authors of the world we inhabit. If I want to understand my infatuation, the question should therefore be: what is it in my mind that makes me fall in love with this object (technically spoken, of course)?

Third Tool: The Crowbar

We use a crowbar to move a thing that's stuck in its position; in this case, the intentional relationship. This is the tool of dialectical philosophy, and the grand master of this discipline was Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel. He produced his principal works in the early part of the 19th century. According to Hegel, our attention flips back and forth between subject and object, while (and because) both poles are in constant movement. My infatuation thus appears as a process that begins, for example, when I perceive the object to display certain notable features. Then, as subject, I project a world of expectations on to the object. Typically, however, the object will prove too weak to carry the weight of that world, and the infatuation will collapse as a result, transforming into a different type of relationship instead, such as love or hate or indifference, or a peculiar relation to "somebody that I used to know" as Gotye put it in their marvellous song.

Fourth Tool: The Bare Hand

Phenomenology, developed by Edmund Husserl around 1900, aims to establish such conditions as will allow the object to reveal itself for what it is. This requires a certain reflexive approach, for the place where the object can

manifest its true character and nature is in the consciousness of a subject that fully opens itself to the object. Applying any kind of further tool or theory will only hinder the direct experience of the object. You should rely on the sensitiveness of uncorrupted perception, or in other words: only use your bare hands. With respect to infatuation, the aim would be to describe as accurately as possible your honest experience of the object of infatuation. Precisely this self-imposed limitation will yield an understanding of infatuation.

Fifth Tool: The Jig Saw

The electric jig saw is a powerful piece of equipment that represents analytical philosophy. 'To analyze' means to make separations, distinctions; therefore analytical philosophers sometimes speak of using a knife to sharply distinguish sense from nonsense, and within the realm of sense to distinguish between different meanings. A carpenter won't tackle a wooden panel with a knife but with a jig saw, however. As a fundamental tool, analytical philosophy flourished in the hands of Ludwig Wittgenstein, in the first half of the 20th century. The jig saw pursues insight into intentional relationships by carefully observing speech acts. Thus, the object of infatuation is not approached through the content of one's consciousness as recommended by the phenomenologist, but through an analysis of one's utterances. If you want to know what infatuation is all about, then examine the way in which it is expressed through words. And, importantly: concentrate on utterances only! Whoever lets his or her thoughts about infatuation run freely, heedless of the normal usage rules of the language, will only drift away from a natural understanding instilled in us as speakers of that language. (Recall how the enchanting Dulcinea, Don Quichot's great love, was above all a topic of conversation. And just maybe not more than that...)

Sixth Tool: The Electric Screwdriver Drill

Here we have a versatile piece of equipment that is a real pleasure to work with, and that can be applied to material in a variety of ways. It always requires careful use, but with the right drill and the right screwdriver bit, you can do a fine job in no time. The drills and screwdriver pieces represent the tales people tell, which play a pivotal role in the hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutic philosophy, founded by Martin Heidegger in his abstruse 1927 masterpiece *Being and Nothingness*, understands an intentional relationship by making sense of it. And sense is a fabric woven of the stories that appeal to us. In his book *Love Is a Story* (1998), the psychologist Robert Sternberg understands love and infatuation in terms of 26 possible storylines. Not all have a happy ending.

Seventh Tool: The Working Person

Deconstruction is a somewhat paradoxical tool for thought, since it questions the very idea that meaning can be intentionally controlled. Every strategy is unhelpful in the end, as it will start getting in the way of its own original objective. You cannot make sense like you build a bridge, planning and control won't work. Deconstruction does not focus on the object side of the relationship, but on the subject side. By attempting to reach and grasp the object of an intentional relationship, the subject is transforming itself. Jacques Derrida was a reputedly unpredictable thinker, but I gather that confronted with infatuation, he would be interested in the way this condition changes the person caught by passion. Looking for a fitting metaphor in the carpenter's workshop, I initially tried to find a tool that transforms itself. In the end I settled on the working person himself: not a tool that he has and holds, but the tool that he *is*.

