



PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Articles

Massimo Pigliucci

The Quest for Character: Five Insights

Jeremy Gallegos

*Hume's Psychology and Artificial Virtues
as Applied to Philosophical Practice*

Martin Carmann

*Obsessed with Truth? Deconstructing
Oscar Brenifier's "Phenomenology of Lying"*

Peter B. Raabe

*Approaching Elsewhere:
On Fear of 'The After-life'*

Book Reviews

La Regola Della Vita: Il Morire e L'angoscia di Morte

Reviewed by Anna Sordini

Sick Souls, Healthy Minds:

How William James Can Save Your Life

Reviewed by Peter Vernezze

You: A Natural History

Reviewed by Miriam Van Der Valk

Biographies of Contributors

Book Review

William B Irvine, *You: A Natural History*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780190869199. 233 pages.

REVIEWED BY MIRIAM VAN DER VALK
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Beyond the Why-Questions

William B Irvine's *You: A Natural History* is a book by a philosopher about science, written with non-scientists in mind—"for readers not only to understand how, according to science, they and their world came to exist, but to take this science personally" (as he says in the introduction, page xiii.) And, indeed, all of the book's 20 chapters invite personal reflection—from "Your People" (Chapter 1), "The Neanderthal in Your Family Tree" (Chapter 6), through "You Are Complex" and "Your Ancestors Were Boring" (Chapters 9 and 10), "Pulling Yourself Together" (Chapter 16, from Part III, *The Atomic You*), to the last and most philosophical chapter, "Why Are You Here?" (Chapter 20).

About 15 years ago, as it happens, I had an administrative office job that permitted listening to audio books while I was working. One of the books I listened to was Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2003,) read by Richard Matthews' matter-of-fact yet dryly humorous voice. As I'm reading *You*, I often hear Matthews' voice—especially through Irvine's more personal comments that pop up here and there between paragraphs and chapters. In response to the would-be irony if our descendants, hundreds of thousands of years from now, "were to dig up and analyze [our] bones ... they might conclude that we didn't really belong to a species—that we instead represented an intermediate stage between *Homo heidelbergensis* and the next ..." (62). Irvine leaves us with the exclamation, "Oh, the indignity!" Commentary like that makes for a swift, fun read. Irvine is also the author of *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (2008)—I can feel how he's had fun writing the book, too.

All in all, this is a book that fits well alongside Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2003), Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011), and Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997). I browsed through Wikipedia to verify names and dates and such, and came across a quote by Harari. He reportedly cites *Guns, Germs and Steel* as one of his greatest inspirations, since it showed that it was 'possible to ask very big questions and answer them scientifically.' I see that same sparkle in Irvine's book. In the beginning of the last chapter (on page 185, Part IV, *Your Place in the Universe*, "Why Are You Here?"), he writes, "If I have done my job as scientific historian, you now have a much better understanding of how you came to exist, as well as how remarkably contingent your existence is." Quite. This contingency—this sense of awe and wonder about one's personal existence—is a convincing theme throughout the book and, of course, a superb topic for many philosophical practitioners in their work. I co-led a group of 10-12-year olds at the City Library at one point, and we had a lot of fun wondering whether someone else had been born instead of them or their siblings, etc. It can be quite fabulous to have one's mind blown, so to speak, and I love it when I get to utilize this our very human ability to ask hypothetical questions. To get to follow the question where it leads ... Forming 'communities of inquiry' and philosophical companionships, where we aren't trying to convince one another—instead, the ideas that form *in*

our dialogue, in our togetherness, are what really count. They're what we really seek to find. At least that's what I usually say when I try to explain what I mean by 'philosophical practice.' I might add something about Suspension of Disbelief. 'Let's suspend our impending disbelief on the hallway coat hooks,' I might say, 'and sit comfortably together, windows open. And then, let's do a thought experiment, a philosophical exercise. Let's propose for a few minutes or hours or a weekend (or a year) that we in fact are just an intermediate stage between *Homo heidelbergensis* and the next species. Now let's describe that next species. What do our findings imply for our ethics, identity, values, politics, or metaphysics?'

(I'd love to devote a half-day workshop to that!)

