



Exploring Philosophy - Audio

Philosophy in the real world

Winifred

Nigel Warburton is the author of the first book, the one on the Self. He's very keen to stress the extent to which philosophy is rooted in the real world.

Nigel Warburton

Some people think philosophy is just another wordy subject, nothing to do with real life, just for people in ivory towers. I completely disagree with that. That's just not true. For example, we are all going to die. Everybody knows that. We are mortal. And as soon as you realise that you start asking quite naturally the question well what happens next? Do I just decay in the earth or maybe is there some part of me that could survive death? And when you start to question that you very quickly get into ideas about what is the nature of the self? What am I? What could possibly survive death? And when you do that you are in the realm of philosophy and philosophy is everywhere. For example I'm strolling down a busy high street here and there are people milling around. There is nothing much happening particularly but as I look around I can see a whole series of philosophical issues that spontaneously could be coming out of my situation here. So for example there's a church on my left here. People devote many hours of their lives to worshipping a god or doing the right sorts of things that they think will get them to heaven but there is still a fundamental question underneath that: Does God exist? And that is perhaps the most important philosophical question that's been asked in the history of philosophy. It's vexed philosophers for thousands of years. And obviously in recent years in our more secular society there have been very vocal atheists arguing philosophically that there isn't sufficient evidence for God's existence. There's traffic passing me by here and surprise surprise everyone's wearing a seat belt. But why? Well, because the law tells them to presumably. But that law is a paternalistic law. It's telling you do this because it's in your own interest. But we are all adults. Drivers are adults. Shouldn't they be free to make a decision as fundamental as that about their own lives? Well, maybe. Maybe there are issues about whether the State should provide health care for people who are damaged from not wearing seat belts. Maybe not. Maybe people aren't responsible enough to take control of their lives. And underlying all this you know if you start thinking about that, is a basic philosophical question, what are the acceptable limits of freedom in a civilised society? Where do we draw the line? And that is right at the heart of philosophy. That is something that Plato talked about – the thousands of years of discussion of where the line should be drawn between what an individual wants to do and what the State wants that individual to do.

That's an audio reminder that burglary is on the up around here. There is a lot of crime in this area. But when you think about it why shouldn't people take other people's stuff if they want to? What stops us? In Plato's book 'The Republic', there is this great example of The Ring of Gyges. This is a ring that makes you invisible. Now, if you had a ring that made you invisible would you really behave morally? Once again that's a great philosophical question, right at the heart of ethics. Why should I be moral? Speaking of which I am just next to a burger bar and I can smell the smell of burgers cooking coming through here and I'm a bit hungry and I'm really tempted but – we've all seen television documentaries about how meat is produced and there's a big question about whether it's possible to produce a humane beef burger, one that doesn't involve suffering to animals. And this is a really philosophical question you get to very quickly because how do we balance the rights of animals, if indeed they do have rights, against the desires of human beings to eat beef burgers? The question of whether we ought to be vegetarians for example is a philosophical question again. It's really an ethical question.

Just here, I'm passing a dentist. There's a door going up some stairs and there's a dentist up at the top who has got a plentiful supply of anaesthetic. Fortunately we live in a century where anaesthetics are pretty effective but the only reason they're effective is because they're based on medical science. But what is science? Does it reveal the truth about the way the world really is? Again, a big philosophical question and it's come right out of the street. You don't have to go off to your ivory tower for that one. I've been on this street before but that was probably twenty years ago and I've changed quite a bit since then. My hair's a lot shorter than it was and I've put on a bit of weight and certainly I've lost a few cells, probably brain cells, so am I the same person? Obviously there is a continuity in my body but there is still a question whether there is anything that is me that stays the same throughout that. It feels like there is and it's quite natural to think there is a continuing self that doesn't change and I'm changing me behind everything. But perhaps that's just an illusion. Again, you know, this is a philosophical question. Is the self, the experience of the self, merely illusory?