

A

Philosophical Look at Life

and

Mental Well-being

and

Other Stuff

I wish I had known about when I was younger

Introduction 1

In the September of 1973, when I was 11 years and 3 months old, my parents drove me to a small village 4 ¾ miles from Ipswich and dropped me off at what was to be my school and home, holidays excepting, for the next 7 years. After having waved my parents goodbye until their car had driven off out of sight, I made my way to my dormitory; a room containing 20 beds whose metal frames stood on bare wooden floorboards, where in addition to a bed, each boy was afforded a chair and a small locker no bigger than a suitcase in which to put all his worldly goods. I sat on my bed and looked out through the tiny window panes that were to rattle in their leaded frames on windy nights and I thought about the days, months and years ahead.

As I write, the calendar shows the days for the month of August 2021 which means that 47 winters and summers have chilled and warmed these shores since that September afternoon.

And thinking back to that time, as I often do, a thought recently alighted in my mind, but from where I don't know. It wasn't a thought I had had before, but it was a thought that caused me to ponder for some time. So much so, that it planted a seed for the writing of this book. And that thought was...

"Is there anything that I now know, that I wish I had known back then?"

Was there a subject I wish I had studied or is there some great pearl of wisdom that I wish one of our Masters had taken time to bestow upon us? Something that would have made us better, more rounded, more grounded persons today than perhaps we are and something that might have given us the life skills to cope better with the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (as Shakespeare might have put

it) that life throws at you as you walk further from the cradle and closer to the grave? Was there something that we could have been taught that would have made us appreciate the world round us more and better understand our place within it? Was there something that we could have been taught that would have helped us find out who we were and what life had to offer us and what we really wanted from life before embarking on a course of life that we thought we wanted, or a course of life that we were told would be best for us, or a course of life resulting from taking the first option offered to us or the course of life that we simply drifted into because we didn't choose to do anything else?

It is only fair to say that, academically speaking, I did learn quite a lot at that school, but in all honesty I haven't had cause to use much of it during the intervening years.

I know that the capital of Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) is Ouagadougou (aged 11 we had to learn all the European, African and South American capital cities). I know that the German words "Vergnügen Dampfer" mean 'pleasure steam boat' and that that the Young's Modulus of a metal is calculated by dividing its 'stress' by its 'strain'. But never in the last 41 years of my life have I been able to casually include these gems of information into either polite conversation or in the workplace and none of the many business meetings I have attended in Germany over the intervening years were ever held in, on or near a pleasure steam boat.

However, regardless of what you know, knowing stuff is not a problem. You can never know too much stuff, no matter how little you might use it. Problems only arise when you think you know stuff that you actually don't (as George Bernard Shaw once said, "Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangerous than ignorance") or when you don't know the stuff that you should know; stuff that could help make your life easier, more enjoyable, more rewarding and more

fulfilled. Dr Richard Paul (a former Director of Research and Professional Development at the Center for Critical Thinking and Chair of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking) talked about the 'intellectual humble' person. A person who values and seeks out knowledge of their own ignorance. If you know what is not known and you know it in detail, you can explore the unknown, but when you think you know something that you don't know, you are neither motivated to find out, nor do you know how to find out. Anyway, more about this later in the Chapter that talks about 'Critical Thinking'.

I must admit, it would have been nice if we had access to the technology that is now common place in all schools. My children are now 25 and 22 and from their earliest days at school they had the benefit of; Smart Boards, Photocopiers, PCs, Educational Software, Printers and the Internet; none of which were available to my generation in 1973. That said, I did get a 'pocket' calculator for Christmas when I was 13.

My children were even taught about Mind Maps! Where the hell were Mind Maps when I needed them?

Slight digression alert...

