

# My Philosophy

This essay sets out my personal philosophy. It is the end-product of a decades-long process of intellectual self-discovery, and as such it is of great significance to me, and it may be of some interest generally. But the existence of this essay does not mean that I intend to influence the personal philosophy of any other individual, or to contribute to philosophy as an academic discipline. Rather, my intention is merely to record for posterity my way of looking at the world and my place in it. Make of it what you will.

For reasons that shall become evident, I will describe my personal philosophy under the following headings: Identities; Perspectives; Aspirations; Values; Ideas. And for reasons of maintaining interest I will get on with it.

## Identities

Who am I? This simple question does not have a simple answer, for it depends on who's asking, and who's being asked. My father? My mother? My wife? My son? My son's wife? My wife's sister's son? My neighbour? My barber? My doctor? My publisher? My former employer? My friend from school? My friend from work? My parliamentary representative? My notional bank manager? An imaginary all-seeing eye? A security algorithm? A database? You? Me? The list of potential interviewers and interviewees is limited only by our patience and imagination.

Who am I? The answer depends also on the context and the reason for the question. Does it require reference to my ancestors? My descendants? My loves? My friendships? My credentials? My titles? My roles? My possessions? My skills? My achievements? My experiences? My deeds? My aspirations? My interests? My values? My beliefs? My ideas? My opinions? My outgrown former selves? My imagined future selves? Again, the scope for variation seems limitless.

From these observations I conclude that I am defined through my associations.

By 'associations' I mean 'associations between percepts', and by 'percepts' I mean 'mental impressions of sights or sounds or other sensations'. These definitions are from my book *How to Make a Mind* (HMM), where they are discussed at some length. I will not repeat any of that discussion here; suffice it to say that it effectively resolves several fundamental theoretical problems in fields as diverse as artificial intelligence (AI)<sup>1</sup> and analytic philosophy<sup>2</sup>. But I will point out that the present assertion, 'I am defined through my associations', follows directly from a general proposition, 'Everything is defined through its associations', which in turn may be inferred from the argument in HMM that it is only through the complex connectivity of their associations that we can apprehend the relative significance, or 'meaning', of percepts.

From these arguments I conclude that the definition of my identity depends wholly upon the circumstances of its perception. But does this mean that I have multiple identities, or even that I have no identity at all? Not at all. It means that I belong to a small select group of people who are able to look at themselves from many different perspectives, and who resist the natural instinct to categorise themselves with a simple label: 'middle age', or 'middle class', or 'middle England', for example. Paradoxically, this small select group of people is easy to identify and label: we are 'free thinkers'.

Who am I? I am a free thinker, and all identities are alike to me.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See HMM, in particular, chapters 4 and 9.

<sup>2</sup> See my notes on Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*, MyPhilNotes.pdf, 20-22 May 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rudyard Kipling, *Just So Stories, The Cat that Walked by Himself*: 'I am the Cat who walks by himself, and all places are alike to me.'

## Perspectives

When I look at the world, I take the following perspective: that nothing exists other than the singular material universe, with all its stars and planets and dross and gas and light and space, including our planet Earth, with all its land and sea and air and plants and creatures and people; that every material entity in this universe came into existence through the automatic operation of many competing physical processes, the discovery of which is the core purpose of our natural sciences; and that the perpetuation or the termination of these same material entities is governed by just these same physical processes, entirely independent of the supposed operation of any supernatural power. In other words: whether as creator or sustainer or destroyer, god does not exist.

When I look at the presence of people in the world, I take the following perspective: that all people exist by virtue of the same physical processes that govern their environment; that they happen to be endowed with the potential to develop certain cognitive faculties; and that among these faculties are consciousness, free will, and originality.<sup>4</sup> It has long been a mystery to philosophers how this intellectual autonomy could have emerged in an avowedly unthinking universe. Some argue that ‘complexity’ (howsoever defined) cannot increase by itself, thereby justifying their belief in the operation of an external higher power. But while this might be true for idealised systems which are thermodynamically closed, it is not true for open and dynamic environments such as the surface of the Earth, where it seems that complexity only ever gives rise to yet more complexity. In other words: human cognitive faculties are not god-given, and the human soul does not exist.<sup>5</sup>

When I look at the great seething mass of humanity, I take the following perspective: that global overpopulation is an imminent and overwhelming crisis which threatens our very existence as a species; that at the very least it is the personal responsibility of every individual to exercise radical birth control; that this is a policy which no democratic government will dare to promote, for fear of igniting tribalist, racialist, sectarian, or libertarian extremism; and that all of these manifestations of the supremacist instinct receive essential ideological affirmation from the universal religious doctrine that mankind is at the pinnacle of creation. In other words: religion is blighting our hopes of survival.

