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Summary

This paper suggests that philosophy was originally a practically oriented discipline concerned with understanding the nature of reality and of our place within it. Academic philosophy does not have this practical orientation. Irrespective of what this means for philosophy as an academic discipline, there is a need in society today for philosophy to return to its origins. The new media, and in particular, the World Wide Web, provides a forum for the practical philosopher to teach. However, if the practical philosopher is to be effective in cyberspace then attention needs to be given to instructional design principles and to the particular challenges of teaching in what is very much an emotionless electronic space. We make use of a conversational model to address the particular issues of engaging in philosophy in cyberspace and suggest that if conversation can be successfully carried out, then practical philosophy can fulfil its function.

What is Philosophy?

There is an introduction to philosophy text book that begins by asking the question, “What is Philosophy” (Warburton 2002, p.1). The author suggests that the question might be answered by considering that the word philosophy is derived from the Greek word meaning ‘love of wisdom’ {Gk. φιλοσοφία [philosophia]}. However, this direction is quickly eschewed because, “this is rather vague and even less helpful than saying that philosophy is what philosophers do.” (Warburton 2002, p.1) It is certainly the case that attempting to define philosophy as the ‘love of wisdom’ per se does little to answer the question, ‘What is philosophy?’. However, with further elucidation the notion of philosophy as the love of wisdom can provide an answer to the question, ‘What is philosophy’. Wisdom is, “an understanding of the highest principle of things that functions as a guide for living a truly exemplary human life” (Audi 2001, p.976) and philosophy as φιλοσοφία is an activity characterised by three distinct pursuits each of which was engaged in by the ancient Greeks: speculative thinking about the nature of the world; practical thinking about the way in which a life should be lived; and critical thinking about the basis of thinking and enquiry (Kemerling. 2002). . The terms “nature of reality” and “highest principle of things” are here considered to be synonymous since the principle for which the philosopher searches is a comprehensive or fundamental law that underlies reality. Therefore, considering the concept of the love of wisdom leads to a definition of philosophy as a reflective and self reflective activity that attempts to understand the highest principle of things in order to provide the basis for leading a truly exemplary human life. For the purposes of this paper, we do not have to concern ourselves with the way in which a philosopher arrives at their view of reality

or with the way in which they justify it. We are concerned only with the way in which they will go about conveying that view of reality in cyberspace.

The Contemporary Role of the Virtual Philosopher

We will begin with the basic methodology of instructional design and we will then consider the implications of this methodology for teaching a particular philosophical position in cyberspace. In terms of a high level instructional design model (Flechisg 1997, p.27), the basic methodology of instructional design involves: the instructor coming to the designer with a particular instructional problem to be solved; the instructional designer carrying out a needs analysis; the instructional designer working with the instructor to develop a solution; the instructional designer developing a prototype of the proposed solution; testing the proposed solution; revising the solution; the final release of the solution.(Dijkstra 1997, p.21) Within this process, the primary foci of the instructional designer will be the course content, the course aims and the desired outcomes. That is, the designer will need to know about the body of knowledge to be presented together with the format of that body of knowledge, the intended aims of the instructor and the result that the instructor wishes to achieve.

As a practical discipline, instructional design consists of set of activities for building instructional environments or for building instructional objects. However, unless the design of this environment is to be completely arbitrary, the instructional design activity has to be explicitly grounded in a theory of learning that guides the design of the instructional environment (Tennyson 1997, p.55). There are a number of significant competing learning theories and we cannot consider them all here (Gillani 2003). What we can do, however, is state why we have chosen one particular learning theory to inform the design of an instructional environment for a virtual philosopher. In order to do this we need to know the philosophical position and the practical aims of the virtual philosopher. This mirrors the instructional design process in which the learning theory that is applied to the design will be contingent upon the nature of the instruction to be delivered. It is the philosophical position of the virtual philosopher that a meaningful life is a life that is lived soulfully. To live soulfully means to relate fully and deeply both to ourselves and to the world around us. To live soulfully is to live genuinely and with depth (Moore 1994, p.xi). The virtual philosopher believes that there is a divine aspect to reality and that the fullest life is lived in relation to this divine aspect of reality. He believes this because he believes that the best things are the most eternal things (James 1956, p.25).

