

Questions from a pub

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

I overheard a fascinating conversation between two men sharing a pint after their day's labors during a visit to a small pub in Ireland several years ago. It was shortly after the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II's life. The men were debating the morality of prolonging life through extraordinary medical means.

The argument moved back and forth. Then one man asked how a decision could be made among the needs of several equally sick persons in a case where available medical resources were limited.

The debate heated up when the younger man adamantly insisted that the choice should not be based on the fact that one person has more responsibility than the others — the pope, for instance.

"I'm just as entitled to medical care as the pope," he said with fire in his eye. "And I'm sure the pope would agree."

The argument went on for some time. Then both men departed, shaking hands with each other and obviously happy.

As for me, I was delighted to have been a silent partner to that rather philosophical exchange between the two workmen.

Recently I spoke with philosopher Paul Weiss.

"Everybody is a philosopher in some way," he observed, seated in his living room where every inch of wall space is covered by books. Weiss teaches now at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

In his view, armchair philosophers take up the same concerns as classically trained philosophers. Both talk about basic questions, Weiss explained: "the right way to live"; "personal rights"; "whether science is the only truth."

Armchair philosophers are like "amateur violinists or persons interested in music for fun," Weiss added. They can enjoy themselves without worrying about going into questions as systematically as professional philosophers.

A man with a passion for teaching, Weiss says that on the first day of class he always tells students that his course is "no good" for advancing them on their road to a career. His interest is elsewhere.

"I'm a teacher. I tell students to philosophize," Weiss continued. "I try to make them reflect, to open their minds." This is valuable, he thinks, because it makes individuals "more critical and more curious about life."

Developing a philosophical outlook makes people "less accepting of things without sufficient thought," Weiss said.

And philosophy as Weiss understands it "doesn't confine itself to a particular field or culture or theory. It opens up the field" and encourages people to "deal with basic questions and look at the broad picture."

Can philosophy help people to lead more virtuous lives?

"Philosophy can make us want the good," the philosopher said, but choosing to act in accordance with the good is another matter. It "requires tenacity and control" and continuing effort.

What philosophy can do "is point out the limits and the places" where the good can be found. But the person has to be willing to take the next step.

Weiss, 84 years old and a professor emeritus at Yale University, hasn't thought of retiring from teaching, he said. "I'm stimulated by teaching and enjoy having students' questions focus my thinking."

He commented: "I've never heard a foolish question. Questions always make me think further, probe deeper."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

Ph

By Sister Prudence Allen, RSM
NC News Service

A philosopher may appear to be someone remote, isolated and lost in a world of ideas. But the word "philosophy" really signifies something much closer to home. In fact, nearly everyone philosophizes in some way or another.

A philosopher is someone who asks what life means, what happiness is, what is good or what is true.

Most people ponder these questions occasionally. They usually arise when we have some time free to think — on a vacation when close to the beauties of nature, or in homes when we find a quiet moment for reflection, when we are bedridden from illness, or in church.

The human person is the only animal that has the capacity for self-reflection. That is, humans are able to think about their own lives, to ponder values and to exercise free will to make important choices.

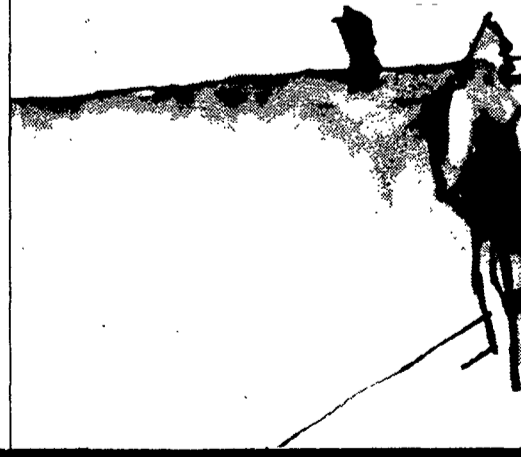
This remarkable aspect of human intelligence makes philosophy possible.

Sometimes when thinking about life's deeper questions, we begin to pray to God for guidance. Then philosophy can make way for faith.

Actually, human reason and faith represent two complementary ways of searching for truth.

We could say that reason and faith are like our two legs. Using only one leg limits us to hopping about on one foot. Using both legs in harmony means we can walk and even run. Similarly, I believe, when people learn to use their reason and faith in com-

"Human reason and faith represent two complementary ways of searching for truth."



The mind of ben Sirach

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Jesus ben Sirach was a typical Hebrew philosopher. He was on fire with love for wisdom. We meet him in the Old Testament book that bears his name.

Sirach was convinced that wisdom was the key to success and happiness. For the benefit of others he wrote down the results of his study about 200 B.C. Later his grandson translated this book into Greek.

Sirach was the heir of a long wisdom tradition in Israel going back to Solomon in the 10th century B.C. His "philosophy" has the special flavor of biblical wisdom.

The sages of Israel concerned themselves with concrete, practical matters of everyday life: How to succeed in business and social life; how to maintain order and harmony in the family; what kind of company to keep or to avoid.

Perhaps more than any other wisdom writer, Sirach was convinced that there could be no true happiness without a solid relation-

ship with God. Trying to understand humanity without reference to its Creator is like trying to understand a book by reading only the last chapter. It makes little if any sense.

Sirach wrote: "All wisdom comes from the Lord and with him it remains forever" (1:1). "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (1:12). Fear for Sirach meant "reverence" and "worship."

Since wisdom was practical expertise leading to success, its possession and practice were the secret of a meaningful, rewarding life. Thus, in the area of family relationships, Sirach said: "He stores up riches who reveres his mother. He who honors his father is gladdened by children and when he prays he is heard" (3:4-5).

In a culture which knew nothing of Social Security or retirement homes, care for aging parents was a practical necessity:

"My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate with him...for kindness to a father will not be forgotten" (3:12-14).

Friends enrich our lives in many ways, but a really good friend is a rare treasure. So be careful in choosing one:

"Let your acquaintances be many but one in a thousand your confidant. When you gain a friend, first test him and be not too ready to trust him. For one sort of friend is a friend when it suits him, but he will not be with you in time of distress...A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter; he who finds one finds a treasure" (8:6-8, 14).

In the area of government: "A wise magistrate lends stability to his people and the government of a prudent man is well ordered...A wanton king destroys his people but a city grows through the wisdom of its princes" (10:1,3).

This kind of concern for every aspect of human conduct reflects the Israelites' realization that happiness is equivalent to wholeness. For the Israelites, no area of human life is exempt from the need for true wisdom.

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