



## Obituary for Matthew Lipmann

Matthew Lipmann of Montclair State and a central figure in pre-college philosophy passed away 12/26/2010 at his home in West Orange, NJ. Lipmann established the Institute for Advancement of Philosophy for Children in 1972 when he moved to Montclair from Columbia. His many books, articles, and mentoring of others in the movements which together are pre-college philosophy will serve as an enduring legacy of his spirit and wisdom.

and that in the “critical-analytic” programs (including P4C), teachers’ turns were fewer but longer than student turns, and longer than teacher turns in the other approaches. The researchers interpret these results to mean that students have the greatest control over expressive discussions, that teachers have the greatest control in efferent stance discussions, and that teachers and students share control over critical-analytic discussions. This interpretation is consistent with the data on reasoning moves mentioned above, and with one other finding: that students ask more questions than teachers in expressive discussions, that teachers ask more questions than students in efferent discussions, and that teachers and students share questions in critical-analytic discussions (383).

The researchers concluded that the critical-analytic programs—“especially Philosophy for Children and Collaborative Reasoning”—provided the richest opportunities for individual and collective reasoning, due to the way teachers in these programs “model and scaffold students’ talk” (389). The “pedagogical principles” identified by these researchers as “essential to fostering a culture of dialogic inquiry in the classroom,” (376) will be familiar to P4C practitioners: “productive discussions are structured and focused yet not dominated by the teacher. They . . . occur where students hold the floor for extended periods of time, where students are prompted to discuss texts through open-ended or authentic questions, and where discussion incorporates a high degree of uptake. [A]lso . . . a certain amount of modeling and scaffolding on the part of the teacher is necessary to prompt elaborated forms of individual reasoning from students” (389).

Those of us who hold classroom discussions about any kind of text would do well to consider what approach to the text we are asking our students to take, and what we are doing to help our students have insightful, well-reasoned, collaborative discussions. “What the discourse tells us” is an important source of ideas to consider about the ends and the means of these discussions.

## Call for Submissions

*Questions* publishes philosophical work by and for young people, including stories, essays, poems, photographs and drawings, etc. In addition, articles related to doing philosophy with young people, reviews of books and materials useful for doing the same, lesson plans (include description or transcripts of student responses), classic thought experiments redefined/modified for modern audience interests and demographics, transcripts of philosophy discussions, photographs of classroom discussions, and more are sought.

Images, whether photographs, drawings, paintings, et al. should be sent as uncompressed TIFF files (with at least 300 dpi resolution.) Written submissions should be sent in Word, WordPerfect, or Rich Text File formats (as .doc, .wpd, or .rtf). Scholarly articles should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style* for textual and citation manners; please use endnotes rather than footnotes.

Be sure to include contact information with your submissions. A copyright release is needed for publication. All submissions should go to [QuestionsJournal@gmail.com](mailto:QuestionsJournal@gmail.com)

Submissions for the next issue should be received by **May 31, 2011**. After initial review and editing, they will be blindly reviewed and selected by the larger editorial board.

## What is everything?

*Kelly Hickey here draws on Aristotelian theory and applies it to the 1993 film Groundhog Day, which has become something of a popular cult film (if such a thing could be said.)*

*In the Harold Ramis film, we find Bill Murray’s character (Phil) repeating over and over Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, PA. Awakening each day to discover that he has to relive it yet again, and is the only person aware that this has all happened before. He tries unsuccessfully to change anything, do anything, find a way out of this apparently eternal time loop. Through the process he repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) tries to woo Andie MacDowell (Rita).*

*While other commentators have drawn out the Buddhist intonations of the film, or drawn parallels to existential angst (after all, Nietzsche did think about eternal recurrence . . .), Hickey here draws different lessons.*

## Aristotelian Morality and Groundhogs: The Moral Evolution of Phil Connors

Kelly Hickey

According to Aristotle the highest of all practical good is happiness. He claimed the only people who can truly experience happiness are virtuous people, and men’s conception of happiness can be read in the lives that they lead (1095b15). Aristotle believed that virtue does not come to us by nature, but rather nature gives us the capacity to receive virtues and to perfect that capacity through habit. In doing good things, we become good, and in doing bad things we become bad. It is our decision which path to follow, depending on our own preferences and our behavior in particular circumstances (1103a25). Moreover, in order to become good, one has to develop two conspicuous types of life: the political and the life of thought (1096a5). Only by developing a moral compass for ourselves and following it by choice and habit can we become happy.