This is a tool that we cannot (and should not want to) get a tight grip on. The thinking, feeling, longing person has no fixed identity for Derrida; accordingly, he declared the death of the subject in philosophy.

Eighth Tool: The Atelier

For this tool we point a wide-angle lens at the intentional relationship. What is achieved in the atelier is the result of an interaction between the working person and the materials. However, the actual result is also shaped by that particular setting, and by all the possibilities and impossibilities that it presents. The atelier resembles an incubator, with various designs on the drawing board that compete with each other to be executed, tested, and modified.

By viewing infatuation from this broader perspective on the intentional relationship between subject and object, we realize how on this earth, every day, countless subjects are falling for countless objects. Falling for someone else is evidently an important possibility of being human. If infatuation did not exist, a huge part of our culture would be unthinkable, including the entirety of pop music. But also our whole social organization would look different. It is not without reason that we maintain this kind of intentional relationship. Pragmatism is a school of thought strongly affected by Charles Darwin's evolution theory, and it focuses on the function fulfilled by infatuation. We shall see how pragmatism today represents a broad movement in philosophy, taking its inspiration mainly from American philosophy at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, and with William James as its principal proponent.

The Philosopher's Workshop

For more than fifteen years, I earned a living as managing director of a philosophical institute. This was by all standards a challenging job for me, and I felt the need to add some expertise in business administration to common sense. But apart from strictly managerial skills, I also experienced quite some advantage from my philosophical background. Philosophy is of course an enormously rich source of inspiration with respect to many fundamental subjects. But I profited even more from the variety of ways of thinking that the philosophical tradition has to offer. If sense-making is an important aspect of your job, as it certainly is when are expected to show some leadership, philosophical method can be a great help. And the good news is: in order to profit from philosophical stratagems, you do not need to take a degree in philosophy.

At least, that was my idea when I began giving two-day workshops called *Tools for Thought - A Philosophical Pit Stop*. At the start of the workshop, I always invited participants to formulate their own question, the problem out of their own practice that they would like to tackle in the two days to come. The list of questions thus collected served as our raw material, on which tools for thought were to be applied. In the past 10 years, hundreds of men and women were introduced to the eight tools of thought. They were shortly introduced to the philosophical foundation of the tools and their intuition was nourished by illustrations from music and the visual arts. And then they made an attempt to create new perspectives on their target question guided by the tool at hand, mostly with the help of a few other participants in what we call an SSG (Smart Small Group). It was wonderful, for the participants as well as for me, to experience that it worked. I may safely

state that everyone of those hundreds of men and women who joined the workshop left in possession of new and valuable insights with regard to their question. Some found a convincing answer, others learned surprising insights, e.g. that the real problem behind their question lay in another place altogether.

Jean Christophe, one of the participants of these workshops, was (and still is) a publisher. He urged me to write a book about the philosophical tools for thought. I did, eventually. The book was received well in The Netherlands and in Italy (thanks to the Italian translation *La bottega del filosofo*). Several professors use the book in the classroom, especially in technical and professional universities, where students like to be addressed from a practical point of view. Besides the educational domain, professionals in a variety of occupations learned to use the tools to enrich their practice. The Dutch Society of Management Consultants nominated the book for the award Professional Book of the Year 2010.

Petra, a participant of the very first workshop, remarked that the procession of eight tools reflects in a nutshell the history of philosophy. I was perplex. I immediately recognized that Petra was right - the perplexing thing was that I hadn't thought about that. In preparing the workshop, my only concern had been the quest for the most suitable logical and didactical order of the tools! I realize that the parallel between historical, didactical and logical order doesn't prove anything at all, but nevertheless it felt 'right'.

