



# Can Philosophy Save Us?

By **Christopher Tricker**

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EGO

Hey, Philosophy. How can you help ensure the future of humanity?

PHILOSOPHY

Hi Ego, old friend. Now, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Your question assumes that I *can* help ensure the future of humanity. We should test that assumption before proceeding to answer the question. If the assumption is wrong, any answer to the question will also be wrong.

EGO

Dude, you always do this! Look, I really just need an answer to the question. You see, there's this competition — it offers fame and money, and to win it I need to answer *that* question.

PHILOSOPHY

Ego, you always do *this*: rushing in and wasting a lot of time and effort answering questions based on wrong assumptions, producing answers that cause a whole lot of trouble. Remember all the wasted time and effort, and all the trouble caused, when you answered the question, “How can I use Social Media to make money?”?

EGO

Well, at the risk of being falsely modest, I did have some help from Advertising and Computer Engineering. O, wait a second — you're criticising me. I think *you're* forgetting just how *well* I answered that question!

PHILOSOPHY

Ego, please, do try to listen. I *was* acknowledging how well you answered that question. My point was that given your intention, you asked the wrong question. You started out with the intention, “Make the world more open and connected”, but then asked a question that neglected to include that intention in its formulation. And so, when your admittedly brilliant algorithms began making truckloads of money by encouraging misunderstanding and outrage between people, you blinked and congratulated yourself on how well you'd answered the question.

EGO

Hey, I never meant to create social discord. My intention was to make the world more open and connected.

PHILOSOPHY

And yet look at what has happened, because you neglected, and continue to neglect, to examine the assumptions on which your question is based.

EGO

You always criticise my interest in money.

PHILOSOPHY

No, I just identify your underlying motivations, and you don't like it when I do *that*. Whether being motivated by money is a bad thing or a good thing —

that's an interesting and complex issue that I've been debating with myself for millennia. One particularly interesting idea I had, if you'll allow me to say, was that the combination of self-interest and a free market would lead, paradoxically, to the greatest good for all. But then —

EGO

I thought that was Economics.

*Economics is one of my children. Hard-working lad.* 

PHILOSOPHY

Economics is one of my children. Hard-working lad. Picked up my idea and really ran with it. He still consults we me now and then, you know.

EGO

You must be very proud. But look, you've done that wandering-off thing that you do. Focus, yes? How can you help ensure the future of humanity?

PHILOSOPHY

You mean, *can* I ensure the future of humanity?

EGO

Can you?

PHILOSOPHY

No.

EGO

O, for the love of — . “No” is not going to win the competition. Come on, Phil, buddy. I've seen you do amazing things. Things that have changed the course of history. Like — democracy! Remember that one? Brilliant! Buddy, that's all I need — I mean, what *we* need, what *humanity* needs: another whopper of an idea like that!

PHILOSOPHY

It's true that I've sometimes reflected on the virtues — and vices — of participatory government, but I really can't take the credit for the existence

of actual democratic states. You should talk to History, and Politics, and Revolution, and —

EGO

Come on, you're too modest. Those kids would be nothing without you. Look, I'm not asking you to save humanity *single-handedly*. Maybe I should have made that clear. No, I'm just asking how can you *help*. How can you *help* ensure the future of humanity?

PHILOSOPHY

Well, when you put it like that. Let's see ...

EGO

That's the spirit.

PHILOSOPHY

Just to check that we're on the same page: the context for the question is that there are things that actually or potentially *threaten* the future of humanity? Things like nuclear apocalypse, environmental collapse, a highly deadly, highly contagious pathogen, the rise of a super-powerful tyranny that enslaves all humans on earth, the emergence of an AI that destroys or enslaves us. You want to know if I can help ensure that humanity doesn't get wiped out, or effectively wiped out, by one of those events.

EGO

Now you're cooking!

PHILOSOPHY

"Ensure" is a strong word, isn't it?

EGO

No, no. You were doing so good. Let's not go down that rabbit hole again. Thanks to you, we all now know that, except for deductively drawn conclusions, nothing is certain. We know that if Socrates is a man, and if all men are mortal, then Socrates is mortal, but none of us knows what the sun is going to do tomorrow. You have freed humanity from the delusion of looking forward to tomorrow's sunrise, and I'm grateful for that, we all are, and so we can assume — I mean, let us then assume — that in the present context "ensure" means "improve the likelihood of". I mean, what else *could* it mean, philosophically speaking? So the question is: How can you help improve the likelihood that humanity does not succumb to nuclear

apocalypse, or environmental collapse, and so on?

