

“The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness”

Ludwig Wittgenstein- *Philosophical investigations*

### Summary

This essay analyzes briefly the difficulties of human life such as choosing right and asking questions that finally get no answers. It is concerned with the attempt to find a cure for our own helplessness concerning our own minds and the world: philosophizing.

At the beginning, one of Hieronymus Bosch’s paintings is invoked to express plainly the difficulty in choosing the suitable path and from then on, we are dealing with the frustrating efforts of knowing ourselves, the world and, in the end what is best. A short reference to the evolutionist theory shows how complex the human being has become and emphasizes the many things we yet have not been able to know or understand. The reference to the iceberg in explaining the unknown part of the human mind further underlines this aspect.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory concerning the philosophical language and its flaws is analyzed a bit to show how misunderstandings can cause damage to our knowledge. In this way, it is shown that philosophers act like doctors concerning the questions that are raised (but not always apply the good methods), and that knowledge and questioning themselves are a kind of incurable disease for human beings, making them self-aware. But this is not a bad thing as the “immortals” example in the conclusion will show.

### A painting’s worth a thousand words

In his series of very interesting, yet bizarre paintings such as “The seven deadly sins”, Hieronymus Bosch shows us a dying man sitting on a bed. We can observe his grimace as he is facing death, but what is striking about this image is not the fact that the man will soon and forever be gone. What catches our eye is the fact that, he is having a very difficult time choosing the right offer for the “next life”: the angel’s or the devils.

### The hard, hard choice

This painting reflects very well the human condition, meaning that, as long as a person is alive, she must make choices that will surely have consequences on her life. It really is not about religion or eternal life, but about day-to-day life as we know it. Being able to choose means you already know at least partially the causes, the consequences and the implications of your choice. Pretty tough for a man in trouble.

Yet, this demonstrates the unique ambition and strife of human beings to understand what is going on with them and around them, so that, they get to do what is best. In a nutshell, we are thoughtful creatures and proud of it. We question ourselves and the world and we just can not stop from thinking. But, what if the thoughts popping non-stop through our heads are a sort of incurable disease? Should we get treatment?

### Then and now

Charles Darwin in the “Origins of the species” stated the idea that the homo sapiens-sapiens we know today is the result of an evolution process. This does not involve only the biological aspect, but also the psychic one, which I dare say, is the most important. Throughout history, man becomes aware of himself and of others, but what is more, he becomes conscious. The complexity of our own being is actually overwhelming and hard to digest.

In “A brief history of everything”, Ken Wilber explains the concept of “evolution” this way: “transcend and include”. And this brings up the fact that maybe, we, as homo sapiens-sapiens, are all the hominids that lived back then plus something “extra”. To sum up, there is a dark, unknown side of our being that we are eager to know but that keeps hiding from us. And actually, what is it: the background or the “plus factor”, that troubles us? Is this insecurity our incurable disease?

### The iceberg

The image of the iceberg is the one that explains very well how Sigmund Freud pictured the human mind. There is the tip, our conscious life, and what is hidden under water, our subconscious. The complexity of the mind is greater than we could ever imagine and the fact that we can not fully understand the way our own minds work (the brain-mind interaction problem) is really unpleasant. This means that the amount of things you can not control, is greater than the amount of things you can. It is scary and infuriating to just stand there, hands crossed and not be able to do anything- to just float in an endless ocean, at the mercy of some unknown currents. And considering the fact that a human being sleeps for a third of her life, this adds up to the amount of unknown that life has.

This seems to be the problem: the scary factor, the hidden part of our own minds; a kind of illness that plagues each individual in the form of the impotence of understanding oneself, impotence of controlling his/her own mind.

### Philosophy on the road to cure the no-control-over-anything “illness”

As expected though, people have figured out a way to deal with this problem. And it does not solve it all, but it at least gives some comfort. This is “philosophy” or, to explain better as Pythagoras put it, “the love of wisdom” (in Greek, “philo” means “love” and “sophia” means wisdom).

