What's Philosophy Got To Do With It?

i. Choosing to do philosophy

When I stood at this lectern as an eight-year-old three decades ago, I did not think I was going to be a philosopher.

There were two guiding icons of my life, besides my mother who unquestionably occupied first place. These were my explorer father Rupert, longtime fellow of the RGS, and my famous veterinarian grandfather, Donald Sinclair, who many of you will know as Siegfried Farnon, chief protagonist of the James Herriot stories.

With an appetite for adventure that at the time I took completely for granted, my family travelled the world constantly. We visited places Europeans had never been to before. I had no idea just how unusual this was until I was an adult and noticed that other people's childhoods had been different. My first expedition was to Borneo, when I was one year old, where I met people who had never seen a white person, and slept under rafters from which hung the human trophies of headhunters. From Dad, I learned that exploring the world – journeying, adventuring, discovering - was not something you do for fun in between the serious business of getting on with life, but actually was itself the life.

So I supposed that I would be an exploring scientist, preferably a zoologist or naturalist; something between a David Attenborough and a Charles Darwin. I suppose what my childhood gave me was a thirst for adventure. And science was always, for me, part of that adventure, but only one part. My science teachers were bitterly disappointed when I told them I would not study biology, or chemistry, my favourite science. I remember them asking me why. I told them that science was just one piece of the pie of understanding.

With a childhood like this, it was impossible not to be driven to ask fundamental questions. The urge to philosophise emerged from the experience of travel itself. Why do people in the world live so differently from each other? What do we have in common, across differences like this? Why is life so unfair, with some people having so little, and others so much? Why is the world so beautiful, and so sad, at the same time? Where did all this beauty come from? What does it mean? Does it have any purpose? Or is it all just sound and fury, signifying nothing?

My childhood invited me, very early on, to do as Rumi advised. *Sell your cleverness, and buy bewilderment.* Children are natural philosophers. The question is whether

we can stay one as we grow up. I think one is a philosopher if one goes on selling one's cleverness, and buying bewilderment.

As I got into my teens, I noticed that people had been asking my questions already for a long time. Brilliant minds had deliberated for centuries about what the right way is of asking these questions, and what the right methods are for trying to answer them. I realised I could apprentice myself to those minds, to those traditions. So I did.

ii. Walking Towards a Cliff

A few years after these pictures were taken, when I was about 12, I heard for the first time about climate change. I was sitting in my geography classroom. The teacher drew a greenhouse on the board. He put a little picture of the earth inside it. He inscribed a face on the earth. Then he drew drops of sweat on its forehead.

When I thought about humanity sitting in that greenhouse, it didn't seem such a good situation for us. I imagined myself as an adult, sweating constantly, and not able to get out, because outside the greenhouse was just empty space, with nowhere to live.

I consoled myself with the thought that the people in charge of the world were also having this explained to them, just as I was. They would know what to do. And they would do it, obviously. Because clearly this couldn't be allowed to go on.

So I didn't worry about it. That was 26 years ago. As I don't need to tell you, the people in charge of the world did have it explained to them. They did know what to do about it. And they did not do it. About 4 months ago, they did not do it again.

Shortly before COP26 took place, I was at a meeting of the world's faith leaders at the Vatican. The President of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences informed us that his one-year-old granddaughter is likely to become an adult in a world that is uninhabitable.

As a child, I was numb with horror contemplating the certainty that one day the sun will explode and engulf the earth. That unimaginable event is due to take place in around 4 billion years. Now we live a world in which what is at issue is whether or not we will have a habitat – a *home – in one generation's time.*

It's hard to know what to say at this point. We and our leaders have heard the science many, many times. And we haven't done what was necessary.

Dr Hoesung Lee, Chair of the IPCC, was at the Vatican meeting. He expressed his feelings about our situation. The question that keeps him up at night, he said, is not:

What is happening to our earth?

