

Society in its Challenges

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Society in its Challenges:
Philosophical Considerations
of Living in Society

By

Santiago Sia

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

Society in its Challenges:
Philosophical Considerations of Living in Society,
by Santiago Sia

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To

MARIAN
*friend, spouse,
co-traveller, co-author*

in heartfelt gratitude

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FOREWORD

Ours is an exciting period in history. We have witnessed, and continue to experience to the present day, tremendous developments in various fields—social communications is a good example—which have immensely impacted on our lives. They have transformed society in various ways, bringing the entire global community much closer and helping improve standards of living. But ours is also a troubled period in history, for despite the onward march of democracy and human rights, peace is still elusive for many; and the hopes for widespread prosperity have been dashed by the global economic crisis which haunts and ravages families and communities. Some of these problems exist side by side with the positive developments. Others are regrettably the effects of these developments. Thus, while acknowledging their benefits, we also need to address urgently and convincingly the problems which have arisen.

In our attempts to deal with all these developments and to meet the consequent challenges, we ought to employ all the resources we can muster. Our society and the world generally have become increasingly complex and complicated and so solutions are not easy to find. Harnessing whatever is good about all these developments is essential as is facing up squarely to what is not good. The same easy communications which allow us to stay in touch and informed also invade our privacy and make our children vulnerable to exploitation. Yes, we can be instantly alerted to the miserable plight of people, near and far, and thus are enabled to respond more quickly. Yes, instant and easy dialogue can promote peace and cooperation; but they can just as easily harden attitudes and force dangerous rushes to judgment.

To truly address the challenges of living in this society entails that we face up to our responsibilities as individuals as well as members of society. This involves debating the fundamental values that make for a humanly decent society for all. It is worth constantly reminding ourselves that many of our problems are not merely due to random human failings but rather to lack of an embedded moral rectitude. People make really bad choices for the vanity of their own short-term gain, with terrible consequences for others as our economic crisis has illustrated. It is crucial, therefore, that we continuously educate ourselves, enlarge our vision and develop our personal and collective value-system around a sense of be-

longing to a wider community and a studied sense of responsibility to and for others.

In the various essays in this book, Santiago Sia considers and discusses in an accessible philosophical way some of these pressing challenges of living together in society. He calls us all to a fresh dialogue. It is a call that is worth heeding. He contends that in addressing these challenges, it is not enough to look for immediate solutions. He urges us to probe deeper into our assumptions and to re-examine age-old, and at times entrenched, viewpoints. In this task, he maintains that philosophical thinking can be an important resource and ally. I have no doubt that his book will help provoke the kind of probing discussions we need to be having about how we can live humanly together, draw wisdom from information and experience and not simply accrete knowledge. The hope is that our exciting yet troubled period of history will also turn out to be a better one for us all and that our society will become one that will enable each to thrive and flourish as a human being.

As Dean of Philosophy at Milltown Institute, Santiago has been a tower of inspiration to countless students, just as he has always been during such a distinguished academic career. As well as being a fine teacher, he has never put down the pen—or the keyboard!—of the researcher and the writer, and his legacy also includes such an impressive corpus of writing and wise scholarship. I congratulate Santiago on the publication of his latest book which is a very important addition to that corpus and to our civic discourse. It is a wonderful and generous gift on his part of continuing service to the people and to the spirit which animates the very best of what it is to be human.

Mary McAleese
Former President of Ireland

PREFACE

A prevalent view to which I had ardently subscribed for a long time is that during our younger years, we should heed Confucius's admonition that we ought to participate actively in the life of society. It then suggests that in our more advanced years we should emulate Lao-tzu and withdraw from society to commune with nature, appreciating its beauty and peace. Tranquility and serenity are worth seeking and enjoying.

That may still come—hopefully! But in the meantime, it seemed to me that A.N. Whitehead's description of speculative thinking—which he compared to the flight of an airplane—as starting from the ground, then lifting off into the rarefied atmosphere, but landing back on the ground became much more pressing and challenging after a career in academia. By landing back on the ground he meant showing the relevance for other experiences in life of what one has engaged in for a long time.

The society we live in today—as it has presumably been the case in the past—is fraught with problems and beset with challenges. Retirement provides one with opportunities, whether sought out or imposed, to pay more attention to what events, problems or issues are grabbing the attention of the public at large. It also opens up one's vistas as one sees and hears—day in and day out—the plight of people, near and far—at closer range. Philosophy, the main academic subject which nourished my teaching and research and preoccupied my academic career for several years, sometimes appears to distance itself from those problems and challenges. It should not. Whitehead's insightful metaphor becomes all too real—there is the need to consider the relevance and applicability of one's philosophical thinking in understanding those problems and addressing those challenges.

