If you were in charge of a runaway train and five people were tied to the track ahead, should you direct it onto the alternative track to which a single person is tied? Yes, you say. But then should you kill a healthy person for his organs if that were the only way of saving five others? Such philosophical questions are liable to strain the brain.

Speaking of which: if surgeons were to plonk your brain in Britney Spears' skull, and hook it up to her body, would that be you? These are the sorts of questions I discuss with my philosophy students at Glasgow, where the subject is much in demand. It always impresses me how tightly the questions grip them. But, apart from the fun of it, why do we bother? Brain transplants don't happen and we probably won't find ourselves in charge of run-away trains.

A highfalutin reason is that such questions are important because they are the best way of getting traction on some of the most profound questions there are: What are we? How do we persist through change? What is to be conscious? What can we know? Are we free? What should we do? How should society be organised?

Another reason is that straining the brain is good for it – and the demands that philosophical thinking makes on the brain especially good for it.

The point in philosophy is neither to blurt out any answer that takes your fancy nor merely to discover what famous dead philosophers thought. It is to grapple rigorously with the questions, and to do so in the self-conscious way distinctive of philosophical thinking. This involves not only taking and arguing for positions, but also reflecting on what count as good reasons and good arguments – indeed, what count as good questions. Such self-reflection, never far away when doing philosophy, is a superb way of sharpening students' abilities to articulate views, to draw distinctions, to argue rationally, to pay heed to counterarguments. And, of course, these analytical abilities that philosophy hones are essential throughout life: when studying history or science or literature, when running a company or a hospital, when making presentations to clients, when pressing a legal argument, even when deciding how to vote.

Students and employers increasingly realise this. Between 2001 and 2006, the proportion of UK philosophy graduates finding employment within six months of graduation rose sharply even as the number of philosophy graduates more than doubled. As for postgraduate study, in a 2007-08 report on the major aptitude test for American postgraduate schools (the GRE), average scores were ranked according to the subjects that examinees intended to take: in the verbal and analytical sections, philosophers came top; in the mathematical section, they came top of those applying for humanities subjects. So too in aptitude tests for American law and business schools (the LSAT and GMAT). Average scores for philosophy undergraduates tend to be in the top four, higher than other humanities students (and, even for the GMAT, higher than business students).

In UK schools too, philosophy is on the rise. But didn't Plato himself argue that we shouldn't teach philosophy until later in life? He did, but he was surely wrong. For philosophy is a young person's subject. Or, at least, the young tend to be relatively free of the orthodoxies and intellectual stubbornness that get in the way of good, clear thinking. Philosophical questions, moreover, come naturally to them. It is when we are young, sometimes very young – when we are furiously interrogating the world around us – that we are most apt to wonder about what might be beyond the limits of space and time; about whether others might see green where we see red; about reasons to be good; about whether computers and robots might be conscious. The young, surely, are the most philosophical of all. We should nourish their interest.

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