When I look at my place in the world, I take the following perspective: that, by any measure, I am insignificant; and that, at the same time, I am unique. That is, whilst I am just one thinking being amongst many, all populating just one habitable planet amongst many, only I can think my thoughts, some of which are entirely original. This latter acknowledgement of my individuality is not to be found in the holy scriptures of any of the established religions. Therefore, in order to derive any sense of personal worth and purpose, I turn instead to the ancient pagan maxim, ‘Know thyself’. In other words: the purpose of my life is to develop and demonstrate my own ideas.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the United States Declaration of Independence: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’

<sup>5</sup> See HMM chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the Bahai short obligatory prayer: ‘I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.’

## Aspirations

When I was young I wanted to save the world. Subsequently I have found it wiser to assume that the world cannot be saved. Not by me, anyway.

From 1987 until 2011 I worked full-time in a succession of government and ex-government laboratories. Over this period I applied my knowledge and skills to a wide variety of technical problems, most of which, I felt, required the development and demonstration of original solutions. Increasingly, however, my employers took a different view, based more on expediency and office politics than on technical merit.<sup>7</sup> Consequently I have not found paid employment to be a rewarding experience, except insofar as it has enabled me to support my family financially.

Following the birth of my son I have found that parenthood is an entirely satisfactory end-in-itself. If in years to come I am remembered only as the father of Arjun Kingdon then that's fine by me.

More recently I have found it insightful to draw a distinction between 'herd-dwellers' and 'herd-quitters', and to place myself in the latter category.<sup>8</sup> Thus I identify strongly with the predicament of the fictional Paul Pennyfeather<sup>9</sup> and with the later lyrics of John Lennon<sup>10</sup>. I'm just watching the wheels, man.

And that's all I have to say about aspirations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See HMM chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> HMM page 131: 'The majority of folk, those who follow the herd and who remain safe and secure within the comforting confines of their reactive System 1s, are perpetually haunted by the nagging worry that they're missing something in life. But for the instinctive herd-dweller the prospect of examining his own life is deeply unsettling, and so he seeks distraction in company, entertainment, activity, ritual, and oblivion. The remaining minority of folk, those who detach from the herd and who forge their own paths into the wilderness by means of their frame-breaking System 2s, are perpetually haunted by the gnawing anxiety that they're always alone and lonely. But for the instinctive herd-quitter the prospect of following a well-trodden path is a complete anathema, and so she indulges in her own company, pastimes, schemes, obsessions, and fantasies.'

<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*, Otto to Paul: 'Shall I tell you about life? ... Well, it's like the big wheel at Luna Park. ... You pay five francs and go into a room with tiers of seats all around, and in the centre the floor is made of a great disc of polished wood that revolves quickly. At first you sit down and watch the others. They are all trying to sit in the wheel, and they keep getting flung off, and that makes them laugh, and you laugh too. It's great fun. ... You see, the nearer you can get to the hub of the wheel the slower it is moving and the easier it is to stay on. There's generally someone in the centre who stands up and sometimes does a sort of dance. Often he's paid by the management, though, or, at any rate, he's allowed in free. Of course at the very centre there's a point completely at rest, if one could only find it: I'm not sure I am not very near that point myself. Of course the professional men get in the way. Lots of people just enjoy scrambling on and being whisked off and scrambling on again. How they all shriek and giggle! Then there are others, like Margot, who sit as far out as they can and hold on for dear life and enjoy that. But the whole point about the wheel is that you needn't get on it at all, if you don't want to. People get hold of ideas about life, and that makes them think they've got to join in the game, even if they don't enjoy it. It doesn't suit everyone. | People don't see that when they say "life" they mean two different things. They can mean simply existence, with its physiological implications of growth and organic change. They can't escape that – even by death, but because that's inevitable they think the other idea of life is too – the scrambling and excitement and bumps and the effort to get to the middle, and when we do get to the middle, it's just as if we never started. It's so odd. | Now you're a person who was clearly meant to stay in the seats and sit still and if you get bored watch the others. Somehow you got on to the wheel, and you got thrown off again at once with a hard bump. It's all right for Margot, who can cling on, and for me, at the centre, but you're static. Instead of this absurd division into sexes they ought to class people as static and dynamic. There's a real distinction there, though I can't tell you how it comes. I think we're probably two quite different species spiritually.'

<sup>10</sup> John Lennon, *Watching the Wheels*: 'I'm just sitting here watching the wheels go round and round | I really love to watch them roll | No longer riding on the merry-go-round | I just had to let it go'.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Forrest Gump*: 'And that's all I have to say about that.'

