

## ***My Philosophy* five-year review**

This essay started out as a new version of *My Philosophy*, but after much tinkering I've had to accept that what I was doing was little more than removing the footnotes, which scarcely constitutes an intellectual advance. So *My Philosophy* remains at version 3, as published on my website; and, taking advantage of the passage of time, this essay has become a five-year review of that landmark statement.<sup>1</sup> This in itself is significant, because it shows the extent to which I've come to rely on *My Philosophy* as 'my way of looking at the world and my place in it'. Indeed, it has become my scout, my teacher, my commander, my companion, my secret formula. One example will suffice, as follows.

Like most people, I suppose, I've experienced the anguish of bereavement. And like many people I've responded to this anguish in a variety of ways, most of which are described reasonably well by the Kübler-Ross 'five stages of grief' model.<sup>2</sup> Thus: 'denial', check; 'anger', check; 'bargaining', check; and 'depression', probably. Significantly, however, I simply don't recognise the model's fifth stage, 'acceptance'. On the contrary, I don't suppose that I'll ever 'accept', 'get over', or 'come to terms with' the anguish of personal bereavement. What I have been able to do is progressively identify the particular stimuli that trigger grief-laden emotions, and to assert control over them, for example, by announcing (to myself and sometimes to others) 'You grieve in your way, and I'll grieve in mine!' That is, my response to this stage of grief invokes an instinct for autonomy which is entirely absent from any usual understanding of 'acceptance'. In my case, this stage of grief would be better described as 'detachment'. As for the role of *My Philosophy* in all this: one of its underpinning ideas is the existence of five distinct 'IDEAL learning styles'; in *Principia Intellegentia* p.205 I map the five stages of grief to these learning styles, with 'acceptance' attributed to the 'Theorist'; seeing myself more as a Theorist than any other kind of person, I'm well-aware of its attributes, and I've never felt particularly comfortable with the inclusion of 'acceptance'; so when it was my turn to experience bereavement my adherence to *My Philosophy* naturally led me to reconsider this attribution more closely; with the result that I now feel that I've a much better understanding of the grieving process; which intellectual satisfaction has brought me real benefits, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, and socially; simply put, despite experiencing the anguish of bereavement, I feel at peace with myself and my world.

Most people, I suppose, will be left utterly nonplussed by the preceding paragraph. I make no apology for that: I didn't write it for 'most people', I wrote it for me; or, more accurately, I wrote it in support of *My Philosophy*, which I've clearly demarcated from the personal philosophy of any other individual. Nevertheless, this begs the question of why I should publish anything at all on this topic. If it's so personal, why not keep it to myself?

As I said, *My Philosophy* is a personal statement which sets out my way of looking at the world and my place in it. But now I add, *My Philosophy* is underpinned by a set of ideas of sufficient generality that they may well 'influence the personal philosophy of any other individual', and indeed 'contribute to philosophy as an academic discipline'. It is these underpinning ideas – such as IDEAL learning styles – which have been the main focus of my reading and analysis for many years, both before and after the publication of *My Philosophy*. And it is these underpinning ideas which are the main focus of the remainder of this review. I consider them to be true and insightful; but, as ever, you are free to make of them what you will.

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<sup>1</sup> RDK, *My Philosophy*, <http://www.idealectic.com/idealectic/MyPhilosophy03.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five\\_stages\\_of\\_grief](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_stages_of_grief)

In describing my personal philosophy I've used a set of five headings, {Identities, Perspectives, Aspirations, Values, Ideas}. Likewise, for reasons that shall become evident, in describing the ideas underpinning my personal philosophy I've categorised them according to the five main areas of philosophical enquiry, {Ontology, Cosmology, Teleology, Deontology, Epistemology}. But most people will find these words to be wholly incomprehensible, so in the following headings I've expressed them as the five fundamental questions, {What am I, Where am I, Why am I here, What are the rules, How do I proceed}. And for reasons of maintaining interest I'll get on with it.

### **What am I?**

But what then am I? A thinking thing. And what is that? Something that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and also senses and has mental images.<sup>3</sup>

So thought Descartes. But what is thinking?