The 1993 film *Groundhog Day* follows one man’s journey to find happiness. In the film, Phil Connors, a rude and cynical weatherman from Pittsburgh, finds himself reliving the same day over and over. Phil goes from one iteration of the day to the next, trying to discover happiness, and is eventually transformed through practice and experience into a virtuous and loving man. Therefore, the film *Groundhog Day* serves as an excellent illustration of Aristotle’s ethics as Phil portrays Aristotle’s views on virtuous character, living well, moral development, and friendship.

As Phil experiences “the heaviest weight,” living *Groundhog Day* over and over, he is able to morally develop his rude, arrogant, and cynical self into what Aristotle would recognize as a virtuous character. Phil begins his moral journey as a mean and lonely weatherman, unable to appreciate himself enough to appreciate others. He seeks happiness by exploiting his own “superiority” and “attractiveness” and by pursuing his own selfish interests, such as comforts, pleasure, fame, and wealth. He refers to himself as “the talent” and claims that a very important station is looking at him for a better job. He rejects any kindness or friendliness offered to him and often offends those trying to help him. Even before he leaves the inn he is staying at in Punxsutawney on his first *Groundhog Day*, he is snappy and rude to a friendly man on the stairs and is sarcastic and nasty toward the owner of the inn. As he walks down the street, he meets a homeless man, whom he ignores, and Ned (a high school acquaintance), who he completely rejects and tries to avoid. Even when Rita, his new producer, attempts to be kind and asks him to dinner, he claims he would rather be alone. Phil also sees the worst in every situation. He is upset about being in Punxsutawney in the first place and

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believes he is above this kind of a story, and when a blizzard comes, he acts as if it is the end of the world. For Phil, even doing his job seems like a chore. Phil is therefore incapable of happiness in the beginning of the film. However, as Aristotle claimed, evil in its nature is infinite, so for Phil, the heaviest weight was beneficial because it allowed him to challenge this principle, develop his own moral code, and thus discover happiness as he relives each day throughout the film (1106a8).

In the second stage of Phil's moral development, as he starts to relive the day, Phil realizes the benefit of his situation and his ability to do virtually anything he wants without consequence. In this stage, Phil exploits his ability to seek pleasure. Aristotle would therefore see him as an ordinary or vulgar person because he equates pleasure with happiness and seeks a life of enjoyment (1095b16). Pleasure makes us do what is base and pain makes us abstain from what is noble, so seeking pleasure would obstruct Phil's ability to become a more virtuous person (1104b9). In his first rebellion and attempt at seeking pleasure, Phil takes-out two drunken men and rides with them on the train tracks, taunting the police and mockingly claiming, "You make choices and you live with them." He then goes on to be inappropriate to the man in the hallways, and keeps knocking-out Ned. He even goes to the movies dressed like the Lone Ranger, symbolizing his inability to have any real friends. He steals money, which, according to Aristotle, is not the key to happiness, for money is useful merely as a means to an end for something else (1096a7). He takes advantage of women like an attractive woman named Nancy and his producer Rita by finding out their likes and dislikes in order to create fake interests and set-up dates. By creating a false virtuous persona and claiming that he likes to "say a little prayer and drink to world peace," and by memorizing poems, he attempts to take advantage of Rita.

Even with all of his tricks, however, he is unable to win over Rita because she can see right through him. He uses Rita for love and for pleasure, only so that he can gain something for himself, a trait of a bad friend according to Aristotle (1155b30). Only "good" people can be friends with each other because if one person in the relationship only cares about him or herself, he or she is not really a friend (1157a18). Because this practice was one of the beginning stages of his moral development, Phil was comparable to Aristotle's perception of youth. Aristotle claimed that young people are, "prone to erotic passion, since this mostly follows feelings, and is caused by pleasure; that is why they love and quickly stop, often changing in a single day" (1156b1). He claimed loving is a feeling and friendship is a state, something Phil would soon figure out himself (1157b29).

