

The 60-Second Philosopher

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The 60-Second Philosopher

Expand your mind on a minute or so a day!

Andrew Pessin



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*Some philosophers believe there is a reason for everything.
This book is dedicated to my three reasons for everything:
ERP, NRP, and GR*

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INTRODUCTION

This book is for the philosopher in you.

You may not be aware that there is one, you may not think you *want* there to be one, but I can assure you not only that there is—but also that, once you let him (or her) out for a bit, you'll be more than glad you did. For philosophy can take you to some pretty amazing places, all without leaving your armchair or spot on the 7:13 a.m. train; and it can show you some pretty amazing things, even without your looking very far. In fact it can show you that the places you go and the things you see each and every day are already pretty amazing. It can thus sharpen your appreciation of the world—and your mind—at the same time.

And best of all, it can do this on just a minute (or so) a day.

True, some really smart thinkers have been debating philosophical questions for nearly three millennia now, with the

work continuing at a fevered pitch even as we speak. But few people these days have the time to plow through three thousand years worth of philosophical writings—not to mention master the Greek and Latin and Hebrew and French and German and maybe even Urdu necessary to grapple with the originals.

This book was designed so that you don't have to.

In its concise chapters I hope it will get you to some of those amazing places and show you some of those amazing things—by getting you to think outside the box, and inside the box, and about the whole idea of boxes.

Of course the first decision to make, in composing the book, was exactly what to include. Well, when you ask two philosophers (they say) you get at least three opinions. So, seeking advice on this book, I asked some seventeen philosophers and received, accordingly, about twenty-five-and-a-half different opinions.* Fortunately they all conflicted with each other about a dozen different ways so I could pretty much ignore everything they said. Instead I asked the philosopher within myself what *he* thought, and the result was the sixty or so opinions constituting this book. Of course they too all conflict with

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each other a dozen different ways, so I asked him if that's something I should worry about it. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when he answered, "Well, it is and it isn't."

That's how things are, in the world of philosophy.

For the conflict of opinions *is* something to worry about when you have to make up your mind about some important problem, since at that time all conflict must be resolved. But until that time you will generally find that an awfully good case can be made for one answer and an awfully good case can be made for an opposing answer. A particular idea might seem appealing until you suddenly come up with an objection to it; but then you might almost as quickly think of a way to respond to the objection. Philosophical reflection is like that: not static, and fixed, but ongoing and dynamic. The conflict of opinions not only *isn't* something to worry about, in fact, it is precisely how things ought to be. For only after you've considered a particular issue from all sides will you be able meaningfully to decide what you think.

This book will give you a lot of sides, of a lot of things, to think about.

You will find herein a healthy sample of some of the major questions, problems, issues, and ideas that have been keeping philosophers busy, in some cases, for nearly three millennia. The essays cover a wide range of topics, from mind to body, from space and time to causation and free will, from knowledge and reason to skepticism and the senses, from absolute

morality to relative morality to the complete rejection of morality, from God to godlessness, and more. Though they are related to each other in various ways and sometimes reference each other, they are also quite self-sufficient and may be read individually, in any order. Most importantly the thoughts within are presented as they present themselves to the philosopher who is grappling with them: in a personal way, in a *first-personal* way, as a puzzle or a paradox or a problem that demands resolution as compellingly as it seems to resist it. So it's no surprise, indeed, that you will often discover arguments leaning in opposite ways, leading towards opposing sides of the issue in question, since that is just how thinking itself naturally proceeds.

For again, only after you've considered all sides will you be in a meaningful position to choose one—when that time comes to decide.

And unfortunately, alas, the philosopher within me cannot make that decision for you. His job, he reminds me, is merely to rouse the philosopher within *you* and to get you thinking—not to tell you what to think.

That's *your* philosopher's job.

1

THE PHILOSOPHER WITHIN YOU

There's the legend of the fish who swam around asking every sea creature he'd meet, "Where is this great ocean I keep hearing about?" A pretty small legend, true—but one with a pretty big message.

We are very much like that fish.