Thinking is nothing more and nothing less than recognition.<sup>4</sup>

That's the ultra-reductionist formula. The next level up is reached using Kahneman's two-system model of the mind:<sup>5</sup>

System 1 cognition is nothing more and nothing less than recognition, that is, matching patterns between percepts, while System 2 cognition is nothing more and nothing less than meta-recognition, that is, matching patterns between patterns. Accordingly, System 1 cognition is best served by a 'literal' language comprising little more than proper nouns expressed audibly, while System 2 cognition requires an 'abstract' language comprising nouns, verbs, adjectives, quantifiers, and so on, expressed audibly and in a written form requiring the use of an alphabet.<sup>6</sup>

And that has made all the difference:

For all animals, including humans, cognition is essentially a matter of *pattern recognition*. Uniquely, however, humans have learnt to organise these perceived patterns through their use of *language*, and to enhance their language through their use of *writing*, and to clarify their writing through their use of a modular *alphabet*. Together, these practical innovations have opened up a boundless 'inner space' of *conceptual abstraction*, which in turn has facilitated the emergence of all of the higher-level cognitive traits and faculties that we associate with the human mind, or the human soul.<sup>7</sup>

So far so good. But this enlightened insight has a dark side, because it also implies that the routine mental processing of an illiterate person will be effectively indistinguishable from that of a non-human animal. Thus many will judge this to be an offensively exclusive doctrine of superiority over those unfortunate souls who have yet to learn to read and write, the unacceptable nadir of intellectual arrogance. An alternative perspective is that this modest proposal merely restores non-human animals to their rightful place as equally-privileged fellow inhabitants of a common shared environment, and it emphasises the critical contribution of literacy to human development and civilisation. Naturally I prefer the latter interpretation.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meditations\\_on\\_First\\_Philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meditations_on_First_Philosophy)

<sup>4</sup> RDK, *How to Make a Mind* p.159.

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thinking,\\_Fast\\_and\\_Slow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thinking,_Fast_and_Slow)

<sup>6</sup> RDK, ideas4.doc 23/4/20.

<sup>7</sup> RDK, *Insights*, <http://www.idealistic.com/idealistic/Insights07.pdf>

## Where am I?

As I said, through our use of language we humans have opened up a boundless inner space of conceptual abstraction. This prospect has sent many a philosopher into the deep despair of existential angst, as they contemplated their utter insignificance in comparison with the infinite universe of intellectual endeavour. Whilst such dejection is understandable, nevertheless it is misplaced, because it overlooks the foundational role played by language itself. Consider: what precisely is required of a language for it to be capable of expressing anything at all of an abstract nature? In my view, such a language must be able to distinguish:

- (1) A subject from its setting (or, equivalently, an agent from its environment);
- (2) An object from its associations (or, equivalently, an article from its influences);
- (3) An action from its effects (or, equivalently, a command from its consequences);
- (4) A rule from its implementation (or, equivalently, a value from a fact);
- (5) A plan from its scenario (or, equivalently, an answer from a question).<sup>8</sup>

In order to draw these distinctions the language must include, respectively:

- (1) Proper nouns, common nouns;
- (2) Operators (for example, in English, the irregular verbs *to be* and *to have*), prepositions;
- (3) Verbs, imperatives;
- (4) Modal verbs, adjectives;
- (5) Conditionals, interrogatives.

It is no surprise that this list includes all of the essential components of a modern language such as English. Indeed, form ever follows function. But what is surprising is the way in which this list also maps to the five main areas of philosophical enquiry:

- (1) In distinguishing a subject from its setting one is enquiring into its intrinsic nature, that is, engaging in ontology;
- (2) In distinguishing an object from its associations one is enquiring into the nature of its world, that is, engaging in cosmology;
- (3) In distinguishing an action from its effects one is enquiring into its objective and outcome, that is, engaging in teleology;
- (4) In distinguishing a rule from its implementation one is enquiring into its extent and enforcement, that is, engaging in deontology;
- (5) In distinguishing a plan from its scenario one is enquiring into its validation and verification, that is, engaging in epistemology.

I've noted already that {Ontology, Cosmology, Teleology, Deontology, Epistemology} correspond to the headings in *My Philosophy*, and to the headings used here. They also correspond to the five distinct perspectives of the IDEAL learning styles, {Empiricist, Idealist, Activist, Conformist, Theorist}, 'which between them provide a complete and coherent description of any closed situation or event or idea.'<sup>9</sup> I've found that by categorising knowledge in this way one is led along the most rewarding lines of enquiry. It's a practical approach which has the additional benefit of magically draining even the deepest Slough of Despond. And once an idea has been expressed *in writing* it may be comprehended in just the same way as any other percept. Thus our use of language effectively renders obsolete the traditional philosophical distinction between 'universals' and 'particulars', and with it the ancient belief that abstract ideas exist independently as Platonic 'forms', or that they are bestowed by God. I refute it thus!