The aim of the virtual philosopher is to engage others in conversation in order to achieve the uttermost possibility of understanding between all of the members of the conversational process. This aim is grounded in the understanding that the “rightness” of a philosophical view cannot be demonstrated through a process of academic reasoning which is impotent in terms of effecting change. Rather, individuals have to meet in their full humanness in order to come to “see” the truth of a particular position; the philosopher believes that it is in the context of conversation that this happens. Gadamer’s concept of conversation embodies this understanding.

Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject. (Gadamer 1989, p.385)

In conversation, individuals, who all have their own conceptual schemas or their own ways of looking at the world, come together in an open and honest attempt to truly understand what each has to say. Thus, thought should be present in the conditions of its existence so that presuppositions, values and prejudices can be examined (Bohm 1991). Furthermore, conversation is, at a conceptual level, not teleological in the sense that there is no aim beyond the exploration of the topic in order to arrived at shared meaning (Bohm 1991). “The concern is not to ‘win the argument’, but to advance understanding and human well being.” (Smith 2001). If agreement is reached, then that agreement will rest upon the participants in the conversation arriving at a common conviction (Smith 2001). This means that agreement is not an aim of conversation as such; rather it is a potential tangential effect of the exploration of meaning. Therefore, the conversational model provides for the possibility of the virtual philosopher engaging with others in absolutely genuine conversation in order, minimally, to arrive at mutual understanding and respect and, possibly, to arrive at a position of agreement concerning a particular view of reality and of our place within that reality. Under these conditions, then, there is the possibility that the “rightness” of the philosophical view will become apparent to others. Equally, however, the philosopher must accept that his own understanding may change as a result of conversing with others. Being able to accept this possibility is true to the nature of the philosophical enterprise which must question its own position and presuppositions.

As a working hypothesis we wish to suggest that the instructional design of a virtual philosophical environment must be informed by a constructivist theory of learning (Tennyson 1997, p.58) that has, at its heart, an interactive cognitive complexity learning model (Tennyson 1997, p.117). The constructivist theory of learning posits that knowledge acquisition is contingent upon new knowledge finding a place within an existing conceptual schema. That is, constructivists believe that new knowledge is most readily taken up when it can find a place relative to already existing concepts or when it is meaningful knowledge for the learner. In the context of creating a virtual philosophical space, the usefulness of this constructivist principle lies in the notion that if the philosophical position is ultimately to be adopted then it must necessarily find a place within the existing conceptual schema of the participant(s) in the conversation. We can see that this knowledge might find its place in an existing conceptual schema in at least two ways; a particular interlocutor might come to fully understand and fully appreciate the philosophical position in question without subscribing to that position. Secondly, a particular interlocutor might come to subscribe to the philosophical position. If the latter occurs, then, the concepts will have been integrated into their world view and, additionally, there will have been an emotional shift on the part of the participant.

The complexity model posits that the learner is a complex of interacting parts including sensory receptors, cognitive strategies, affects and a knowledge base (Tennyson 1997, p.119). In terms of explaining the relation between the new knowledge or the philosophical view of reality and the learner, we believe that the complexity learning model most closely represents the way in which individuals actually are in the world and, to that degree, the complexity model will provide the appropriate conceptual framework for developing a virtual philosophical environment. To be more exact, the cognitive complexity model will take into account the fact that participants in the conversation come with both a body of knowledge and a set of emotions and presuppositions and to the degree that the model takes this into account, it can provide a framework for creating a virtual space that facilitates genuine conversation including the presentation of ideas and the examination of the assumptions and values that underly those ideas. Thus conversation will occur in terms of two key aspects of the cognitive complexity theory; these are the knowledge base component and the affects

component. The knowledge base consists of all of the previously acquired information (Tennyson 1997, p.119) whilst the affects component consists of the personality variables such as motivation, feelings, attitudes, emotions, anxiety and values (Tennyson 1997, p.121).

In summary, the constructivist learning theory and the cognitive complexity model provide for the possibility of addressing the individual in such a way that the content becomes meaningful for them and in such a way that the virtual environment takes into account not only cognitions but also other epistemological factors including the affective state of the interlocutors. That is, constructivism and complexity will inform the design in such a way that the space is capable of allowing for genuine conversation rather than just discussion (Smith 2001). With these two theories in place, we must now consider what a virtual philosophical environment might actually look like. To achieve this we will consider how the basic aim of engaging in conversation might be achieved through a virtual philosophical environment.