This volume of essays is an attempt on my part to put aside momentarily Lao-tzu's example and to follow A.N. Whitehead's injunction instead—which has exercised considerable influence on my philosophical thinking. Following Charles Hartshorne, the other philosopher to whom I am greatly indebted, and whose fundamental metaphysical concept of creative synthesis has become a foundation for my own thinking,¹ I have endeavoured to build on what I had laid out in the past, entered into dialogue

¹ As I complete this work, perhaps one can after all combine these two philosophical insights: “do nothing—creatively!”

with the present concerns in the meantime, and forged my way ahead into the future in the hope of sharing new findings. Whether it has been a worthwhile and successful venture on my part is left to the reader.

I am grateful to the former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, who in her message on my retirement wrote: “Given his great energy and enthusiasm, I have no doubt that retirement day will be for Santiago merely another milestone along the journey of such a full and active life and no doubt we can look forward to several more interesting publications in the future.”² Her words have stimulated the writing of this book. It is a particular honour for me that, despite her various commitments, she graciously accepted the invitation to write the Foreword. Given the theme of this book, I believe that it is appropriate to pay tribute to her in these pages for her efforts and achievements in—among several others—building bridges across various divides in society. I should also like to thank Sjur Bergan for his gracious endorsement of this book. His own work and publications have been of immense value in assessing educational policies throughout Europe and further afield.

The various institutions, with which I have had the good fortune to have been associated throughout my career, deserve my thanks: Newman College (now Newman University College), Birmingham, UK; Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium; Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, USA; Milltown Institute, Dublin, Ireland. Other academic institutions and professional societies in various countries have honoured me with invitations to share my work with them. The experience, for which I am grateful, has enriched my thinking on many of the issues discussed in these essays. I also appreciate their library resources and the help of the library staff. Colleagues and students at those academic institutions as well as elsewhere have greatly contributed to the development of my thinking—they have my gratitude. There are many, many more whose assistance and encouragement facilitated the process of writing and the completion of this present publication. It is not possible to mention them all, but they should be assured that I am in their debt.

I am grateful to publishers/editors/co-authors for their cooperation and for their permission to include in this volume selected chapters/essays/sections from previously published works: “Philosophizing, Philosophy and the Religious Context: Reflections on the Source, Resource and the Setting of a Quest,” in Brendan Sweetman (ed.), *Philosophical Thinking and the Religious Context: Essays in Honor of Santiago Sia*

² Mary McAleese, “Message from President McAleese” in Brendan Sweetman (ed.), *Philosophical Thinking and the Religious Quest: Essays in Honor of Santiago Sia*, (London and N.Y.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. ix.

(Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 171-189; "Balancing Public and Individual Interests: a Philosophical Analysis," *European Commission, Radiation Protection No. 167, International Symposium on Non-Medical Imaging, 2011 (Proceedings of a Symposium held in Dublin 8-9 October 2009)*, 93-97; "Ethical Thinking and Philosophy," *New Blackfriars: a Review* (UK), Vol. 91, No. 1033 (May 2010), 242- 252; "An Alternative Conception of Power: Some Implications," *Sofia Philosophical Review* (Bulgaria), IV, 1, (2010), 64-74; "Images, Reality and Truth: Some Philosophical Considerations," *Tattva: Journal of Philosophy* (India), V, 2 (July-December 2013), 1-20 and *New Blackfriars* (UK) (forthcoming); (with Ferdinand Santos), *Personal Identity, the Self and Ethics*, (N.Y. and U.K: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); "Contemporary Society and Faith-based Higher Education: Challenges and Issues," Gabriella Pusztai (ed.), *Religion and Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe* (Debrecen, Hungary: Center For Higher Education Research and Development, 2010), 12-23; "Education, the Business Model and the Bologna Process: a Philosophical Response," in Alexander L. Gungov and Karim Mamdani (eds.), *The Addressees of the EU Internal and External Policy: De Jure and De Facto* (Sofia: Sofia University Press, 2011), 87-111; (with Marian F. Sia), "Punctuating Life's Message: a Grammatical-Philosophical Exercise on the Quest for Meaning," *Santalka* (Lithuania) XVIII, 4, 2010, 81-92. <http://www.coactivity.vgtu.lt/en/>; Janez Juhant and Bojan Žalec (eds.), *The Art of Life*, Theologie Ost-West, Europäische Perspektiven 14 (Berlin and Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010), 79-89; (in Slovenian) trans. Rok Blažič "Postavljanje ločil v sporočilo življenja: gramtikalno-filozofska vaja v iskanju smisla," *Tretji dan*, Letn. 39, ¾ (Mar/Apr 2010), 23-31; "Economic Crisis and Accountability: a Re-examination of Certain Views and Practices," *Studies* (Ireland) (forthcoming).