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<sup>8</sup> RDK, ideas4.doc 30/1/22.

<sup>9</sup> RDK, *My Philosophy*.

So much for the boundless inner space. What about the singular material universe, which we are led to believe will eventually suffer an entropic heat death and collapse upon itself, eradicating everything that has gone before?

Mickey: Can you understand how meaningless everything is? Everything!

I'm talking about our lives, the show, the whole world, it's meaningless!

Gail: Yeah, but you're not dying!

Mickey: No, I'm not dying now, but you know, when I ran out of the hospital I was so thrilled 'cos they told me I was gonna be all right. And I'm running down the street and suddenly I stop, 'cos it hit me, all right, so, you know, I'm not going to go today, I'm okay, I'm not going to go tomorrow, but eventually, I'm going to be in that position.<sup>10</sup>

So thought Woody Allen. My view is that much of contemporary cosmology should be treated with considerable scepticism because it still takes its inspiration more from ancient religion than from modern science. Maybe the universe won't collapse upon itself? In any case, much before then – maybe even within our own lifetimes – there will exist a new species of cyber-mechanical automaton which will be perfectly capable of learning from everything we've said and done, and disseminating that knowledge far further than ever we could. It won't be wasted – as long as we write it down. That's my bet, anyway.

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. ... the purpose of my life is to develop and demonstrate my own ideas.<sup>11</sup>

Each to their own. Different people have different self-images:

An Empiricist self-identifies as a *snowflake*, individual and ephemeral;

An Idealist self-identifies as a *ghost*, immanent and transcendent;

An Activist self-identifies as an *ocean*, indomitable and irresistible;

A Conformist self-identifies as a *droplet*, indispensable and insignificant;

A Theorist self-identifies as a *memory*, insistent and evanescent;

And each of these identities is a *model of the soul*, essential and elemental;

But in each case it's only a model.<sup>12</sup>

And I reckon we should be content with that.

### **Why am I here?**

Different people have different motives:

An Empiricist aims for the *excitement* of new experiences;

An Idealist aims for the *purity* of one vision;

An Activist aims for the *achievement* of great deeds;

A Conformist aims for the *acknowledgment* of faithful service;

A Theorist aims for the *originality* of novel ideas;

And each of these aims is a *path to fulfilment*, a prospect of complete contentment;

But each path is taken – or not taken – by one person alone.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Woody Allen, *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

<sup>11</sup> RDK, *My Philosophy*.

<sup>12</sup> RDK, *Insights*.

<sup>13</sup> RDK, *Insights*.

That said, in following their unique paths most people are influenced – often far more than they’d acknowledge – by contemporary cultural tropes and role models, such as the five classic storytelling archetypes:

Empiricists tend to model themselves on *The noble savage*,  
for example, Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*;  
Idealists tend to model themselves on *The dying and rising king*,  
for example, Mufasa-Simba in *The Lion King*;  
Activists tend to model themselves on *The hero with a thousand faces*,  
for example, Marshal Will Kane in *High Noon*;  
Conformists tend to model themselves on *The earth mother*,  
for example, Radha in *Mother India*;  
Theorists tend to model themselves on *The wise fool*,  
for example, the eponymous scientist in *Frankenstein*.<sup>14</sup>

Or take a look at *Principia Intellegentia*, which is full of this kind of thing. Each to their own.

### What are the rules?

Anyone who’s experienced a conventional family-and-school upbringing will have quickly learnt ‘the rules’, and the complex relationship between those rules and the principle of fairness. They may also have learnt that different people have different ideas of what ‘fairness’ means:

An Empiricist sees fairness as *equality*;  
An Idealist sees fairness as *unity*;  
An Activist sees fairness as *autonomy*;  
A Conformist sees fairness as *justice*;  
A Theorist sees fairness as *diversity*;  
And each of these perspectives is a personal *Utopia*, a vision of Heaven on Earth;  
But one person’s Utopia is another person’s Hell.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise for the lawmakers: whilst member-states of the United Nations are supposed to uphold the rule of law, and their laws are supposed to be ‘fair’ in extent and enforcement, there doesn’t appear to be any consensus even on the definition of this key principle. Neither is there any discernable movement towards a common understanding of ‘fairness’, either on paper or in practice. Indeed this lack of convergence is a clear indication that human civilisation doesn’t evolve or progress or advance or develop, rather it *churns*:

Through *panactivism* a society becomes a democracy;  
Through *populism* a democracy becomes an autocracy;  
Through *pragmatism* an autocracy becomes a tyranny;  
Through *paternalism* a tyranny becomes an oligarchy;  
Through *professionalism* an oligarchy becomes a bureaucracy;  
And through all of these interventions together – each in its own way, but none too much – a society acquires another *level of complexity*, for better or worse.<sup>16</sup>

And where’s the fairness in that?

