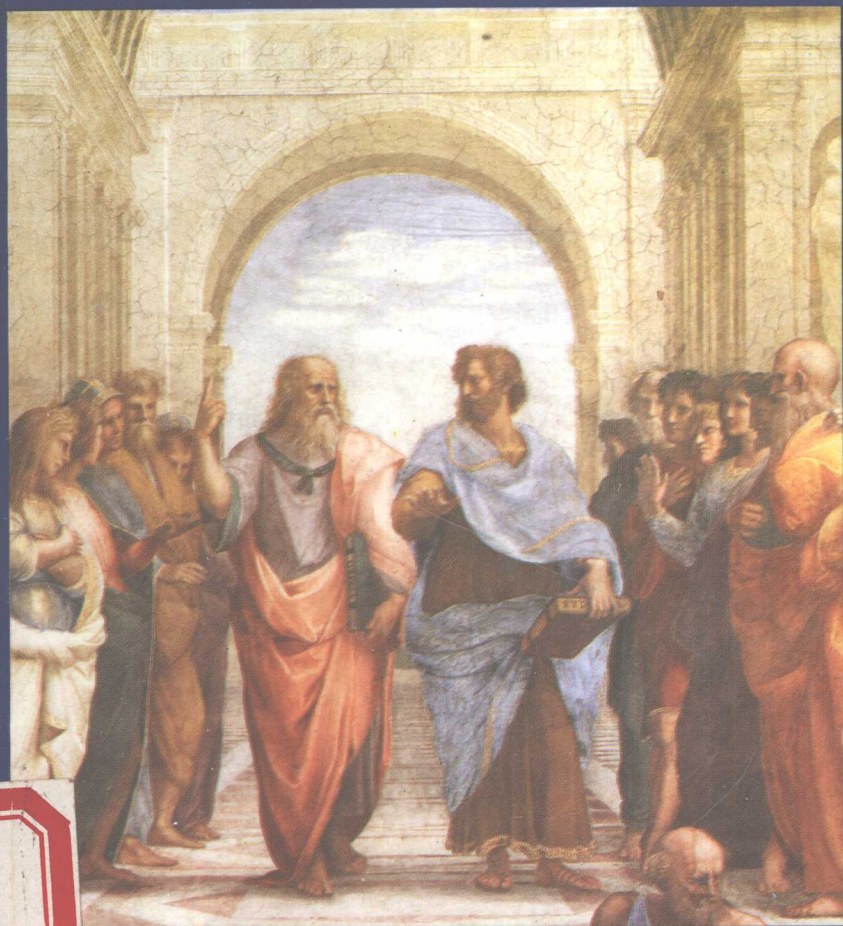


*Invitation to*

# PHILOSOPHY

Martin Hollis



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For Simon and Matthew

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# 1

## Wonder, Paradox and Vision

Is there conscious life elsewhere in the universe? That is an old question, asked for changing reasons. Lately it has become a scientific one, exciting because science just might be able to answer it. We have set foot on the moon and fired probes at the planets. We have radio-telescopes and computers to extend our puny reach. That hardly puts us nearer proving the negative – that nowhere in the infinite universe is there conscious life – but it starts to raise the chances of finding positive signs. The scientist's mixture of knowledge, ignorance and curiosity can go to work on the technical challenge.

The philosopher's curiosity has a different focus. Pause and think about the question itself. It is a little like asking whether there is gold under the polar ice, but only a little – we know gold when we find it. If a space probe flashed home pictures of blue Venusians waving cheerily, that would be like finding gold. But 'conscious life' embraces all sorts of other possibilities and, on reflection, we do not know where the limits might lie. Even in earthly biology it shades off into organisms which are not conscious; and work on artificial intelligence in computing holds out prospects of conscious systems which are not exactly living. As science fiction reminds us, there is nothing inherently special about our own head, two eyes, thirty feet of digestive tract and opposable thumbs. Somewhere between biology and computing there is an unmapped field which we do not care to prejudge. But scientific

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ignorance is only one reason why we are unsure what 'conscious life' embraces.

