

Misology Questionnaire

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One more questionnaire might seem to be unwarranted in an age that has been inundated with polls and questionnaires. But the following questionnaire engages the student and may help to break the stiff formality that often accompanies the first day of class in an introduction to philosophy course.¹ Since some of the questions are misleading and have facetious intent, I suggest that the questionnaire be used only if there is time to discuss it in the class meeting in which it is given. This discussion can also be a good lead in to many of the first-week topics and questions in an introductory course such as: the definition of philosophy; the nature of arguments in general and philosophical arguments in particular; and the nature of philosophical questions and how they differ from other kinds of questions. Because many students place great value on the scores they get on questionnaires, it is instructive to direct their attention to the lack of clarity of some of the questions themselves or the debatable assumptions behind the questions. In bringing these assumptions to light, the instructor may demonstrate one of the major functions of philosophy: uncovering our unrecognized assumptions.

The questionnaire engages the student and points to the relevance of Plato whose beloved teacher was devoted to argument. The story of Socrates' prosecution and trial, his decision in jail, and his death, highlight wider questions about the place of reason and argument in life.

Those who see philosophy differently, and try to do something else in the introductory course, may wish to devise their own "questionnaires" for prospective students.

Memo

To: Philosophy Students

From: Your Instructor

Subject: Misology or Logophobia, hatred or fear of reason: Do you have either?

Observe some people listening nervously to a controversy in a dorm room or class room. They hesitate to enter into the argument fearing either a) their

point may be too late to affect the argument, or b) their “two cents” will be regarded as worth precisely that. Reasoning and argument do scare some people. For them, losing an argument means loss of face, friends, and influence—in short, social disaster. It never seems to occur to such people that there are procedures for developing good arguments and steps one can learn to improve one’s ability to argue.

Such steps were not learned by a friend of mine. He lost most of his arguments. He would argue for a position about which he was not clear. He gave weak reasons that were easily seen through. He drew conclusions that did not follow from the reasons he gave for them. He argued badly and so did most of the people around him. Because of that, they all feared reason and rational discussion. They would not be caught dead in a philosophy course.

Plato knew of such people in Athens in the fifth century B.C. In his dialogue, *The Phaedo*, he warns us about misology, the hatred of reason, and suggests that no worse thing can happen to a person. He likens misology to misanthropy, the hatred of mankind:

“Misology and misanthropy both come from similar causes. The latter arises out of the implicit and irrational confidence which is placed in a man who is believed by his friend to be thoroughly true and sincere and trustworthy, and who is soon afterward discovered to be a bad man and untrustworthy. This happens again and again; and when a man has had this experience many times, particularly at the hands of those whom he has believed to be his nearest and dearest friends, and has quarrelled with many of them, he ends by hating all men and thinking that there is no good at all in anyone.”²

Because we lack enough experience of human character, we unwisely trust the wrong people. Because we lack experience in reasoning, we unwisely choose bad reasons to defend our beliefs. When the argument turns out badly, we then hold a grudge against reason. For Plato, this is unfortunate.

“...if there be a system of reasoning which is true, and certain, and which our minds can grasp, it would be very lamentable that a man who has met with some of these arguments which at one time seem true and at another false should at last, in the bitterness of his heart, gladly put all the blame on the reasoning, instead of on himself and his own unskillfulness, and spend the rest of his life in hating and reviling reasoning, and lose the truth and knowledge of reality.”³

Loathing reason is especially tempting when we find our most valued beliefs breaking down under criticism. To save them, we fault philosophy, the worth of argument and rational discussion, rather than our own lack of wisdom in holding the beliefs. Plato thought philosophy was important because it encouraged people to think critically about their values and assumptions and it enabled them to defend their beliefs with solid reasons. We should try to improve our critical abilities, not turn them off.

None of this advice from Plato had any effect on my friend. I suggested delicately that he take a course in logic or philosophy and learn how to reason

effectively—learn how to get somewhere when he tried to think deeply about things. He quickly lost patience and would say such things as “I can’t remember all that stuff,” or “Thinking is hard and I don’t have the time.” He simply continued to blame reason with such expressions as “You don’t get anywhere arguing.” On one occasion he did present an argument of sorts: that he had tried reasoning and philosophy but that only confused him and made his problems more difficult. [One unstated conclusion to his argument is that, therefore, reasoning and philosophy are the cause of his confusion.] On many occasions he would look around triumphantly and mumble the vague expression that serves as a stop or plug to any future argument: “I’m not logical.”

Do you hate or fear reason?