The Characteristics of the Virtual Philosophical Space

For the purposes of this paper we will take it as understood that the design of any virtual environment has to be carried out in accordance with the fundamental principles of multimedia design and layout (Gillani 2003, Chs. 6-10). That is, the environment must be designed in accordance with rules for: the use of colour; for achieving balance, proportion and harmony on the page; for the placement of objects such that viewers will make the appropriate logical connections; for successful navigation and use of the various features of the environment; and for the minimum of technological interference such that the environment does not get in the way of the teaching process (Sims 1999). Not all environments will require attention to all of these design issues but all of the environments will require attention to at least some of the design issues. Assuming then that the instructional designer has followed good basic design practice, we are interested in the specific mechanisms for effecting genuine conversation.

In order to provide a hypothetical starting point for the design of a virtual philosophical environment, we are going to posit that the virtual philosopher has only a written record of their pursuit of a view of reality. This would not be uncommon in an instructional design situation. Often an instructor will approach an instructional designer with instructional material predominantly in a traditional text based format. The instructor might, for example, want a course developed for delivery in a more flexible format and it is then the job of the instructional designer to develop an environment to make that possible. In addition to the philosophical view of reality we know that the aim of the philosopher is to engage with others in genuine conversation about his particular view of reality. Genuine conversation entails the presence of certain emotions and virtues: concern; trust; respect; appreciation; affection; and hope. Additionally, there are certain pre-conditions for successful conversation. Amongst these are: suspension of assumptions and viewing each other as colleagues or peers (Smith 2001). In other words, the environment has to be a “human” emotional environment characterised by equality and mutual respect. Finally, genuine conversation must also allow the substantive “rightness” of all ideas to appear in their uttermost possibility, where substantive is understood to refer to both the essence and independent existence of what is said (Bohm 1998, p.ix).

One of the central questions with transposing the dialogical process to cyberspace is whether the already difficult task of starting a dialogue would become even more difficult as a result of attempting to carry out that dialogue in a different medium. That is, given the generally

superficial level at which conversation in the world is carried out, we often find it difficult to start a real conversation (Bohm 1998, p.viii). Similarly, the World Wide Web is full of inauthentic conversation that sits on the surface of the real, causing divisions and obscuring what is most important in our lives. Thus the conditions for starting a real conversation are at least as difficult in cyberspace. One has to somehow find willing participants with an interest in genuine conversation and one has to somehow facilitate that conversation. Being present in cyberspace is not particularly difficult. One can create a website relatively easily and host it either for free or at a very low cost. Alternatively one can start a web log (blog) at such sites as www.blogger.com and use the blog as a place to begin a conversation. One can also create a user group at websites such as www.yahoo.com and there is no cost in this. These are all ways in which the philosopher can establish an initial presence in cyberspace. In establishing this presence, the philosopher is providing the subject matter for the dialogue and setting himself up as the initial facilitator of the dialogue (Bohm 1998, p.15).

In terms of creating an emotional presence, we would suggest that, in the first instance, the philosopher present a written a record of search for truth in the absolute humanness of that search. In presenting himself together with his ideas, the philosopher must follow the principles for authentic dialogue; the written presentation must embody self reflection, self questioning, openness and honesty, a willingness to be uncertain, an exploration of the philosopher's values and a distinct lack of ego. This written representation could take a variety of formats but given that people are generally more reticent to read text on a screen the content should be reasonably short. For example, the philosopher might present a series of short essays or, perhaps, develop maxims that embody what he wishes to say. This initial philosophical space will also have to present the aims of the philosophical space and provide some way in which prospective participants can make contact with the philosopher. In other words, the space acts as an invitation to converse.

In terms of creating an appropriate initial conversational space, it is important to reiterate that the purpose of engaging in conversation is not to convince others that the philosophical position is correct. The purpose of the dialogue is to engage in conversation, "to communicate coherently in truth" (Bohm 1998, p.17). The philosopher invites participants to converse not in order to convince others that he is right but, rather, to talk about a perceived truth in the conditions for the possibility of that truth. This means that the philosopher has to be as open as all the other participants to questioning his own view of reality and his own assumptions and opinions and this openness must be apparent in the philosopher's initial presence. Therefore, the ideas that are put forward for conversation cannot be represented as having the status of fixed and immutable truths. This degree of openness is absolutely in accord with the notion of philosophy as a reflective and self reflective discipline, a discipline that demands that the practitioner constantly question their own assumptions. Additionally, dialogue is a process that has to occur between peers or between equals (Bohm 1998, p.15). Thus, one could argue that the philosopher has, in the first instance, to present himself as a person who is an equal amongst others. To this degree, academic titles would have no place in a virtual philosophical space.