In 1973, Tony Buzan (*the genius responsible for popularising Mind Maps*) was just starting out on his Mind Map crusade and any mention he might have made about Mind Maps back then failed to penetrate deepest Suffolk during my extended visit. In fact, I didn't 'discover' Mind Maps until the late 80's when I was working in the aerospace industry and I stumbled across his mind map book imaginatively entitled, "The Mind Map Book", in the company library. I was hooked instantly. Mind maps are a brilliant way of learning stuff, remembering stuff, revising for exams, expressing your thoughts, planning essays, planning projects, giving presentations, making presentations less boring, etc, etc, etc. I actually feel 'robbed'

that I went through my school, college and university years without having had them as a weapon in my learning armoury. I know their use is now widespread and they are taught in most if not all schools, but, if you are not already in the habit of using them on a daily basis, do yourself a huge favour and do so. But I digress ...

While I feel that Mind Maps have 'great worth', and I wish we had been introduced to them when I was at school, they are not the focus of this book. So getting back to the original question and without any further digressions or deviations, the answer to the question, "*Is there anything that I now know, that I wish I had known back then?*" is

...

Yes, ... I wish we had studied ...

Philosophy!

Ok, so given the title of this book, I guess that didn't come as too much of a surprise.

But philosophy wasn't something that even crossed my mind when I was at school, it wasn't a subject that was on offer and to be honest, if you had asked the 11 year old me what philosophy was, I don't think I would have been able to tell you. The word 'philosopher' would have conjured up an image in my mind of an old grey haired bearded man wearing a toga and scandals and I could have probably named 2 or 3 philosophers, but that was about it. The fact that philosophy was still alive and well at that time totally passed me by. Of what philosophers did, had to say or how they may have contributed to society, I had no real idea.

How strange I feel it is then, that in all those years since I left school, no one else has come to the same conclusion as I, or if they have, they have failed to successfully argue their case with those responsible for the education and well-being of the Nation's children and get

philosophy into the main school curriculum. That said, it might be the case that the level of philosophy deemed required by a teenager is covered by other subjects in the school curriculum? Who knows? I certainly don't and when I question my children who have both left school, it would seem that the world of philosophy has passed them by too.

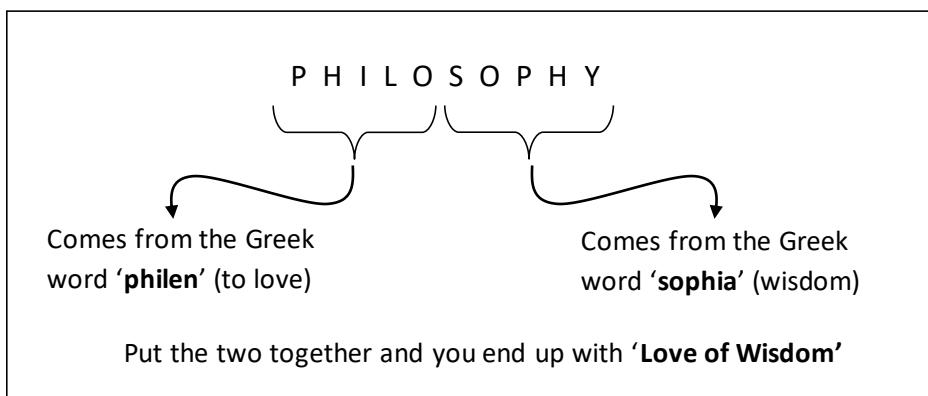
I don't know for sure, but I guess that a lot of young people's knowledge of philosophers and philosophy is pretty similar to that of the 11 year old me, and not wishing to sound patronising, and apologies if I do, it is possible that the first time many young people ever heard the word 'philosopher' was in JK Rowling's book; "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone". In fact, the American film industry was so worried that Americans wouldn't relate to the word 'philosopher', they renamed the film as "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone".

