Interview by Minco van der Weide, from *Portraits of Philosophers*

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The other philosophers interviewed in this volume are: Alex Carter, Julian Baggini, Daisy Dixon, Alice Crary, A. C. Grayling, Peter Singer, Clare Carlisle, D. Ferreira da Silva, Stephen Law, Roger Crisp, Simon Blackburn, and K. Anthony Appiah.
The book may be obtained **here**

JOHN COTTINGHAM
God and the Good Life
18 June 2024 – Reading, England

On a mild summer afternoon in West Berkshire, I find myself in the home of John Cottingham, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Reading and Honorary Fellow of St. John's College, Oxford. His house looks and feels just as one might imagine a philosopher's dwelling: ivy climbs the walls of his study, a beautiful garden stretches outside, and shelves groan with books. After the usual adjustments to lights, cameras, and microphones, we settle into a conversation that once again travels across the landscape of philosophical inquiry, capturing both the breadth of his learning and the wisdom shaped by decades of deep reflection.

Defining Philosophy

We begin by exploring the foundational question: *What is philosophy?* John pauses, considering the question with the careful attention that usually marks his responses. "That's a really interesting question," he begins, his voice measured and thoughtful. "Philosophy is unique as a subject. It's really the only discipline that endeavours to take a total view—to connect together different aspects of our worldview: the moral, the metaphysical, the scientific, and the ethical—and to see how far the different bits fit together." He refers to this as a "synoptic conception of philosophy," contrasting it with the view he encountered as a student, when philosophy was treated as "a purely second-order discipline that always stood back and just asked very abstract questions about the meaning of the terms involved." While acknowledging some truth in that model, he emphasises that philosophy must be engaged, not merely detached and abstract.

Pressed to distil this conception into more accessible terms, John explains, "I think there's a need for a subject that, rather than focusing tightly on one particular aspect of reality, endeavours to see the whole picture: the meaning, if there is one, of the whole picture and how it all fits together, or how different parts of it interact or clash. I describe it as a grand synoptic discipline that endeavours to reach a worldview." This expansive vision is what first drew him to philosophy, though his entry point was not immediate.

The journey into Philosophy

John's own path to philosophy came through classics. He studied Latin and Greek literature at school and was channelled into the "Mods and Greats" course at Oxford (officially known as

Literae Humaniores), where students studied Latin and Greek for the first two years, followed by philosophy and ancient history for the remaining two. "I started philosophy with the great classical philosophers, Plato and Aristotle," he explained. "We didn't do much modern philosophy when I was an undergraduate; a certain amount, but it was largely of a very minute, nit-picking kind, always preoccupied with the questions, 'What do you mean by X?'" It was as a graduate student, when he began working on Descartes, that his excitement truly ignited.

"Descartes had a grand synoptic vision of how the whole thing fits together," John explains, animation entering his voice. "He had physics, metaphysics, ethics, and psychology. I think that's where my interest really started to get going." This perspective evolved as John came to see philosophy connecting with almost every aspect of life. "It's not just a retrospective subject. It's a subject that engages with how we are now, our present view of the world, and how we should live. Big 'normative' questions, as philosophers sometimes call them."

John's continued fascination with philosophy after decades of study speaks to the enduring nature of philosophical questioning. When asked about moments of profound insight in his philosophical journey, he responds with characteristic humility. "I'm always a little bit suspicious of philosophers who claim great profundity," he admits. "Obviously, we're part of a really long tradition of staggeringly profound minds from the classical era—Plato and Aristotle—through the Middle Ages, Aquinas, through to the early modern period where the subject really takes off: Descartes, Berkeley, Locke, Hume, and Kant, right through to modern times."

In light of this historical legacy, John suggests it would be "arrogant to think that one's own tiny contribution could be called profound." However, he affirms that the questions of philosophy are indeed deep questions about the meaning of our existence, whether there is meaning to human life, or whether human existence is "just a random blip on the enormous cosmic palette."

John argues that if philosophy loses this sense of profundity—this sense of the deep importance of questions about the human condition—it becomes a less interesting subject. While acknowledging that many good philosophers focus on small areas and analyse them precisely, he maintains that "these big questions have to be questions we don't lose sight of. Otherwise, ultimately, I think philosophy would lose its *raison d'être*."

I ask how one encourages curiosity among students or readers. John acknowledges the difficulty of this in Britain's exam-orientated educational culture, where students "are funnelled into these series of examinations, GCSE, A level, then degree, and so they're often very concerned to produce the right answers." True philosophical dialogue, he suggests, emerges when one is less concerned with finding the right answer and more focused on asking the right questions. "Philosophy is a very dialectical subject. Ever since Socrates, it's been involved in questions and answers and challenges. Socrates challenged people who thought they knew what they meant by a certain concept or a certain word and often challenged them to realise they didn't really know what they meant."

As a teacher, John believes the way to engage and generate curiosity is through this question-and-answer process. "Encouraging students to write essays and, in dialogue, to raise questions—not

necessarily to produce the perfect answer, because there isn't the perfect answer in philosophy—but to continue to ask questions." He quotes T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "We shall not cease from exploration." This, he suggests, captures part of what philosophy is about.