Or: *What should we do?*

But: *Why do we not do what we know we should do?*

The first two questions are well-answered by science. The last hangs in the air. As someone who has been asked to speak about this issue for many years now, I lie awake at night wondering the same thing. After we have heard the facts so many times, and still here we are, what's the point of saying it again? It feels like handling a rubix cube which is built to have no solution. You feel like dropping the cube, going away and giving up.

A few years ago, I did that. I stopped taking up invitations to speak about it, because I didn't know what there was to say anymore. I figured that until I had something different to say, I was just part of the problem.

Now I am trying again, because I did what I am about to suggest we all do: *stop* and *think*.

Let me tell you a story. A crowd walks together. At some point one of them notices that there is a cliff ahead. The news spreads slowly through the group. Some take a while to be convinced of the reality of the cliff. But as time passes, they can all see that if they continue to go in that direction, they will walk off it. They talk to each other shrilly about how we all need to change course. But still they walk on. At this point pretty much everyone knows what is going to happen. They say they wish they could change course, but they seem unable to.

Every one in the crowd wants to live. Everyone knows what is required, in these circumstances, to go on living. They need to change direction. Everyone has agreed that changing direction would be a good idea. Some of them actually love each other very much, and want others to go on living too.

They talk quite openly about how strange the situation is, how odd it is that they can't seem to change course. As they talk, they advance towards the edge. Sadly, they come to terms with the fact that they will not change direction after all. And they start saying goodbye to each other.

iii. 40 years of knowing 'The Facts'

What happens next in this story? I don't know. But all we need to do to find out is wait and see. Although we don't need to actually go on walking for the cliff to come closer. We just need to do nothing. All that needs to happen is the passing of time.

The story I've just told you wouldn't happen in a book, because it wouldn't make any narrative sense. How will we tell such a story to our children, and their children? Incidentally, one of the best definitions of philosophy is from Plato: philosophy is telling the right stories in the right way. Well, this is a story that needs to be told. Because our children are growing up to face a world that is uninhabitable. And one day they will find out that *we knew* they would grow up to live in such a world; we knew what we needed to do to stop it, and we didn't do it. Because nearly everything

we understand about fossil fuel emissions leading to global warming was understood in 1979.

That is strange enough, but the story is stranger still. This crowd, once they saw the cliff coming up ahead of them, didn't just walk ahead; they actually ran.

We have done more damage to the climate in the years since we knew what we were doing, than we did in the rest of human history put together. Not only was our knowledge of what we were doing not enough to stop the damage; it was not enough to stop us doing it more, and worse, than ever.

It is not shocking, by itself, that we accidentally started destroying ourselves with fossil fuels, in the same way as it was not surprising that people used to smoke when they did not know that it was killing them. We simply did not know what we were doing in the industrial revolution. What is a surprise, what calls for explanation, is this: *that once we knew the science, we did not stop, but speeded up.*

This is the great overlooked feature of our situation, and that overlooking is very dangerous. Once we did know the science, we did not stop.

This sounds bleak. But it is only bleak if we do not learn the lesson. As I say to my students; there is no need to be anxious about making mistakes. The problem is if we do not learn from the mistakes we make. The nauseating repetitiousness of the conversation about climate change consists in this. We go on presenting data, reciting climate science like a mantra. But *science alone* is about as helpful as calmly informing someone that smoking will kill them, or that eating junk food will cause an X% rise in their chances of developing bowel cancer. It does not – demonstrably – cause them to stop smoking and going to Burger King.

iv. Values: Missing in Action

People are fond of quoting Einstein's dictum: madness is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results. I have often said this about our situation, but I now think it's not a good description. We are not mad. That's too easy, because insanity is not a choice.

The truth is harder. It is the narrowness of our thinking, our thinking only in one register; our modern obsession with 'the scientific' as the ultimate form of grasping reality. We mistake information for knowledge. We mistake facts for the truth. They are not the same. Facts can function untruthfully. Information is just bits of stuff, zeros and ones. It does not add up to understanding.