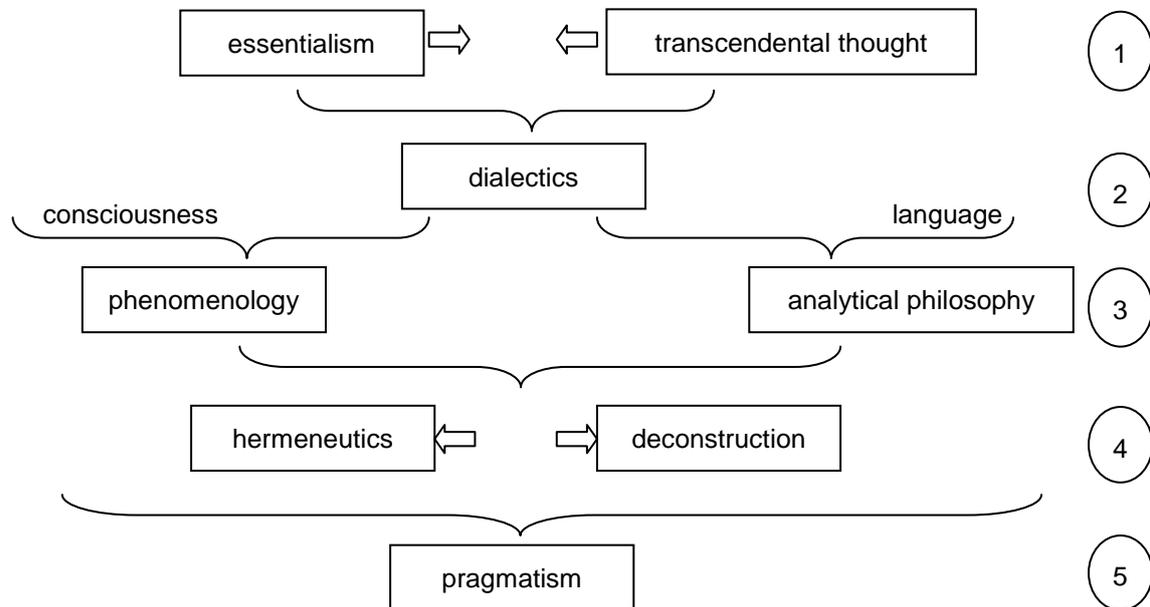
As a philosopher, I cannot simply be content with feelings. Why would the coincidence between the historical and the logical order be anything more than accidental? To be honest,

I think the reason is that there is remarkable progress in the history of philosophy.

Progress can mean one of two things. First, it can mean that incorrect ideas are discarded and replaced by better ones. In the second meaning, ideas are not rejected but, in the light of new insights, are recognized as special instances of a more comprehensible, encompassing perspective. We find clear examples of both forms of progress in the natural sciences. According to Aristotle's physics, heavier objects fall faster than light ones. By the time Galileo and Newton came around, it was clear that this is wrong, and the idea was replaced by a better one. This is progress in the first sense. Subsequently, in the light of the more encompassing relativity theory, it was Newton's theory of gravity that turned out not to be entirely accurate. But in specific instances and for smaller distances, his theory works fine. So this is progress in the second sense.

The way the eight tools relate to each other also reveals progression in the second sense. Later schools of thought transcend the contradictions between earlier schools, or create new perspectives by incorporating new angles and approaches. The diagram below offers an overview of our toolbox. It is a radically simplified rendering of a complex conceptual evolution. So please don't get hung up on it: the only purpose of the diagram is to provide a general overview.

An extremely essential representation of the history of philosophy



Explanation:

1) Essentialism lies at the root of the Western cultural and scientific tradition, introducing the subject-object relationship. The philosophical mission of the subject is: to penetrate to the actual core of the object. It is not until much later that Kant places a mirror between subject and object. In his transcendental philosophy, the subject's mission is to learn to understand itself, as it creates the world according to its own image.

2) Dialectics represents a synthesis between these two perspectives: subject and object remain locked into each other, as a permanent source of tension; the intentional relationship is thoroughly dynamical.

3) This dynamism is acknowledged by 20th century philosophy, but divested of its dialectical straitjacket. Both phenomenology and analytical philosophy attempt to find solid ground beneath the flux of intentional relationships.

Phenomenology seeks this ground in consciousness, while analytical philosophy turns to the rules underlying speech acts.