To dialogue in the real world one would have to assemble a group of between fifteen to forty people (Bohm 1998, p.viii), convene and conduct a conversation. Once the philosopher has established his presence either in a user group, on a website or on a blog, he too has to find a group of willing participants. This can be achieved through getting ranked in search engines, through frequenting chat rooms, through posting on message boards or through the traditional method of finding participants in the "real world" and inviting them to a conversational space

in cyberspace. It is at this stage that one of the constructivist principle becomes particularly important; learning takes place most readily when the content can be related to pre-existing concepts or, more broadly, when it can be fitted into an existing conceptual schema. A conceptual schema is simply a cognitive structure in terms of which we interpret the world. Functionally a conceptual schema can be defined as “a structural framework into which new knowledge is instantiated” (Tennyson 1997, p.57). As far as virtual philosophical dialogue is concerned this means putting mechanisms in place to facilitate a connection between what is proposed – dialogue – and the conceptual schemas of the would be interlocutors. One such mechanism might be a series of “advance organisers”. Advanced organisers do not function as summaries of material to be learned which is not, in any case possible, in dialogue. Rather, an advance organiser is a brief introductory text or graphic to bridge the gap between the learner and what needs to be learned or, in the case of virtual philosophical dialogue, to bridge the gap between the potential interlocutor and the subject matter and aims of the dialogue (Ausubel, 1978, pp.171-172, cited in Driscoll, 2000, p.139). In the case of the virtual philosophical space, these advance organisers might take the form of a series of questions aimed at connecting potential participants with the subject matter of the dialogue. These questions would be oriented around, for example, reasons why an individual might want to engage in the conversation. “Do you think about meaning?” “Do you wonder why you are here?” “Are you looking for something more?”

We can understand the value of advance organisers in another way. Learning can occur in terms of either ‘taxon’ memory in which ‘knowledge is non-contextual and not integrated with prior knowledge’ or in terms of “locale” memory which is “contextual and situational based”. Experts in a particular field have organised their taxon memory into their locale memory in terms of some core concepts (Gillani 2003, p.7). This entails that learning occurs readily when the subject matter to be learned can be fitted in to an already existing set of ideas and that because the knowledge is meaningful and organised in terms of key concepts, the knowledge can be readily recalled and applied. In terms of the virtual philosophical space, until the conversation actually begins, these advance organisers would act as an invitation, as a way of connecting possible participants with the process. The notion of a dialogue would find its place in the conceptual schema of the potential interlocutor as potentially useful for their life. To this degree, dialogue has to be perceived as meaningful in terms of having the ability to solve the particular problem of the nature of reality and of our place within it. This follows the principle that learning is enhanced if learners are given learning experiences that improve their ability to identify patterns of information that are meaningful for solving problems within a particular field. In our case, the field in question is the real world in which participants are looking for answers concerning their life (Cocking 1999 retrieved from <http://www.nap.edu/html/howpeople1/index.html>).

If the process of promoting the virtual philosophical space works, then the philosopher will be approached by a number of individuals all of whom will be interested in having a conversation concerning the nature of reality and of our place within it. The fact of bringing together a group of people in cyberspace raises an interesting issue to do with the diversity of the group. One of the key aspects of dialogue, as Bohm conceived of it, is an emergent friction between a group of people with widely divergent values (Factor 1994; Bohm 1998, p.ix & p.11). If a group is recruited in cyberspace, then the values of the resultant group are likely to be even more diverse since, potentially, members of the dialogical group can be recruited from all over the world. This will add to the richness of the dialogue but it will also increase the friction encountered in the conversational process. One particular constructivist principle posits that learning can be made meaningful by taking account of the cultural

context of the learner and by developing strategies for solving “the particular problems faced by the culture” (Driscoll 2000, p.238). Whilst dialogue is not aiming to solve a problem per se, it is attempting to operate in terms of the creation of a shared meaning and, therefore, attention has to be paid to whether the problem of the nature of reality and of our place within it is a cross cultural question. Even if this is a cross-cultural question, and we would suggest that it certainly is, thought still has to be given to whether these questions present themselves in the same way in different cultures. Because the diversity of the group is likely to be greater in cyberspace, more will be demanded of the participants in the dialogue in terms of allowing ideas to appear in their uttermost possibility because participants from different cultures will have to strive to understand one another’s perspectives.