The publishers and staff of Cambridge Scholars Publishing have placed their confidence in my work. The present volume completes a trilogy, the first two of which have already been published by them: *Ethical Contexts and Theoretical Issues: Essays in Ethical Thinking*, and (with Marian F. Sia) *From Question to Quest: Literary-Philosophical Essays on the Challenges of Life*. For that confidence and for their professionalism throughout my association with them, I am immensely thankful.

My extended family, both living and deceased, have supported me and my endeavours from the very beginning. The geographical distance between us has never been a barrier. I have benefited from all the encouragement I have received from them over the years. To them, my sincerest thanks. More than ever before, I am truly indebted to my beloved wife, Marian, who has always accompanied and supported me in my personal

and professional journeys—she truly deserves my greatest gratitude. I had dedicated my first book to her at the start of my academic career. As I look back on that career with this work, this is a most opportune time to dedicate it too in her honour.

INTRODUCTION

Challenges in Society

Living in society has always presented a variety of challenges to its members. Some of these are fairly routine, requiring immediate and even cursory attention. Others demand more planning, organizing and networking. But there are certain challenges which require intensive debates, prolonged discussions and sustained scrutiny due to the nature of these challenges or the long-term effects on individual citizens or on society as a whole. Irrespective of what is required in terms of time and effort, addressing these challenges is a task that has to be undertaken and pursued if we are to improve our lives and membership in society.

This observation can be made throughout human history, of course. But it is particularly true today because of certain developments that have arisen in our time. We are witnessing much progress but also increased deterioration in the lives of people, and it is essential to understand the causes in order to support the positives and rectify the negatives. One such challenge is the present economic crisis that looms large on practically everyone's horizon these days. Society, too, is constantly changing—in form, in structures, in composition—for several reasons; and with the transformed situation comes fresh problems and new issues which need to be tackled. The complicated advances made in medical research demand that more information is sought and other relevant skills are developed. Ethical issues have arisen which had not been anticipated. Advances in science, technology and communications, among others, almost unthinkable in the past, present problematic situations that challenge assumptions, views and standpoints. They require more careful and rigorous investigation that is not always possible compared with the rather routine challenges associated with living in society. Moreover, because of what is at stake, they do point to the necessity of examining the implicit or underlying thought-patterns that inform policies or solutions. The society of today is thus not merely a replica of yesteryears but a vibrant, complex and complicated one.

These challenges of living in society, whatever they may be, confront every one of us, albeit differently. As members and citizens, we are all affected. We are duly impacted by any twist and turn in and by society and

its members. Societal developments in whatever form and from whatever quarter make a difference, minimally or otherwise, to our ordinary and professional lives. And yet, we are also influential to varying degrees as we carry on with our daily lives and deal with our own concerns and pre-occupations. Interacting with one another in different ways and forms, we bring our respective personalities, skills and competence as we meet these challenges, sometimes indirectly but at other times more directly. Some of us may occupy specific roles or have special status in society and therefore have particular duties and responsibilities. There are also those who have acquired specialized training or accrued relevant experience that puts them at an advantage in tackling these challenges. In addition, many are motivated to contribute, with whatever they can muster, their share in renewing societal life. But in whatever circumstance or position we find ourselves, membership in society and the presence of those challenges entail being influenced by, and even indebted to, one another while reciprocating that influence on others. Thus, there is a certain onus on all of us to deal with these challenges as best we can.

A Philosophical Perspective

If the above observation is true, to what extent can philosophers and philosophical thinking participate in this process? Can their particular skills and competence contribute positively to the betterment of society? How can they enable citizens to respond to the concrete and varied challenges in life? Somehow these questions sound surprising, at least initially, since these do not readily come to one's mind when one is confronted by the challenges in society. In fact, there is a perception that philosophy and philosophers are so detached from what is regarded as "reality" and "real life" that they could hardly claim to have any worthwhile contribution to make. In fact, sometimes it is alleged that they even muddle the discussions!

While it is regrettable that this perception is wide-spread and not totally undeserved, the criticism, nevertheless, seems to forget that philosophical thinking in ancient Athens actually took place in the agora—not in any ivory tower. As Plato mingled with the crowds, asking searching questions, he was urging them to think more deeply about the issues that mattered more, so as to make a difference to their way of life. He interrogated ordinary citizens with a view to widening and deepening their interests and concerns. He challenged those whose task it was to govern the lives of the citizens of society to consider fundamental issues as they embarked on their responsibilities. And in ancient China during the period of

the Hundred Schools of Thought, racked by wars and strife, the community actually turned to the sages, i.e. philosophers, for an answer to their urgent question: How can we live at peace with one another? The expectation was that philosophical thinking had much to contribute in dealing with concrete and practical questions and regulating our conduct in society.