Pythagoras considered himself to be a lover of wisdom, not a wise man, because wisdom is something that you never really fully acquire, but truly, a process throughout life. But what is wisdom, other than this need to know oneself in order to understand and get a better grip on one’s actions? If you can not control what happens, you at least get to control your conscious self. Or maybe people need doctors for the soul and mind, as they need doctors for their physical bodies. Philosophers seem, as Wittgenstein said, to do the meticulous job of doctors, especially when they analyze important questions raised by troubled minds. It is said that the question is more important than the answer. In their assessment of the questions, philosophers paradoxically discover other questions, as interesting and captivating as the one they were analyzing. As movement is characteristic to living organisms, maybe questioning is the sign that we are alive.

### The never ending questions

The acquired and much appreciated ability to ask questions is the symptom of the disease mentioned: this over-thinking that plagues our minds.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in his “Tractatus logico-philosophicus” and in his “Blue notebook”, that language is an essential part of our lives. This means that it shapes our existence and thoughts and defines who we are. Words are what we operate with when we think, we use words to communicate efficiently with one another. For good reason then, Wittgenstein said “my world ends where my language ends”.

Some scientists, a couple of years ago have made an experiment on an indigenous population in Africa. I need to mention that this population used language, but had no words for high numbers (like higher than ten). And the scientists tried to see if the indigens could operate with a high number such as 1000 or at least imagine what it means, but they were not able to do so. They did not have words for this, so they did not have the necessary instruments to think of it. They had to be taught firstly the concept of “high number” and what it means, and afterwards they had to be given examples. This comprises a lot of time and effort and demonstrates a very important reality.

It means that language is the key to our understanding the world. When we ask a certain question or think of a certain thing, our minds operate with the concepts we have acquired. For example, you will not see a mathematician understanding easily Kant’s philosophy, simply because he does not know the terms and their implications. And neither a philosopher could understand mathematics unless he first learns the basic elements.

About questioning and philosophizing, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that people have had it wrong for a long time. This is basically because, language being so complex, the words’ meanings have changed through time and confusions have appeared. For example, the word “intentionality” has two meanings: the fact that you mean to do a specific thing, and the target towards which your thoughts point (used by Phenomenologists).

What is more, every philosopher, when developing a certain system of thought seems to be reinventing the language, giving new meanings to common terms. Think for instance of Heidegger’s “dasein”- a very complicated and hard to understand concept that stems from a thoroughly common term. All these things create confusions and maybe this is why so many questions arise. When the usual words abruptly lose their meaning, your perspective shifts. You sometimes find yourself in the impossibility to drag the line between the common use of the word and the philosophical one and you get tangled up in your own questions about it.

### No definitive answer

One question triggers another and another and yet another and you can live through a whole series of questions-responses and still have the strange feeling you have lost something on the way. Every philosopher seems to play the doctor now and then and try to treat the question illness with the response antibiotics. But just like Wittgenstein suggested, if you want to solve the problem, you should first check if the cure is the right one. Philosophy being the cure and philosophers the doctors, they first have to verify the very basis of what they are teaching, because small mistakes

can end up turning into a grave situation. Just as philosophy seems to be nowadays , for the untrained eye: a sum of opposed styles, explanations that contradict one another and confusions that might lead to misunderstandings. What is sure, though, is that a definitive answer to all our questions will not be found soon. We could hope or we could imagine what it would be like, but this stays in the fiction department for the moment.

To illustrate this, there is a story that Jorge Luis Borges tells in his book “Labyrinths”. It is about a man who gave up his whole life’s activity as a general, to write a book that would have the solutions to all humanity’s questions and struggles. As the story goes, we discover that the book is actually a labyrinth containing not only the things that happened or will happen, but also the stories untold and the questions unasked, in a kind of what-if-that-happened spiral. This was supposed to contain the solutions to humanity’s problems, because it stated all the problems and their possible answers. The conclusion is grim though: even if we had the possibility to write such a book and to have the solutions, it would be impossible to understand them or to use them practically. How would we look them up?

