Opening Extract from...

HOW TO TEACH PHILOSOPHY TO YOUR DOG

Written by **Anthony McGowan**

Published By **Oneworld Publications**

HOW TO TEACH PHILOSOPHY TO YOUR DOG

HOW TO TEACH PHILOSOPHY TO YOUR DOG

A QUIRKY INTRODUCTION TO THE BIG QUESTIONS IN PHILOSOPHY

Anthony McGowan

ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Book

First published by Oneworld Publications in the United Kingdom,
Republic of Ireland and Australia, 2019

A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978-1-78607-674-8
Paperback ISBN 978-1-78607-795-0
eISBN 978-1-78607-675-5

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk, NR21 8NL
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
England

To Monty, of course, who has brought
so much love into our family.

Contents

Therefore the brutes are incapable alike of purpose and dissimulation; they reserve nothing. In this respect the dog stands to the man in the same relation as a glass goblet to a metal one, and this helps greatly to endear the dog so much to us, for it affords us great pleasure to see all those inclinations and emotions which we so often conceal displayed simply and openly in him.

Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Volume II, Chapter V, translated by R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp

Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.

Attributed to Groucho Marx

Author's Note

How to Teach Philosophy to Your Dog is intended as a welcoming introduction to the world of philosophy. As with walking the dog, there are always different routes you can take in this sort of enterprise, varying in the direction, the distance, and even the purpose. Is it exercise, entertainment, or merely a quickie to get your business over and done with as efficiently as possible? Some introductions to philosophy simply start at the beginning, with the speculations of the earliest Greek thinkers in the sixth century BCE, and gradually work their way through the ages, until we reach whatever the 'now' is for that author. Others are more biographical, sugaring the pill with anecdotes about the eccentricities and oddities of the philosophers. More recently, it has become popular to take a purely thematic approach, breaking the subject down into questions or themes, with an emphasis on topics that are still 'hot'.

These different approaches reflect the fact that philosophy has an oddly hybrid nature – it's less of a purebred Afghan, and more of a labradoodle. English literature is a subject that essentially consists of its history. Chaucer and Shakespeare and Austen and George Eliot are not read for their historical interest, but because their writings are still living works of art. Furthermore, their greatness lies not in some ideas that could

be abstracted and summarized, but in the language: the words and sentences and paragraphs and longer, deeper, musical movements of the texts.

Mathematics and physics, on the other hand, are subjects that can be taught without ever mentioning the backstory. To calculate the area of a circle, you don't need to know that pi was first roughly computed by the Ancient Egyptians and Babylonians, and then brought to seven decimal places by Chinese mathematicians in the first millennium CE: you just need a pocket calculator. And Newton's laws of motion have a meaning and importance that have nothing to do with the words in which he expressed them. Aristotelian physics, with its abhorrence of the void, its straightforwardly wrong conception of motion and its ingrained cosmology, with the Earth at the centre of a static universe frozen into a series of concentric crystalline spheres, is of no use whatsoever to a modern scientist, other than to make her feel superior.

Philosophy spans both these worlds. It's certainly possible to discuss the ideas of Plato, Aristotle and Wittgenstein without ever quoting them. In this sense, they are like Newton. However, the problems of philosophy tend not to get solved. They are news that stays news. Professional philosophers today still engage with Aristotle and Descartes, still argue with Locke and Bentham, in a way that no scientist would think to dispute with Archimedes or Copernicus. And so the *history* of philosophy never goes away, never becomes irrelevant.

It's also a fascinating story in its own right. And so, in this book I have tried to capture that crossbred *labradoodleness* of philosophy. The form I have adopted tips a hat to the history of the subject. It is structured as a series of walks, which connects to Aristotle's practice of teaching while on the move – a habit

that gave the name *Peripatetic*, from the Greek word meaning to walk about, to his school. And on these strolls my dog Monty and I, in the dialectical tradition of Socrates, discuss the central problems in philosophy, taking the broad subject divisions of the field as our guide.

After the introduction, the first three walks are about ethics and moral philosophy. We then have a couple of minor side-strolls, one dealing with the concept of free will, and another on logic. Next, there are three walks in which we discuss metaphysics, those knotty questions around the nature of reality and existence. After that we stroll our way through three walks on epistemology, or the theory of knowledge. Four walks, really, as there's also a discussion of the philosophy of science. Finally, there's a chapter on the meaning of life, which also briefly examines some of the proofs for the existence of God.