Although society and the world have changed considerably since those times, this expectation that philosophical thinking can come to our aid in the important task of meeting today's challenges is still heard nowadays. Given the present economic crisis, for example, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, calls for some fundamental re-thinking of economic affairs and strategies in the hope of improving the lives of citizens and of society as a whole. In his view, an improvement of society and its structures can come about only with a transformation in points of view and general outlook. He believes that this can be accomplished, or at least initiated, through education. Challenging economists and economic theory to shift their priorities and to address human concerns, he adds that: "The society we so dearly wish for will not take shape unless we acknowledge the need for an education of character and desires, the need to encourage and support critical reflection and a more holistic approach to knowledge."¹ He then specifically refers to philosophical thinking as facilitating the fostering of an ethical consciousness among the citizens of society. Philosophy, in his view, "trains one in how to think, how to address issues of decision-making in areas of life's fundamental and applied questions"² and is a gift or skill that can be taught and acquired.

It is an endorsement that is simultaneously a challenge! One hopes that the task is being taken up and the expectation is being met.

Philosophical Considerations

This book is an attempt to explain and pursue this important and fundamental task. Enlisting philosophy as a significant resource for clarifying and addressing relevant issues, it examines various social contexts, some of which are continuing while others are relatively current. The book contains a number of essays, each of which is focused on a specific context and particular challenge, but all of which are informed not just by the relevant issues but also by philosophical thinking. The aim of this project is to

¹ Michael D. Higgins, "Toward an Ethical Economy," Ethics for All Public Lectures, Dublin City University, 11 September 2013.

² *Ibid.*

show the need and the value of engaging in critical analysis and sustained investigation by providing philosophical considerations if we are to inform and contribute substantially to the debates in society. Contrary to the perception that philosophy is concerned exclusively with purely theoretical problems—some of which are of its own making—the essays offer discussions that make use of conceptualities and worldviews that can illuminate certain avenues which may be followed fruitfully. In short, its purpose is to show the relevance and importance of philosophical considerations of the challenges of living in society and hopefully, to add to its enrichment.

The title of the book indicates its theme; namely, the challenges of living in society. It is not a study of society such as would be undertaken in a sociological work. The subtitle explains both the content and the approach: the essays are primarily considerations, from a philosophical viewpoint, of some of the challenges arising in one's life in society. There is no claim that these are the most crucial or the most pervasive ones.³ The topics of the essays are those which the author has had the opportunity to address in various contexts. These are pursued individually, which explains the inevitable varying emphases and styles in the essays as well as some unavoidable repetitions. These have been kept to the minimum, however, and retained primarily to preserve the integrity of the original discussions. Although each essay stands on its own, having been written at different times and for a specific readership, there is a consistent conceptuality that informs all of them. This is evidenced by the cross-references in the footnotes to other essays in the book. In addition, ample use has been made of footnoting, not just to acknowledge sources as is traditionally done, but also to make comments on, or observations of, certain events in contemporary society.

Following an Introduction, the book project is divided into two parts: Part I: Theoretical Considerations and Part II: Contextual Considerations. However, the division of the book is not intended to be exclusive since in each of the parts, both theoretical and contextual issues are given attention. The division is introduced mainly because of the focus of the respective essays. The chapters comprising Part I deal with more theoretical issues, including the role of philosophical thinking in addressing some of the problems and issues in society. They also critique certain conceptions of one's relationship to society and of society itself. The chapters which form Part II are more context-dependent. Each focuses on a particular social

³ One can easily point to other challenges to society and its members: wars, revolutions, terrorism, child labour and boy soldiers, abuse of women and children, unequal distribution of wealth, unjust commercial practices, environmental issues and global warming, human trafficking, and many others—all of which are urgent.

context and provides a philosophical consideration of some of the more fundamental issues of that context. Some readers, depending on their interests and background, may prefer to start with Part II and then be informed by the discussions in Part I. Those who are more philosophically-oriented may want to delve into Part I and then see how the issues analyzed and developed there are followed up in the contextual discussions of Part II. The book project ends with a concluding chapter, two Appendices and a Selected Bibliography.

Part I opens with *Chapter One* titled “*Philosophizing, Philosophy, and the Social Context: A Reflection on Human Living*”. As the initial essay in the collection, the discussion here revolves around the starting point and the approach of the entire work. Reflecting on the process of philosophizing, it looks into what is involved in the raising of fundamental questions. It then discusses the basis for it—the nature of human beings. It sets the act of philosophizing within the societal context inasmuch as such questioning takes place in that setting. Turning to philosophy as a valuable resource, it defends the role of philosophical thinking in addressing certain challenges in society.

The title of *Chapter Two* indicates the specific theoretical issue to be pursued and the manner of the investigation: “*Public and Individual Interests, the Common Good: an Analysis and a Proposal*”. A constant challenge of living in society is the tension, and even conflict, between public and individual interests. It is usually resolved by resorting to striking a balance between the competing interests and making references to the common good. In its analysis the essay shows that such a tension and suggested resolution are really due to certain conceptions of the individual and society. It proposes in its place an alternative conception of self and society, discussed in later chapters, and provides certain practical guidelines that can be usefully followed on that basis.

