

# Personal Vision of Philosophy

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The word "philosophy" comes from two Greek words: "philo," which means love, and "sophia," which means wisdom. So philosophy means literally "the love of wisdom." But what does it mean to love wisdom?

To me, loving wisdom has two parts. First, to love wisdom is to want to know the truth about things, to want to know and understand the world the way it really is. This means following the investigation wherever it takes us, even if it is inconvenient, or difficult, or different from what I was taught to think it was and different from what those around me believe. We tend to have the habit of seeking comfort rather than truth, so to want to understand things even when it means having to admit we were mistaken or been acting unwisely requires a real commitment to and a love for what one is seeking: wisdom.

Second, to love wisdom is to want to make it a part of my life, to live in accordance with the wisdom that I have found. As I see it, philosophy is not about a form of verbal recreation, talking only, it is a way of life. Philosophy is about learning to live more consciously and transforming my day to day life in light of the wisdom that I have acquired. If something I am doing is having a negative impact on the life prospects of others or the environment and does not make sense to me, then I want to stop doing it; I need to commit myself to making a change in my life. Because I want to live more wisely environmentally, for example, the handouts you receive in my classes will be printed on the backs of sheets of paper that have already been used once, and I will ask you to do your assignments on used paper, too.

Socrates once said that "The unexamined life is not worth living." So much of what we do in our lives is done because it is what we see others doing or it is the way we have always done it. We tend to unconsciously follow "life scripts" that tell us who we are (as males and females, as workers, as students) and what we are supposed to do next (graduate from high school, go to college, get a job, get married, have children, work for forty years 40 hours per week, retire at "retirement age," and spend the rest of our lives driving around the country in an RV and going out to eat). Where do these scripts come from? Do they really make sense? How much of what we believe and do would be entirely different if we had been born in another country in another part of the world? Do I want to be doing something just because I happened to be born here rather than China? Philosophy attempts to move us away from believing and doing things out of habit or custom or culture and to move us toward starting to make more conscious choices about what we will believe and how we will live.

The approach that I take in my classes is not one which is historical in nature. Our purpose is not to learn what this or that great philosopher thought about some question that interested them. Our purpose is to try to find our own answers to questions about our own lives that interest US. Who am I as a person? What direction do I want to be going in life? How can I

live a life that is true to what makes sense to me (true to my commitment to living consciously and wisely) in a society that often tells me I should be doing something that does not make sense to me? We will certainly be reading what philosophers have had to say about these questions, but our focus will be on understanding what they have said that may be wise, and on finding ways to apply that wisdom in our own lives.

I believe that philosophy is about transforming one's personal life; it is about finding a life path that is intelligent and wise. The Buddha taught that there are basically two kinds of lives. The first, he called random or "wandering about." This is the person who is unreflective and is pulled this way and that by various outside forces, like a leaf in the wind. The second kind of life he called "having a path." This is a life that has a consciously chosen direction to it; this is living intentionally. Tolstoy has a wonderful metaphor for describing this. The first kind of life is like drifting in a boat in the river, going wherever the current and wind may take you. The second kind of life is picking up the oars, pointing the boat in a direction that you have consciously chosen, and rowing.

Part of living more consciously is recognizing that our choices influence other people. If I do something, other people will see me doing it, and that creates a choice for them that perhaps they didn't know they had. "Oh... Dale is using second hand paper for environmental reasons in his classes; I had not thought of that. I wonder if I should be doing that?" Secondly, if I do something, whether I like it or not it makes the nonverbal statement to people that "Dale thinks it is ok to do that; after all, he is doing it himself." If I drive 80 mph on the freeway, I am telling other people that I believe this is an ok thing to do. That makes it a little easier for them to do it, too. Is that a result I want to be producing in the world? Living more consciously requires that I examine the impact of my actions. As Gandhi once said, "We must BE the change we wish to see in the world." If I want a more peaceful world, I must begin with ME and become a more peaceful person myself.

I believe that philosophy is concerned with developing a sense of personal integrity. We need to heal the prevalent split in our culture between what we say our personal beliefs are and what we actually do in our personal actions. To do so is to live consciously, wisely, and to be at peace.

"...Do not speak much...about philosophical theories and precepts: but do that which follows from them. For example, at a banquet do not say how a person ought to eat, but eat as you ought to eat. ...For even as sheep do not vomit up their grass to show how much and how well they have eaten; but when they have digested the pasture... [their health and energy is obvious for all to see]. Do you also not show your theories to people, but show the acts which come from their digestion." Epictetus