Slight digression alert...The 'Philosopher' in that story was a certain Nicolas Flamel; the maker of a stone which could turn base metals into gold and give immortality to its owner. You might not know this, but the character in the story was actually based on a real person! That's right, Nicolas Flamel did exist, and so did his wife, Perenelle. He was a Frenchman born just to the North West of Paris sometime between the late 1330's and early 1340's and he died in 1418. That would have put him somewhere between 78 and 82, which despite being a pretty good innings for those days, was still a long way short of 665. (read the book). And I'm afraid the bad news continues... He was neither a philosopher nor an alchemist, but was in fact a scribe and manuscript seller. That said, he was a pretty successful and wealthy scribe and manuscript seller and by all accounts a decent fellow to boot; giving away, as he did, much of his wealth to the church and local schools and hospitals. He may well also have dabbled in 'alchemy', albeit unsuccessfully, but it was probably due to his longevity, for that time, wealth and generosity that some 200

years after his death, rumours began to circulate that he had in indeed been a philosopher who had created the Philosopher's Stone. I'm sure Euhemerus (ancient Greek philosopher and writer) would have said this was a simple case of 'Euhemerism' in action. Euhemerism being named after Euhemerus who was of the opinion that the Greek Gods and other mythological heroes were actually based upon real people who had lived and died generations before, but whose reputations, exploits and powers had been increasingly exaggerated in each telling by story tellers over the generations.... but again, I digress...

So let's get back to basics and answer the question, "What is philosophy?"

Well, put very simply...



Well that was straightforward! But where did it come from?

Time for another quick digression...

Modern men and women, as we would recognise them, have sung and danced their way across the planet for over 200,000 years and during most of that time, they were hunter gatherers. Their days would have been spent trying to keep warm and dry and looking for food while taking care not to be on the menu of beasts bigger and stronger than they.

However, at some point in our history, these people would have started asking themselves questions about nature and the world round them.

Why does the sun rise higher in the sky in the summer than it does during the winter and why is it warmer in the summer than it is in the winter? Why does the moon wax and wane? What causes the tides to come in and go out? Why do the stars move round the sky? What causes thunder and lightning? What causes floods, famines, storms, and pestilence? I could go on but you get the point.

Archaeological evidence suggests that roughly 5,500 years ago 'polytheist' societies started to evolve. These are societies in which people worshipped multiple Gods or Deities and for the most part it was these gods and deities and the spirits of their own ancestors who were responsible for 'controlling' one or more different aspects of the natural world and bestowing fortune, be it good or ill, on the masses.

For example, if you were Egyptian and you were worried that the Nile might not flood your lands and make them fertile, you would worship the God 'Hapi'. If you were Greek and were afraid that an earthquake might reduce your house to a pile of rubble, you might pray and make offerings to the God 'Poseidon' as an early form of 'House and Contents' insurance.

The Ancient Greeks had their 12 Olympian Gods (Olympian because it was thought they lived in or on Mount Olympus) but they also

worshipped many lesser Gods; my favourites being 'Alastor' (God of family feuds and avenger of evil deeds) and 'Pricus' (The immortal father of sea-goats) - where are they when you need them?

The Romans couldn't be bothered to come up with their own Gods, so just borrowed the Greek ones and gave them 'Roman' names to make them feel they were their own. Consequently, the Greek God 'Zeus' was known as 'Jupiter' by the Romans and 'Poseidon' as 'Neptune'. Recycling was obviously alive and well back then.

But I'm digressing from my digression...

Polytheism may or may not seem like superstitious nonsense to many of us now, but it would have seemed perfectly rational to people living more than 2,000 years ago. Even as late as the middle ages, the Aztecs were still deadly serious about it; *"Last year we sacrificed 100 people to appease 'Tlaloc' (God of earth's fertility) and we had a bad harvest. This year we will sacrifice 200!"* Don't quote me on the numbers, but you get the point.

But as the years rolled by, thoughts and attitudes began to change and some people started to question the belief systems passed down to them by their ancestors. They began to doubt the notion that everything was in the 'laps of the Gods' and decided that there must be more rational answers to questions concerning the natural world. These people were the first philosophers, and one of the first philosophers we know anything about was a Greek known as Thales of Miletus. Thales was born in 624BC and died 546BC, his name is pronounced 'Thaleace' (rhymes with 'Alice') and Miletus was the ancient Greek city from which he came.