When asked whether some philosophers lose their sense of wonder after years of study, John reflects on the professionalisation of the field. The doctoral thesis, he says, presents "the great hurdle", where detailed focus on a specialised area is required. "Dissertations are seldom failed or referred back for being too detailed, but they might be if they raised questions that aren't satisfactorily answered. So I think people tend to play safe, and sometimes that continues into their careers." The result, he suggests, is a kind of intellectual trap: "They master a specialised area—I think sometimes at the cost of really being interested in it." I ask whether this is something he experienced himself. John quotes Spinoza in response: "All fine things are difficult." He acknowledges the frustrations of trying to express one's thoughts clearly on certain topics but adds, "It's also very rewarding if you can manage to power your way through the difficulties. That's a great feeling."

Our conversation turns to Wittgenstein, who famously wrote about the importance of saying only what could be said clearly. John describes him as "probably the greatest philosophical genius of the twentieth century" and explains that despite Wittgenstein's emphasis on clarity, "he also had a great awareness of the mystery of life, the mystery of existence, and of the things that couldn't be said but possibly could be shown." This tension—between the expressible and the ineffable, between what can be clearly articulated and what lies beyond our full comprehension—captures something essential about the philosophical enterprise itself: a relentless curiosity that also acknowledges its own limits.

Who we are

When the conversation turns to personal identity, John pauses only briefly before making a decisive claim: "I think identity is something that many philosophers have got wrong." Next, he cites David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher who denied the existence of a continuous self. "He thought that there was simply a succession of impressions, one following another. And he said that when he looked within, he never found anything called the self—just a fleeting succession of impressions and ideas."

The way John sees it, Hume's denial of a continuous self exposes a deeper flaw in his empiricism: the idea that everything must be grounded in sensory impressions. "We may not have an impression of the self," he says, "but it seems to me there clearly is a self. There is an experiencing subject that has these ideas and these thoughts." This self, John maintains, endures from early childhood through to old age. "There is an enduring self, and I think there has to be a self to support the ideas of responsibility... the idea that as we go through life, we learn from our past mistakes and project forward to plans and purposes which are not yet realised."

He invokes the concept of "continuity in moral space," a term used by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, to emphasise the importance of moral development over time. This development, John argues, presupposes some concept of the self, though he acknowledges the difficulty in

defining exactly what that self is. “It’s clearly based on the physical animal, this particular specimen of the species Homo sapiens—but what makes me the same me that I was when I was seven years old is, I think, a very difficult question to answer.” Still, he maintains that we don’t need a precise definition to affirm the existence of an enduring self: “the subject of all our impressions and ideas.” When I suggest the metaphor of the *Ship of Theseus*—where the ship’s planks are gradually replaced until none of the original remains—as a way to understand personal identity, John welcomes the comparison. “If you focus on the bits and pieces, thinking of Theseus’ ship, you take this plank out and you put that plank in instead; you can still have an idea of the same ship, even though after several years every single plank may have been replaced.” This, he notes, mirrors our biological reality, in which our cells are continually replaced throughout our lives.

“What remains the same?” John asks rhetorically. “Nothing remains exactly the same, but there is enough continuity for us to be able to speak about the same person.” He warns against looking for a “mysterious essence, like a kind of Cartesian soul”—an immaterial spirit that, he argues, wouldn’t actually resolve the problem of continuity over time. Instead, John advocates a common-sense approach: “We, you, and I, think of ourselves as enduring through time, despite all the different things that happen to us, despite all the changes we undergo. I think that conception is basically correct.”

When I ask how spiritual or religious beliefs might shape one’s sense of personal identity, John notes the striking contrast across traditions. “In Buddhism, for example, there is no real belief in personal identity. There are just these conditions that arise and pass away, so there’s just a succession of conscious states, rather like Hume’s view I was talking about a moment ago.” This contrasts with the Judeo-Christian tradition, where “there is a self we are meant to be. There are many stories in the Bible of people being called, and they’re often called, as it were, out of their present existence—towards something better, towards the better self they are meant to be.” This resonates with a deeply human truth for John: “We do have this yearning to become better, not just to rest content with the messy, disorganised parcel of events and ideas that forms our life, but to move forward towards something better.” In this context, the term “soul” need not imply something immaterial or ghostly. “I think you can think of it in moral terms, referring to the better selves we ought to become. And life, it seems to me, has that quality: it has the quality of being a journey towards a destination not yet achieved.”

When I press him on what that destination might be, John is quick to resist any final definition. “If you’re asking what the terminus of the journey is, I don’t think there’s an answer to that. If you think about it—if someone said, this is the destination point, and once you’ve reached it, that wraps it all up—that wouldn’t make sense. Because it’s our human nature always to reach forward for more.” Even if presented with a complete map of the universe, the human mind would continue to ask questions: why is it this way? What more is there? This insatiable questioning spirit applies to individual development as well. “If someone could say, ‘now you’ve reached your destination; you’ve arrived,’ the human spirit would still reach forward for something more. That could be called that yearning for transcendence.” While mortality eventually ends this journey, John underlines that “as long as we retain our humanity, I think this questing spirit, the desire to reach forward for more, will always be there, should always be there.”