The missing link in our response to climate change is *not* information. If it is knowledge we lack, then it is knowledge not about the universe, but about ourselves. As Caesar warned: "The fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." It is of literally existential importance that we stop and think, not about the universe, but about ourselves. If we do indeed live in 'the Anthropocene', then understanding the human has never been more important.

Facts by themselves do not have any motivational power for us at all. Nobody ever gave their life for a mere fact. Facts gain motivational power when they relate to or connect with something that is important to us. What determines our actions is not so much what is true, as it is what is *important.* What we care about. It is our *values* that cause us to identify certain things *as facts*, to put them in an order of relevance, to prioritise some over others.

For example, the mere 'fact' that you are in pain does not *all by itself* make me respond to you. For it may be that it does not have any meaning or significance, for me, that you are in pain. 'The fact' that you are in pain needs to relate to a sense I have of what is important; for example, an imperative to help those in need. In the same way, the mere fact that more than 3 billion lives will become unliveable with the 2.4 degrees of warming we are now facing may have no importance for me. If that is the case, knowing this fact will change nothing about my behaviour. Looking at where we are now, it is quite plain that those lives are not that important to those who hold the reins in our world.

Philosophy, and its allied disciplines of theology and ethics, are the disciplines concerned precisely with this; not *just* the true, but the good. Not *just* with what is, but with what should be. Not *just* with the world as it is given, but the world as we can make it, want to make it, as we must make it. Not just with facts, but with values.

v. 'Wicked Problems'

Let me introduce, or reintroduce, you to the concept of a wicked problem.

Firstly, how we define a wicked problem determines the solution. So what counts as a solution is not obvious from the outset. Secondly, how we define the problem and its solution is a matter of worldview. Third, many different perspectives, values and disciplines are involved in both framing it, and in solving it. Finally, and following naturally enough, 'information' is not enough to solve the problem, because what at issue is how the problem is defined, by whom, and what is going to count as success in addressing it, which is a matter of perspective and value judgement.

Climate change, and the other great environmental crisis which is biodiversity loss, is wicked to an extreme degree. Why? Because the number of different values, perspectives and worldviews involved in defining this problem and exploring a solution is effectively unlimited. The 'stakeholders' in the solution are every human being. And not just individuals, but also the different bodies and communities at multiple scales which claim to represent or speak for those individuals. And this without considering that increasingly something like perspectives and preferences are attributed to nonhuman creatures and systems.

Further, the wicked problem of environmental change is going to amplify and ramify; it will become more and more wicked. For we have in a certain sense already failed to

'solve' this problem, in the sense that climate change is already happening, and will go on happening. And with climate change will come many associated crises. Food shortages. Water shortages. Poverty. Migration. Political instability. War.

There will be pressures on our social infrastructure and moral commitments in ways we can't even imagine. What will it mean to 'believe in human rights' when there are billions of human beings on the move? We need to be able to respond to these challenges with a degree of unity, collective clarity, consistency, joined-up-ness, that we have not so far showed ourselves capable of. And this is just as the conditions for such solidarity become not easier, but more difficult, as environmental change fragilises the ties that bind.

If I was going to summarise what's at stake in a wicked problem, it would be this. A wicked problem throws into question *how we measure success.* 'Success' is a vector word. It trades on a picture of where we are coming from and where we are going. The larger and more multiscalar a particular problem is, the wider the canvas, the higher the impact of how we measure 'success'. And success is a matter of value, because what counts as 'success' depends on where you think you're starting from, and where the goal is. What the goal is set by what is important to you. That's pretty much the definition of a goal. Human action, as Aristotle also said, is by definition goal-oriented, and so matters of value are fundamental to human action. The way in which we measure success, what we take success to mean: this depends on what we think being human is all about.

vi. Wicked = Human

I find the characterisation of a "wicked" problem funny. Because these characteristics almost exactly describe my daily work: the daily work of the disciplines we call 'the humanities'. History, literature, philosophy, theology, ethics. If the work of these disciplines is categorised as 'wicked', in contrast to 'traditional' problems, we have an interesting insight into how the modern mind works! The categorisation of this sort of problem as 'wicked' tells us less about the world, and more about how we now think about thinking itself.

