



In late 2011 when I became leader of a Northampton U3A philosophy group, we began by considering ethical issues: what it means to do good and to do no harm, and the concepts of autonomy and justice.

We then moved to 'Which is worse, killing or failing to save' in conjunction with the big questions of abortion, euthanasia, living wills and advanced health care directives. This took us to the autumn of 2012.

On deciding what to do next, the most popular choice was philosophy of religion which had to start with the controversial question 'Does God exist?' Unsurprisingly, a division opened up between atheists and believers and we had to conclude that there are some things we can neither prove nor disprove.

At the end of 2012, we took stock of the ground we had covered to decide what we were aiming to achieve by studying philosophy. Some agreed that U3A groups provide much needed entertainment and diversion – we enjoy the moment but don't necessarily intend to apply what we've discovered.

Others felt that the learning process was equally important to keep the grey cells charged but that it was difficult to retain complex ideas (especially philosophy) which were interesting at the time but dissipated into incongruent fragments unless they were revisited regularly.

Most members felt that a clearer picture of life's issues would enable them to be better prepared for certain eventualities. Ethics had been a good area with which to begin because there were plenty of practical applications.

It was good to have an informed view on things that are often accepted without question (especially abortion, paternalism and biased distribution of resources), to decide if they were more or less harmful than we realized. Did they impose on other people's autonomy or were they unfair on the rest of society?

When we moved to less concrete issues such as the question Does God exist?, even Pascal's wager was never going to be a satisfactory answer and acceptance of His existence was going to depend ultimately on a leap of faith.

## Practical Philosophy

In view of these findings we decided to tackle philosophical issues that had a definite practical application, and the group's title was changed to Practical Philosophy. With this in mind, our next subject was political philosophy and we have worked our way from the Ancient Greeks through Machiavelli to Marx, Freud, Fromm and Gandhi.

We put ourselves in the position of capitalists, anti-capitalists and alter-capitalists, monarchists and republicans, social democrats, neo-liberals, Marxists and anarchists.

We then became aware of how little political clout we have as individuals, despite living in this mother of all parliamentary democracies. Most of us vote for a potential MP about whom we know little and for a party whose views we may only agree with in part.

At least 50% of us end up with a representative whom we may not have supported. Faced with this scenario, we needed to find out exactly who our MP and Euro MP were, what they were voting for on our behalf and whether they were prey to lobbyists.

We also planned how we as individuals could influence the direction that society takes. In the end it is alright talking about the issues but talk alone makes no difference. What we wanted was action!

So we came up with ten items to help us to become politically active:

- Consider watching alternative news channels and reading articles from diverse political press outlets.
- Before deciding to vote, read the manifesto of the parties.
- Check online to find out what your MP is voting for in the House of Commons and if you don't agree write and tell him or her without delay.
- Know what your local councillors are doing on your behalf and register your support or opposition to issues that are important to you.
- If an issue concerns you, join a local action group or if one doesn't exist, start your own.



■ See which groups, companies or vested interests are abusing the system, let them know that you're not happy and if their policies don't change, boycott them.

■ Report any innovative ideas that could be implemented through the political process to your MP or Government Minister, e.g. suggest to the Health Minister that patient awareness of the cost of drugs could be improved by printing the cost on the repeat prescription.

■ Think about ways in which you can support your local economy.

■ Get involved in local social groups which help to integrate local people.

■ Consider standing for a political or leadership post.

Having put forward this plan for political action, we intend to see how far members of the group are prepared to go to implement it. Six months from now, we will go through each point and check on progress.

We may be surprised. We may be disappointed. It depends on the motivation of individuals and whether group pressure can spur them on.

At least we will see whether political philosophical thought is a catalyst for action or whether members are no more than champagne socialists, idealists with their heads firmly in the clouds, or passive observers just looking for a way to pass the time before oblivion intervenes.

If this trial works well, then we must go on to environmental philosophy and apply a new list: ten ways to save the planet; plastic bag manufactures, beware; meat eaters, enjoy your last sirloin steak; lovers of foreign climes, consider a week in Skegness. We philosophers are poised to make you see the light.