The Philosophy Foundation
THINKING CHANGES

PRINCE GAUTAMA (2)

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism has several distinctive features. One of these is the rejection of the world. The everyday world we move about in is, for the Buddhist, a distraction. If we are too attached to it, we will always be caught up in suffering. Although this rejection of the world can be found in other religions too, for Buddhism it is the central truth.

In Hinduism, and very clearly in the Hindu text Bhagvad Gita, we see a very similar idea to the one expressed here - that enlightenment comes from first rejecting the everyday world. Hindus generally believe that Buddha was one of the ten forms (avatars is the word often used!) taken by the god Vishnu. Historians have claimed that this was necessary for Hinduism to re-establish itself in the face of the spread of Buddhism. Whether that is true or not, it is interesting that Buddhism was born in India, and spread as far afield as Afghanistan and Japan, but there are a vanishingly small number of Buddhists in India today.

The session here takes the central idea of Buddhism and encourages the class to analyse it. These three sentences are the foundation of Buddhism:

1. Life is suffering

2. Suffering is caused by desire

3. Stop desire and you stop suffering

Interestingly, they form a logical argument. The foundations of other religions don't. Compare two other examples:

There is one God and Mohammed is his prophet. (Islam)

God sent his only son into the world so that we may be saved. (Christianity)

These are plain statements. Believers take them as the foundation of the religion. There is no attempt to prove a point, just a requirement that we submit to the truth. Admittedly, there is a noble tradition of logical argument in both of those religions, but it comes further up the line - not at the base.

So this gives us a chance to look at the principles of logic argument. Aristotelian Logic (that developed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle) tells us that an argument consists of three parts: two premises and one conclusion. Like this:

1. The attacker was left-handed (Premise 1)

2. Tom Robinson is not left-handed (Premise 2)

THEREFORE

3. Tom Robinson was not the attacker (Conclusion)

This is the argument that Atticus Finch uses in To Kill A Mocking Bird in his attempt to prove Tom Robinson's innocence. The way this argument - and every argument in this form - works is that if Premises 1 & 2 are both true, then the conclusion must be true as well. It is impossible to accept the premises and reject the conclusion. If this is the case, then we call the argument valid (this is a technical term in logic).

Here is an argument that is invalid (helpful note: I've changed the name, and changed is not to is in Premise 2 and reversed the conclusion!):

1. The attacker was left-handed (Premise 1)

2. Charlie Lee is left-handed (Premise 2)

THEREFORE

3. Charlie Lee was the attacker (Conclusion)

It's wrong, isn't it? Just because Charlie was left-handed doesn't mean that he did it. Any left-handed person could have done it. So this argument is not valid. But be careful because here comes the tricky bit: all of those statements (both premises and conclusion) could be true. Or they could all be false. That's because logic never tells us what is true. It tells us what is true IF other things are true. You first have to find out if the two premises are true before you know what to believe.

It can help to compare it with maths. Maths tells us that 2 + 2 = 4. It doesn't tell us whether I actually have two items plus another two items to add together, or not. Look:

The queen has two sons

The queen has two daughters

THEREFORE

The queen has four children.

This argument is valid because 2 + 2 = 4 and if the two premises are true then the conclusion must be true. It doesn't tell us whether the premises are really true. They are not. They are both false, as the queen has three sons and one daughter. Funnily enough, the conclusion (that she has four children) is actually true - it just isn't supported by this particular argument. So we see the validity of the argument is totally separate from the facts.

It follows that if we want to refute an argument there are two ways to do it:

1. Show that one of the two premises is wrong

With the argument about the queen's children we produce Charles, Andrew and Edward to prove the first premise wrong. Just for good measure we might prove the second premise wrong too, but there is no need. One false premise is fatal.

OR

2. Show that the conclusion doesn't follow from the premises.

We do this with the second, invalid, Charlie Lee argument by producing any other left-handed person (who could also have been the culprit).

Tragically, in To Kill A Mocking Bird the jury come to the conclusion that despite being unable to use his left hand at all after an accident, Tom Robinson must have been the attacker because he is black. This illustrates one of the other limitations of logic: it doesn't work on racists.

STIMULUS

Here is the last part of the story told in Prince Gautama 1. You don't necessarily need to tell it for this session, [If you don't, skip to the asterisk now] but you may like to link it up.*

After he sneaked out of the palace, Prince Gautama went to live with other people who had chosen to live as beggars. These people had no home, and ate very little food. They washed in the river and only had one set of clothes. They were trying to forget all about about money and nice food and clothes and all the things that make life comfortable. They believed that chasing after pleasure was a mistake because it doesn't last, and we end up sick and old and then we die.

Gautama was determined to find the truth about the best way to live. He sat under a tree for seven weeks and meditated until the truth came to him. The truth, he discovered, has three parts.

[If you are not using the end part of the story start here:]*

1. Life is suffering

2. Suffering is caused by desire

3. Stop desire and you stop suffering

Here is a good way to introduce the buddhist argument:

Write/print each sentence on a separate sheet of paper

Lay all three sheets in the centre of the circle. (You could introduce them one at a time but I prefer to put them all down together)

Ask someone to 'put them in order'. (They should discuss how to do this in pairs first. No need to say what kind of order, just yet.)

If they haven't already, ask them to put them in order - first, second, third.