The big question that kept Thales awake at night was,

"What is the basic material of the cosmos?"

He ultimately came to the conclusion that because all living organisms need water to survive, that all matter must ultimately be made of water in its different forms; either as a gas, a liquid, a solid or in some other state as yet unknown. Ok, so he didn't hit the bulls-eye, but he was certainly onto something. After all, approximately 50% of a tree's weight is due to its water content (varies from species to species), human adults are said to be anything from 50% water (thin people) to 65% water (fat people) and the water content of a jellyfish comes in at a huge 95%!

Given that Thales didn't get it right, was he wasting his time? No, certainly not. His answers led to other questions being asked and answered, and as more questions were asked and answered, so the drop of human knowledge gradually became a puddle and eventually a pool. People had discovered a 'Love of Wisdom' and philosophy had been born! And within 100 years of Thales asking his initial question, two other philosophers; Democritus and Leucippus (both Greek) came up with the notion that all matter was made up of tiny indivisible and unchangeable particles, which they termed 'atomos'. Atomos being the Greek word for 'uncuttable'. However, we had to wait until 1477 for the English poet (yes, a poet) Thomas Norton to give us the word 'atom', but again I digress. Democritus and Leucippus concluded that different matter was due to the same atoms being arranged in different patterns. We now know that it is different atoms (numbers of protons, neutrons and electrons) that are responsible for different matter, so they weren't bang on the money, but they were certainly heading in the right direction.

And many more years later, in 1803, John Dolton (British Chemist and Physicist) did a 'first draft' of the Periodic Table. This was later improved by Dmitri Mendeleev (Russian Chemist) in 1869 and Julius Lothar Meyer (German Chemist) in 1870 and it has been added to regularly ever since; its last update being in 2016.

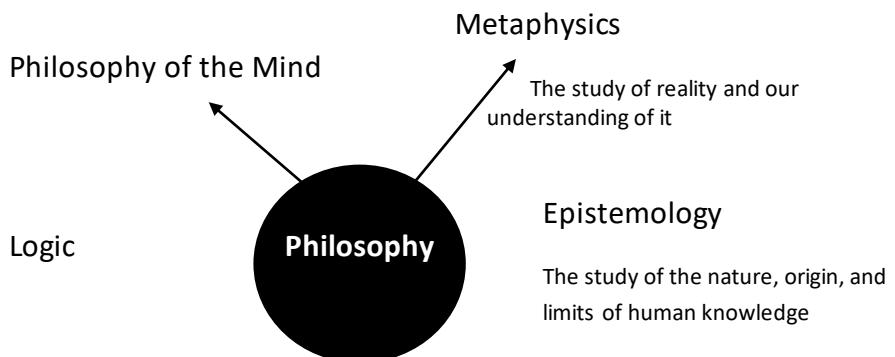
But again I digress...

In the early days of philosophy, philosophy pertained to all knowledge and the tree of all knowledge comprised many different branches. Some of those branches were based upon factual knowledge and they went on to become subjects of study in their own right. For example, the branch that dealt with numbers became 'mathematics', the branch that dealt with illnesses and disease became 'medicine', the branch that dealt with the body became 'biology' and the branch that dealt with matter became 'physics' etc, etc. Over the centuries, the tree of knowledge became progressively pruned so now there are just 7 main recognised branches left. However, these branches have smaller branches and those branches

...

We won't go into too many details here, after all, this is still the introduction, but just for the record, the 7 branches are shown in figure 1 and rest assured we will discuss some of them more in detail throughout this book.

That said, some scholars declare Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics as twigs on a branch called Axiology making 5 main branches, but hey, let's not get too hung up about that.