Continuity and change

I share a personal reflection, explaining that when I think back to my younger self, it sometimes feels as if I'm remembering a different person entirely. And yet, I remain responsible for the actions that "different person" took. How, I ask John, can philosophy help us make sense of that tension? He begins by acknowledging that many philosophers have grappled with this, most notably John Locke, though he finds none of their answers fully satisfactory. His own account is of the self as a "forensic concept"—a notion intrinsically linked to responsibility. "As we change and develop, you're right: we do become different from how we were earlier. Hopefully better," he adds. "But I don't think we can escape from responsibility for the things we've done. If you don't believe in the self, you could say, I'm a different person, so it doesn't count. There's something about that which doesn't seem quite right."

Without a sense of ourselves as moral beings who retain enough continuity to support responsibility, John argues, "we would be lesser beings, simply flitting through life." Just as we move forward toward a not-yet-achieved destination, we must also recognise ourselves as capable of learning from past mistakes. "Otherwise, life would be a kind of formless flux."

When I ask him to expand on the concept of the soul across different philosophical traditions, John begins with Aristotle, who defined the soul as "the form of the body." "What he meant by that is not all that easy to explain. It's a kind of organising principle," he says. "For example, the matter that constitutes your stomach is informed—organised in a certain way that enables it to digest." Similarly, the brain is "intricately organised, configured in a certain way, enabling you to perform the functions of thinking and feeling and being conscious."

In one sense, then, the soul is an organising principle that enables humans to perform various functions: moving, digesting, thinking, feeling. This contrasts with Descartes' seventeenth-century view that the soul must be non-physical because he could not imagine how thought could emerge from material structures. "He just couldn't see that there were enough bits, enough switches, if you like, in the brain or wherever it might be to perform those functions," John explains. By contrast, our modern understanding of the brain, with its billions of neural connections, makes it easier to conceive of mental functions being realised in physical systems.

Yet for John, "soul means a bit more than mind." It is not just a collection of mental abilities but also refers to "the true self—the self we are and the better self, as I was saying earlier, that we want to become, that we are called to become." The term soul, he argues, remains useful precisely because it captures "this moral or spiritual yearning, this yearning in the human spirit to reach forward… toward a destination that's not yet achieved."

Throughout our discussion of identity, John frequently returns to the idea of transcendence. When I ask him to elaborate, he explains that "transcending, etymologically, means crossing or going beyond" and has traditionally referred to realities—like God or the ultimate ground of being—that surpass human comprehension. However, transcendence, he adds, also characterises human thinking itself. "Even if you had a complete inventory of all the items in the cosmos… a

complete map of the position of every electron and every atom... and then someone said to you, there it is, there's the totality—you could always, in your thought, go beyond it and say, what caused that? Or what further is there?"

This capacity to ask further questions, to seek what lies beyond our current understanding, John sees as intrinsic to our humanity. He illustrates the point with a comparison: "If you take a horse and place it in a field with plenty of exercise, food, and so on, then it's all—job done. It's a flourishing horse. You can see it's fulfilled and flourishing, and nothing more is needed to realise its equine nature." But human nature is different. "Even if you give a human being all the nutrition, exercise, and mental and physical stimulus they need, there are always these moments when we question and say, yes, but what's the meaning of it? What more is there? What further?"

This dimension of questioning—of reaching beyond current understanding—constitutes transcendence for John. Religious traditions have expressed this through the concept of God. However, "God is a name for all that is transcendent. All that we cannot fully encompass. All that we cannot fully grasp." Regardless of one's religious commitments, John maintains that "we cannot live our lives entirely within the immanent frame. We always, at least in our thoughts, have to reach toward something more."

The nature of free will

As our conversation turns to choice and free will, John highlights what he views as a troubling trend in contemporary philosophy and science. "We live in a time where there are many philosophers and scientists who want to reduce our humanity, who want to, as it were, cut it down to some scientific template." This impulse, he notes, is hardly new. Much of twentieth-century psychology embraced deterministic models, treating individuals as "simply the creatures of the genetic mechanisms within them, operating in accordance with a pattern they didn't choose."

John, challenging this deterministic view, emphasises the importance of affirming "our humanity, and our humanity does involve the power of rational choice. We don't just affirm or go for the option which, on balance, is dictated by the preponderance of desires or inclinations. We have the ability to stand back, to pause, to think, to choose." At the same time, he acknowledges the physical underpinnings of choice: "Those choices couldn't happen unless there were brain mechanisms, neurons firing, chemicals circulating in the blood and so on." The error, he suggested, is thinking that "freedom means we can somehow mysteriously float free of that structure." John rejects the idea that causation always operates "bottom up"—that genes or firing neurones dictate our actions. Instead, he argues for the possibility of "top-down causation," where "the whole human being is making decisions and choices and in that sense is free." In John's view, "We are free to act as a result of rational deliberation. And I have yet to see any argument from biology or physiology that denies that, which shows that we can't really be free in that sense." He maintains the importance of seeing ourselves as "genuine agents, not just passive victims of the biological structures that are going on inside us."

I reference a line from Terrence Malick's *A Hidden Life*, in which Franz Jägerstätter says, "If God gave us free will, we are responsible for the choices we make." When asked to reflect on the

connection between God's existence and human freedom, John responds with caution, noting that "the existence of God is, of course, an enormous and vexed issue philosophically." He is clear that "introducing God onto the scene does not suddenly make sense and guarantee our freedom."