Phil's problem with virtues in this stage, according to Aristotle, is that he is not acting in accordance with right reason. He manipulates people and situations and creates a false persona in order to reap rewards. Phil did not find the mean of virtue, because he did not evaluate his situation or look to the intermediate to judge virtue by his own standards; his actions, like theft, and taking advantage of people, are, according to Aristotle, intrinsically wicked (1107b10). Phil's weakness, like so many other people's weaknesses, was his tendency to follow his feelings of pleasure rather than discover what was beneficial to others (1104b31). As Aristotle said so clearly, we must beware of pleasure (1104b35), and love, for a soulless thing, like pleasure, cannot possibly lead to friendship (1155b27).

In his next stage of moral development, Phil enters a depression because of his emptiness and unhappiness. Because he finds no tangible rewards in his attempts to find pleasure and because he finds himself without any friends, Phil attempts suicide dozens of times and even attempts to steal the groundhog as an act of defiance. It is only after countless attempted suicides that Phil realizes he needs to turn his situation around. He tries confiding in Rita and begins to discover the true meaning of friendship. She makes him want to be a better person and he

### Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

realizes how much he really cares for her. "I don't deserve someone like you," Phil tells Rita the day he decides to tell her his secret. He knows she is morally superior to him and that the only way he can deserve her is by becoming moral himself. It is only then that Phil turns his life around. Rita thus becomes Phil's mentor, guiding him in his moral development and helping him become the best man he can be.

For Aristotle, in order to become a morally upright person and to experience friendship and happiness, one must forget oneself and take part in something bigger. As Aristotle claims, "The function of man then is activity of soul in accordance with reason, or not apart from reason," (1098a8). For Phil, this revelation came in the form of studying poetry, playing the piano, and making ice sculptures. By partaking in these activities of the soul in accordance with reason and moreover virtue, and making these activities part of his way of life, Phil was able to develop his life of thought and transcend himself (1102a5). By knowing himself, he was able to focus on others and thus develop friendships and virtues.

As Phil realizes the true benefit of reliving each day, he is finally able to transcend himself and help others. Instead of ignoring the homeless man, he attempts to save him and when the old man dies, he cannot accept that he cannot help. His reaction to the old man's death helps demonstrate Aristotle's conclusion that the pleasure or pain that accompanies actions tests one's moral state (1099a10). His reaction thus shows a transformation in moral state, because before that time, Phil did not even pay attention to the old man. Phil is also less rude to Larry and Rita and genuinely wants to be kind to them. He is finally cordial to the man on the stairs and gives up on trying to be the center of attention. It is clear through his actions that Phil's moral transformation is finally climaxing at this point and that he is finally discovering what it means to be a good person.

In this stage of moral development, Phil has developed not only his life of thought, but also his political life, as he begins to identify happiness with honor, the general end of political life (1097b5). He discovers in this stage that virtue and excellence are beyond the body and in the soul, and the only way to achieve this inner transformation is to cultivate both his intellectual and moral capacities (1103a15). Phil had already developed intellectual skills through his dedication to poetry, piano, and the arts. Until this time, however, virtue had been lacking in Phil's life, and it was only by habit that he eventually acquired such a moral compass (1103a17). He had to adopt the right attitude toward pleasures and pain and deliberately choose to do what was good and noble for its own sake in order to discover such moral virtues (1102b25). In discovering the mean of a virtue, one must consider that deficiency and excess are both equally flawed, as demonstrated by Phil's earlier attempts at being "virtuous." Therefore, the mean of a virtue is the middle ground or the most appropriate virtue applicable. In this stage of his moral development, Phil realizes that thinking and philosophizing about virtue do no more than thinking about playing the piano. He had to act to become virtuous (1105b9). In finding this balance, Phil had to consider that the mean is relative to each person, and therefore had to discover the mean himself (1106b36). Finding this mean is extremely difficult for Phil, as it is for anyone else, because it requires abstinence from the things to which one is most inclined. We are more inclined to pleasure than to pain, and we are more prone to self-indulgence than selflessness (1107b4). In resisting these inclinations we come closer to discovering the moral mean, and therefore becoming moral ourselves, just as Phil discovers as he transforms himself through his acts.

