**Justice, Knowledge, Life and Death:**

**Philosophical Revelations from Plato, Ayer, Sartre and Heidegger**

Some Suggestions for Those New to Philosophy

"Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,

 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;

 Round many western islands have I been

Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told

 That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;

 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene

Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

 When a new planet swims into his ken;

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

 He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men

Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—

 Silent, upon a peak in Darien."

"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" by John Keats, may seem archaic now, especially its language. But it expresses the poet's delight and excitement when he discovers a new literary revelation, hitherto hidden from him. He makes an intellectual discovery.

I've had this sense of discovery when reading philosophy. Some new approach, some new idea, has made me see a concept I thought I understood in a different and more rigorous way; made me re-examine what I thought I'd understood perfectly well before. It's not so much that the authors I was reading offered the last word on the subject, more that they offered the first word.

As time passes, "Chapman's Homer" moments naturally become less frequent. But here are some examples (not an exhaustive list) that have occurred in my life, where an author has reintroduced me to a familiar concept and made me see it in a radically different way.

1. **The Concept of Justice.** What is justice? Can you define it? When you use the word, do you really know what it means? Why should you lead a just life? Can you expect justice from others? This is the problem considered by Socrates at the beginning of Plato's "Republic". He is challenged, in a dialogue, by Thracymachus and Glaucon, and gives, to my mind a slightly incomplete answer. But it set me off wondering and I've wondered ever since. Justice is a metaphysical concept, in the end. But no society, nation or group of nations can do without it. Other philosophers as far apart in time (but not in approach) as Kant and Rawls, to name but two, have added much to Socrates' argument. But do we really know, even now, what justice really is?
2. **The Problem of Knowledge.** This was raised for me in a book of the same name by A.J Ayer, published on the early 1960s by Pelican. He tackles the basic problems of epistemology in a far reaching commentary said to be written for the general reader, but only for a general reader with a good attention span. I was just starting out on a career in scientific research at the time. Ayer made me realise that what I'd considered to be knowledge, I had, for the most part, just accepted from my teachers, and that in philosophy, and in life, you take nobody's word for it. I have since read Ayer's "Language, Truth and Logic", and W.V.O Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", and if I'd read either of them first, it might had had the same revelatory effect on me. Knowledge is not to be taken for granted, always questioned, and examined.
3. **What Is Being Alive About?** Is that a daft question? Try reading Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical novel, "Nausea". Published in 1938, it tells the story of Roquentin, who is fed up with life – it bores him. Gradually this drives him to such a state that even the mere appearance of simple physical things like tree roots and other people make his feel physically sick. He has difficulty trying to think his way out of this state, but at the end of the book he starts to realise that a jazz record he keeps hearing in a bar makes him feel happy. He starts to wonder at the creativity of the song writer and the musicians, and to consider the possibility of trying to do some creative thinking himself based on the skills and knowledge that he has in his own field (he is a historian). A simple enough tale, told like that. But Sartre made me realise that the problems Roquentin is having are with freedom, a scary thing, and how we are confronted by it in our lives. Sartre expands on this theme ten years later in "Existentialism and Humanism", when he says "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself"; and that "...man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards."
4. **The Phenomenon of Death**, and how its prospect affects our lives. This was revealed to me on reading Heidegger's evaluation of death at the beginning of Division Two of his main work, "Being and Time".At this point in the book, Heidegger is starting to examine how one grasps one's human nature as a whole. He wants to know if death can permit us to view our existence in its totality in some way. Observation of one person dying by another living person are of limited use here. We are addressing the subjective experience, so we must look at our own Being-towards-death. We can see death as certain at some time, and always possible at any time. We live in the face of the end. Death is part of a our Being. Rather than treating death as an event to be ignored, Heidegger says that a more thoughtful, honest and logical approach (he calls it authentic) would be for a human being to use death to as a means of concentrating on his/her own existence. Death puts our existence into perspective. There's much more to it than that, but hopefully that gives a flavour. Death is not a heavily studied concept in metaphysics, rather surprisingly. Perhaps it should be. But Heidegger caused me to view my own ultimate demise in a different light.

Not an exhaustive list, but a start. And are there any more important concepts than justice, knowledge, life and death? None - apart, perhaps, from football!