Rather than seeing God as directly enabling freedom, John describes God as "the mysterious source of being and goodness… the underlying source of existence. That which holds in being the whole created universe and that which is responsible for the goodness in the universe, for that which is good." Among the goods in human life, John includes rational choice, which is "the power to deliberate on our courses of action and to choose in accordance with the good." While humans cannot create the good—"We're not gods. We can't decide what is good"—we do have "the power to respond to it, to discern it, and to act accordingly."

The task of human life, then, becomes "to try and bring our lives into line with this enduring source of goodness." This view allows us to conceive of ourselves as "free beings who seek the good" and underscores the distinction between humans as "choosing beings" and other animals who "don't choose except in a very minimal way."

When I ask about existentialist ideas regarding choice and freedom, John identifies both valuable and problematic aspects of existentialist thought. The "good bit," he suggests, is "this idea that as human beings we're, as it were, thrown into existence and we confront the whole mystery. Silently, helplessly. We are, as it were, baffled by existence. We don't have the pathway mapped out for us, and therefore we have to exercise our choice." The "bad bit," in his view, is "this idea that we can somehow create our own values." He describes this as "one of the great fallacies in philosophy, which perhaps started with Nietzsche, who famously announced that God is dead and then seemed to suggest that by an act of will, we can, as it were, decide on the good by ourselves."

John considers this "a dangerous fallacy, because as human beings, we're not creators of the good, merely responders to it." The good for humankind, what represents our flourishing, "is not really up to us." Fulfilment and happiness, he argues, require following certain paths: "of love, for example, trying to achieve harmony with our fellow creatures, of truth, of justice." These values are not our inventions but "objective ethical values which we can turn away from. We're not compelled to follow them. But if we turn away from them, that's the way to darkness and destruction. If we turn towards them, that's the way to light and fulfilment."

This position stands in clear contrast to existentialist ethics. Instead, John aligns himself with what he calls "essentialism," the idea "that there is an essence of goodness, which is not up to us to choose, to determine, to invent, or to create. We cannot create value… We can only respond to it and try to follow it."

Meaningful choices

Can philosophy teach us to make meaningful choices in life? John is modest in his estimation. "Probably not as much as philosophers would like to think." He references Aristotle's insight that "virtue is to some extent a matter of habit. You have to be trained as a child. You learn to be good

by doing good things. We're not born good." This positions ethical development as rooted not just in reflection but in upbringing and habituation.

The capacity to make good choices, John suggests, comes largely through "this process of ethical habituation, so that it becomes second nature to be good." Philosophical reflection can support this process, but grand ethical systems, such as utilitarianism, which tell us to "always act so as to maximise the greatest happiness to the greatest number," are, in his view, "too crude" to serve as reliable guides.

"There are many forms of goodness. There are many different virtues. Sometimes they'll be in conflict," he notes. "So we simply have to do the best we can… relying on our powers of rational deliberation, but also on the training and the habituation and virtue that hopefully a good upbringing provides." He acknowledges that this might disappoint those hoping philosophy can offer definitive answers to life's hardest questions. But for John, the reality is more grounded: moral growth is less about finding formulas than about becoming the kind of person who is able to choose well.

The foundations of morality

We broach the topic of utilitarianism, specifically effective altruism—the idea that one ought to donate resources in ways that maximise global well-being, rather than spending on personal pleasures. I mention that, according to this doctrine, we probably shouldn't buy nice things at all but instead donate money we would have spent to charity. John is critical of such approaches. "Personally, I think these systems are unrealistic and ultimately don't fit with human psychology and therefore are simply implausible ways of tackling ethical problems." His concern is not with generosity itself but with the totalising scope of such theories. Constantly calculating actions for maximum global utility, he argues, risks undermining something essential. "I would cease to be a person at all. I'd just be an ant or a bee in the ethical hive. Just a mindless mechanism for promoting utility." He points out that we spend significant time on personal projects and caring for those close to us. "Theoretically, yes, that time and those resources could be diverted to global utility. But if so, we would not have this network of partiality, friends, family, and so on, which is so crucial to our human ethical development."

Even simple pleasures like walking in the countryside, while not maximising global utility, are "essential for recreation and for a reasonable human life." John thus rejects "this whole framework, which suggests that we need constantly to consider the consequence of our actions in terms of the greatest happiness to the greatest number."

When faced with competing ethical frameworks, such as Peter Singer's utilitarian effective altruism and John's more relational, virtue-oriented approach, how should we decide? For John, "an ethic we can live by has to be one which we can, with integrity, adopt." He makes no criticism of those who devote themselves entirely to maximising the happiness of others. On the other hand, he acknowledges that he could not, in good faith, follow such a path himself. "I know perfectly well that I am going to continue to take a walk in the country… and not just that, but that I would want those I care for also to have a legitimate space for their own pursuits and interests, provided these

don't harm others." Therefore, the fundamental question becomes, "Which ethic can I, with integrity, adopt?" There must be coherence between how we live and act and the ethical framework we claim to follow.

