

PREFACE

When I'm good, I'm very, very good; but when I'm bad,
I'm better.

Mae West

In these pages you will find philosophy – if you look. My recommendation is that you look first, rather than read this preface first. It is often better to taste than be told about tasting; better to love than be told about loving; and better to puzzle than be told about puzzling. So, I'll start this introduction again, for when (or if) you return to this page. I hope you will return, for here too there are puzzles.

In these pages you will find philosophy – if you look. My recommendation is that . . . I'd better not start all over again and engage in the endlessness which triggers certain unusual tales and puzzles; see, for example, *Therapy for tortoises* and *Just hanging around* (Chapters 5 and 11).

In these pages you *will* find philosophy; you will also find the puzzling, the paradoxical, the perplexing. You will find tales and tall stories, reasons and arguments, common sense and bizarre conclusions. While there are thirty-three chapters, there are, paradoxically, many more than thirty-three paradoxes or puzzles, taking us from saints and sinners, to the perils of love, to murders swathed with innocence, to the distress of a robot, to the metaphysics of time and to the myths of democracy.

Although the tone is largely light, some of the matters are deadly serious: sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically. They are, indeed, matters that matter. Although their presentation is as paradoxes and puzzles, paradoxes and puzzles give rise to some of the deepest problems in philosophy: in metaphysics, logic and epistemology; in ethics, politics and aesthetics. Although the tales and reflections are, I hope, stimulating and sometimes amusing, they are not, I trust, ‘dumbed down’. They make some challenging thoughts more readily accessible than they often are but they are not intended to suggest that the matters are not genuinely difficult, complex and unresolved.

I should like to think that this book is for everyone – for every woman, every man and every child – who is inclined to puzzle about the universe, about themselves and others and about how we should – and do – live and, yes, about grains of sand, bikini tops and sexual desire. I should like to think that this book appeals to people with no acquaintance with

philosophy as well as to those with some and, indeed, to those with considerable acquaintance who may find it useful to be reminded of some puzzles for their next lecture series.

I should like to think those things but whether I should think them is another matter. That distinction, the distinction between what we should like to think and what we should think, is one at the heart of this book. The paradoxes, puzzles and perplexities that follow show us that some of the things that we should like to think – that our reasoning, ethics and practices raise no questions – are not justified. Paradoxes, puzzles and perplexities remind us that there is a distinction – a further distinction – between what appears to be so and what is really so.

‘Food for thought’ could aptly describe this work. Philosophy feeds those who want to muse, meditate and mull; it also feeds those who initially lack pleasure in such mental activities but who, once exposed to the subject’s bafflements, acquire a taste for it that rarely goes away. The philosopher’s cuisine is generous. Here is a *smorgasbord* (I’ve always wanted to write that) of paradoxes, puzzles and perplexities concerning the nature of time and space, of free will and determinism, of the self (what am I?) and of what morality demands.

Paradoxes, puzzles, perplexities – and Monty Hall

A witty quip, such as the one from Mae West that heads this preface, can momentarily puzzle because it seems to involve contradiction. But then revelation occurs, quelling the

seeming – in this case, by our becoming aware of the alluded ambiguity of ‘good’ and ‘bad’; well, good and bad at what?

Philosophical problems can often be cast as paradoxes, puzzles or perplexities which fascinate through generating apparent contradictions. We strive for revelation; we seek for the ambiguity, the false presupposition, the mistake in reasoning, to ease our unease. Yet the answers continue to leave many dissatisfied, either because they are unconvinced by some steps or because the answers raise new perplexities. The contradictions are often deeply rooted in our lives or language; ‘surely, something has gone wrong’, for we resist the thought that the world could itself be contradictory: how could it be? A contradiction can be readily produced in the sense of writing it down or saying it. I could easily say, ‘This page contains a million words and it does not contain a million words.’ But what I said could not possibly describe how things are or could be. What sense can be made of the thought that one and the same city, Athens, is both capital of Greece and not capital of Greece? How can the world be such a place that space is divisible, yet not divisible? What grasp can be made of our having free will, yet everything we do also being determined by events not under our will?

Some philosophers use the term ‘paradox’ very narrowly, very formally, concerning just those apparent contradictions that derive directly from our grasp of the nature of truth, of meaning or of mathematics. I – and many others – use the term far more widely, employing ‘paradoxes’, ‘puzzles’ and ‘perplexities’ more or less interchangeably. In this sense, a paradox

arises when there is a clash in our beliefs, a clash that we cannot readily resolve, for the beliefs are either highly plausible or derive from other highly plausible beliefs, as, I hope, the following pages bring out.

A paradox involves a piece of reasoning, a piece of reasoning that strikes us as excellent. The reasoning starts with some premisses – beliefs, propositions or principles – which seem obviously true. When we reason from true premisses – and our reasoning does not go wrong – we reach true conclusions. A paradox, however, has a conclusion that, in some way, hits us as manifestly false, unacceptable or undesirable – a conclusion that contradicts what we take to be obviously true. What has gone wrong? Can we spot errors within the reasoning or are there underlying assumptions that merit rejection? May one or more of the premisses – which appear so blatantly true – not be true? Or perhaps we need to embrace the conclusion that seems so obviously false? Something has to give.