4) It would make a great story for these two opposites to once again merge into a synthesis, but that is not how things went, unfortunately. What we can say, however, is that the two schools of thought that were fairly prominent toward the end of the previous century, at least on the European continent – hermeneutics and deconstruction – incorporated significant elements of their predecessors and brought these to bear on each other. The experiential world and language come together in a focus on narrative, or 'discourse'. Both schools investigate the dynamics of sense-making. Hermeneutical philosophy seeks to comprehend understanding; deconstruction intervenes and disrupts, it knocks the subject off its philosophical pedestal and refuses to put anything in its place.

5) Will we reach a happy end after all, with pragmatism as an all-encompassing apotheosis? The diagram should not be interpreted as such, although I would suggest that pragmatism transcends the preceding positions. Pragmatism is a pluralism that acknowledges that many roads may lead to Rome; a pluralism that settles on the right road forward by assessing the different options in the light of specific circumstances, and with a view to practical human life. Pragmatism is no latecomer: it has been an undercurrent in western philosophy for over a century, and if the signs do not deceive me, it became a serious force to reckon with today.

Tools and materials

The eight tools represent fundamental methods of thinking that were introduced in the history of Western culture. The invention (or discovery?) of alternative methods was not the

effect of a special interest in methods, of course. Methods are means, not ends. People struggled with tough problems; the need to tame these problems was the driver of conceptual innovation. Philosophy was never a real 'discipline': problems are hunted down over whatever boundaries. A philosopher is not someone who searches for his keys under a lamp post, not because he lost them there but because that's where he can see clearly.

Take for example, as a result of progress in the brain sciences, the recent discussion about the (non-) existence of free will. An old conundrum blazes up once again. Some neurologists claim that, since the brain seems to cause our decisions, free will is an illusion. A philosopher recognizes that this seemingly simple claim is in fact a hub of confusions, where not only scientific findings, but also logical and methodological issues play their part. Even an analysis of the meaning of ordinary language is issue: can we really mean by ascribing free will to a decision that it was uncaused? Of course not, but what do we mean then?

Philosophy pursues questions far into the dark, it is the owl's trade. With 'the dark' I do not refer to the realm of the occult, which is a kind of kitsch, but as the wide and rugged landscape of questions that have not been tamed. An untamed question is not (yet) susceptible for a widely accepted, reasonably reliable method leading to an answer, as in the sciences.

In what follows, we shall largely steer clear of the field of traditional philosophical topics, such as the nature of knowledge and belief, the existence of God, the relationship between mind and matter, the foundation of morality, and the meaning of meaning. I was completely taken away by questions

like these when I was an adolescent, but to be honest, these eternal riddles writ in capitals lost their interest for me along the way. This book treats philosophy as a means to an end, not as a goal in itself. I attempt to make some philosophical tools for thought available to the reader, so that she or he is more able to tackle her or his own untamed questions. However, more information about contemporary philosophy as a discipline will be given in Part II of this book.

Errotetics, or the Craft of Asking Questions

We all have our worries and concerns, but if you ask anyone point-blank: 'So what exactly is your question?', chances are you'll be met with a frowning silence. You sense a certain embarrassment, perhaps even helplessness or unwillingness. Yet if our aim is to apply a method or strategy of thinking, then it does help to have a question on the table. The question, certainly the formulation of the question, may change as you go along, but at least it gives you something to start off with. A question serves as a focus, an attention funnel.

We shall apply strategies of thinking to questions both ripe and green, exactly as tossed at me by participants in workshop sessions. Some of the questions may strike the reader as a little odd. Are these questions any good? In fact, what is a good question? (Is *that* a good question, by the way?) What types of questions can we distinguish, and in what situation is what kind of question appropriate? What *is* a question, anyway? And how does a question cast its shadow forward to the answer? Furthermore, there is the eternal issue what is more important: questions or answers?

Today questions are draped with a certain 'romantic aura'; it is fashionable to state that questions are more important than answers. We also often hear the platitude that there are no wrong or dumb questions, only wrong or dumb answers. So here we immediately have an instance of a dumb statement, since we needn't look far to find counter examples. It's not smart to ask a lady for her age (unless it's your job to do so), and it's awkward to ask what is smaller than nothing. It is even sillier to ask whether nothing likes being that small, or to ask for the colour of the curtains in a room where there are none.