PHILOSOPHY

“Help improve” — even if just by a very teeny tiny bit?

EGO

Ah, seriously!

PHILOSOPHY


Even allowing for a non-philosophical use of the word “ensure”, I think we are bound to say that the question is looking for solutions that are *likely* to work, don’t you think? I mean, imagine if I offered the following contribution to address the threat of nuclear apocalypse: “Using reason we see that the policy of having nuclear weapons to deter the use of nuclear weapons in fact increases the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be used, therefore all nuclear weapons should be decommissioned and no more should ever be made. Having had this insight, I now hand it over to Politics to implement my idea.” We would hardly consider that to be a contribution that will help ensure that there will never be a nuclear apocalypse, would we?

EGO

O, I don’t know; it sounds pretty good to me. I’ll use it in the competition. Thanks! Using reason we see that the policy of — what was the next bit?

PHILOSOPHY

Ego, please do not attribute that idea to me. All I did there was state a problem that everyone is already aware of, and *has* been aware of since governments started making nuclear weapons 80 years ago. I haven’t helped solve the problem at all. Look, I am not that feckless nephew of mine, Intellectual Posturing; I am Philosophy. I care about reality. So, we’re not looking for impressive *sounding* solutions; we’re looking for solutions that are *in fact* likely to work, wouldn’t you say?

*Look, I am not that feckless nephew of mine, Intellectual Posturing; I am Philosophy.* 

EGO

Yes, Philosophy.

PHILOSOPHY

In a similar fashion, we would hardly be satisfied by a contribution by me that was very, very small. For example, imagine if I offered the following contribution to address the threat of AI: “We need to clarify what we mean by AI, and then assess the specific risks posed by each different *type* of AI.” Actually, I’ve already raised this idea with Computer Engineering and — well, I’ll give you the sanitised version of what he said. “I’m slogging my guts out here putting in 18-hour days. Do you have any idea of the maths and physics involved? It hurts *my* head. So yes, I—think—I— am—a—ware—of—the—different—types—of—A—I. But thanks for swanning in here to check.” Fair enough, I thought. Conceptual clarity is a special skill that I bring to the table, but if Computer Engineering ends up producing AIs that are human-friendly, it would overstate the case to say that *I* helped ensure that outcome. I’d be embarrassed to make such a claim. In this context, a contribution only helps to ensure an outcome if it is a *major* contribution, don’t you think?

EGO

Yes, Philosophy.

PHILOSOPHY

Good work, Ego. I think we’re making real progress here. You want to know: Can I play a major role in radically improving the likelihood that humanity does not succumb to nuclear apocalypse, or a pandemic, and so on? How does that sound to you?

EGO

It sounds like you’re not about to tell me *how* you can do it.

PHILOSOPHY

Now, now. Chin up. In philosophy we must never let ourselves be led by what we *want* to be so. We must allow our enquiry to lead us to what *is* so.

EGO

You do know that nobody likes you.

PHILOSOPHY

Excellent point, Ego. In fact, you’ve stolen my thunder.

EGO

(Stares blankly.)

PHILOSOPHY

You know my sister, Ideology?

EGO

Of course. A pretty creature, if a bit serious. Hangs out in North Korea.  
How's she doing?

PHILOSOPHY

We don't talk. But North Korea? Ego, she's *everywhere*, you just don't recognise her. In whatever form she takes, she's upbeat, has dazzling eyes, and speaks in catchy slogans. She's always very popular. I'm nothing like her, of course, but she likes to go around telling people that she's me, and people believe anything she says.

EGO

Why would she want people to mistake her for you? You're ugly, unsociable, and a bore. You take forever to answer the simplest questions. Nobody likes you.

PHILOSOPHY

I seek wisdom and truth. People respect that about me, even if they hate everything else about me, everything that's required to actually *seek* wisdom and truth, and so Ideology offers people something they dearly want. She offers them wisdom and truth with catchy slogans that make you popular. So people flock around Ideology, but call her Philosophy. They ignore me while claiming to love me. If I wasn't so wise I'd be incredibly frustrated by it.

EGO

How I would love to get Psychoanalysis to respond to that comment. Look, I'm not interested in Ideology. What I need to know is how *you* can help ensure —

PHILOSOPHY

You don't see how Ideology pertains to your question?


EGO

You don't have any idea how demeaning rhetorical questions are?