Although this broad structure is thematic, within each subject we look at what the great philosophers have had to say about it. My hope is that this will both help the reader to understand the problem, and also to give a real sense of the history and development of thought.

I should say that this is a very partial history of ideas, in that I have concentrated on the Western philosophical tradition. This is not because of a parochial disdain for Islamic or Chinese or Indian philosophy, but simply because these are vast and complex fields in which I have no expertise, and it would have been insulting to add snippets, merely to make this work seem more diverse. Each of the great non-Western traditions deserves a Monty of its own…

Finally, this is not one of those introductions to philosophy that gives the reader bullet points to help revision. It is arranged as a series of walks, and just as on a walk, there are times when

we wander off the path, beat around for a while in the undergrowth, disturb a rabbit, feed the ducks. There is the occasional dead end. And sometimes, you have to walk beside a busy road, or through a field of stubble, before you get to the good bits, that lovely clearing in the woods, or the stream with the kingfisher.

Prodogue

I have a dog, a scruffy Maltese terrier, called Monty. I say 'have' not to suggest ownership, particularly, but more in the way you'd say I have dandruff or a cold. Monty looks like a failed cloud that has fallen to earth and rolled around in the muck for a while. He has inscrutable black eyes, a black nose and a nicotine-stained moustache gained from sticking his snout into aromatically enticing nooks and crannies, both biological and geological.

When it comes to intelligence, Maltese terriers are generally described as 'middling': slower-witted by far than highly strung poodles and chess-playing collies, but a notch or two up from the bewildered boxer, staring in bafflement at a tennis ball in the hope it comes back to life, or stoner Afghans, intellectually exhausted by the effort of not swallowing their own tongues. Monty has no tricks, and he doesn't *come*, or even *sit* reliably; although he will wait passively for you to approach him if the world has nothing more interesting to offer. His greatest triumph came when he won Best Boy Dog at the Cricklewood, or, rather, 'Cricklewoof', dog show. A rabbit was runner-up. Third prize went to a teddy bear.

Although I've been a little harsh on his intellectual accomplishments, Monty has a sort of earnest, quizzical look to him, as if he's methodically striving to understand some secret code,

or seriously pondering the hidden meaning of the universe. I think of him as a sort of Dogter Watson – no, don't worry, this isn't going to be one of those books full of awful puns, there will be no more. If he's Watson, does this make me Sherlock? Alas, I fear that Monty and I are like one of those double acts made up of two straight men – we are both Watsons, both of us huffing and puffing our way to a truth that more agile minds might reach with greater speed, if not accuracy.

So, I find Monty a useful companion as I wander here and there, trying to make sense of the world, applying, where I can, the philosophy I've picked up over years of academic study and private reading. We chat things through. Bounce ideas off each other. I've come to be able to guess his thoughts. Articulate them, even.

The following chapters present some of our philosophical conversations, undertaken on our walks across the streets and parks and graveyards of north London (and occasionally a little further afield). They are intended to form an accessible introduction to the great questions in philosophy – you know the ones, the usual suspects. What is the right thing to do? Does free will exist? What is the ultimate nature of reality? How do we know anything? Is there a God? Why do I always try to put the USB stick in the socket the wrong way round first time?

It's a book intended for people rather than dogs, and deals with human problems, rather than the worming schedules and faecal-disposal strategies that take up so much of our canine-oriented energy. But there is, nevertheless, a doggy flavour… I kept an eye out for the appearances of humanity's best friend in the classics of philosophy. And it turned out that there were more of them than I expected. A bit like wigs. I should probably explain.

Back in the early 1990s I was going out with a girl who had a curious obsession with men in wigs. I don't mean in a kinky way – she didn't like me to don a judge's horsehair and flail around with a gavel, pronouncing her guilty of wearing a negligee without due care and attention. No, it was simply that she liked to spot them, like a birdwatcher ticking off a goldcrest or chiffchaff. She'd nudge me in the pub or on the tube, and whisper, 'Syrup,' and I'd have to try to locate the wig-wearer. (Syrup, by the way, is Cockney rhyming slang: syrup of fig – wig.) Back in those days, hair replacement technologies were still in their infancy – weaves and transplants and follicle regeneration unguents hadn't achieved their current state of sophistication; and even then, the classic three-strand comb-over was no longer an acceptable option, so there were more wigs around to observe.