Questions have a purpose and this one is older than the technical curiosity of recent science. One enduring purpose of it has been to understand how human consciousness fits into the larger cosmos or order of things. Wonder at an unknown cosmos is as old as the sight of the stars from the mouth of the cave – wonder about what there is and how it moves and why the gods have ordered it so. Out of that wonder comes a puzzle about consciousness itself and a sense of an inner cosmos in uneasy relation to the cosmos outside. Human beings carry a world within them, different from the everyday world of the senses and imperfectly continuous with it. So, up to a point at least, do animals. They too are sentient, ingenious, purposive and organize a communal life. Perhaps they even dream. Yet they do not record the past in song and do not spy death coming nor wonder what lies beyond death. This is a profound difference. It may in the end be only a large one of degree. But meanwhile it is marked by our human awareness of contrast between inner and outer worlds, a sense of self apart from experience, which is very hard to pin down.

Since long ago, then, mankind has tried to understand nature for reasons other than making life easier and more convenient. There has also been the challenge of our own human nature. We stand somehow at the juncture of inner and outer worlds, creatures of both body and spirit, subject to laws of nature yet making our own way. We are both part of the order of nature and separate from it; and the cosmos we glimpse is also a cosmos which we impose after our own manner of understanding. These are old perplexities (posed here in a way which later chapters will query) and they have long led thinkers to wonder if they are unique to ourselves. Is there conscious life, like ours, elsewhere in the universe?

It is worth stressing that the question is truly a practical one. By noting that it has now become one about the reach of technology, I may have seemed to contrast modern

practicalities with ancient speculations. But there is nothing more practical than trying to discover how to live and, hence, how the universe is constructed. How we should live has much to do with what changes could in fact be engineered. That depends on what is essential to human nature and what is an accident of place and time. For example, humans have all sorts of desires, some making for a peaceful life together and others for strife and enmity. We are prone to love and sympathy and also to envy, hatred and malice. Some variety in the mixture is due to place and time; compare, for instance, the honour code of old Japan with the individualism of modern market economies or the aggressive impulses of classical Spartans with the peaceable sentiments of Quakers. Some desires are as enduring as maternal instinct and others as fleeting as the craze for skateboards. It would be a very practical matter to know which were essential, either because we cannot remove them or because we would cease to be human if we did, and which could be set aside in a suitable environment. This is another reason to wonder whether there is conscious life elsewhere. Even speculation makes us define what we are assuming about the fixed and the variable components of human nature.

There is a difference between 'practical' in the sense of technically feasible and 'practical' in the sense of making a difference to how we live. It is practical in the latter sense to ask whether there is a God. But it is not practical in the former sense, and I do not wish to confuse them. My point is that questions about conscious life do not separate cleanly into the two senses. On the one hand, if we are going to build radio-telescopes to look for it, we need to decide what we are looking for. On the other, local information about the nature of consciousness is so elusive that fresh and perhaps disconcerting data might help us understand what we have already. By analogy, experiments with embryos in test tubes can disturb both our beliefs about the development of cells and our beliefs about the nature of persons. Theorizing (or the making of sense out of experience) involves both information and under-

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standing, with no easy separation to be made between scientific and moral understanding. Later in the book I shall distinguish between knowing more and knowing better but this opening chapter is about the wonder and curiosity which inspire philosophy. They are not the peculiarity of peculiar beings called 'philosophers'. They are the motive of every thinking person's search for an order which makes scientific and moral sense. That is why I picked an opening question, where theorizing brings the technical and the moral together.

Is there conscious life elsewhere in the universe? There is a question of fact here, one which would be settled, if we happened to find beings just like us beyond Alpha Centauri. But it is, at best, an imprecise question, since we are very unsure how unlike us something could be and still count as conscious life. Some of the imprecision could be removed by defining the terms 'conscious' and 'life' exactly. But this is not just a matter of defining them as we please, since it needs to be possible that discoveries in space will increase our understanding of conscious life. Part of the imprecision reflects our puzzlement about the nature of consciousness. Yet it is a curious puzzlement seeing that we live among conscious beings and have had many centuries to study ourselves. Hence, there is another sort of question involved, not wholly one of fact, nor of words but, obscurely as yet, of how to think. It is this kind of question, born in wonder but probing for order in matters of fact, which I shall pick out as typical of philosophy. Readers who have got this far will sense what I am after, since they will have been drawn to the book by their own philosophical curiosity. But an intuitive sense will not be enough for later chapters and I shall now draw a contrast between the *closed* and *open* questions, which prompt the search for knowledge or, to strike a rather different note, wisdom.

