

Who is a Philosopher?

Over the past twenty-plus years, I have had many interesting conversations with individuals who are philosophical by nature but not by training. If they know I've studied philosophy, they often make a point of professing their own ignorance of that field. Their declarations of philosophical inexperience appear to rest on an underlying assumption – that doing philosophy requires in-depth knowledge of a certain body of ideas and authors, and that without a thorough education on these ideas and authors, they are unable to participate. The time has come to debunk that belief.

The primary tools needed for practicing philosophy are not a diploma or successfully defending a dissertation, but an inquisitive nature, a desire to think critically, and a willingness to engage in dialog. Philosophy is not something that can be performed sans interaction. It is, and has been from its beginnings, a series of conversations between individuals. Sometimes the dialogues take place in person, but often, they happen across space and time with one philosopher “speaking” their ideas to others via their writings. But this is more than one individual reading the works of another. The works must be read critically and should evoke a response, either internally in your head, externally by responding with critical remarks, or even verbally by relaying your thoughts to another individual.

Being a philosopher is very different from being a psychologist, a doctor, a lawyer, an IT professional, or a vast number of professions. There is no exam you must pass or organization you must join before being allowed to refer to yourself as a philosopher. There are no specific technologies in which you need to be proficient. There is no required reading list for admission. There are also no secret handshakes, no IQ level requirements, or (contrary to popular culture) no wardrobe stipulations. One simply decides to call oneself a philosopher. To be clear, it took me a number of years to figure this out.

But calling yourself a philosopher does not give you license to march into a college classroom and begin lecturing the students you find. A philosopher is not the same as a philosophy professor.

Lest it be thought I am implying that doctorates in philosophy are unnecessary, let me state plainly: making a meaningful contribution takes much hard work. Communicating your thoughts concisely and with minimal ambiguity is no mean feat. Add to that the requirement of showing that one has considered the relevant existing dialogues on one's topic, while also constructing original and compelling arguments. But as I already stated, you don't have to obtain a doctorate before referring to yourself as a philosopher. You don't even have to think or write anything original – you just need to critically engage into a dialogue.

Here is why I think more people should identify as philosophers: when people start to view themselves as philosophers, both their self-image and their intellectual habits change. They begin to place higher value on their own cognitive powers, and as a result these powers are improved through greater use. Also, their understanding and ability to vocalize their own beliefs and opinions increases. Why? Because, as they examine the beliefs they hold, they come to better understand them, and to revisit and refine and reform them. Through this process of self-examination, they may come to understand how others arrive at beliefs contrary to their own, having pivoted in a different direction due to a different set of influencing factors. As a result of this understanding, it's possible that their levels of tolerance and compassion will increase.

There is a perception that philosophers are stuffy – that they are averse to discussing the trivial and the pedestrian – that is, the very things that make up most of our daily conversations. This perception is accurate to a point - philosophical conversations are not full of simple pleasantries and the plans for the day. They can be intense discussions, sometimes heated, where the participants struggle to articulate, to persuade, and to reach a meaningful conclusion.

There is a stereotype of the individual who has had a few drinks and then begins to wax philosophical. It is human to want to understand the world around us, and to also want to express what we have been able to figure out to our friends and acquaintances. Those couple drinks can sometimes open a window into one's thought processes and give a glimpse into what makes us who we are, or at least who we believe ourselves to be. Is it the couple beers and opening up to your friend or colleague that makes you a philosopher? No. The thoughts and the self-analysis pre-existed the beers, which serves

merely as a conduit – a lubricant, as it were – for more quickly reaching a state of philosophical discourse.

The next time I find myself talking with someone who professes their ignorance of philosophy, provided that my aging memory doesn't fail me, I plan to ask them these questions:

- Do you think it is important and useful to examine your own life and the world around you?
- Do you believe there's a benefit in sharing these ideas?

If they answer yes to both questions, then I'll congratulate them and inform them that they are, however unbeknownst to themselves, a philosopher, and they should henceforth refer to themselves as such. I doubt that they will immediately take on that label, but hopefully I will have planted a seed. Despite having engaged in philosophical discussions and also receiving my Master's in philosophy, it still took me many years before I started thinking of myself as a philosopher. I'm hoping that, with a little guidance, I'll be able to nudge others along that path at a quicker rate.