For those of you who are not sure where you stand, here is a short questionnaire that may give you a better idea of your own feelings toward reasoning and philosophy. Unless otherwise indicated, for each question, score +1 for each “yes”, -1 for each “no”, and 0 for “**don’t know.**”

_____ 1. Do arguments or reasons that would justify your beliefs come hard for you, while everyone else in your circle seems to have good reasons for anything they say or do?

_____ 2. When you do enter into debate with others, is it just at that time that you forget the reasons you had for your position? (If everyone seems to have the same degree of difficulty you experience, score 0.)

_____ 3. Does any argument (conclusion or premise) seem weak as soon as you present it?

_____ 4. How do you feel when you see a large philosophical treatise such as Plato’s *Republic*? (For panic or annoyance, score +1; pride or interest, -1; indifference 0. If you have a tendency to see a large philosophical book as an excellent doorstep only, by all means give yourself a +2.)

_____ 5. Do you steadfastly refuse to work at understanding a difficult point in a book? (If you go running to condensed summaries and the many outline books on the market, give yourself high marks, an extra +1.)

_____ 6. How would you feel if someone told you that philosophy is being increasingly linked to logic, the use of symbols and computers? (Pride and interest, unmixed with fear or worry, score -1; total panic, score +1; indifference, don’t know, or neither, 0.)

_____ 7. What is your reaction to what is taken to be the typical philosophical questions: “If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one around, is there any sound?” (If you are not inclined to answer the question but are awestruck momentarily by its profoundness, score +1; if your reaction is one of indifference, score 0; if you have thought that this question and others like it may be silly, score -1.)

_____ 8. How do you feel about the following statement: Most problems can

be at least partially solved by thinking hard about them? (True, -1; false, +1; don't know, 0.)

All right. Now add up your score. If you can't manage it, add another +1 and give it to someone else to do. If you have an urge to argue with the statements and assumptions in this questionnaire, add -1 to your score.

If your score lies between -3 and -9, you may do well in philosophy. If your score is -9 you may be a philologic, a lover of logic and reasoning. You should be aware of philosopher David Hume's antidote for too much philosophy: dine, enjoy friends, play backgammon periodically until your tolerance for unanswered questions returns. Be aware also of the tendency to adulate the first robed (non-designer), sandled, pug-nosed thinker from Athens that comes along.

A score that lies between -2 and +2 suggests a lack of interest in a subject that may have a major bearing in your life. The fact that you have gotten this far in this questionnaire is hopeful, however.

If your score is +3 to +6, you are a second-class misologist. No therapy is indicated although you will continue having difficulty arguing in a pleasant tone with anyone for more than two minutes. However, if you know something about a narrow technical subject, you will be able to speak about that and the weather endlessly.

If your score ranges anywhere from +7 to +11, you are a first-class misologist. In fact you have reached the top of this category and deserve the special name of "logophobe." There are four ways out for you:

1. Take a philosophy course. You could major in philosophy, but this is extreme. How would you explain it to your parents or loved ones if you haven't been taught yet to present clear explanations and arguments?

2. Continue on as usual, namely, complaining about how philosophy and argument have ruined your life and the lives of those around you. However, you will be unable to articulate any good reasons for why this is so. Indeed, you'll have no clear idea of what the expression "ruined life" means.

3. Get someone who is good at philosophical argument to defend your beliefs for you. You won't be able to critically assess the job they are doing for you and will feel helpless and intellectually wishywashy but, in addition to their fee, that is the price you pay. There are major industries out there, "opinion makers," that perform this service. However, with no logical tools to fight back, you will be at their mercy.

4. Try religious cults or other groups which would be glad to help you avoid reason and argument. Blind faith in the openly irrational is always a way out. Note that this is expensive. You will be at the mercy of whatever claim they make or brand of authority they have to offer.

Like it or not, this is a world that requires giving reasons for your beliefs and recommendations whether you are arguing a point in law, economics, marketing, or any other field. Plato's advice is that we should not hate or fear reason

and philosophy. We should learn to use them well.

End of Questionnaire

Thanks for the helpful comments of two of my colleagues, Bart Gruzalski and Stephen Nathanson. I am sure their introductory questionnaires would look quite different.

Notes

1. What follows is loosely patterned after an article entitled "Technophobia" by Hal Hellman, *Technophobia: Getting Out of the Technology Trap*, New York, M. Evans and Co., 1976). The relevant section is reprinted in Albert H. Teich, ed., *Technology and Man's Future*, 3rd ed., New York, St. Martin's Press, 1981.

2. Plato, *The Phaedo*, tr., F.J. Church, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1951, 89d-e, p. 41.

3. *The Phaedo*, 90c, p. 42.

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