Another example: In Part I, *Your Deep Ancestry*, Chapter 8, "Your (Alien?) Roots," we play with the idea that life arose elsewhere in the universe and was somehow transported here. The universe, writes Irvine,

is, after all, huge. It has hundreds of billions of galaxies. Many of these galaxies in turn have hundreds of billions of stars, each of which probably has multiple planets—and probably moons as well—on which life can potentially arise. Therefore, even if there is a one-in-a-billion chance of life arising on a planet like Earth, there are likely trillions of places where it can arise, making it highly probable that life would arise on many of them (82).

Good start, right? And at the end of the chapter things get *really* interesting. Irvine concludes, "... alien life, even intelligent alien life, doubtless exists, but because of its intelligence, it can think of better things to do with its time and resources than visit Earth" (84). Right! Our next workshop will be about intelligent behavior. What would a super intelligent alien do with its time and resources? What do our responses say about how we conceptualize 'intelligence?'

There are a couple more places like that in *You*—inspirational places to pick up philosophical practice workshop material. Something about identity, for example; about the mosaic that is me: the atoms that were formed in the beginning of time, and the cells that are often no more than a few years old. Identity, subjectivity, meaning ... Core philosophical questions, so to speak. One part in particular has stuck with me since I finished reading, and it has to do with searching for meaning. On page 190 Irvine takes a hermeneutic look at a pencil. He writes:

Suppose someone came up to you, showed you a pencil, and asked what it means. In an attempt to clarify this rather strange question, you might inquire whether the person was asking what the word pencil means. Suppose he replied that, no, he was asking what *the pencil itself* means.

I'm at once full of delightful responses to what a pencil might mean. The pencil means writing—the 'writing animal'—message—relationality—time: to record, to remember, reflect, to *want to revise*. A pencil means desire for manifestation and evolution, etc. But Irvine continues,

My answer would be that the pencil itself has no meaning ... I would add that in asking this question, the questioner is committing what philosophers call a category mistake: he is asking whether something has a quality that only something of a different quality can have. If you ask me for the diameter of hope or the location of the number six, you are making a similar error: desires cannot have physical dimensions, and numbers are not located in

physical space ... although a pencil cannot have meaning, it can be used to do meaningful things ... (190).

Aha. I see what he means. And yet, suddenly, as I'm reading this final chapter of a fine book from which I learned a *lot*, I find myself longing for some, well, some quiet time in my own mind, where I can allow it to expand as much as the question asks me to, possibly believing at least six impossible things before breakfast, as Alice in Wonderland might. Irvine writes that why-questions generate more why-questions, and that there comes a point "at which asking why-questions, rather than adding to our understanding of the universe, becomes little more than a diversion from the pursuit of useful knowledge" (189). Hmm. 'Useful knowledge.' OK. So, science asks *How* and philosophy asks *Why* ... And a combination of the two—would that be What if ...? I'm thinking about radio waves. Heinrich Hertz, who discovered them, famously said he didn't think they'd have any practical application. But someone must have wondered what these waves could carry, like other waves carry ships and birds, and mark the edge of the world of whales and electric eels. Then, I'm thinking about the Higgs boson. I remember watching on TV—a reporter asked about potential use and I think the response was, 'I have no idea.' To me, this is a starting point for philosophical practice: make a Suspension of Disbelief Proposition and, well, run with it. Then stop running, and reflect philosophically. (That'll be Part I and II of our whole weekend workshops.)

"There will always remain an element of mystery," writes Irvine (190); we will never reach the end of the chain of why-question that we can ask about our existence. The most sensible psychological strategy is to embrace that mystery, he adds. Here, I want to have a long, fabulous conversation about the meaning of psychology and strategies, mystery and mysteriousness but, alas, there are no more pages.

When we were teenagers, I had a friend who suffered from an eating disorder. At the end of her treatment, she got to fill out a form from the clinic. One of the questions was something like, "I embrace life's mysteries," YES or NO. I remember how we smiled at that, smoking cigarettes in her dormitory window. She obviously had to write "yes"—imagine the follow-up questions she'd have to answer if she didn't—but it was such a funny way of putting things. What did they mean? That we might never understand why things happen, and that we accept that we can't always change them, either? Suppose so. But ... there's just so much more interesting stuff to unravel and talk about. About narratives, agency, the body and the mind, and *why we're here*. That's where I'm at, as I'm stowing *You* on the bookshelf, embedded, as it were, in the insight that my story began not with my birth but with the beginning of time, I'm standing by the door that Irvine's last chapter left slightly ajar. I feel like fearlessly pushing it wide open.

Why are we here, you ask?

What if ...

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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