Regarding the foundations of morality, John identifies what he sees as the dominant contemporary approach: "a form of humanistic ethics, where the only ultimate foundation for ethics is human nature." This, he finds problematic, because "human nature is a mess. It's a ragbag of conflicting impulses, desires, and inclinations, some of which point us to the good, others of which do not." For John, there must be "something beyond the mere contingent nexus of impulses and desires that is our human nature. There has to be something that calls us to conform our conduct to standards that we may not always appreciate… but that nonetheless exert a kind of ethical pull on us." This leads him to support "some form of moral or ethical objectivism," one that isn't based merely on contingent human desires. "My own view is that there is a transcendent source of goodness," he says, acknowledging this as "a very unfashionable view because the great majority of my philosophical colleagues are secularists or atheists, so they would have to find the source of ethical value somewhere within the world as we have it."

The fundamental choice, as John frames it, lies between "secular ethical naturalism, which tries to base morality just on the way things are," and "some form of theistic naturalism, which suggests that morality is ultimately founded on a transcendent source. One that requires us to go beyond what we now are to something better." His position is clear: "Morality has to be connected with religion in order to retain what philosophers call its normativity, its authority."

Religion

John unpacks his philosophical understanding of religion by cautioning against rigid definitions: "If you try to give a theoretical answer, I think you're immediately lost in a sort of quagmire of difficult questions, and the very nature of—if religion is based on God—the very nature of God is something we can never fully grasp." Instead, he stresses what he calls "the primacy of *praxis* over *theoria*, the primacy of practice over theory." For him, the value of religion lies in its capacity to "give us a way of expressing our spiritual yearnings… our yearning for the good, our unsatisfied yearning for the good, this tendency to reach forward to something better."

Religion accomplishes this through "forms of liturgy and forms of ritual: enactments whereby we can perform in a certain way that shows our allegiance to the good." Rather than seeing religion as "a set of doctrinal precepts," he suggests viewing it as "communal forms of practice, whereby we strive together to come closer to the truth, to the good, which we are required to pursue." In addition, John suggests that religion offers a framework for understanding "the authority of goodness, the sovereignty of the good." Moral judgements carry weight; they "exert a pull on us," even when we fail to live up to them. "Even when I'm not being compassionate, the virtue of compassion still exerts a pull on me. I'm somehow aware that's where I should be going." This normative force, he argues, "finds very satisfying expression in a religious worldview" but is "not easily explained on some of these more down-to-earth, reductionist views of human nature."

When I ask directly, "What is *the good*?" John responds without hesitation. "We know; we can identify the things that are good: justice, compassion, mercy, and loving kindness." These virtues, he notes, are not primarily discovered by philosophers but are "described in the great scriptures of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian New Testament, and indeed also Buddhist scriptures and so on."

He points to a "remarkable degree of convergence" among the major religious traditions when it comes to the virtues required for human flourishing, though not complete agreement. He contrasts Aristotle's ideal of "great-souledness"—a kind of lofty dignity attributed to affluent Athenian gentlemen—with the "Christian ideals of humility and compassion," which he finds ultimately more compelling. Rather than attempting to reinvent ethics from scratch, John suggests that philosophy should "just follow in the wake of" these enduring moral traditions "rather than trying to rewrite the script."

Moral dilemmas

As our conversation progresses, I return to the everlasting question of navigating moral dilemmas: situations in which different philosophical frameworks point toward conflicting courses of action. How should one choose between them? John is forthright about the limits of philosophical guidance: "I don't think I can answer that question. I'm not sure if philosophy can answer it." When faced with a clash of competing goods, "I don't think there is a calculus that will churn out an answer. If there were, the human condition would be very much simpler than it is."

Instead, he suggests we must acknowledge that "we do face dilemmas, and sometimes we face tragic choices where, whichever option we choose, there will be some degree of suffering." Such conflicts are inescapable features of our finite condition: "Human life is not a kind of angelic domain of perfection. We are mortals. We are weak. We have all sorts of limitations of knowledge and power. And we can't really wish that away. It is the human condition."

John agrees with Thomas Aquinas that "human beings are fundamentally configured towards the good, so even when we turn away from the good, this always leads to some kind of tension, some kind of double-mindedness and psychic dissonance, and that we're only truly fulfilled when we turn towards the good." Yet even turning towards the good isn't straightforward because "there are often conflicts of value, and I don't think philosophy can magically solve those."

The mystery of existence

To shift our conversation to the ideas of mind and consciousness, I ask John to reflect on the wonder of existence itself—the fact that we find ourselves thrown into the world, as Heidegger might have put it. "If we start to think about what existence is, I think we'd be amazed," John replies. He reflects on how elusive the concept really is: "Being there. Yes, but being there, where? Being there in front of me? That can't be what existence is because it doesn't depend on me." We might think of existence as occupying space, having certain space-time coordinates. However, that merely refers existence to a larger system—the earth, the solar system—but what is it for the solar system to be there? "We don't really know, yet we have a keen sense of actual existence as being present. Still, this is at the very limit of our understanding."

The same mystery applies to our own existence. "We're aware of ourselves as thinking, feeling, and reflecting. We're aware that thinking could stop at any minute. But what is it for us to exist from moment to moment? What is it that sustains us in existence? We can't fully say."

Specifically on the topic of the mind's existence, John suggests it differs from the existence of physical objects because "the mind isn't a thing." Although "mind" is a noun, which might suggest it names a discrete entity, John argues it actually "refers to sets of capacities and abilities that belong to a human being." A human being, he explains, is "a biological creature of a certain kind, a featherless biped, that thinks and feels and runs and so on," with both physical properties (like weight) and mental properties (like thinking, rationality, and emotion). "Some of those qualities are what we call mental qualities, but we shouldn't try to look for a thing called the mind beyond those qualities," he says. As for consciousness, John expresses scepticism about the utility of the term itself: "I think those who work on so-called 'consciousness studies' are beginning to think that the term is not of much use."