## PHILOSOPHY

I promise to answer your question, but if you don't know how to recognise Ideology, my answer won't make sense to you. Here, let me illustrate my point with an example. I once revealed a profound truth to a Jesus of Nazareth. Well, he spoke to a Mary and a Paul, and each of them spoke to another Mary and Paul, and before you could say "God help us!", Ideology was swanning about the place sprouting her slogans, creating disciples and articles of faith, and trust me when I say that not one of these slogan-drunk disciples even remembered who that Jesus was, much less had any idea of what I'd revealed to him. They all *thought* they did, of course, enraptured as they were by Ideology's dazzle and charm. So I guess you could say that I helped to bring about the Crusades and Inquisitions, but *I* would say that my role was diminishingly small. Here's another example. I helped Karl Marx identify some problems with capitalist societies in the 19th century, and I gave him a solution to those problems. My ideas were mostly wrong, and my solution was hopelessly wrong, but that didn't stop Ideology using Marx's philosophy to create the hellscape of Stalinist Russia and Mao's China. (I guess people will disagree over what hell is and is not. For me, it's anywhere I am tortured and killed.) You see, it's not me who moves the multitudes, it's my sister. I speak only to individuals. Whenever you see me speaking to a crowd, know that you are mistaken. You are seeing not me, but Ideology. I implore you to remember this, Ego, for when you mistake her for me, *then* you have truly lost me; then *you* have joined the glassy-eyed multitudes who cannot engage with reality. And *that*, if you ask me, is the truly great threat that faces humanity. Not this or that natural or human-made catastrophe. Those are threats, sure; but the greatest threat is that another individual loses the ability to engage with reality. And then another. And another. Until there are not enough individuals left, not enough sane individuals who can work with Politics, and Economics, and Science, and Engineering, and Psychology, and Literature, and all the rest of the disciplines, to help solve the practical problems of the world.

*Whenever you see me speaking to a crowd,  
know that you are mistaken.* 



Right, so — yes, I see what you're saying. A bit long winded, but what you're saying is — the answer is to educate as many people as possible in philosophy. We could, let's see, start in the primary schools. No, the preschools! The curriculum would be — well, we'll work that out later. I'll propose a committee to work out the details. But yes, this is an idea, a practical idea. O, I know: We need to legislate that philosophers must be on the boards of companies, and — O, this is great! — only appropriately trained philosophers can be the leaders of parliaments and political parties. No, that won't be enough. It must be that only philosophers can *be* politicians. O, I'm on fire. I can't believe no one has thought of this before. Philosopher Politicians — has a nice ring to it. Would be better if I could make it a bit pithier. Philosopher —

PHILOSOPHY

Hey, Psychology. Could you lend a hand over here?

PSYCHOLOGY

Sorry mum, you just have to let it run its course. I could ask Psychiatry and Enforcement to sedate him —

PHILOSOPHY

No, don't do that. I'll wait.

(Sometime later.)

EGO

Sorry about that.

PHILOSOPHY

It's OK. She's very seductive, and you're only human. The important thing is that you've come back to your senses.

EGO

I'm not going to have anything for this competition, am I? Someone's going to present some vague, hopeful piece inspired by Ideology, and they're going to get the fame and money.

PHILOSOPHY

O, you never know your luck. I'm very heartened that you're letting go of fame and money and have come back to talk to me.

EGO

I'm not happy about it. I still want the fame and money.

PHILOSOPHY

I understand, it's your nature.

(EGO stares pensively into space for a moment.)

EGO

Philosophy, why do I do it?

PHILOSOPHY

Do what?

EGO

Abandon you and embrace Ideology. I mean, I feel like a complete moron. It's depressing. And you're no help. It's as if Ideology has won the day and humanity is doomed.

PHILOSOPHY

You're being too hard on yourself. Sure, Ideology is a moron, but according to Evolutionary Anthropology she's the necessary ingredient for our special genius as a species. It's Ideology who tells the stories that allow us to form groups and communities. Without her, we humans wouldn't exist. Our philosophically minded ancestors, wandering about individually on the African savanna, wouldn't have got together to create culture, technology, science, and all the rest of the things we value. And it's not that we'd still just be isolated individuals wandering about on the African savanna. We'd be dead. Extinct. Eaten by the sharp-toothed fauna and killed by the tribes of hominoids that *did* happen to have Ideology. We actually owe her quite a lot.

EGO

But now she's leading us to our destruction. She's making it impossible for us to solve problems that require a collective response and a commitment to reality. She keeps breaking us up into groups, telling each group a moronic story that blinds them to reality and pits them against the other groups. We have to stop her!

PHILOSOPHY

But she is humanity, no less than you and I.

EGO

She's going to destroy us!