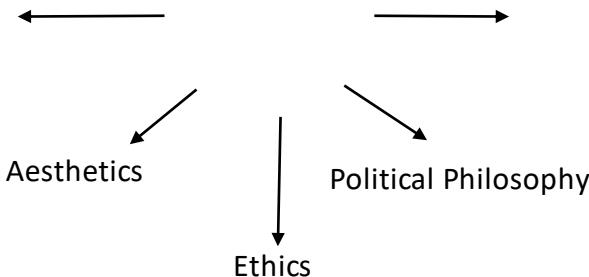


Figure 1 – Branches of Philosophy

Asking questions is obviously very important in Philosophy, but it is the manner in which questions are answered that separate the philosopher from the non philosopher. An answer can't simply be a gut feeling or a superficial answer based upon some emotion or popular thinking at the time. It must be rational and well reasoned. An answer must have been arrived at through performing a series of logical steps. In answering a question you must enter into a dialogue with yourself and pose to yourself and answer those questions that others might ask of you, such that you might prove your argument to them. Only once you have a rational and reasoned answer that you can argue the case for, can you believe your answer to be true and viable. Ultimately, your answer might be proven not to be true, but that doesn't matter, just as it didn't matter the early philosophers weren't always on the money, but they were heading in the right direction.

But while philosophising can be an individual activity it is also suited to discussion with others as Socrates (ancient Greek philosopher) was prone to do. He was famous for philosophising by questioning and debating with those people he met while walking the streets of

Athens. He would engage in debates with people who were sure they knew what they were talking about, but after his questions; they soon came to realise they didn't know as much as they thought they knew. His style of debating subsequently became known as the 'Socratic Method, but a lot more about that and him later.

Is that it then, Philosophy is just about asking questions about stuff and then answering them?

The short answer is ... Yes! Well, sort of, but we will expand on that later. The fact that there is no single definition of what philosophy actually is (other than the love of wisdom) has caused many a great mind including Isaac Newton (English scientist) and John Keats (English Poet) to denigrate philosophy. But my favourite denigrative (excellent word, I challenge you to use it in your next essay or presentation) quote comes from François-Marie Arouet, better known as 'Voltaire' (if you haven't read 'Candide', read it - It will all be for the best) who said of philosophy;

"When he who hears doesn't know what he who speaks means, and when he who speaks doesn't know what he himself means ... that is philosophy!"

Brilliant! How damning is that? That said, I think his tongue may have been firmly in his cheek when he said it because when you Google 'Voltaire' (other search engines are available) you will see that he was a writer, historian and ... philosopher!

There are also longer answers to the earlier question but not a definitive one.

Out of the many different 'long answers' I have come across, one of my favourites is given by Tom Morris (US Philosopher) in his excellent book, 'Philosophy for Dummies';

“Philosophy is a healing art. It is an intellectual selfdefence. It is a form of therapy. It is map making for the soul, cartography for the human journey. It is an important navigation tool for life that too many modern people try to do without.”

But my absolute favourite is the slightly longer definition which comes from Seneca (Roman Philosopher, 4BC 65AD) in a letter to his friend Lucilius ...

“Philosophy’s concern is not with words, but with facts ... It moulds and builds the personality, orders one’s life, regulates one’s conduct, shows one what one should do and what one should leave undone, sits at the helm and keeps one on the correct course as one is tossed about in perilous seas. Without it no one can lead a life free of worry. Every hour of the day countless situations arise that call for advice, and for that advice we have to look to philosophy.”

I’m sure there are many, many equally descriptive definitions of philosophy, but from the two above it is sufficient for me to surmise that philosophy is all ‘those things’ I now wish I had learned when I was at school!

I can understand that many people are put off philosophy by mistakenly thinking that it is the domain of academics and intellectuals or for the privileged few who don’t have to work for a living and can spend their days smartly dressed and sipping espressos on the terrace of some Parisian cafe, smoking Gitane (other cigarettes were available) whilst staring into the distance in prolonged thought. But that simply isn’t the case. We are all born to be philosophers, we are philosophers from birth. Young children spend their waking hours trying to make sense of the world round them by asking questions on anything and everything. It would be impossible for them to philosophise any more than they already do. It is only as we grow older that we stop being philosophers.