It seems the term 'wicked problem' is supposed to indicate a problem that cannot be solved in the terms of science alone. But what is so wicked about *not* being 'scientific'?

A friend of mine, a professional research chemist, asked me recently: Carmody, what do you actually *do* all day, in philosophy and theology departments? Well, the answer is, we tackle the wickedest of problems: the problem of what a human being is, how we should live, what should count as 'success' for me, for humanity. The purpose of these disciplines is to think coherently, intelligently, rigorously, on our identities, our

values, our self-understanding, our place in the world, our goals; on what is important to us, what matters to us, who we are, who we can be.

Sometimes in the scientific literature there is talk about 'taming' wicked problems. But wicked problems don't need to be 'tamed'. That supposes they're intrinsically hostile; that their 'wildness' is a problem. But they aren't hostile or wicked; they're simply human. All our deepest problems are like this: complex; incapable of final resolution; it's not clear what would count as finally solving them; they cross many boundaries of disciplines, time and space; they're multiscalar and multifactorial; they involve many different perspectives; and – above all – the outcome matters almost impossibly much.

That we call 'wicked' any problem that is not resolved in the simple terms of science – a problem that is difficult, complex, ambiguous, variable, multiplicitous, uncertain, where the enquiry is in principle unfinishable – reveals what we (now, in modernity) think reasoning and thinking is: that it should produce clear-cut answers within clearly delimited boundaries to well-defined problems, and not to be able to do that is a kind of failure. I have come increasingly to the view that this picture of reasoning is a major cause of our apparent inability to rise to the kind of challenge that something like climate change is.

Does their ambiguity, their open-endedness, mean we can't think coherently, responsibly, systematically, effectively, about them? Not at all. If it did, philosophy wouldn't exist. But it does mean we need a different sort of rationality, one which is adapted to handling not just truths, but goods; not just facts, but values; not just what is, but what should be; not just the empirical world, but the world of meaning, which is the world human beings actually live in. Welcome to philosophy.

vii. Thinking Versus Calculating

In *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the protagonist famously proposes that the answer to the question of the meaning of life is 42. Everybody finds this funny. Why? Because everybody instinctively understands that the meaning of life is not that sort of problem.

Saying that the meaning of life is 42 is not *thinking*. It's just *calculating*. What we have been doing with the environmental crisis is *calculating*, and then repeating the results of the calculations, more and more loudly.

There's a great line in the last Avengers movie: Iron Man's daughter says to him, "I love you *three thousand"*. It's funny and sweet, because we know love doesn't come in units. It is strange that we value quantative reasoning as the highest kind, because absolutely no-one expresses their sense of what is most important to them in units. (Wall Street 2) But as Avengers and every other film tells us, it is things like love and beauty – unquantifiable things, things that are in themselves intangible - which shape and govern our lives.

Once upon a time, people believed that it is love that is the driving force of everything altogether; that is the motive force of reality itself. As Dante put it: it is love that moves the sun and the stars. We don't believe that anymore, for the most part. But we do still instinctively sense that we cannot quantify what is most important. We capture that instinct in thoughts such as: "He knows the price of everything and the value of nothing."

If we do not learn to respect the distinctive kind of rationality with which we think about values, purposes, meanings, goods, how to negotiate between different visions of what is important in a world we urgently need to share, there is little hope for us.

We are desperately short of time, yes. Too short of time for philosophy, we might think. But I would answer that we are so short of time we *must* do philosophy, and do it urgently. We don't have time *not* to think deeply about our values.

We need to learn to think as though thinking matters. Not just calculating; not just gathering data and repeating it. Actually *thinking.* That's why philosophy has everything to do with it.