It is said that after Ludwig Wittgenstein finished writing his works, he gave up philosophy and became a primary school teacher. The reason seems to be the fact that he saw there might be an answer to our problems and understood what should be fixed and that his job was done. But, what if, what he truly understood was the fact that it is way too difficult to change a complicated way of thinking in a simpler, more relaxed and focused one? What if the effort comprised by such an activity would drain us and make us useless?

### Is a life without questioning worth living?

On the other hand, Socrates used to say that only “the analyzed life” is worth living. He thought that the human being is a kind of puppet on a strings and that the gods have the strings. But there is one “golden thread” that we have in our own hands and that is reason and we must use it imperiously. Only this way we become true humans and see things we were not able to see before. This brings up the myth of the cave in Plato’s “Republic” (book 7), Plato being the student of Socrates, so there is a clear influence. The prisoners in the cave see only shadows and think that they are all there is. They live in a world of shadows, but when one prisoner gets out and sees the world out there, he gets a new perspective on things.

This is the philosopher: he sees the light or, more clearly, he sees what is worth seeing and appreciates it at its true value. He needs some time to adapt to the new reality perceived, but what makes him a true doctor for the souls is the fact that somehow, he comes back, he returns and is willing to share his knowledge. And yes, knowledge brings out a lot of questions. First of all, to the ones being initiated and secondly to the philosopher himself. It is like, if we were talking in medical terms, knowledge is the germ that attacks the body and makes it self-aware. And maybe, in the end, this is not a bad thing. Maybe only this way we can understand what is going on with us. Nobody can achieve something if he does not sacrifice something at his turn. And our ignorant welfare might be worse than the infinite questions knowledge raises, because, ignorant people do not know what more there is to see. Ignorant people do not even look for more.

### From bleak to shiny

Looking on the bright side, Seneca said in his meditations that the man who has begun questioning himself and came to understand at least partially his limited condition, is an illuminated person. In what way could that be? Raising a question, means one thinks of a problem and that this problem is being analyzed. It means that a person makes an extra effort to do something. She's not just accepting a verdict; she is reconstructing the previous causes and tries to make her own case.

Philosophers as lovers of wisdom might be illuminated because they have the patience to analyze the situations and to analyze themselves. Raising a question is a very difficult thing to do, because it implies the fact that you accept your own incapacity. The first step towards the answer is the admittance of the problem. It is like in the problem of the choice; it is hard while you make up your mind, afterwards you just know what you have to do. It is just like Muriel Rukeyser, an American poet, said in one of her poems: "there's a choice and the rest falls away". The fact that, as Wittgenstein said, philosophers treat a question as if it were an illness is expressed by their wanting to find the right answer. When researchers look for a cure, they take a lot of time to study and to check if it is right. Could philosophy be the job of soul-searchers, people who want to find the better way in life?

### Conclusion

It is obvious we can not live without wondering what is out there and, mainly, wondering about ourselves. People can not live lives of total ignorance. Even if they do not want to, there will come a day when they wake up and realize this or that is wrong and ask their very first question. And this is the moment when everything changes; an unforgettable moment that will mark their life forever.

Philosophers are not the only ones who ask questions, but they are more dedicated to the fact. They more eagerly try to solve problems and take a full-time job in understanding what life is about. The endless series of questions might be a nuisance and it might trouble our minds, we might even consider it a kind of epidemic, but just think for a minute... what if we actually cure the "disease"? What if someone, someday would find an universal answer and all the questions would cease? The conclusion might be startling: there might not be anything else to do in the world, anything else to search and, therefore, anything else to find. We would never feel the thrill of adventure down our spines again and that would be a very, very bad thing. We might even become immortal and bored like in Jorge Luis Borges' story about the immortals (in his book "Labyrinths") in which people who have lived for a long period of time and found all the answers, became quiet and sad and retired to holes in the ground and forgot to even speak to one another.