In addition to developing his intellectual and moral self, Phil finally realizes how to become a better friend. In order to become a good friend, according to Aristotle, individuals must be good themselves (1156b9). Because Phil was finally

How can something come from nothing?

How did the world begin?



### What is nothing?

developing morally, he had the capacity to be good himself and find similar virtue in the people in the town, especially Rita. Like moral development, friendships take time to develop, and in this stage, Phil uses his time wisely to know Rita beyond simple acquaintance (1156b24). He is also useful to Rita and the others and strengthens their friendships in small ways, like treating them to coffee (1156b24). Phil thus demonstrates Aristotle's principle that when a good person becomes a friend, he becomes good for his friend (1157b33). The only challenge for Phil at this stage is the distance between him and Rita because she could not consciously relive the days with him. However, he is still able to keep the relationship because, "distance does not dissolve the friendship unconditionally, but only its activity" (1157b1). Therefore, through Phil's moral development and effort, he is able to find true friendship and love climaxing in his final Groundhog Day.

After presumably decades of experiencing Groundhog Day, Phil is able to perfect his morals and talents, culminating in his final Groundhog Day. Phil makes his newscast poetic and beautiful and politely rejects Rita's invitation to lunch, claiming he has to run some errands. During this time, he saves a boy falling out of a tree, helps old ladies with their flat tire, saves a choking man and a young couple's marriage, and buys insurance from Ned. Rita finds him at the community party where he is playing the piano with the band and conversing with all the townspeople who he has helped. Instead of being cocky and egotistical, Phil is modest about all of his good deeds, and claims it was nothing. Because of his transformation, and because friendship is reciprocated goodwill, Rita buys him at the auction and his romantic and humble side is revealed as he sculpts a beautiful portrait of Rita (1155b34). He finally discovers happiness and discovers how much he really loves Rita. The next morning, he wakes up to a new day and a new life.

Phil's final Groundhog Day helps illustrate Aristotle's views on ends, or good deeds to be accomplished. For Aristotle, the highest good is clearly something final and the most final is that which is never used as a mean to something else.

### What is the purpose of life?

Happiness, as Phil finally discovers, is an end in itself. When someone finds happiness, he desires nothing more, making happiness truly self-sufficient (1097a15). The final day also helps illustrate Aristotle's view that one cannot perform just and temperate acts simply to be just or temperate. The doer must know what he is doing, deliberately choose to do the act and do it for its own sake as a part of his own firm and immutable character (105a30). On his final day, Phil feels emotions at the right times, for the right reasons, towards the right people, and in the right manner, finally discovering the mean (1106b36). Phil relives the day over and over before this last day because he needed to find such a particular mean. The difficulty of finding the mean in any case is why goodness is rare, praiseworthy and noble. It takes time and effort and self-knowledge to become a truly moral person (1106b30).

Phil discovers during his moral transformation, "For though the good of an individual by himself is something worth working for, to ensure the good of a nation or state is nobler and more divine," (1094b8). Phil started out as a mean, stubborn, rude weatherman, but repeating Groundhog Day gave him the opportunity to change. It was a long and brutal process, especially because he was not able to develop his morals like anyone else can during childhood, but through practice and habit, he was able to develop new and improved moral standards and eventually find happiness (1104b11). He has to find his own personal balance between his sensual, political, and intellectual lives in order to become the virtuous person he always had the capacity to be (1109a19). Along the way, he was able to discover the importance of friendship, a crucial ingredient for happiness in anyone's life (1155a1). In the end, like any virtuous person, he discovers the importance of community and earns praise for his virtues. Finally, Phil discovers Aristotle's most important lesson in morality; our most important responsibility is to keep a certain character in our activities and discover for ourselves what it means to be moral (1109b21). As the film *Groundhog Day* clearly illustrates, the only way to truly discover happiness is to become a virtuous person, live well, develop and discover your own moral compass, and share your happiness with the people you love.

*Tiffani Lewis here presents a humorous examination of how philosophy can, well, go wrong. Perhaps it is not best to start out with the "heavy" questions like what the meaning of life is. (The cat also reminds me of Ludwig Wittgenstein's remark that if a lion could speak we would not understand him.) Be that as it may, we would love to get more philosophically oriented drawings, pictures, collages, or other visual art work.*