CLOSED QUESTIONS

Are there little blue people on Venus? That is a closed question, since it is clear what would settle it. If we do not have the answer already, at least we know how to get it. Getting it might not be easy, if an inference from what we know now about Venus was not enough. Better fuels, metals or instruments would be needed for an exhaustive hunt and might cost more than we are willing to spend. But these matters of technique and willingness do not affect our understanding of what is involved. It is a matter of fact and one which we see how to decide.

The limiting case of a closed question is one where the answer is known already. The child asks what laid that speckled egg and is told, 'a thrush'. The pupil asks the date of the Magna Carta and is given the right answer; or asks something harder and is told to look it up in the library. These are questions which tap a stock of information and there is no mystery about them. They are like simple raids on the memory store of a computer. Call such questions *completely closed*.

Harder questions soon begin to tax the existing stock of information. What is  $29,317 \times 82,401,379$ ? Perhaps no one has asked exactly that before and there is no file which holds the answer. But the technique is to hand and simple ignorance is soon dispelled. There are indefinitely many facts, which we could establish, if we wished, once armed with a suitable technique. Where we already have the technique, the questions which apply for them are almost completely closed too.

But matters of fact soon outstrip existing techniques. Are there little blue people on Alpha Centauri? That is quite beyond us at present. We can say that it is unlikely on the available evidence. But the space probe needed to decide is science fiction. On the other hand, it too is a straight-forward matter of fact. It calls only for a ship powerful enough to travel so far to settle which of two

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clear possibilities in fact holds and, in principle, we know what would be involved in building such a ship. So that too can be deemed a closed question.

Notice those little words 'in principle'. They signal the start of a blurred edge to the idea of a matter of fact. Are there little blue people so far away in the universe that it would take a million years to get there? It is not clear whether we know how to find out. 'In principle' a long enough journey on a fast enough ship would do it. So 'in principle' would a ship with a space-warp-drive which jumped intermediate points. But these are not exactly real possibilities for us. On the other hand, mere distance seems not to make a difference. If it is a matter of fact whether there are fairies at the bottom of the garden, then it should be one whether there are fairies at the end of the next galaxy. 'In principle' it is the same sort of question. Let us say that it is closed without being completely closed. It is not completely closed because we neither have the answer already nor have the technique which would give us the answer. It is closed, nonetheless, because (to put it roughly for the moment) we can state conditions for the truth or falsity of the hypothesis about little blue people.

There is an image for closed questions, which may help to keep things simple. It is the image of map-making. The map-maker arrives at unknown country with a blank sheet of paper, explores and gradually records what the country is like. In olden times it might be as hard to explore the world as it is now to explore the stars. The map-maker might not know how to record the curvature of the earth; indeed he might believe the earth to be flat. But, in principle, the landscape was out there waiting for him. Its mountains were so high, its rivers so long and it either did or did not contain dragons. His problem was a well-defined one of reproducing things as they were. This is a powerful image for the nature of many questions in everyday life and in science. It applies not only to finding out how things are but also to deciding how they were or will be. Historians, for instance, cannot journey back in

time but we usually think of them too as makers of maps, whose work stands or falls in principle by whether it is accurate. The image is of a world independent of what we believe about it, whose features are an ultimate and objective test of truth for what we believe. Wherever that image makes sense, questions are closed.

#### OPEN QUESTIONS

The image makes sense less often and less thoroughly than one might suppose. Is there conscious life elsewhere in the universe? Little blue people would be an example but, as noted, 'conscious life' embraces far more and there is soon a puzzle about what counts. Let the map of Alpha Centauri record 'Here be gaseous cuboids' and let us add all that observation can tell us of their behaviour. That may still leave us undecided whether they are a life-form and whether they are conscious. There seems to be something here which eludes map-making.