Chapter Three called “*Distinct, not Separate: a Critique of a Dualistic Conception of and in Society*” is a critical analysis of a pervasive interpretation of the relationship between the individual and society which is underpinned by a dualistic conception of society. As well as offering a rival understanding of society, it examines critically the logic of dualistic thinking and highlights some of its implications for other facets of life in society. It shows how the philosophy of Charles Hartshorne lends support to non-dualistic thinking.

Chapter Four: “Relationships and Communal Life: a View on Types of Relatedness” examines human relationships in its various forms. Developments in social networking mean that the traditional ones are complemented, or even replaced, by newer forms. What these relationships

mean and their implications for the society that we live in are the subject-matter of this chapter. It draws on the philosophical writings of Martin Buber who has devoted much of his attention and concern to the topic of our relationships with one another and within society. Buber, the essay points out, reminds us that the most important consideration here is the kind of relationship that is nurtured and developed, rather than who enters into it. This way of thinking has also some implications for society's response to some of the social developments and relationships today.

The focus of *Chapter Five* called "*The Individual and Society: a Philosophical Conception of Self as Social*" is the question: How should one understand one's identity and status in society? It pursues further the discussion contained in the previous chapters. Drawing largely on Charles Hartshorne's philosophy, it develops a conception of self as social, while acknowledging its uniqueness, and argues that such a view has implications for our appreciation of, and response to, some of the contemporary challenges of living in society and for our understanding of self-identity. It also anticipates and responds to possible criticisms of the notion of a social self.

Living in society and interacting with one another inevitably result in challenges which have ethical significance. In *Chapter Six* titled "*Ethical Thinking and Formation: a Challenge for Life in Society*" the discussion shifts more intently to the issue of ethics. It explains the significance of an ethical consideration in meeting some of the challenges in society. Given the important contributions to this topic by the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius, particularly as a political mentor of his time, this essay sets out his insights into the moral nature of human beings and its development. It then expands further on what is involved in the ethical challenge: the importance of ethical thinking, of developing moral sensitivity and of taking a moral stance.

Part II examines selected social contexts for some philosophical considerations. One such context takes the shape of developments in computing and technology, which have enhanced the status and role of imaging and of media communications in general. But with the welcome advances have also come undesirable and even threatening consequences for both individuals and society generally. These have presented challenges and issues which need to be addressed urgently which are the subject-matter of *Chapter Seven: "Images, Reality and Truth: Some Philosophical Considerations."* Focusing first on the tension between image and reality, it provides a philosophical background to the debate. It then discusses the question of truth and the related issues of the right to know, freedom of speech and the right to privacy. It provides the foundation for these fundamental

rights but also examines the tensions or conflicts in their exercise. The essay then offers and discusses some guidelines to deal with these challenges and issues; namely, the criteria of appropriateness and acceptability and the importance of accountability.

In the next essay, *Chapter Eight: "Human Freedom, its Power and Limits: Some Implications for Life in Society"*, the focus is very much on whether human beings are truly free. Our daily lives in society do present at times situations which make us wonder about this issue. The essay presents first the philosophical debate between indeterminists and determinists. It then follows a related line of enquiry which underpins many of the debates in contemporary society, especially regarding human rights. To what extent are human beings free and, even more importantly, to what extent should they be free? The essay claims that taking this route puts us in a better position to appreciate the implications of what it means for human beings to be free and to provide some guidance on how we are to conduct our lives in society.

Ethics in the public scene is the subject-matter of *Chapter Nine: "Social Roles, Public Office and Moral Society: Lessons from the Past for the Present?"*. It looks closely at the ethical responsibility attached to social roles, particularly to public office. It enquires into the extent that we can expect society to be moral and discusses the lessons we can learn from Confucius and his teachings, especially on the ethical living out of one's role in society, with particular reference to public office.

The topic of *Chapter Ten: "Economic Crisis and Accountability: a Re-examination of Certain Views and Practices"* has been prompted by the global economic situation that has affected large sections of various societies. While the problem itself and its effects are not new, certain issues are definitely contemporary primarily because of the present-day banking crises which have affected countries and their populations. While there are of course several causes, some of which are outside one's control, there has been the ever-growing awareness that the crisis is the concretization of a particular "mindset" and the consequent "culture". The essay exposes and critiques that way of thinking and acting and points to the need for a different outlook to conduct business and financial affairs. It discusses the issue of accountability in the context of two key notions: "moral hazard" and "moral luck".