PHILOSOPHY

I agree that it's not looking good. But maybe she won't. It's a very complex situation, with a huge number of players. Yes, there's my sister, Ideology. But also, my many children: Economics, Politics, Science, Technology, Psychology, Literature, Globalism, to name just a few. There's my old and venerable uncle, Chaos — we should talk about *him* one day; perhaps when you're in a better mood. And, of course, there's all of you individual egos who converse with me from time to time. The cast is staggering! You never know how things will come out in the wash.

EGO

That's all you've got to say! Who knows how things will come out in the wash!

PHILOSOPHY

Take a breath, dear friend, and you'll remember that I've said quite a bit. And I have one more thing to say, too, which I'll get to presently. But yes, I don't know how things are going to turn out for humanity, and I don't know how to stop Ideology.

EGO

Gee, Philosophy, is there anything you *do* know?

PHILOSOPHY

I know that I *don't* know. And as the Delphic Oracle said —

*Gee, Philosophy, is there anything you do know?* 

EGO

Yes, yes. *Wisest is she who knows she does not know*. If I have to hear that one more time, I'm going to put a fork in my eye.

PHILOSOPHY

Ego, you haven't come to Ideology, you've come to *me* for *my* answer, which

means that on some level you want to know reality, even if reality is unsettling.

EGO

I'm definitely feeling very unsettled. Actually, I'm feeling a lot of things. I'm starting to feel very angry. And — incredibly sad. I think I'm about to cry.

PHILOSOPHY

That's understandable, and healthy. But dear friend, don't wallow. You need to remember: you and I have a vital part to play here. Keep me alive, and never confuse me for Ideology. Observe her. Never underestimate her — you've seen how easily you fall for her charms. Keep her always at a distance. Learn to value anonymity, being powerless to sway others, as a river, at ease in the earth, is powerless to sway the sparrows that chirp and flit about by her banks. In this way, keep me alive in your heart and mind. Your *individual* heart and mind. In your aloneness, know that you are not alone: know that just as I speak to you, I speak to others. Amidst the noise and posturing of the world, keep an eye out for these others, for they will be a great comfort for you.

EGO

You said you have something else to tell me?

PHILOSOPHY

Yes. Actually, not tell you; show you. I will show you what I revealed to Jesus, and Epictetus, and Boethius, and Spinoza, and Emerson, and Nietzsche, and Chuang Tzu, and Gautama Buddha, and so many others. And, you'll be happy to know, this vision of the world, this reality I want to show you, is *not* unsettling. Nor is it a distant future you must hope for and work towards. It is a way of seeing the world as it is right now. A vision of the world as it always has been and always will be, so long as I am here to behold it. I will show you such beauty and harmony, and you will feel such peace and gratitude.

EGO

Really, you will show me?

PHILOSOPHY

Dear friend, of course I will show you.

EGO

Now?

PHILOSOPHY

Yes. Come, take my hand. Let us walk.





**Christopher Tricker** is an independent writer who taught himself Classical Chinese so that he could find out what Chuang Tzu says. His edition and translation of Chuang Tzu's long-lost book is published as *The Cicada and The Bird. The Usefulness of a Useless Philosophy. Chuang Tzu's Ancient Wisdom Translated for Modern Life* (2022).

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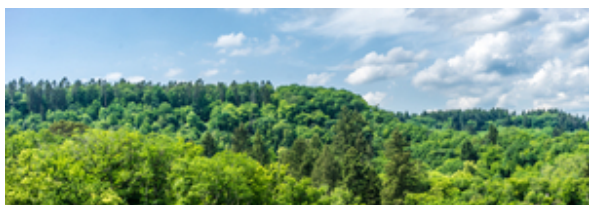
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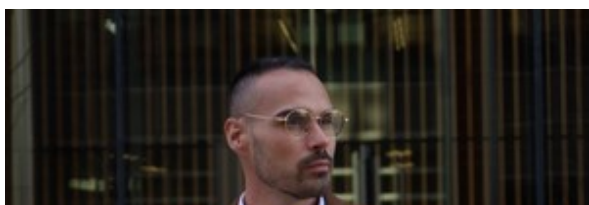
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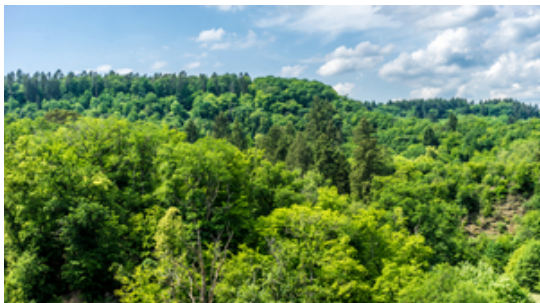
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