The obvious retort is that the question is at fault. It is like telling the map-maker to record all salient features without telling him what counts as salient or even what 'salient' means. Certainly that is a possible fault and one which can lead to wasted time. For instance, if a satellite were positioned permanently above Nebraska, there might be an argument about whether it circles the earth. It does, in that it orbits the earth's notional centre point; it does not, in that it has no path round the earth's surface. Which is the right answer? It really does not matter, as only the preferred use of the verb 'to circle' is at stake. But that is a deliberately trivial example and it will not generalize. More hangs on questions of what is to count as conscious life. If that is not plain for gaseous cuboids, try it for attitudes to the human foetus in arguments about abortion. Admittedly this is a moral matter and so may seem special but there is also a matter of how to conceptualize a foetus and that is a further question.

The new factor is that the country to be explored is no

longer independent of our thought. Of course, the question whether there are mountains never was independent of what we mean by 'mountain' but this is not what I am after. Even if we refused to *call* Everest a mountain, it would still *be* one. Whether or not we call a 3,000-metre hill a mountain makes no difference to the landscape. But plenty of concepts do not function just as labels. Concepts also enter into how we perceive, before we interpret and explain. Indeed, in perceiving, we are often already interpreting and explaining. That is the link between what may have seemed very disconnected readings of the opening question. Travels in space, I said, might change our picture of space and our picture of ourselves. The link is that they might revolutionize our way of thinking about what there is, making us self-conscious first about our map, then about our ways of mapping and then about ourselves, who make the map. Instead of giving new decisions within a framework of thought, they could shift the framework. Closed questions are those, however difficult and important, whose answers only add to our information. Open questions threaten the rules by which we decide what to believe.

This distinction is more easily seen with the help of history. Let us give the question of life among the stars an older context. In medieval Christian astronomy the earth was the centre of the heavens, stationary and set within the concentric crystal spheres of the moon, the sun, the planets and the fixed stars. These spheres revolved eternally round the earth and only below the sphere of the moon was there any change or decay. This cosmology was not separate from the received view of life on earth. Both were entwined within a Christian framework, enmeshed with a view of human nature. Man was unique in the cosmos in being created with free will and a corruptible soul. He was at the centre of God's design both physically and spiritually. Physically, the earth was at the literal centre of things. Spiritually, he was the only reason why God had not created a fully automatic universe without place for choice between good and evil. Physical and spiritual were



connected aspects of this central mystery. Within the framework there was something odd about asking whether there is conscious life elsewhere. Provided that the framework went unchallenged, the answer was plainly 'No'. To toy with the idea of other conscious beings, perhaps of other Gardens of Eden and even of other crucifixions, was plainly idle. To the closed question the answer was definite. Yet curiosity continued.

In fact, the framework was fragile and under growing pressure both religious and scientific. The strains which led to the Reformation subverted the traditional authority of the Catholic Church and, hence, its power to keep closed questions closed. Astronomers began to insist on a new map of the heavens, displacing the earth from the centre and, as it was put later, smashing the crystal spheres like windows. It became reasonable to ask whether there is conscious life elsewhere – a subversive, now open, question, which made serious sense but only as a fresh framework for it emerged. The process was gradual and argumentative. Indeed it was dangerous – heretics could find themselves burnt alive. The modern map of heaven and earth took the shape, which we now broadly accept, only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We can realize now, with hardly a tremor, that our earth is just a satellite in a tiny solar system barely 7,350 million miles across, embedded in a medium-sized galaxy of 100 billion stars, itself one in a web of galaxies to which our greatest telescopes can find no end. We can accept that human life has lasted a mere tick of the astronomical clock. To that extent we have a framework for the question.

With hindsight, we can see how a closed question can become open and then, within a new framework, start to become closed again. But it has not become wholly closed. We no longer insist on making human life central to an account which fuses science and religion. But we do not yet understand the nature of conscious life. Our own framework is vulnerable in its turn to future experience. At the same time, like any framework of thought, it governs experience. This is a puzzling relationship. The