After the alert from my girlfriend, I'd scan the room or the train carriage. In the early days of our relationship, other than the obvious and terrible wigs – the ones looking like a slumbering beaver, or those with a rigid consistency like fibreglass or overbeaten cream or melted plastic – I'd usually entirely fail to spot the target. But, gradually, I learned to pick up the clues: the unnatural darkness contrasting with greying eyebrows; a follicular density undermined by the puckered visage below; a glossy iridescence reflecting the neon of the streetlights.

Before our relationship, I'd never noticed a wig, never *seen* one. It was a detail, a granularity, that my world did not contain. Ludwig Wittgenstein – a philosopher we'll meet again in these pages – writes at length in *Philosophical Investigations* of the process by which we learn the meaning of a word. Rather than there being a simple linear relationship between an object and its name, we acquire the meaning of a word by seeing how it is

used, by learning the rules governing its utterance, and the *form of life* – the rich matrix of cultural procedures and traditions – in which it is embedded. Knowledge is behaviour, a thing we *do*, rather than a thing we *have*. And so I had to learn to perceive the wigs, by following the lead of my master, and soon a whole new aspect of the world became distinct to me. I began to see them everywhere, and together we rejoiced in this shared element, like porpoises breaching in the surf. And even after she'd gone, although the joy of shared discovery was past, I still found myself picking out a wig in a crowd, the rich, dense, chocolatey mass above the melancholy face, and I'd murmur 'syrup' to myself, wistfully…

As with the wigs, I'd never really *seen* the dogs trotting through the pages of Western philosophy until I started actively to look for them. And then suddenly they were everywhere, sometimes skulking in the textual margins, as if they knew they were in trouble for some gastric mishap or act of store-cupboard larceny, and other times hiding in plain sight.

Given humanity's long and intimate association with dogs, it is not surprising that they have insinuated themselves into so many aspects of our intellectual culture, our myths, our stories, as well as our philosophical investigations. Archaeologists have found it tricky to tie down the precise moment when dogs were first domesticated, although the best guesses tend to cluster around thirty to forty thousand years ago. It seems likely that wolves began hanging around the encampments of our ancestors, and that over tens of thousands of years something like the modern dog began to peel away from the wolf, a process driven by a combination of natural selection and selective breeding.

By fifteen thousand years ago, well before we'd discovered farming, humans and dogs were entwined in life, and death.

The very first unequivocal evidence of humans and dogs living together comes from three Palaeolithic skeletons found in a quarry in Germany: a man, a woman and a little dog, all buried together. The dog had suffered from distemper, and could only have survived as long as it did if it had been looked after by the people. Too weak and feeble to be of any use on a hunt, it must have had some other function in the lives of the group it lived and died among. It was a pet…

Inching our way forward through time, we find dogs generally revered and respected in most human cultures. In pre-Columbian America, dogs were regarded by the Mayans and Aztecs as benign guides and guardians, leading the dead to the spirit world. The Egyptians may have been better known for their fondness for cats, but dogs were also often mummified and entombed with their owners. And one of the very first animals whose name has come down to us was a graceful hunting dog called Abuwtiyuw (no, I've no idea how to pronounce it, either), who thrived sometime in the Sixth Dynasty (2345–2181 BCE).

A little closer in time and place to the roots of the Western philosophical tradition, the Persian Zoroastrians were much taken with both the sagacity and moral rectitude of dogs. In a curious echo of the Mayans, Persian dogs guarded the bridge over which the dead sauntered to paradise. But they were also key combatants in the endless war of light against darkness, fighting for the wise Ahura Mazda against the insects, slugs, rats, lizards, frogs and, I'm afraid, cats that served the dark lord, Angra Mainyu. That curious way that dogs have of standing stock-still and staring silently into the middle distance was explained by the fact that they can see evil spirits invisible to us. To mistreat such a powerful ally in the good fight must incur

terrible punishments, in this life and the next. The murder of a dog could only be atoned for by a demanding list of penances, including the killing of ten thousand cats. So, yes, the Zoroastrians were definitely dog people…

Inching still closer to the origins of philosophy, the heroic age of Greece gives us Odysseus' faithful hound, Argos, who waited for twenty years for his master to return from his travels. Once glorious in the chase, but now lying on a dunghill, starved and beaten, he alone of all those left behind on Ithaca recognizes Odysseus. He is repaid with a tear from the hero and, happy at last, expires. On the other hand, the ultimate post-mortem shame for any Homeric hero was to be stripped of his armour on the battlefield and left naked for the dogs to eat.