While we can investigate specific mental functions, like vision or hearing, consciousness seems to be "some mysterious extra item" beyond these particular operations. Contemporary discussions often focus on "what it is like" to be conscious, which John finds unhelpful. For him, consciousness amounts to having discriminatory powers—detecting colours, smells, and tastes—while "I don't think there's some elusive 'what it is likeness' behind all that, which has somehow mysteriously eluded everyone."

The limits of knowledge

During our conversation about mind and consciousness, we discuss the relationship between science and philosophy. John has a clear standpoint: "I don't think philosophy can do things that science can't, but it can point out the limitations of science." He identifies "scientism" (the view that science encapsulates all reality and truth) as "one of the great fallacies of our time." This position is self-refuting, given "that judgement that there is no truth outside of scientific truth… could never be established by science." "Thus, it's a non-scientific truth." Many truths, John notes, exist outside the domain of science—the most fundamental being "the fact of the cosmos existing at all," a mystery that science is not equipped to explain. "The idea that this could be solved by science, that there could somehow be a grand theory of everything that explains why there is something rather than nothing, is, I think, a mistake."

John praises science as "a wonderful thing: one of the greatest of human achievements," but insists it cannot be all-encompassing. "The idea that some equation, a set of equations, however brilliant, however elegant, could somehow magic the cosmos into existence out of nothing is, I think, absurd." He references Stephen Hawking's suggestion that equations might be "so compelling they bring about their own existence," calling this "an absurd idea." Science can't solve the mystery of existence, but neither can theology, in John's view. "You can say God brought the world into existence, and if religious belief is true, that is the case. But it doesn't, as it were, solve the mystery." Quoting Dominican philosopher Herbert McCabe, he suggests, "When we use the term 'God,' we don't solve a puzzle; we draw attention to a mystery."

Acknowledging the limitations of science, philosophy, and theology reflects the inherent boundaries of human knowledge. "Human beings are limited, limited creatures by their nature," John observes. "And there's always this sort of fantasy that we could solve it all and wrap it all up and then go and have lunch or something." But, as he wryly adds, "there is no such thing as a free lunch—not in philosophy, not in theology, not in science."

Nature of Love

After tracing the contours of metaphysics, morality, and meaning, we arrive at a quieter, more intimate question: love. Philosophy has often skirted this domain, leaving it to poets and artists. Yet few human experiences shape our lives more profoundly. I ask John whether philosophy can say anything meaningful about love. "We certainly know what love is from first-person experience," he begins. "We know what it is to care for someone, to miss them when they're absent, to want to do good things for them."

However, he observes that aspects of love often remain hidden from our conscious awareness, particularly "the passionate side of love." Drawing on Descartes, he recalls, "Descartes wrote to a correspondent that he had an unaccountable tendency to fall in love with women with a squint, cross-eyed women, and this puzzled him until he traced it back to an episode in his childhood where he'd been very drawn to someone who happened to have a squint."

John sees this as "a curious anticipation of Freud," suggesting that our attractions often stem from unconscious associations. Without endorsing all of Freud's theoretical scaffolding, he affirms one of Freud's core insights: that "the human mind is something very complex, very vast, to use a metaphor, of which we often only have the thinnest, most fleeting awareness."

Self-understanding (particularly regarding our emotions) proves extraordinarily difficult, even for philosophers "who think they're terribly rational and intellectual" but "often can be the most extraordinarily unself-aware people." Introspection doesn't necessarily "reveal exactly why we're drawn to certain things," especially when it comes to love. Nevertheless, John advocates the value of "trying to grow in self-awareness," suggesting that psychotherapy can "help enrich our sense of ourselves and delve into the sometimes childhood roots of our emotions." Despite many philosophers being "extremely dismissive of psychoanalytic ideas," John considers them "extremely helpful, an important part" of understanding the human condition.

Can love, I ask, be rational, or is it inherently emotional or irrational? John acknowledges "a non-rational component," especially when it comes to attraction. "When you love someone as an adult, you're also attracted to them, and the attraction is partly non-rational… you're not necessarily responding to qualities you could write down and say, the reason I love them is that they are X, Y, Z.'" That being said, he maintains that "there's a lot in love which is rational, because it depends on something perceived which is good." Citing Aristotle's claim that all things pursue the good, John explains that we pursue things "because we see something good about them."

Mediaeval philosophers expressed this idea by saying everything is pursued *sub specie boni*: under the appearance of the good. "There must be something good about it," John explains, "otherwise

why would you be drawn to it? Why would you be pursuing it?" When I ask what 'good' means in this context, John begins with a simple example: "The mouse pursues the cheese. Why? Because the cheese is nutritious. The mouse desires the good of being fed or not being hungry anymore." Humans, of course, pursue not only basic needs but also "grander things—truth, beauty, and goodness—sometimes called the transcendentals." While mysterious, these higher goods are recognisable as "things which enhance our lives." We seek out beautiful objects—paintings, music, sculpture—because "something deep within us responds to them as enriching us."