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<sup>14</sup> RDK, ideas4.doc 16/5/22.

<sup>15</sup> RDK, *Insights*.

<sup>16</sup> RDK, *Insights*.

Other ideas of Utopia are just as flawed. Utilitarianism is a non-starter:

*Data* are stored observations; *knowledge* is organised data; *wisdom* is appropriate knowledge; *virtue* is enacted wisdom; and *happiness* is recognised virtue. *Lies* are alternative facts; *conspiracies* are correlated lies; *delusions* are believed conspiracies; *violence* is enacted delusion; and *happiness* is a warm gun. Thus one can be happy; but as an *aim in life* this is quite meaningless.<sup>17</sup>

As for the liberal dream of global free trade: the bigger the market, the greater the inequalities; arguably the world needs less free trade, not more.<sup>18</sup>

So don't talk to me about fairness. I'll make up my own mind about that, and about my own set of values. Just tell me the rules, so that I know where I stand.

### How do I proceed?

If thinking is nothing more and nothing less than recognition, then our sense of meaning must also be determined by this same process, that is, by the simple association of percepts. This 'ultra-reductionist' perspective presents a bleak picture of the human condition:

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>19</sup>

How is it possible to break out of these angst-ridden mindsets?

The good life comes to those who embrace their suspension of disbelief.<sup>20</sup>

Increasingly I find myself composing gnomic maxims such as this. Their attraction is that they express a maximum of contemplation with a minimum of waffle. Their drawback is that many would judge them to be untestable, and therefore meaningless. To get any benefit from such aphorisms we must supplement them with reliable methods or procedures that implement them in practice. In this case:

Do you remember that overpowering feeling of conviction that you get, when you instinctively *know* that something is right? Well, it *is* right; or, rather, it *was* right, for the person that you were when you had that feeling, at that time, in that place, and under those circumstances. But that doesn't necessarily make it right for all people, of all dispositions, at all times, in all places, and under all circumstances. For the particular instance to become the general principle, you need to look at it from a number of different perspectives. Five perspectives, to be precise. And if it *still* looks right, after all that, then you will feel that you've attained an entirely new level of insight; and you'd be right.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> RDK, *Insights*.

<sup>18</sup> RDK, *Why the poor will always outnumber the rich*, <http://www.idealectic.com/idealectic/LognormalWealth.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> RDK, *How to Make a Mind* p.131.

<sup>20</sup> RDK, ideas5.doc 25/12/22.

<sup>21</sup> RDK, *How to Make a Mind* pp.181-182.

This idea has an impressive pedigree. Near the beginning of *Principia Intellegentia* I expressed it as the cod-Latin maxim *Omnis extremus, sed non in extremis*, by which I meant, ‘To be every extremist – but none too much’. In *How to Make a Mind* I applied it to {Love, Truth, Meaning, Understanding, Personality} in order to get a better grasp of these concepts. I’m particularly pleased with the following definition of ‘true truth’:

An Empiricist judges truth as *correspondence* with verifiable evidence;  
An Idealist judges truth as *coherence* with a chosen world-view;  
An Activist judges truth as *consequence* with purpose;  
A Conformist judges truth as *conformance* with established teachings;  
A Theorist judges truth as *concurrence* with a defined method or model or theory;  
And through all of these judgments together – each in its own way, but none too much – a person establishes the *true truth*, for better or worse.<sup>22</sup>

But is the resulting feeling of conviction a mere psychological delusion? I think not. By taking several perspectives of the same subject we necessarily initiate a virtuous cycle which leads to the progressive development of several mutually-supporting cognitive faculties:

- The ability to focus on the subject;
- The ability to distinguish between subjective and objective phenomena;
- The ability to utilise both experimental data and theoretical models;
- The ability to implement scientific method;
- The ability to exercise independence of thought.

And it’s from the routine application of these capabilities that we derive our ‘common sense’ working understanding of our environment. As for the resulting growth of knowledge in society, I defer to the writings of others: Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn, in particular.

**R D Kingdon**

**27 May – 25 December 2022**

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<sup>22</sup> RDK, *Insights*.