But the quality of questions is a delicate matter. There's a cartoon that always makes me laugh when I think of it. It shows a woman carrying heavy grocery bags, asking a taxi driver the following question: 'Will you drive me to a previously agreed destination for a predetermined price?' To which the driver replies: 'That's a rather cheeky question lady!'

Susan Stebbing, in her classic book *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939), says that a question can only be considered intelligent if an answer to that question solves the problem that provoked the question, or at least is a step toward a solution. This a severe requirement. Professor Stebbing is not very encouraging when it comes to questioning. She reminds me of Mister Benson, Frank McCourt's schoolmaster in *Angela's Ashes* (1996). The schoolmaster is exasperated by a pupil named Brendan Quigley, a compulsive questioner. One day Benson is teaching the class about the state of grace, and of course, here comes Brendan.

Brendan Quigley raises his hand. We call him Question Quigley because he's always asking questions. He can't help himself. Sir, he says, what's Sanctifying Grace?

The master rolls his eyes to heaven. He's going to kill Quigley. Instead he barks at him, Never mind what's Sanctifying Grace, Quigley. That's none of your business. You're here to learn the catechism and do what you're told. You're not here to be asking questions. There are too many people wandering the world asking questions and that's what has us in the state we're in and if I find any boy in this class asking questions I won't be responsible for what happens. Do you hear me, Quigley?

I do.

I do what?

I do sir.

Erotetics, the theory and craft of asking questions, has its work cut out. The word is derived from the Greek word *erotesis*, meaning a (rhetorical) question. It is not a commonplace concept in philosophy, but it can be found in combinations as 'erotetic logic' or 'erotetic education'. There is a popular (and somewhat romantic) belief that philosophers' core competence is asking questions. Be that as it may, but one thing is for sure: you will not find much reflections on questioning in a philosophical library. My favourite lesson in this limited field of study was given by the American philosopher Ned Markosian. It is a tale known as the paradox of the question, published in 1997, and it goes in my version as follows.

Amidst a world congress for philosophers, all of sudden an angel appeared. He addressed the flabbergasted philosophers as follows: 'Dear people, I wish to take this opportunity to do you all a great favour. You may ask me one single question,

which I shall truthfully answer. Do take your time to settle on one question; I'll be back tomorrow at the same time to hear and to immediately answer your question.' And then the angel disappeared. After a while, the first philosopher to somewhat recover his composure tabled a proposal. What we should ask the angel, he said, is whether my master Heidegger was right when he stated that man is thrown into the world. His proposal did not meet with much enthusiasm; some wondered whether the angel would even understand the question, being posed in the jargon of a rather obscure thinker. Another colleague, not bothered by any jargon, thought he could answer this question himself: some people are thrown into the world, but others are a difficult delivery. Most philosophers agreed that the question should at least be comprehensible, and that it should have some relevance for mankind. Next, a hard boiled positivist from Chicago spoke up. Positivists are fond of facts and only care for logical combinations of facts. He proposed to ask the angel whether we should check a car's oil gauge when the engine is hot or when it is cold. This question seemed to satisfy the conditions perfectly, but almost everyone agreed that the matter was somewhat lacking in importance. Then an analytical philosopher from Cambridge made a smart move. He remarked that the group would never come to an agreement regarding relevance, so that they should actually submit this matter to the judgment of the angel himself. So the question should be: 'What is the best question that we can ask you and what is your answer to that?' Upon which a colleague from Oxford acidly pointed out that this was not one but two questions. Someone came up with an alternative: 'What is the answer to the best question we could ask you?' But alas, what will be the point of being informed by the angel of a mighty important answer, like 'Three!' or 'Never before dinner', if you do not know the question? And so the philosophers decided to sleep on it for a night.

