

SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

PHILOSOPHY IN TODAY'S WORLD

As children many of us would have wondered, "How can I be sure that my teacher isn't an alien," or, "How do I know if the corridor is still on the other side of the room when the door is closed?" While mostly we would put these thoughts down to nothing more than a wild imagination, in the world of philosophy questions like this can be legitimately posed and discussed at great length. Although arguing the legitimacy of one's degree of alien-ness may sound absurd, Associate Professor Bill Fish believes it might just be the answer to seeing the world in a whole new light.



Dr Fish, a lecturer in Philosophy in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, is keen to see more people take philosophy seriously and recognise its place in society.

“There is a reason that the majority of the highest degrees are PhD’s – that is a doctor of philosophy. Philosophy is the structuring and guiding principles for nearly everything that we do. It gives us a deep understanding of how things are done and why, and invites us to question whether there are other ways of being, doing and thinking about things,” he says.

Dr Fish feels that despite it having a reputation for being disconnected from the world, philosophy is the source of everything good.

“When we are faced with absurd or different approaches to situations, approaches we wouldn’t normally consider, we don’t come to them with any preconceived notions about what is or is not an acceptable response. Suddenly, our minds have the freedom to let go. We think, “wow” how do we resolve this?”



“We often grow up to simply accept that things are the way they are. We think of a democracy as the only way to run a society, but it’s not. Philosophy teaches us that nothing is given or necessary about the way things are done.”

Massey University’s refreshed BA incorporates philosophy into its new core curriculum to encourage students to think critically about the world. Dr Fish feels that if more people learn philosophy then society will take a lot less for granted.

“Whether you’re milking cows or being prime minister, the skills you get from philosophy can be applied anywhere. If everyone were to do it I think we wouldn’t always assume that certain things were the right way to go about things. Although we might take a lot longer to decide on things, we would be a lot more creative when thinking about how to do things differently,” he says.

Outside of the lecture theatre, Dr Fish also spends time introducing children to philosophy. In his weekly sessions with local school children he introduces concepts like fairness and alternative ways of thinking about it. He raises the question of what is the fair thing to do in a situation when there are different opinions and ways of doing it.

“In philosophy there is no right or wrong answer, so it can take a while for the kids to get over the fear of having to be right. However, when they get there, they really become liberated from the need to be right. They enjoy having the opportunity to explore and consider things in their own way, and its mind opening for them.”

The benefits for learning, he argues, are profound, wide-ranging and long lasting. He cites international research on the effects of studying philosophy that show it increases cognitive ability, verbal skills, self-esteem and confidence across all subjects, and for years after a student has studied it.

Associate Professor Bill Fish is one of the top philosophers in the world. His core research focuses on the interaction between mind and the environment. He explores how experiences work and how these experiences put us in touch with our environment. More recently, Dr Fish has begun to expand his focus and recently co-authored a book about internal security on state building and peace building missions.

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