Review - Philosophize This!

Written by Anna Closas

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By Stephen West
Podcast, ongoing since 6 June 2013

The term 'philosophy' comes from the Greek 'philo-', love for, and 'sophi', knowledge or wisdom. Etymologically speaking, then, philosophy describes the love for wisdom, the constant scrutiny and investigation of our world. Philosophy is about the desire to problematize, the attempt to turn our world and reality/ies into a problem. That is precisely the motivation behind the podcast Philosophize This!. Convinced of the need for relentless, never-ending scrutiny and acknowledging the pleasure that can come from it, this podcast aims to bring the complexity of philosophical curiosity and the works it has produced – 'classic' and 'non-fiction' works that still fill in the shelves of a great number of libraries and bookshops – to our ears. Such philosophical curiosity could be highly beneficial to scholars of International Relations (IR), for it could foster a deeper conversation between philosophy and IR. After briefly engaging with the podcast's take on the ontology of philosophy, this review explores how *Philosophize This!* might contribute to such a conversation.

Making Philosophy Accessible

Philosophize This! is a free podcast hosted by Seattle-based Stephen West. Since June 2013, West periodically releases half-an-hour episodes on a great variety of mostly western texts, philosophers and ideas. Starting off with the pre-Socratics, *Philosophize This!* unpacks a number of philosophical problems often deemed overly complicated and explains them 'using a bit more English' (#122). Without guests, breaks or interruptions, each episode consists of a lecture-style monologue given by West that is reminiscent of a first-year introductory course to philosophy. However, the podcast succeeds in explaining sophisticated philosophical thoughts and questions in accessible language without reducing the complexity of the thought.

Although this podcast mostly follows a historically informed sequence of authors, it also includes, as if they were breaks in this line of abstract thought, discussions that focus on a variety of topics: from suffering (#94) and tolerance (#43) to insecurity (#72) and Confucianism (#008). This allows the podcast to historically position and locate problematizations without reproducing the idea of linear progress or supposed 'improvement' from Aristotle to the present. It also helps underline the circularity and the reasons behind both the rise and fall of topics and methodologies.

What is perhaps most interesting is West's take on the ontology of philosophy. From the very first episode, West defines what philosophy is about for him and proceeds coherently from there, allowing his audience to capture the attitude that he thinks characterizes philosophical inquiry: 'philosophical curiosity'. But what is this 'philosophical curiosity? In episode #125, West adopts Deleuze and Guattari's (1991) argument that, contrary to what other thinkers previously defended, philosophy is not a disappointing endeavour that has failed at producing objective truths and meta-narratives. As highlighted throughout the episodes, the validity of an ontology does not lie in its truth, or lack of it, because the goal is not to *be right*. Philosophy must be thought of as creation rather than a discovery of what there is. In West's words, ontology is 'the art of concept creation', a process through which one innovatively creates categories which help us frame what Deleuze believed was a chaotic reality. This approach puts an end to

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the unproductive debates of who was or was not right and sheds light on the usefulness, sophistication, subtlety and creativity of philosophical inquiry. As the podcast highlights, it also brings to the foreground the contingency of our concepts, theories and ontology/ies, for every person is nothing but a 'by-product of their time' (#125). In line with this, West also draws on the concept of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972). A rhizome is an 'image of thought' that describes how ideas and systems of thought interact; not merely in a linear and hierarchical fashion, with one single origin and a clear end (#126). This concept brings to the foreground that theories are not fully coherent, all-comprehensive and encompassing narratives which give a full account of what there is. Rather, they are only sections, bits of a wider space, chaotic structure of enquiry and critique.

West also covers a range of philosophers who, even though they greatly differ in the texts they produced, share a similar attitude and take on what philosophy is about: doubt. Doubt is an attitude one can choose to take towards one's beliefs, what one considers to be true, challenging what one ponders to be unchallengeable. As explored by Montaigne (#24), Descartes (#28, #29, #30) or the Sceptics (#13), to doubt is to accept the limits of the facts one holds dear, the not-knowing and contingency of our reality. Montaigne's *Essays*, for instance, deconstruct truth-claims for his work never tries to become a meta-narrative, another philosophical story of what the world is (#24). When Montaigne set down the exercise of doubt, he did not understand doubt as a desperate cry for knowledge, a moment of unbearable solitude or lack. Doubt, as such, is intrinsic in the process of judgement formation, a process which leads to the joyful wisdom that comes with the dismissal of knowledge (Montaigne, 1958, ch. XXVI): 'Only fools are certain and immovable' (Ibid., 56). Taken together, the podcast understands the ontology of philosophy not merely as a truth-seeking endeavour but as an ongoing activity, an attitude of doubt, scrutiny, never-ending questioning, research and questioning.

Philosophy and IR: A Conversation to Be Had

What, then, can IR can gain from engaging in a true conversation with the debates this podcast introduces? As is the case with other social sciences, IR has generally privileged positivism as the vehicle to arrive at the truth about 'the international', forgetting that ideas are not always-already-there, waiting to be discovered through the appropriate method. To become scientific, conventional IR has tended to treat political phenomena as natural events, often leaving philosophical curiosity aside. I do not intend to imply that IR has not engaged with philosophy at all, as we can see in the discipline's engagement with Hobbes' *Leviathan* (see, for example, Bull, 1981, Morgenthau 1967, or Waltz 1979), Mervyn Frost's (2002) thorough reading of Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, or the emergence of the Foucauldian governmentality studies (Aradau and Van Munster, 2007; Bigo, 2002; Larner and Walters, 2004; Merlingen, 2003 or Dillon and Reid, 2001), just to mention a few. Yet, the never-ending scrutiny of philosophical inquiry, this 'philosophical curiosity' which *Philosophize This!* puts forth, could foster a deeper conversation between philosophy and IR. In other words, a history of philosophy allows to locate the discipline's problematizations and highlight the *a priori* grounding of its production of knowledges and truth-claims, which in turn can challenge dominant narratives of IR's scientificity.