The mystery, for John, is not what these goods are but why they exert such a powerful pull. "Why is something in the human soul drawn to these beautiful shapes or beautiful harmonies?" Evolutionary explanations fall short, he suggests. The pull of beauty may point instead to "this longing for transcendence... these longings for something that will take us out of ourselves, out of our mundane, routine, drab existence of keeping alive and working and so on—towards something higher."

Beauty

When asked whether any philosophers have offered particularly insightful accounts of the transcendent dimension in aesthetic experience, John mentions several who have addressed beauty. "Plato has things to say about beauty... Kant, Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher, wrote a whole book on aesthetic appreciation: the *Critique of Judgement*." Still, he admits to finding aesthetics "rather unsatisfying" compared to areas like the philosophy of science, ethics, or metaphysics. "Defining beauty is much, much harder, I think. And most philosophical definitions I find unsatisfying."

He again invokes Wittgenstein's insight: "At the end of the *Tractatus*, he says what cannot be spoken of should be passed over in silence." What moves us in great art or music, what stirs "these longings for transcendence," remains ineffable: "I don't think we can say what it is. We have to pass over in silence why it is so sublime."

Experts can analyse the technical components; musicologists can study harmonies and counterpoint, for example, but such analysis misses the essential emotional and spiritual response: "You could be a superb musicologist who scored an A on all your musicology exams but still not have that elevation of spirit, that wonderful upwelling of joy that we feel when we're confronted with something truly beautiful, whether in the arts or in nature."

Poets like William Wordsworth capture "this extraordinary rising of joy in the human spirit when confronted with the great beauties of nature." Artists create works expressing these experiences, but "I don't think philosophers can add very much by way of explanation or theory. We just have to rejoice that it's there, I think, rather than trying to explain it."

Life's meaning

As we move into my favourite section, I ask whether John's philosophical journey has helped in his search for meaning. He recalls writing a book, *On the Meaning of Life*, around the turn of the century, during a period when such questions were struggling to regain legitimacy in academic

philosophy. As an undergraduate, he says, questions about life's meaning were routinely dismissed: "It was said that a sentence has meaning, a word might have meaning, but life doesn't have meaning. We were taught that that's the wrong sort of question to ask."

Logical positivism encouraged scepticism towards "grand questions," suggesting that only science offers meaningful propositions. As this perspective faded, interest in meaning returned, though with a significant shift: "Interestingly, most of the work now done is about meaning *in* life. So philosophers are happy to talk about the various activities that are fulfilling in life. But they don't tend to think that there is a meaning of life as a whole." For John, considering "a meaning of life as a whole takes us into metaphysics. Because it involves the belief that there's a way we're meant to be. There's something that a human life should be and that we should strive to realise."

This connects meaning to religious perspectives: "To be religious, as I think Wittgenstein once said, is to believe that life has a meaning." The conviction that "in the very short time allotted to us, we feel some kind of calling—some kind of authoritative call to become what we are supposed to be" suggests "there is indeed a template for human life, which we are supposed to fulfil." Understanding this template requires more than philosophical analysis alone: "I think we need a tradition; in particular, I think we need a religious tradition. So that will take us outside, perhaps outside of philosophy proper, into the realm of revelation or handed-down spiritual practice or things of that kind." Despite attempts to dismiss the question as meaningless or confused, John maintains that "it's a question that won't go away."

I ask about the relationship between authenticity and meaning. Can simply being authentic provide meaning in life? John expresses scepticism toward this popular philosophical position. "There have been many philosophers, particularly in recent times, who thought that authenticity is sufficient for meaning," he says, characterising this view as claiming that "our job is to overturn what's understood as true and good and find our own truth and goodness—or find our own reasons for living. As if we could generate meaning and value by some grand act of will. As if being ourselves was all that was necessary, all that was required."

John rejects this approach, grounding his argument in the view that humans are responders, not inventors, of value. "I don't think a human being can be a creator of value. Indeed, I don't understand what it would be to create value. A value is something which exerts an authoritative call on us that we're called to respond to. We are responders rather than creators of value." While authenticity, in the sense of acting with integrity, remains important – "we don't want to be double-minded; we don't want to be duplicitous" – there's no "special generative virtue in authenticity. It can't show us where to go or how to live."

Can philosophy, then, provide direction, purpose, or meaning in life? John suggests it can "supply the reflective component," but he challenges the ancient Stoic ideal of "the life of pure reason, with reason at the helm," and Plato's image of reason as a charioteer controlling the unruly horses of emotion and appetite. "I don't think that quite works," he says, returning to his earlier reflections on psychoanalytic insights into the mind's complexity. For John, integrity demands more than rational control; it requires integration. "Integrity requires us to integrate, as the name 'integrity'

suggests, all the parts of the psyche, including the emotions. It requires us to develop proper self-understanding. It requires us to bring the emotions and other impulses into harmony so that we can act in a way that doesn't fluctuate from moment to moment."

Reason plays a valuable role. "Without reason, we wouldn't be acting in a reflective way at all." Still, "isolated reason can't somehow uncover the essence of how we should live. I think that's a confused notion." John references Aquinas's concept of the natural light of reason, suggesting humans possess an ability to discern the good in a similar way to how we perceive logical or mathematical truths. However, this capacity is "perhaps best described as just an ability of the whole person. An intuitive or perceptual ability of the whole person. Rather than an exercise of abstract rationality. It could be called discernment, perhaps, rather than pure reason."