And how is good thinking shaped? What conditions do we need for good thinking?

viii. Questions We Cannot Avoid

Humans have always, in the history of what we call culture, pursued philosophy as primary. Civilisations before our own put the search for meaning, the articulation of value (in which religion was fundamental, incidentally) at the centre of their intellectual, moral and political life. They recognised that information is not the same as knowledge; that knowledge is not the same as wisdom; that 'what' is not enough to know how to live; we also need 'why' and 'how'.

What sets our civilisation apart against this history – the civilisation that we call 'secular' - is that we no longer understand or respect the distinctive kind of rationality with which we think about values. We are a society obsessed with the primacy of scientific knowledge. Which is ironic, because humanistic of reasoning is the reasoning that counts with us most decisively. Human beings are creatures of love before they are creatures of truth. Truths that do not relate to what we love have no power for us. It is true that people will starve, freeze, burn, lose their homes, and go to war, because of fossil fuel emissions. But is it important? Do I care? Why should I?

Our relentless cultural and political downgrading of the humanities is an immense act of self-harm with serious consequences. Because we are motivated by values, identities, goods, not facts alone. We don't have the choice in that. We are animals, not computers.

The only choice we have is whether to reflectively engage with that. And we need to, in order to live conscious and free lives. But not only do we always nee; we need to

do it particularly when times are dark and difficult; when the questions facing us are tough; when the existential stakes are high.

What is a human being? What do we ultimately have in common with each other? What are the ultimate goods that should govern our lives? We casually refer to 'our common humanity', but we almost never stop and wonder what that is. We do not like to address these sorts of questions, because we cannot answer them quantitatively. We think we can get around them by flinging larger and more brilliant technologies around, or having better business ideas. We cut funding for the humanities and put it into STEM subjects and enterpreneurship schemes.

But businesses, technologies, and laboratories do not help us to discern what kind of future we want, what kind of world we want to create. They may help us secure it, once we know what it is. But if we do not really think about what kind of future we want – what it is all *for* – then the business, technology and government serve only to amplify our confusion, or our selfishness, or our shortsightedness.

Questions of value, identity and goodness may look abstract and remote in our science-obsessed society. But we can see how completely concrete they are if we notice that they are fundamental to posing, let alone answering, the pressing practical questions which underpin what we choose to actually do – everything from governance and politics, to business and technology, to science itself.

ix. An Example: Biodiversity

Let me give you a concrete example, taken not from climate change but from the biodiversity crisis.

What is biodiversity, and why is it good? This question may seem banal, since one is unlikely to hear an ecologist, or anyone else, saying that biodiversity is bad. But its value is not as obvious as might be supposed.

To inhabitants of mangrove forests in Bangladesh, the forms of large vertebrate diversity known as the Bengal tiger and the Nile crocodile may count as biological difference, but it is not obvious that they are good, responsible as they are for the gruesome deaths of hundreds of villagers each year. To inhabitants of the southern hemisphere, the mosquito is hardly a desirable form of biological difference. Europeans waged efficient war on the ancient megafauna of Europe in order to create their civilisation in this continent. If we say that they shouldn't have, we need to notice that the reintroduction of wolves has been immensely controversial, and we need to ask how we would feel if bears and sabretooth tigers were being restored to Hampstead Heath.

Why should we preserve charismatic megafauna, when it's expensive and the numbers involved are absolutely tiny and now ecologically insignificant, such as with the snow leopard? And anyway, apex predators can now easily be replaced by human beings. Humanity has waged earnest war on millions of microorganisms throughout

human history, as a result of which we live longer and healthier lives: cholera; tuberculosis; the bubonic plague; and the common-or-garden germs we routinely exterminate in our homes.

Rephrasing "biodiversity" as "biological-difference" sharpens the point. Why is it that the difference of creatures is good? Where does our instinctive sense that *more* variety and not *less* is desirable come from? It's not actually obvious. The Elizabethans, for example, were well-known for their identification of some creatures as bad, as evil; it was they originated the concept of 'vermin', and started an extermination programme. What biodiversity is and why it is good actually needs to be argued for, and its value balanced against other values. Consider the recent debate about whether we should, if we could, eliminate the malarial mosquito using genetic engineering. The relative value of human and nonhuman lives needs to be measured and assessed; the relative value of individual animals over against species and habitats; and, most dauntingly, the relative value of different human lives, poor and wealthy, north and south, young and old.