A conversation between IR and philosophy could then be beneficial in two main ways: First, traditional IR could benefit from this philosophical inquiry to think and problematize its own present actuality and the limits it sets to its discursivity. Through the work of Immanuel Kant, the podcast underlines the importance of such self-reflection. The Kantian work to which IR has dedicated most consideration is probably *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch.* Yet, besides Kant's interest in the problem of the international, it would be indeed helpful for IR scholars to explore Kant's essay 'What is Enlightenment?', as does West in an intriguing episode (#61). 'What is Enlightenment?' explores the moment in which reason is put to use, independently from any authority, helping us get away from dogmatization. Materialized in the expression of *aude sapere*, dare to know, this is a praise of the value and the courage it takes to think for oneself, (Kant [1784] 1992: 1). It is in this sense that Kant could be considered the first critical thinker, the first who turned the present as such into a problem. Here, one sees philosophy problematizing its own discursive actuality, a moment when philosophy itself interrogates knowledge on its own limits. This spirit can help IR scholars problematize the limits of both their intellectual field and the assumptions that govern it, reintroducing the question of difference and historicizing its privileged categories and frameworks.

Second, it is imperative to problematize the choice of philosophers and the works which IR scholars decided are

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worth reading. IR has certainly read Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Machiavelli, mostly *The Prince*, and has long since established a consensus on what this means for 'the international': a world divided by state-unit formations holding power over their territory through deception, espionage and military power, defending oneself in fear of one's opponents. Power and politics are hence made synonyms, and governance is reduced to the activity of upholding power. However, an honest conversation with philosophy requires scholars to go beyond and engage with the debates held within the discipline of philosophy. As the podcast emphasizes, that means challenging the one-dimensional interpretation of Machiavelli (#23) and engaging with scholarship that reads *The Prince* alongside other works, mainly the *Discourses on Livy,* to explore different interpretations of Machiavelli's legacy. Philosophers have long since revealed Machiavelli's republican convictions, complicating the standard reading of *The Prince* (see Bock, Skinner and Viroli 1993; Dietz, 1986). Similarly, IR's Foucauldian scholarship's focus on *Security, Territory and Population* has left other works, such as the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, generally underexplored. An intricate reading of it would shed further light on Foucault's notion of power, or indeed the power-resistance nexus, giving the latter the importance it deserves.

Here, an important caveat seems to be in order. While the podcast is instructive in challenging mainstream readings of philosophical works, it is important to acknowledge that *Philosophize This!* is still broadly western, white and male-centric. In general, the discipline of philosophy has established an outragingly limited understanding of who was entitled to practice philosophy, of who could *do* philosophy. This is an extremely urgent yet pending question which philosophy as a discipline has only recently started to tackle, and which the podcast does not fully engage in. Even though the podcast tries to incorporate non-western and female philosophers such as the Islamic philosopher Ibn Sina, often referred to as Avicenna (#18), or the feminist thinkers Mary Wollstonecraft (#65) and Simone de Beauvoir (#89, #106), it largely fails to question the choice of philosophers and generally reproduces the discipline's understanding of who and what must be studied and read. Hence, the podcast could benefit from introducing more non-canonical figures and exploring how philosophical curiosity has been developed beyond the European boundaries imposed by the standard philosophy textbooks––as could the discipline of IR.

Final Remarks

Having engaged with West's discussion in *Philosophize This!*, it now seems clear that a deeper conversation between philosophy and IR is not only helpful but desirable. By bringing attention not only to what can be considered 'true' but also what it means to label something as true, this conversation could challenge the concepts and systems of belief that still structure some IR scholarship. Proceeding this way will illuminate the ways of seeing the world which IR has fostered, inserting history back into the debate and providing a more sophisticated procedure to inquire into the static assumptions on which IR so often relies.

With this in mind, IR scholars would certainly benefit from engaging with the debates and topics *Philosophize This!* brings forward. Despite its Western, male-centric gaze, the podcast succeeds in making a case for relentless, never-ending scrutiny, and fully acknowledges the pleasure that can come through it. For IR scholars, philosophical curiosity then not only provides a way to challenge the explanation-seeking and causality imperatives governing IR departments; a curious and doubtful attitude will also bring to the foreground the political nature of the exhaustive examination of some topics and the categories and concepts informing most of IR's scholarship.

More broadly, IR scholars could benefit from the podcast's desire to make knowledge accessible. Both through language and the audible format, *Philosophize This!* aims to make philosophy understandable, useful and exciting, something that should be further encouraged in other disciplines, including IR. Hence, beyond gaining an overview of the philosophical problems which have inspired thinkers for centuries, this podcast can also trigger a reflection on the need to demystify 'knowledge', to make knowledge accessible. IR scholars would thus have much to gain by listening to *Philosophize This!*.

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Anna Closas holds an M.A. in International Conflict Studies at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. She previously studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Pompeu Fabra, Carlos III and Autónoma de Madrid Universities. During her B.A., she started to develop an interest in philosophy, particularly continental philosophy, which led her to study at the University of Chicago, to broaden her knowledge on the humanities. Her interests lie in International Relations, Migration Studies, conflict analysis and resolution, as well as Critical Security Studies. More broadly, she wishes to encourage a transdisciplinary study of Social Sciences and Humanities.