On death

The end of our conversation inevitably turns to the end of us. I ask what philosophy has to say about death, from either a philosophical or spiritual perspective. "I think very little," John replies, candid as ever. He notes that philosophers like Epicurus tried to show there is nothing to fear in death, while Wittgenstein claimed that death is not an event in life. And yet, the prospect of a life cut short, he adds, is universally recognised as a tragedy—something to be feared and avoided. The limited span of human life, our mortality, is a fact we struggle to accept. This, he suggests, is why the idea of immortality appears in so many religious traditions.

The very concept of immortality reveals our resistance to mortality as a limitation. John is sceptical of attempts to overcome death: "I don't think there are any; in my view, there are no good ways of resisting it." He dismisses contemporary technological approaches: "These current fads for thinking we can somehow become machines or upload ourselves into computers. I'm not even sure what that means. It's based, I think, on all sorts of philosophical mistakes." One such mistake is describing artificial intelligence as a form of intelligence. John prefers the term "simulated intelligence," arguing that AI systems are "trawling through vast amounts of data at enormous speed in order to come up with plausible simulations of an intelligent response."

Regarding belief in an afterlife, John observes that such ideas "often turn out to be confused." The notion of surviving as a disembodied spirit, he suggests, is ultimately unsatisfying. Traditional religious doctrines, he notes, focus not on the persistence of a ghostlike soul but on "the resurrection of the body." Any meaningful form of survival, he argues, would require some kind of physical substrate, either restored or capable of supporting consciousness. Yet these claims remain deeply speculative. "We have to remain agnostic on the question of the afterlife," John concludes, "at least from a philosophical point of view."

I ask whether thinking about death might enhance our appreciation for life. John offers an interesting response: "I think the most enjoyable experiences are ones where one is not really thinking at all. There are moments of pure physical pleasure. For example, swimming in the sea, when you're totally absorbed—or skiing, where you're just absolutely present in the moment." This applies to intellectual activities too. "The most enjoyable kind of philosophy is one where you just see the words coming up on the screen, just flowing." Being fully present "in the moment"

provides “the most supremely satisfying bits of one’s life.” In contrast, reflecting on mortality, thinking “Oh, this won’t last forever,” might add “a bit of melancholy spice” or encourage us to “make the most of it,” but these are “really second bests.”

Drawing again on Aristotle’s insight that “happiness is activity—activity of the soul,” John suggests that when we are fully engaged in worthwhile pursuits, “I don’t think we do think of death or the human condition very much at all. We just do whatever we’re doing.” Pleasure, in this view, is not something to be chased. It arises as a byproduct of meaningful action: “You’re not doing it in order to gain pleasure. The pleasure just wells up when you’re doing something good and worthwhile, and the spontaneous activity and energy continue, whether it be mental or physical.” For John, “the joy of human life consists of activity,” and our mortality, rather than something to be feared or solved, “is just something we have to accept.”

Ending

When I ask John what advice he would give to someone starting out in philosophy, he is pleased to note that the subject remains popular in England, both at A-level and in universities. His main suggestion: “Intensive reading is often more productive than extensive. I’d be inclined to read one short classic of philosophy and think in detail about it, rather than trying to cover the whole sweep.” He points to his own anthology, *Western Philosophy,* which contains twelve sections, each with twelve extracts accompanied by his introductory commentary. “By dipping into that, one can get a flavour for many of the big questions in philosophy,” he suggests. At its core, John’s advice emphasises depth over breadth—a philosophy of study that mirrors his vision of the discipline itself: attentive, reflective, and willing to sit with complexity rather than rushing towards easy answers.

As our conversation draws to a close, I ask John to share any philosophical quotes or ideas that have particularly influenced him. He mentions Socrates’ famous dictum, “the unexamined life is not worth living,” which he describes as “crucial for the philosophical motivation.” This, he explains, connects deeply to Aristotle’s definition of happiness as “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue… the active exercise of our human faculties,” a formulation he finds “quite complex but also quite an inspiring thought.”

From Descartes, whose work shapes much of John’s career, he highlights the suggestion that “once in a lifetime it’s worth pursuing metaphysical enquiries.” This, he explains, acknowledges the importance of metaphysics while also implying it’s “not something you should keep on about all the time.” He also returns to Wittgenstein’s insight that “what we can’t speak of, we must pass over in silence,” a reminder, he says, “of the limits of philosophy and indeed the limits of human systematic thought.”

John resists offering a single, definitive conclusion. “There’s always a tendency, I think, to believe that there’s some final nugget that will encapsulate the whole thing. And that, I think, should be resisted.” Philosophy, for him, involves “wrestling with complicated questions and trying to work out satisfying answers,” and “the thought that there’s a short answer is itself inimical to truth and understanding.”

This complexity, this resistance to easy summation, seems fitting for a discipline that grapples with the deepest questions of human existence. As our conversation in John's book-lined living room comes to an end, I am left with a profound appreciation for philosophy's enduring value. Not as the provider of the ultimate answers I perhaps thought it would be, but as a practice that enriches our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world, inviting us to continue asking questions and to pursue what John called "this yearning for the good, our unsatisfied yearning for the good, this tendency to reach forward to something better."