As for the idea that we should affirm biodiversity because we are somehow 'part of it all', it's worth remembering that many civilisations have thought of the human being as a sort of alien in the world, not at home here at all, hoping only to escape from it. The affirmation of this material and biological world as intrinsically good is something historically contingent. Even ecologists themselves cannot agree whether we are truly "part of it all" as far as defining biodiversity is concerned, or whether humans need to be excluded from biodiversity itself.

I could give almost endless further examples. How we assess the good of a life now versus the good of a life that doesn't yet exist? How we can claim to 'conserve' natural systems if nature is in a constant state of flux? Which state of an ecosystem is held to be its 'normal' state, if nature is not a balance in eternal equilibrium, but a continual flow of change? When does the good of individual autonomy become overridden by the good of saving everybody from themselves?

Behind all these questions hovers a favourite concept of the environmental movement – *sustainability*. Without philosophy, nobody stops to address the glaring question-mark that that concept is. *What do we want to sustain*? Which is to say: *What is it all for?*

x. A culture without the virtues or the skills

But our civilisation has let the methods traditionally used to address these questions of value die of neglect. These methods were at one time called 'moral reasoning'. Disciplined, informed, rigorous, careful reflection on what is good. Instead, in this time when we urgently need to do philosophy – to reflectively and thoughtfully engage with questions of value – decisions about what is important to us are increasingly made by nonhuman or artificial intelligences; or they are made by the invisible operation of unaccountable global powers. We live in a rather undemocratic age, and

it is becoming more undemocratic just as the participation of all 'stakeholders' becomes more and more urgent.

I see three options.

We can do what we have been doing. We can go on repeating numbers and reciting data.

We can outsource decisions about our shared future to these powers. Artificial intelligence, and a small number of elite and unusually unelected human representatives.

Or we can – in this deepest and widest sense – do philosophy, and do it together. We can start having a shared conversation about the goods that we most value, and what we think everything is all about, so we can know what it is we want to sustain.

I think we should do philosophy.

But we need to learn again how to do it, because our society has lost touch with its philosophical heritage. We no longer believe that the goods which govern our lives and choices are things about which we can think well or badly; which can respectfully, meaningfully, rationally argue about. We no longer believe that intellectual virtues are real virtues, and that we need to nurture those virtues in ourselves and others in order to protect a shared culture of enquiry about what is important to us. Virtues of patience, self-control, humility. These qualities are fundamental to what Aristotle described as an *educated mind*: an educated mind, he said, is a mind which can entertain a thought without accepting it.

And we have lost the skills too: skills of clarity, articulateness, exactness of thought and speech. Learning how to say what you mean. Learning how to hear what others have *actually* said, not what you want them to have said, or fear them to have said. And we have lost the dispositions, the most important of which I have already mentioned: curiosity. A desire to learn, to understand, to grow.

All these qualities of mind are the opposite of the qualities engendered by extended use of contemporary communication media and culture: impatience; lack of self-control; inarticulacy; intolerance; sound-biting; short attention spans; dogmatism.

If we do not resist this trend, and cultivate the traits for good thinking, how can we have a conversation about the shared goods we need to be able to go forward together?

Conclusion

Science is necessary, but it is not sufficient. We are not computers. We are animals. We are motivated by loves, fears, cares, concerns, beliefs, vulnerabilities, desires, hopes. The door that leads us to future does not pass through facts, but through the purposes, meanings, goals that give those facts context; that make the facts mean something to us.

Our notion of reason has become one-dimensional, and our response to the environmental crisis reflects that. Our exclusive focus on facts, data, information, is not just wrongheaded. It's killing us.

Let's do philosophy again, before it is too late.