Something has to give because, although we may casually speak of this being a contradictory world, we cannot, as already mentioned, make sense of the world really being contradictory. We cannot make sense of its being the case that you are both reading these words and not reading these words at the same time. On the one hand, you may be doing something else as well as reading these words and, on the other hand, you may be doing something less than reading; skimming but not paying attention, and so on. But you cannot both be reading and not reading at the same time.

All these puzzles continue to keep philosophers in business, arguing over what are the right answers. All reveal long-standing philosophical problems. Many are traditional but I've given a fair number a new look. I have deliberately ignored examples, often to do with probability, that typically strike people as reaching surprising conclusions yet over which there is no serious dispute about the reasoning and no serious dispute about which answers are right. Perhaps I should add a caveat to that disregard of mine; for let me offer one example: the Monty Hall Show.

In the Monty Hall Show, there are three doors, A, B and C. One door has a desirable prize behind it. The other two doors each have a goat behind them. (For this puzzle we assume that goats are neither desirable nor desired but we are perhaps being speciesist; see Chapter 17 *Girl, cage, chimp*.) You want the prize and you can play a sequence of games. Which door hides the prize is chosen at random. Consider a game. You choose a door: say A. Perhaps you choose it in each game; that is irrelevant. Maybe a goat lurks behind door A; maybe the prize. You do not yet know. Your chosen door remains closed but the show's commère or presenter – and she knows what is behind each door – opens one of the other doors, B or C, to show you where one of the goats sits. (There is bound to be at least one goat that she can display, for even if there is a goat behind your chosen door A, there must be another behind either B or C.) Let us say that she opens B, displaying a goat. She then asks you if you want to change your choice from door A to B or C.

Obviously, you do not want to change to B (for that hides a goat) but you could change from A to C. You do not know whether the prize is behind A or C. All that you have discovered is that B is definitely ruled out. The puzzle is: is it rational to change your mind? That is, would you increase your chances of winning, over a sequence of games, if you changed your mind each time?

The solution, a solution over which thoughtful philosophers and mathematicians are agreed, is provided in ‘Notes, sources and references’ at the end of this book. In contrast to Monty Hall, the other problems in this book continue to give rise to perplexities – usually significant perplexities – in philosophy and for philosophers.

I have sought, in the main, to provide big and famous puzzles, with allusions to many others. I have also provided steers towards possible solutions – or, better, dissolutions – of the problems. Many great minds, over many centuries, have battled with the underlying problems; many great minds, over many centuries, have given conflicting answers. You may rightly reason that this author, therefore, is unlikely to be giving many (if any) definitive answers – and certainly I make no pretence to ‘the’ answers. In the pages that follow there are suggested approaches to resolution.

Wittgenstein considered giving his major work, *Philosophical Investigations*, a Shakespearean motto, ‘I teach you differences.’ In a short introductory work, there is the danger of not sufficiently heeding that teaching – the danger of letting

fine distinctions, caveats and qualifications fall by the wayside. It is useful, when reflecting on the paradoxes, to look out for conflations, slidings and sleights of hand. None, I hasten to add, has been wittingly included. Although the book possesses its fair share of ‘may’s, ‘maybe’s and ‘perhaps’s, there is perhaps (!) value in quoting John Maynard Keynes who writes, ‘. . . the author must, if he is to put his point of view clearly, pretend sometimes to a little more conviction than he feels.’

Using this book

It was once commonly said that an apple a day keeps the doctor away. Who knows what the current, and no doubt transient, health advice is? Let us have some non-transient health advice for our minds. Here we have a puzzle a day, with two or three to spare, for a calendar month, or a puzzle a week for a good half-year. Each puzzle stands alone; there is no preferred order for reading them. If this book has any value, it is in its readers dipping in and pondering on the perplexities raised.

Let a paradox linger in your mind. If you prefer metaphorical flights of fancy, consider a paradox as an unusual wine or beer: swirl it around within your mouth, take in the flavour, sense new nuances of scent. You may find yourself enjoying the drink, uncovering more hidden temptations as you sip on. Enjoy, too, the intoxication of these wine-dark puzzles, but beware of intoxications interfering with reasoning.

If you have a strong dislike for such metaphorical flowers and flavours, forget the wine and beer – just think hard about the paradox and where it leads. Take it with you on your way to work, play or sleep; muse upon it with colleagues, friends or lovers; ponder upon it in the bar, bath or bed. Spread the paradoxes around. Philosophy is contagious and, in this instance, contagion is for the good.

Socrates went overboard, perhaps, when he told us that the unexamined life is not worth living; sometimes we feel that it is best not to examine some aspects of life. Certainly, for most people, there is value in reflecting on the universe and our place within. Aristotle commented that philosophy begins with curiosity and wonder. I hope that these puzzles will set you a-wondering and becoming more curious; hence I have provided quite a few detailed notes and references together with some, more general, further reading.