Developments in society present a constant challenge to the educative process—which is dealt with in *Chapter Eleven: "The Marketplace, Academia and Education: a Philosophical Assessment of the Bologna Process."* One such development in contemporary society has occurred in the marketplace. Since education, among its manifold aims, is expected to

prepare learners for the marketplace, an important consideration for educators is how to meet the changing demands which have occurred and may occur, particularly because of the phenomenon of globalization. Furthermore, it has been linked to what has become known as the knowledge-society and to the importance of competitiveness in education. The Bologna Process attempts to address and meet that challenge. This essay provides a philosophical critique of that on-going process.

Chapter Twelve: "Developments in Contemporary Society and Faith-based Higher Education: Challenges and Issues" again pursues the topic of education. The essay sketches some developments in contemporary society which present specific challenges and raise particular issues, such as secularization, mechanization and globalization, for a faith-based higher education. It offers suggestions as to why and how, precisely because of its distinctiveness, it can respond to these.

The concluding chapter, *In Retrospect*, takes up once again the theme of the book project, sets out the philosophical vision that informs the various philosophical considerations, and explains further the methodology of the book. It then puts forward a philosophical interpretation of society's creative advance and the challenge to enliven and enhance life in society. It describes how this philosophical vision can provide hope for a transformed society.

The two Appendices focus on a specific challenge confronting society, which regrettably has led to unwelcome consequences: the loss of meaning. In *Appendix A: "Is Life a Sentence?: the Quest for Meaning"* the question as to whether life is a sentence imposed on human beings or a series of sentences which need to be read is considered. It then proposes that, just like a text which must be punctuated properly for the message to be read intelligently, the challenge for everyone in society is to engage in various activities in line with our human nature, that will facilitate the discovery of meaning in, but more importantly of, life. The topic is developed further in *Appendix B: "Meaning and Significance: a Fundamental Challenge to Human Living"*. Here the suggestion is offered that the search for meaning can be complemented, or even replaced with, developing the human capacity for creativity and thus of being able to put significance on one's life. Human nature is such that it can create, and not just discover, meaning as one lives one's life in society. At the same time, it claims that society too has an important role in making that possibility an actuality for its members.

A Selected Bibliography is listed at the end of the book.

PART ONE:
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

PHILOSOPHIZING, PHILOSOPHY AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT: A REFLECTION ON HUMAN LIVING

“Philosophy”

The word “philosophy” is rather provocative. When one mentions it in various contexts, it elicits certain reactions that in a curious way the adjective “philosophical” or the noun “philosopher” does not. More often, the word “philosophical” is used to pass judgment or to make a comment. For instance, whenever one refers to one’s attitude as “philosophical” one is understood to be rather stoical or even indifferent. When it is used to characterize one’s thinking, one is probably regarded as being logical or at least argumentative. In a more dismissive or even deprecating way, the same word is resorted to—often in conjunction with “too”—when one’s contribution to a debate or conversation is judged to be rather abstract, tangential or even irrelevant, that is to say, “too philosophical”. The same observation can be made about the word “philosopher”. Sometimes, when one is referred to as a “philosopher” the reaction is one of awe; at other times, it is a non-committed silence. However, there are also certain occasions—unflattering or disheartening ones—when it leads to a genuine confusion on the part of the listener as to what someone is or does.¹

In contrast, although the word “philosophy” is obviously linked with “philosophical” as well as with “philosopher” and therefore invites similar comments, more often it is the subject of curiosity and leads to a number of questions. The most obvious one, despite its frequent usage in ordinary discourse, is: “What is philosophy?” And when one resorts to the ready answer, from the etymology of the word, that philosophy is “love of wisdom”, it sparks off yet another question: “But what is it *really*?”, with the

¹ One would not want to generalize, of course, but my nephews and nieces, when they were much younger, were always puzzled as to what it was that I was “really doing” since I was considered to be a philosopher. Their reaction has been replicated several times over the years by various conversation partners.

expectation of another short answer rather than a treatise or a lecture.² Although it is true that at times mention of “philosophy” results in a blank stare on the enquirer’s face or a shrug of the shoulders as if to indicate that one was sorry to have asked, more often the word “philosophy” continues to challenge the curious. Somehow the common explanation that it is “love of wisdom” is not sufficient.

It is no wonder that philosophy itself, as distinct from the various topics, issues or questions discussed by philosophers in their teaching and publications, is a topic that continues to challenge the very practitioners of this subject.³ Their own reflections or answers have charted the history of philosophy. A student of philosophy will readily notice that the nature of philosophy has changed and can expect it to continue to do so. Philosophers are renowned for disagreeing not just on their conclusions or their methodologies but even on the very subject-matter of their investigations. It is not surprising then that the word “philosophy” is truly provocative.