The next morning, a Belgian colleague, versed in logic, came up with a brilliant idea. His candidate for the question of questions ran as follows: 'What is the ordered pair of elements, of which the first element consists of the best question we can ask you, and the second element of the answer to that question?' (An ordered pair simply refers to two things that go together in a fixed order, such as the x and y values that together define a point in a coordinate system, or 'father' and 'son' respectively, in a father-son relationship.) No one could even imagine a better question might be possible, so when the angel reappeared at the appointed time, that was the question put to him. Whereupon the angel spoke: 'Of that ordered pair of elements, the first element consists of the question you just asked me, and the second consists of the answer I herewith offered to you.' And off he winged, leaving a baffled audience behind. Our Belgian philosopher was the only person who seemed to enjoy himself. 'I was right, he exclaimed, it was the best question: the angel confirmed it!' Another logician chalked the following formulae on the blackboard, admitting that the angel had kept his promise: his answer was true indeed!

Question = (Best Question, Answer)?

Answer = (Question, Answer)!

This was a grave deception: the best question turned out to be at the same time the most senseless one. The question is like a mirror that reflects nothing but itself, or like a diamond so pure that he is completely transparent and... invisible.

What does the story teach us about the quality of questions? Something very important, it seems to me, namely that you shouldn't put too much energy into refining the form of your question. That's something I've also learnt through practice,

for instance when you need to phrase questions for a written questionnaire. Sometimes it's just impossible to phrase a question in such a way that it is impervious to any misunderstanding. With all the clarification and specification you add, you may be making the question more precise in a formal sense, but not necessarily more effective. Recall the roundabout question the lady put to the taxi driver. Remember that questions always presuppose a hearer willing and able to understand; so ask what you want to know in as simple and direct a way as possible. This is what I always press upon the participants in the tools for thought workshops. Accordingly, I have not in any way polished up the questions they came up with. Let the tools themselves do the work.

Realize that the quality of a question only emerges through its consequences. When Einstein wondered what it means when two events happen at the same moment, no one was particularly impressed. I suspect that professor Stebbing and Mister Benson would not have welcomed this question from Mister Einstein in their classroom. The power of the question only became clear when it turned out to precipitate the theory of relativity.

Michael Gelven is one of the very few philosophers who thought a lot about erotetic themes recently. In his valuable book *The Asking Mystery; A Philosophical Inquiry* (2000), Gelven makes a crucial distinction between what he calls fundamental questions on the one hand, and ordinary questions on the other hand. The crucial difference, according to Gelven, is that fundamental questions have a reflective as well as a reflexive quality, whereas ordinary questions have not. 'Reflective' means that a person asking is aware of his asking, so that the fact of asking the question is part of the problem which is questioned. For example, when someone asks where she can find the encyclopaedia, chances are that she wants to be informed

of a location, because an ordinary question was meant. If the question would have been: 'Where can I find true knowledge?', chances are that the asker would take the fact of her being able to ask this question into account in searching for an answer. The question qualifies at the same time for being highly 'reflexive', meaning that the search for an answer is likely to affect the inquiring person. There is not only a cognitive and objective ring to the question, but also an existential one. When you learn that the encyclopaedia is in the attic, this might be a valuable piece of information for you. When you are out on an inquiry into the nature of truth, your path is, on top of everything you learn to know about whatever, an act of personal development.

Don't judge a book by its cover; likewise don't judge a question by its formulation. Gelven doesn't: he acknowledges that all kinds of situational characteristic may determine whether a given question is fundamental or ordinary. But taken all these ifs and whens into account, Gelven thinks that ultimately a distinction can be made about the nature of a question: is it ordinary or fundamental? I disagree. I think that every question, even when you ask in a café 'Where's the Ladies?', can be transformed into a fundamental question when approached with fundamental tools. The fundamental is not in the question, but in the handling. Instead of arguing this point, I hope the rest of this book will count up to a convincing case.

One last introductory remark though. I would not recommend to tackle all kind of questions with fundamental tools for thought. You would be regarded as a weird person by the rest of society, which is not a problem of its own, but as a result you would probably end up being very unhappy, which would be an awful waste of your life time. (Unless, of course, you

believe in an after live where a good genius will compensate for all stupidities you committed before your death.) My advice would be to choose your fundamental questions, that is: the issues on which you apply fundamental tools for thought, carefully.