## Values

By ‘values’ I mean ‘morals’ or ‘ethical principles’. In my view, the common basis of all values is the deeply-held sense of fairness which I presume is felt by most people. By ‘fairness’ I mean ‘equality’, ‘justice’, or ‘fair-dealing’, depending on the context. And, in my view, the basis of this deeply-held sense of fairness is the balanced two-way relationship which results from the repeated bilateral exchange of goods and services between individuals. For example, a mother gives comfort and food to her baby, and in return the baby desists from whining and dining. This implicit trade agreement isn’t ordained by holy scripture or underwritten by contract law, nevertheless it works for both parties. Repeated many times for many people in a society, it gives rise to a collective notion of what is fair, which in turn becomes the basis of what the society considers to be ‘right’, that is, morally acceptable behaviour.<sup>12</sup>

Earlier I asserted the general proposition, ‘Everything is defined through its associations’. One of the implications of this statement is that Plato’s ‘forms’, also known as ‘universals’, do not exist.<sup>13</sup> And one of the implications of this statement is that concepts which traditionally are seen as absolute and universal and innate, such as values and principles and beliefs, have no such special status, and instead they are to be counted amongst the very many percept-generating ‘inputs on a number of levels’ that I have listed on page 86 of HMM. And one of the implications of this statement is that my personal philosophy would be incomplete if it did not identify the particular values by which I have chosen to regulate my behaviour. So here goes.

Although none of them can be said to be absolute and universal and innate, the values underpinning the Universal Declaration of Human Rights collectively constitute the pre-eminent ethical standard for the establishment and propagation of civil society in this day. I have no reason to quibble with these values, and I have no reason not to adopt them as the basis of my personal moral code. I am particularly mindful of Article 29(1), ‘Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.’ It is only by obeying the law of the land that I can expect to have the freedom to develop and demonstrate my own ideas. And it is only by respecting the right of others to develop and demonstrate their own ideas that I can expect them to do the same for me.

Frequently in discussions of ethical theory one is presented with an idealised scenario in which two or more values are said to be in conflict. It is questionable whether any such moral quandaries ever occur in real life; but, if they did, my approach would be to try to take several perspectives of the problem before committing to an irreversible response. To be precise, I would try to take each of the five distinct perspectives of the ‘IDEAL learning styles’ – the ‘Empiricist’, the ‘Idealist’, the ‘Activist’, the ‘Conformist’, and the ‘Theorist’ – which between them provide a complete and coherent description of any closed situation or event or idea. On page 15 of my book *Principia Intellegentia* (PI) I summarise this approach as *Omnis extremus, sed non in extremis*, ‘To be every extremist – but none too much’, which itself is a minor elucidation of the ancient pagan maxim, ‘Nothing to excess’.

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<sup>12</sup> These comments are derived from my notes on ethical theory, MyPhilNotes.pdf, 14 January – 14 May 2017.

<sup>13</sup> See my notes on Bertrand Russell’s *The Problems of Philosophy*, MyPhilNotes.pdf, 20-22 May 2017.

## Ideas

I've had a number of original ideas, the best of which are described on my website, [www.ideialectic.com](http://www.ideialectic.com). And of these there is one idea which is quite outstanding, because it is the means by which all the other ideas have come about. This is the 'Iterative Dialectic Engine for Automated Learning', or 'IDEAL' for short. In PI I define IDEAL as a 'high-level description of how humans learn', and in HMM I define it as a 'high-level design for a robot control system'. But for present purposes I prefer yet another definition, as follows: IDEAL is a flowchart representation of a novel learning technique which I consider to be the very essence of true scientific method. This learning technique has two components, 'iterative development' and 'the toolkit approach'.

Iterative development is also known as System 1, pattern recognition, deep learning, and normal science, to psychologists, computer programmers, AI researchers, and philosophers of science, respectively. Based on a simple observe-reflect-conjecture-test procedure, iterative development places a strong emphasis on repeating this learning cycle as quickly and as often as possible.

The toolkit approach is also known as System 2, multiple perspectives, meta-learning, and paradigm-shifting, to psychologists, decision scientists, AI researchers, and philosophers of science, respectively. Here the emphasis is on 'using the right tool for the job' and on 'breaking the frame' of a single fixed view. Accordingly, this is where the five IDEAL learning styles may be implemented. For example, this essay comprises five sections, headed Identities, Perspectives, Aspirations, Values, and Ideas, each of which takes the distinct perspective of the Empiricist, the Idealist, the Activist, the Conformist, and the Theorist, respectively. And it is my view that this essay is a complete and coherent account of my philosophy.

**R D Kingdon**

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