

PHILOSOPHY

Discuss, argue, explore

Discussion is a particularly important component of a philosophical education. It is through discussion that we know, formulate and explore new ideas and develop our thinking skills. Until you have had your views challenged and been forced to defend them, you may not have been entirely clear in your mind what you believe and why. It may be that when you have had to state and defend your position against criticism that you realise your understanding is incomplete.

Observe how others go about exploring ideas, try to spot the flaws in their positions and how they defend criticism. You may find that you want to consolidate your case by further reading before presenting your view. This is how we propose to go about the subject of philosophy in our group.

Sometimes philosophical discussions can seem vicious. No sooner has someone put forward a point, than someone else comes up with a criticism of it. It is as if the discussions are intent on undermining each other's position. But, it is through the criticism, the answering of criticisms and the rejection of positions that philosophy progresses. Philosophy thrives on the cut and thrust of debate.

Once you appreciate that the point of each discussion is to get nearer the truth, to reject ideas which will not stand up to criticism and replace them with more robust ones your ego will not feel so battered.

This is not to say that whenever someone raises an objection to what you say you should simply abandon your beliefs. You should treat objections as stimuli which force you to demonstrate the plausibility of your position, defend it with examples, reasons etc.

Remember, philosophical discussion is not just argument and counterargument. Talking about philosophy can involve interpretation, exploration of possibilities and working together as a group to achieve a deeper understanding and insight. Discussing philosophy need not be negative nit-picking, it can be creative and stimulating. Exchanging ideas, looking for a new way of understanding a topic or applying familiar ways of thinking to new and challenging situations all the meat of philosophy.

Part of your armoury must be a sound grasp of classical philosophy. By reading the theories of other renowned philosophers you ground yourself in some semblance of methodology. Analyse, compare and contrast the theories propounded and formulate your own views in relation to their arguments.

Above all enjoy philosophy because it can have a profound impact on how you view the world

Maggie Atkins
November 2007