Philosophy and Philosophising remains open to us all from our first breaths to our last, it should not be thought of as the preserve of the academic elite and you don't need an invitation or a qualification to take part. It is there for all of us to use as we wish and the sooner we reconnect with our philosophising selves, the better.

One might start out studying philosophy by reading the writings of the great philosophers, but that is only the first step. What is important in philosophy isn't just knowing what other people thought 2,000 years ago (albeit that much of it is still relevant today) or more recently, but it is about finding out what you think, why you think what you think and putting those thoughts into practice. Karl Jaspers (German Philosopher) alluded to this when he said that philosophy is an individual pursuit or struggle and as such we can only philosophise as individuals and cannot simply adopt someone else's philosophy as the 'Truth' without having first put some effort into finding out what we think the truth might be. Of course that isn't saying that in deciding on your chosen path, you don't listen to or consider what others might have to say, you use their writings as a launching pad from which your philosophical life can take flight.

However, the true philosopher won't be content to just philosophise, they will 'live' their philosophy. The aforementioned Socrates said of himself,

"If I do not reveal my views on justice in words, I do so by my conduct",

while Diogenes of Synope (another ancient Greek Philosopher) really took this thinking to heart. He was from the 'Cynic' school of philosophy whose virtuous teachings required rejecting; health, wealth, power, fame, possessions, property and pretty much everything else that most of us either strive for, or think we couldn't possibly live without. The word 'Cynic' comes from the ancient Greek 'kynikos', meaning 'dog-like' and true to the word, Diogenes lived pretty much like a dog. He dressed in rags, sometimes went naked,

slept in a discarded wooden barrel and scavenged for food. Similarly, Seneca (him again) in another letter to his friend Lucilius quotes Epicurus (Greek Philosopher) and writes,

"To win true freedom you must be a slave to philosophy, as a person who surrenders and subjects himself to her doesn't have his application deferred from day to day; he's emancipated on the spot, the very service of philosophy being freedom."

I could go on, but let's leave it with Ludwig Wittgenstein (Austrian British Philosopher) who over 2,300 years later was obviously still singing from the same hymn sheet when he simply said, *"Philosophy is not a theory, but an activity."* And as I say, there is plenty more where that came from, but I digress...

Any definition is controversial and already embodies a philosophic attitude. The only way to find out what philosophy is, is to do philosophy."

We are all different and are suited to and driven by different things. Some donkeys are spurred into motion by a smack on the bum with a stick, while others respond better to forever chasing a carrot they cannot reach. And so it is with philosophy, what helps you 'get going' might not be the same as someone else, but ultimately, it is up to you to find out what it is that 'gets you going'. There are many paths through the woods, philosophers and their writings are here to help you choose the right path for you.

Introduction 2

As introductions in books go, this one might come across as a little joyless and somewhat gloomy and depressing; but while there is a large pink elephant in the room, we might as well acknowledge its presence, albeit briefly.

There's hardly a home in the land without a large screen TV, I-Phone, washing machine, dishwasher, wall to wall carpets, central heating, car parked on the drive... We can summon a meal to be delivered to our house on the click of a button, similarly, clicking on pictures of groceries, clothes and books will ensure their delivery to our door within hours and we can listen to the music of our choice and watch films of our choice whenever and wherever we happen to be ... There have been tremendous advances in medicine, foreign travel is now commonplace and we have more free time and disposable income than ever before. And yet ... and yet ... it would appear that we have never been more miserable.

NHS figures for June 2018 show us that:

- 25% of children are likely to experience a mental health problem before they reach their 19th birthday.
- Almost 400,000 children are currently in contact with the Health Service regarding a mental health problem.
- 70,000 children are currently taking anti-depressants.
- 75% of those children with a mental health problem are not actually receiving any treatment.