So far, we have history, myth and legend, but our first fully philosophical dog has to wait until Plato's *Republic*. In the *Republic*, Plato attempts, among many other things, to define justice and to set out the criteria for a perfect society. A key component of the ideal government is the class of Guardians, philosopher-soldiers who lead and protect the state. What qualities would we look for in these Guardians? They must be friendly and benevolent towards the citizens of the city, but harsh and aggressive to their enemies. And where might these qualities, which constitute true wisdom, be found? Why, in the household dog, who instinctively knows good from evil, friend from foe, who licks the hand of his master's drinking buddies, even when he knows nothing else about them, and savages the unwelcome intruder.

> And surely this instinct of the dog is very charming; your dog is a true philosopher.
>
> Why?

> Why, because he distinguishes the face of a friend and of an enemy only by the criterion of knowing and not knowing. And must not an animal be a lover of learning who determines what he likes and dislikes by the test of knowledge and ignorance?
>
> Most assuredly.
>
> And is not the love of learning the love of wisdom, which is philosophy?

Not a bad way for our philosophical dog to make its entrance bow-wow. Plato's view of dogs wasn't always quite so laudatory, and he was capable of hurling the insult 'Dog!' at those with whom he disagreed. This leads us on nicely to the most famous dogs in philosophy. Today, 'cynic' – a word that derives from the Greek term for 'dog-like' – has come to mean (in the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary*): 'One who shows a disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and is wont to express this by sneers and sarcasms; a sneering fault-finder'.

It's not an attractive picture: the thin-lipped misanthrope, mocking good intentions, forever pulling away the mask of virtue to reveal the hypocrite behind. We can certainly find elements of this modern sense in the original Cynics, a straggling group of thinkers who emerged just as Plato was undertaking his very different philosophical project. The Cynics lived simply, disdaining all the trappings of wealth and worldly success, dressing in rags, sleeping rough, railing against the greed and materialism of the affluent. No convention was sacrosanct; no moral or religious tradition left unmocked. But Cynicism was,

above all, a creed devoted to achieving a virtuous life, and the Cynic's critique was a necessary, if destructive, first step to enlightenment.

Where do the dogs come in? There are a couple of different stories explaining the origins of the name. It may simply have been that the very first Cynic, Antisthenes, taught at a gymnasium called 'the place of the white dog'. However, I prefer the story that Plato, annoyed by the constant goading and gulling he got from the greatest of the Cynics, Antisthenes' pupil, Diogenes of Sinope, spat out, 'You're a dog!' This delighted Diogenes, who revelled in the role. When another member of the elite threw bones at him and repeated the slur, Diogenes raised a leg and pissed on him. In truth, Diogenes does seem to have been a bit of an oaf, notorious for eating noisily during lectures and for ostentatiously breaking wind mid-conversation, always either picking his teeth or picking a fight. Everyone's worst nightmare in the quiet carriage… And he could be a little too pleased with himself. The only time Plato got the better of him was when Diogenes wiped his filthy feet over Plato's favourite rug. 'I trample upon Plato's vainglory,' he said. Plato's riposte was, 'How much pride you show, Diogenes, by seeming not to be proud.'

The main reason the 'dog-like' tag seems to have stuck was because the Cynics, like dogs, were notorious for their lack of shame in the expression of their bodily functions. Diogenes would urinate and defecate in the streets. His pupil, Crates of Thebes, took things to the next stage, copulating with his wife Hipparchia in public view. I suppose there's a reason why this activity is still known as dogging.

Crates and Hipparchia lived into decent old age, camping in the doorways and porticos of Athens, but their master,

Diogenes, lived yet longer, into his nineties according to some accounts. And at the end, the dogs return. There are different versions of his death – one is that he simply held his breath for several days (that'll usually do the trick). A more prosaic demise has him eating a raw ox foot, and perishing from food poisoning. But yet another version is more apt for the Cynic. Diogenes was dividing up an octopus for his own dogs when one bit him. The bite festered, and so he died. A variation sees the dog infecting him with rabies.

Diogenes was not, in fact, the first philosopher to suffer death by dog. One of the earliest, Heraclitus, came to a particularly unpleasant end. Heraclitus was an aristocrat with a loathing for the common people, convinced that the truths he told could only be understood by a select few. The top people, he said, are prepared to give up everything for immortal glory, while the masses gorge themselves mindlessly, like cattle. His fate therefore seems, if not quite deserved, then somehow fitting. Suffering from dropsy, he self-medicated by smearing himself in cow excrement, which he believed would draw off the excessive moisture. In this condition he was discovered by a pack of dogs, which, unable to recognize him as human, ate him.