Having established a virtual philosophical presence and having recruited participants for conversation, the actual process of conversation can begin. Here we see that there are, potentially, very significant differences with conversation in the “real” world. In addition to the different synchronous and asynchronous text based modes of conversation such as email, blogs, message boards, chat rooms and user groups, virtual space allows for interaction using a variety of additional media such as images, sound, animations, video and virtual three dimensional environments. Understanding conversation as the exploration of meaning, conversation in cyberspace is potentially richer than conversation as originally conceived by Bohm because ideas and meaning can be explored through these various media. This is in accord with Bohm’s conception that,

“Because the nature of Dialogue is exploratory, its meaning and its methods continue to unfold. No firm rules can be laid down for conducting a Dialogue because its essence is learning – not as the result of consuming a body of information or doctrine imparted by an authority, nor as a means of examining or criticizing a particular theory or programme, but rather as part of an unfolding process of creative participation between peers.” (Bohm 1991)

If there is a difference between conversation using a variety of media and conversation as spoken interaction between a group of people in a room, then it is to be found in an increased richness which brings with it an increased complexity. The richness comes from the possibility of individuals expressing themselves through different media. The complexity comes from the necessity of all of the members of the group interacting in terms of the variety of different media.

In terms of the potential for virtual philosophy we cannot delimit the format of the conversation in advance. However, we can take from instructional design theory the notion that individuals learn in a host of different ways. Some learn most readily in a written form; some are visual learners; some are kinaesthetic; some individuals find that asynchronous interaction gives them the space that they require to reflect upon what it is that they wish to say; some find that synchronous interaction is more helpful for learning. This range of possible interactions is not a disadvantage in dialogue. Rather, it is true to the nature of dialogue. It is challenging and will require participants to examine their assumptions and values. It will necessitate all participants being open to different ways of interacting with one another. When we consider the actual nature of the conversation that will take place we can see that cognitive complexity theory fits perfectly with what we are attempting to do in conversing. In the process of conversation we wish the participants to examine their beliefs and opinions (the knowledge base in cognitive complexity theory) and to become aware of the emotions, values and “prejudices” that lie behind their beliefs (the affective component in

cognitive complexity theory). Thus in dialogue all of the beliefs that are held around the particular subject of the nature of reality and the most appropriate way to live within that reality need to be drawn out. Dialogue also has to enable people to become aware of the affective aspect of those beliefs.

Individuals new to dialogue are unlikely to be conversant with the notions of the conceptual schema, the knowledge base and the affective component of their learning. Therefore, in the initial stages at least, the philosopher is going to have to act as facilitator, guiding the conversation and encouraging the participants to become aware of the body of knowledge that they hold around the belief in question. The facilitator is also going to have to bring about an awareness of the relationship between the process, the body of knowledge and the affects component. This will take the form of drawing attention to how individuals feel during the conversation and to highlighting particularly strong emotional reactions during the conversation. As time progresses, the facilitator will be able to drop into the background as the participants become aware of the key concepts in dialogue and develop the necessary skills to identify beliefs and affects. When this happens, there will be a much greater degree of equality within the group. The success of the dialogue is not to be judged in terms of whether a person has or has not changed their opinion. Rather the success will be judged in terms of whether the participants have seen what they might not have seen before (Bohm 1998, p.20). This is all that the philosopher wishes to achieve. However, an opinion may change as a result of seeing something that was not previously seen.

A Soulful Space

We would suggest if the process of dialogue is successful then the virtual philosophical space will be a soulful space where soul is understood to refer not to a metaphysical substratum of the self but to, “a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value relatedness, heart, and personal substance.” (Moore 1994, p.5) In this sense the “dimension of experiencing life” is something that is located within oneself but not as an “entity”. Rather this dimension is a depth that may be discovered (Moore 1994, p.xi). It is a way of relating to the world. The philosopher will make these aspects of himself present in the virtual space for the same reason that he will make his emotional presence felt; such a representation is authentic. In representing the aspects of his soulful existence, that is, his being in all of its aspects, the philosopher is making present both what he perceives to be possible and, concomitantly, facilitating the process of bringing others to see what is possible. Minimally, if successful, the process will achieve understanding within the group, understanding which includes the philosopher understanding the perspectives of all of the other participants. It is also possible that participants will come to see the world in the same way that the philosopher sees the world.

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