And things don't get any better as we leave childhood behind and become adults:

- 25% of adults will experience an episode of mental illness each year
- 7.3 million adults are currently taking anti-depressants

These statistics are worrying on their own, but put into the context that they are worse than the figures for the previous year, which in turn were worse than the figures for the year before that, there is a very worrying trend developing.

It has to be said that it does seem rather paradoxical that as the Nation's collective standard of living appears to be rising, the Nation's collective mental health appears to be falling.

If that is the case, and it certainly appears to be, surely logic dictates that all we need do is bin some stuff, build an outside loo and switch off the central heating and we'd all be 'happy as Larry'.* But joking apart, the truth is that there is nothing new about this paradox.

** Happy as Larry: This phrase is thought to relate to Larry Foley, a 19th century Australian boxer who retired not only unbeaten but also very wealthy and according to a New Zealand newspaper at the time was 'very happy'.*

Emile Durkheim (French Sociologist and Philosopher 1858 to 1917) recognised it as far back as 1897 when he wrote about it in his book with the 'jolly' title of 'Le Suicide'. (You don't have to be fluent in French to know what that was about) Durkheim's life coincided with France's most politically stable period for centuries, a period which saw France turn away from being a traditional agricultural society and towards a more industrialised and urban society; a change that both improved the lives and increased the wealth of the Nation. However, Durkheim noticed that as the quality of life and wealth of the French population grew, so did the levels of 'unhappiness' and

suicides. But before you say, “That’s the French for you”, his findings were also found to exist in both the UK and Denmark.

And, as if more proof were needed to back up Durkheim... Writing 100 years ago ... Karl Jung (Swiss Psychologist and Philosopher) wrote, *“Anxiety disorders are so prevalent in the modern world that some suggest we live in an age of anxiety”*.

And if you want an up-to-date reference, David Foster Wallace (the genius behind ‘Infinite Jest’) said that, *“The upper middle class in the US are materially very well off, but often there is a great sadness and emptiness amongst them.”*

So why are so many of us so bloody miserable and so bloody angst ridden, when as a Nation, we have never had it so bloody good?

I’m sure the reasons for our current woes, along with the woes of yesteryear, are many and varied and I have no doubt that there are aspects of ‘our’ modern life that have further exasperated our anxieties, compared to the ‘modern’ life of 100 years ago, but I am also equally sure that philosophy, both ancient and modern can help us to shine a torch on our present collective predicament and help us look at life in general, and our own lives in particular, in a different light, in a more positive light and in a light that will result in making us less anxious and more contented individuals.

Being less anxious and more content might seem to be setting the bar of our desires a little low when really we all want a lot more out of life, we don’t just want to be not anxious, we want to be happy, and not just happy, but very happy, and not just very happy some of the time but very happy all of the time. And we want money, but we don’t just want to ‘get by’, we want to be rich so we can do all the things we see other people doing. And we don’t just want to be rich, we want it without having to work too hard to get it, and we want everyone to like us and we want to be famous and ... and ... and that thinking

might just be where our problems start. So let us not be too impatient, happiness is not something that simply appears in front of you when you go looking for it. It is only when you have stopped striving for it and have got on with your life that one day you might suddenly realise that ...“Yes I was/am happy”

As Marcus Aurelius (Greek Emperor and Philosopher) said,

“Happiness is a by product. It cannot be achieved through looking for it. It is found by having a meaningful life.”

This is a common theme amongst many philosophers. Albert Ellis (US Philosopher and Grandfather of CBT) is just one who of a large number who had obviously received the same memo as he was of the opinion,

“Humans are happiest when they are engaging in some project or activity that they define as more important than themselves.”

So, if you are up for a ride on the ‘Great Philosophy Bus’, buckle up, sit back and get comfortable, but be warned, there will be bumps in the road ahead!