The next couple of thousand years of philosophy were relatively under-dogged, at a time when, ironically, philosophy was, under the dominion of Plato's great pupil Aristotle, rather *dog*matic. But when, post-Renaissance, philosophy wakes from its slumbers, the dogs come back.

A dog makes a solitary appearance in one of the greatest – and most difficult – works of Western metaphysics, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. We'll encounter Kant several more times in the perambulations that follow, but for now it is enough to know that, in the *Critique*, Kant attempts both to criticize and

heal one of the abiding divisions in the history of philosophy: between those on the one side who believe that knowledge must come from pure thought, and on the other those who claim that we can know only what reaches the mind through the senses. In explaining how this gap between ideas and sensory experience can be closed, he uses the example of a dog.

> The concept of a dog signifies a rule according to which my imagination can trace, delineate, or draw a general outline, figure, or shape of a four-footed animal without being restricted to any single and particular shape supplied by experience.

Without the concept of a *dog*, says Kant, the various sensory perceptions – ears, fur, lolling tongue, cocked leg – would be lost in the background noise. The idea *dog* is solid enough to force unity onto those various bits of the world in front of us, forming them into our familiar friend and companion. But the term remains vague enough for us to include the annoying little Chihuahua, and the imperious Great Dane.

We have already mentioned Wittgenstein, and the way he locates the meaning of a word in a network of linguistic and social practices. Communication involves taking part in an interlocked series of 'language games', and our knowledge of these different language games is what makes communication possible. In probing the limits of what it is to *mean*, Wittgenstein returns again and again to a rather puzzled dog, who seems to be trying quite hard to be human. But lacking the necessary abilities to comprehend the appropriate language games, our dog can feel neither hope for the future, nor fear at what it might bring. And a dog cannot lie.

> Lying is a language-game that needs to be learned like any other one… Why can't a dog simulate pain? Is he too honest? Could one teach a dog to simulate pain? Perhaps it is possible to teach him to howl on particular occasions as if he were in pain, even when he is not. But the surroundings which are necessary for this behaviour to be real simulation are missing.

I think that Wittgenstein is quite right in saying that it would be impossible for a dog to simulate pain. But surely not even a philosopher would claim that a dog cannot *feel* pain? My last example of a philosophical dog is an upsetting, but also an instructive one.

We're going to go back to the seventeenth century, and the work of René Descartes. Descartes has become notorious among animal lovers for his view that all non-human animals were merely 'natural automata': soulless mechanical devices incapable of thinking, or feeling emotion, or, indeed, pain.

Two anecdotes often repeated about Descartes point to the consequences of such a theory. One day while walking with his friends, the philosopher saw a pregnant dog. First, he tickled her ears, and fussed over the animal. Then, before the horrified gaze of his companions, he kicked her in the stomach. He calmed the distress of the appalled observers by explaining that the dog's howls were merely the grinding of the gears, reassuring them that animals could feel no pain, and that they should reserve their pity for suffering humanity.

The other, more horrific anecdote concerns his wife's lapdog. Fired by his reading of William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood, and determined to observe it for himself, our philosopher waits until his wife and daughter are out

on an errand. He picks up the little dog – a papillon, with those big ears, like a butterfly's wings – carries the dog down into his basement, and there performs a ghastly vivisection.

How do Mme Descartes and the little girl react when they find the corpse? History does not record.

History does not record because there was no Mme Descartes. No daughter. The philosopher remained unmarried. The story is a myth, rising on the thermals generated by the moronic inferno of the internet. Something very like the horror here described did, in fact, occur, some two hundred years later. The perpetrator was the celebrated nineteenth-century anatomist Claude Bernard (1813–78), a heartless slicer of living, conscious, unanaesthetized dogs (and rabbits). He didn't much care for his wife, and he truly did vivisect her little dog. Understandably outraged, she left him, and set up an organization to campaign against animal cruelty. The story seems to have become attached to Descartes because of his views on animals as automata.

And the episode involving the pregnant dog? If it happened at all, the guilty man was a later French philosopher, Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715). Once again, Descartes' reputation meant that such stories gravitated to him.

But enough, now, of dogs in philosophy, let's get some philosophy into our dog!