For consider, it's hard to look at a newborn baby without thinking: what an incredible miracle. But when was the last time you looked at an adult and had the same thought? But why not? Every adult *was* a little baby; if the latter is a miracle then so is the former. But it never occurs to us to think this way for one simple reason: we're so used to seeing people that we stop reflecting on them.

Or you drop something, a spoon, and it falls to the floor. But why? Couldn't it, in theory, have remained floating in air or moved upwards? And *how* exactly does it fall to the floor, by

“gravity”? There are no strings connecting the earth to the spoon. How can the earth pull on something from a distance, that it’s not even attached to? Why don’t we pause every time something drops and say: what an incredible miracle!

The most ordinary things contain a whole lifetime of questions, if only we are reminded to start asking them.

Children already know to ask these questions. Every answer you provide to one of their “Why?” questions just generates the next question. But we were all children once. What we need to do now is to let the child still within us—the philosopher within us—re-emerge. What we need now are a few seconds out of our ordinary conceptual habits. We need to take a cold wet plunge into the great deep ocean of thought.

It’s time to start thinking.

RELATED CHAPTER: 60

2

PASSING TIME

Nothing is more familiar than the passage of time. “Seize the day!” they say, because “What’s here today is gone tomorrow.” But while it admittedly *seems* to us that time moves along, it’s just not clear how it does so. For time is not a physical object or a thing: it doesn’t exist first in one place, then in another. But then in what sense, exactly, does it really move?

Indeed if it were truly moving we ought to be able to say how quickly. You may think that clocks measure that rate, but actually that’s not quite right.

What a clock measures, in fact, is not time but rather how some physical things are correlated with other physical things. You glance at the clock and see that it reads 1:13 p.m., and then glance again and see 1:15 p.m. Those two glances are correlated with those two readings, apparently measuring two minutes of time. But now imagine that between those glances

everything in the universe sped up together, including your brain activity and thoughts and sensations and the mechanisms of the clock. Those two glances would still be correlated with those two readings, but less than two minutes would have passed—and you’d never notice the difference. So the clock isn’t actually measuring the time itself!

If we’re really to imagine time itself moving, distinct from all physical things, we must imagine the universe to be entirely empty of all physical things and ask ourselves whether time would still flow. Again, it’s tempting to say yes. But then remember that it’s an *empty* universe: there is nothing in it. But if there is truly nothing in it, then nothing can be happening, nothing can be occurring, and nothing can really be moving.

“Time flies”, they also say, “when you’re having fun.” I’m all in favor of having fun. But having fun won’t pass the time more quickly, if time doesn’t really pass at all.

RELATED CHAPTER: 40

3

THE WOMAN OF MY DREAMS

We all know that experience: some exquisite, beautiful dream, into which the alarm clock suddenly and rudely intrudes. We wake up, and our day begins.

Or does it?

Can you in fact be sure that you're not dreaming right now—that you haven't been dreaming your entire life? This is not merely a sleepy philosophers' question. For if you can't be sure you haven't been dreaming, then how can you be sure that *anything* you believe about the world is true?

Could you pinch yourself? Well, you could. But then how would you know that you didn't just dream the pinch itself and then transition into a different dream?

Indeed I once decided to keep a log of my dreams. I quickly found that on waking I couldn't remember the dreams I'd had earlier in the night, so I started waking up during the night to

write them down. A few nights of this interrupted sleep and I was exhausted! So my body (or mind) got the better of me: I woke up one morning to discover that my notebook was actually empty. I had only *dreamed* I had woken up to write down my dreams!

At that point I knew I was defeated. But I also knew I had a deep problem. I am positive, right now, 100%, that I am awake and writing this. I'm also positive, right now, 100%, that I have a wife, that I have a physical body, and that other physical objects exist, because I perceive all these things. But then again I was equally positive during my failed experiment that I was awake and writing down dreams. And look how far that got me.

Could it be, then, that nearly everything I believe about the world is false? That even my lovely, lovely wife is only literally the woman of my dreams?

RELATED CHAPTERS: 30, 42, 52, 56