Questions and Question

The specific question: “What is philosophy?” which serves as the background to this reflection takes one back to a more general observation: we humans continually ask questions. Some of these are routine or even trivial. Others are more pressing or significant. But now and then, as we conduct our daily business, interact with one another or are caught up in specific situations, thought-provoking questions in their various guises and contexts do arise and challenge us. This observation in turn leads us to the rather fundamental consideration: Why do we ask questions in the first place? What enables us to raise questions? Why does it matter that we seek answers? What kind of answers can we expect?⁴

There is something curious about the process of such fundamental questioning. While the intended goal is to move ahead from the original

² This can be the typical reaction of some students, particularly those who have to take philosophy courses as part of the core curriculum rather than as their major subject. This was a particular challenge to me when I was teaching in the USA.

³ The theme of the International Philosophical Congress held in Seoul, Korea in 2008 was “Re-thinking Philosophy.” A comparable theme was addressed by the subsequent International Philosophical Congress in Athens, Greece in 2013.

⁴ This essay complements the Postscript “‘Where Does it All End?': the Quest for Answers” in Marian F. Sia and Santiago Sia, *From Question to Quest: Literary-Philosophical Enquiries into the Challenges of Life* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 169-189, which is a more literary treatment of these issues.

situation—with an answer that one expects to a question in most cases—in this context, it is actually a challenge to move back, as it were! The symbol of the question mark, in the English language, is particularly appropriate in this instance. It curls back as if to invite one to look at its foundation. And the Latin word for this movement (*reflectere*) feeds into the whole idea of “re-flecting”—thinking again, re-examining, or taking a second look. The word “reflection”, as used in the subtitle of this essay, indicates some “mulling over”. There is an expectation of a return to the basics in the hope of throwing some light on the present situation. And, although not immediately apparent, if one were to analyze another meaning of the English word, “reflection”, i.e. “an image on a surface”, one realizes that the mere glimpse of the original source could be a motivation to seek it out. Plato’s “analogy of the cave” readily comes to mind here. The same claim could probably be made if by “reflection”—as in “it is a reflection on one’s education”—one passes a comment, positive or negative. There is a hint that to understand the present situation one needs to trace it back to the past.

An equally curious feature of a question—and this has an implication for the fundamental process of questioning—is that somehow it already contains implicit knowledge rather than pure ignorance. It arises because one already knows something, however vague, confused or distorted that knowledge is. While receiving an answer is a step further in the process, the raising of the question itself is possible only because there is some background information already possessed. This is not to say, as some philosophers are prone to conclude, that humans have innate ideas. Rather, it shows that the questioning process tells something about the nature of a questioner. The process of fundamental questioning does reveal the nature of the source of the question if one were to uncover its root.

While the process of questioning may take place in the present—and as has already been mentioned, it returns us to the past—it also urges us onwards. It is not surprising that the word “question” is allied to “quest” as if the nature of this activity is to lure us, to prod us on, or to put us on track. This is particularly true of the more fundamental questions we ask about life. Somehow, for instance, the question “Does life have any meaning?” is meant to unsettle us insofar as it challenges us to search for adequate answers. And the answers are not intended to be straightforward, not because there are none, but because such answers are not solutions to a problem but rather mere responses that demand more probing on the part of the questioner.

Question in Context

Fundamental questions, such as the ones cited above, do not just arise. They are not merely posed to keep the conversation going even if at times these questions and suggested answers are mentioned in passing. They emerge because one finds oneself in a particular situation, now and then even in dramatic form. Sometimes, they come to one's serious attention in the silences of life or with the beauty of nature. In other words, this kind of questioning takes place in a context. A very good example of this is the questioning that occurs because one finds oneself faced with suffering or evil. Tragedies and misfortunes leave us bewildered not just as to how they happened but even more importantly why they occur in the first place. It is a question that continues to haunt thinking beings. Other examples are the unjust situations as well as the admirable acts of many—which cause deep-rooted questioning of the behaviour of individuals, of groups and of society in general. It makes one wonder about the nature of ethics and of an ethical judgment. Inasmuch as religion in contemporary society continues to spark off debate and controversy, it remains an enigma and causes questioning. In this sense, religious belief (and other aspects of religion) is an issue that demands quite a thorough investigation.

The word “context” and its use here need some explanation. The word itself can be equated with “background” or “setting”.⁵ When one maintains that to understand a comment, for example, it has to be put in its context, one is expecting a more accurate understanding of the comment as a result of doing so. Or if one insists that it is crucial to contextualize the debate or the discussion, one is indicating that there is a wider setting within which it is occurring and that must be taken into consideration. Moreover, the historical context of an idea, just as much as of an event, lends itself to a better grasp of the nuances and complexities of that particular idea or event.⁶

But “context” has also been employed—and is so used here—to suggest the concreteness of the situation.⁷ Whereas philosophical thinking is very often dismissed as too abstract and too generalized to be of use in

⁵ This meaning of “context” is also applicable to philosophical thinking, a point that will be treated later in this essay.

⁶ The insistence here on providing the context of one's answer or comment is not always popular in media circles which prefer sound bytes. It will grate on the ears of those who demand and insist on straightforward answers, typically a “yes” or “no” or at most “*dos palabras*”, to the exclusion of a broader explanation.

⁷ This is particularly true in process philosophy, the school of thought associated with A.N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne.

practical situations, in actuality the basis of much philosophical thinking is none other than the concrete situation in all its details and particularity.⁸ Often it is in such a situation, in its specific context, that one begins to wonder and ponder.⁹ It is useful to keep this in mind as we address the “what and why” of philosophy.¹⁰ Contrary to popular misconception, the reference to the ivory tower which philosophers allegedly inhabit is really misplaced. Its home-base is more akin to what the poet W.B. Yeats in his “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” describes graphically when he states: “I must lie down where all ladders start,/In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.” Philosophical thinking does start from and end in the same “shop”.

Philosophizing and its Source

This leads us to a consideration of the source of all this questioning. Why do questions, particularly fundamental ones, come to the surface in the first place? What triggers off the quest for answers? Who is asking the questions? As was already noted, the symbol of the question mark “curls back”, seemingly to suggest that we take a good look at the base.¹¹ Indeed, an examination of the questioning process inevitably brings us to the nature and status of the questioner.¹²

⁸ To the question then as to whether one can make a living from philosophy, it would be more true to claim that one can shape one’s life with philosophy. This is especially relevant to the educative process.

⁹ Philosophy has been presented as “starting in wonder”. It is as if the exclamation point of wonder—to resort to the language of punctuation marks—needs to turn to itself (*reflectere*) to ponder thereby becoming a question mark. See Appendix A: “Is Life a Sentence?: the Quest for Meaning”.

¹⁰ This methodological principle takes its cue from Whitehead’s well-known reference to the flight of the airplane: it starts on the ground, soars up into the air but lands back on the ground. Speculative thinking, he maintains, is embedded in the concreteness of life, but lifts off into abstract thinking only to return to the ground of life with renewed vision and energy. The same sentiment, it seems to me, is poetically described by T.S. Eliot: “...we arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.” “Little Gidding”.

¹¹ The issue of the nature of the questioner is a multi-faceted one and has engaged the attention of philosophers and others.

¹² In more philosophical language, one could say that the effect reveals something about the reality of the cause.

In raising questions, the questioner has already started to philosophize.¹³ Even the child or the untutored is engaged in it.¹⁴ Admittedly, it is an activity that is tentative and probably unstructured. It may even be confused and confusing. Sometimes it is spontaneous—occasionally in conversation, one is said to be “philosophizing”—but more often one philosophizes in response to certain situations. In such situations one wants to “make sense” or one needs “to know”. Accordingly, one is motivated to press ahead with an enquiry. This is when questions surface as an initial step forward. Questioning is a process that is in quest of answers.

Questions arise because of the sort of beings that we are. Philosophers have frequently referred to human nature as rational. Endowed with rationality, humans are equipped to think intelligently and to act freely. The process of questioning or philosophizing is possible because the questioner has the ability to know reality. Moreover, the questioner does not just perceive or sense (and accepts) reality but also, and more importantly, conceives and constructs it. The questioner is capable—and has the will to do so—of laying out a different reality. The questioner is gifted not just with the ability of sensing reality but also with the talent for re-shaping what is there. And for all that to happen, one starts on the quest for understanding through asking questions, probing into reality, in the hope that it will lead to its transformation. That transformation of reality, brought about through questioning, also inevitably changes the questioner. Curiously, the more we humans ask questions and the more intense the quest for answers is, the more we develop our own nature as human beings.

Philosophizing, i.e. the questioning process, takes place at different levels, from the more mundane to the highly specialized. It would be rather presumptuous to hold that insofar as one is raising a question, one’s activity can already be labelled as fully an act of “philosophizing”. There is a certain amount of competence and skill required. Moreover, not everyone has the leisure or the pleasure to engage in this activity. Nonetheless, it lies within every human being’s reach precisely because it is a human activity, that is to say, “in accord with our nature”.¹⁵ At the most ele-

¹³ I have found it useful to explain to students and others that there is a distinction between “philosophizing” (which I believe is more generally practised) and the “study of philosophy” (which only a few are in a position to pursue).

¹⁴ The move to introduce children to philosophical thinking has been gaining some momentum in some countries. Cf. Joe Humphreys, “Saying No to Groupthink: How Philosophy Can Change Learning,” *The Irish Times*, November 19, 2013, pp. 14–15.

¹⁵ There is no specific reference here to the distinction between *actus humanus* and *actus hominis* as made by Thomas Aquinas.