Philosophical Razors Assembly

One of biggest challenges we face in the modern world is the problem of information overload. The Internet, 24 hour rolling news channels, and social media put out a vast amount of material. Nowadays, if we cannot distinguish between what is true and what is false, it is often because we have too much information rather than too little. All too frequently, what we are told is contradictory and overwhelming. The challenge is to sift through the varieties of information that are all too readily available to us. One of the most important skills I hope you will learn in your time at Merchant Taylors' is how to spot fact from opinion, or the reliable from the false.

So, today's assembly is all about how to do that, using philosophical razors and other rules for life that might help us with this problem. In philosophy, a razor is a principle or a rule of thumb that allows for the elimination - or "shaving off" - of unlikely explanations for something. The razor is there to cut out the silly and false. A philosophical razor is not an unbreakable law or rule; it is not always right 100% of the time, but it is right more often than it is wrong, and is, therefore, a useful mental shortcut that allows you to make decisions and solve problems more quickly and easily than might otherwise be the case.

Perhaps the most famous of these is Occam's Razor, which is named after a friar, theologian and philosopher called William, who is believed to have been born in the village of Ockham, Surrey around 1287.

William of Ockham was one of the main thinkers of the period; living as a Franciscan monk, William contributed to political philosophy and the theory of mind. However, he is most famous for a phrase that doesn't actually appear in his writings – it has become a razor named after him. Occam's razor states "Thou shalt not multiply extra entities unnecessarily." That sounds pretty confusing, but it isn't if you understand it in the way he meant. Popularly, the principle is sometimes paraphrased as "The simplest explanation is usually the best one." In other words, if there are two or more explanations for something that are similarly persuasive and convincing and both help us reach the same conclusion, we should always pick the less complex one or the one that makes the fewest assumptions. It is sometimes called the Principle of Parsimony, because it relies on the idea that the universe is probably best explained using the simplest methods.

You do have to be careful. For example, imagine thinking about the start of the universe and how everything came into being from what must have been, by definition, nothing. If you really try to think about that, the mind begins to boggle. Understanding how the universe spontaneously came into existence, for no reason, is very difficult. Then imagine that all the matter in the universe was once contained in the tiniest imaginable point of space, and that time and space also came into being at that precise moment. Most people's minds would be struggling. This feels like a complicated explanation for the start of the universe. In the face of it, some people might say that the simplest answer is to state that God made the universe. They may yet be right, but Occam's razor would not support them. They are not offering the simplest explanation containing the fewest assumptions. Far from it. 'God did it' is a simple sentence to say but requires us to add to the immense complexity of the universe coming into being an even more complicated thing – God, who furthermore can somehow exist outside time and space. You have more than doubled the complexity and made a number of assumptions. Occam's razor would shave your explanation away.

To take a less cosmic example, when people feel unwell, doctors will always consider the most common causes of an illness rather than assuming anything that is rarer. A variation of Occam's razor, used in medicine, is called the "Zebra": a doctor should reject an exotic medical diagnosis when a more commonplace explanation is more likely, following the phrase "When you hear hoofbeats, think of horses not zebras".

Occam's razor helps cut through delusions and fantasies. Imagine you are a therapist treating a patient with paranoia – the delusion that people are out to get him. The patient tells you that his enemies have placed a death ray above the entrance to his house. You have a look and see it is just an ordinary light. You tell the patient that it is a light, not a death ray. 'Ah yes, doctor,' he replies, 'of course they made it look like a light - they wouldn't make it look like a death ray.' How could you convince him - using words only – to set aside his delusions? You would find it hard, unless you used Occam's razor. The simplest answer is best: that it really is a light.

There are a number of other razors to help you arrive at the truth, all of which are linked to Occam's razor. One of these is the Sagan Standard, named after the astronomer Carl Sagan. The Sagan Standard states that 'Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.' For example, if you are going to go on TV and tell everyone that there was a lost continent of Atlantis, which was the original cradle of civilisation, you had better have amazing evidence to back it up. You will need less amazing evidence to convince me that civilisation started in the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia.

The rather marvellously named 'Newton's flaming laser sword' is another philosophical razor. It is called a flaming laser sword as they thought the idea was a bit sharper than a simple razor. It states that we should not trouble to argue about things unless they can be shown by logic and/or mathematics to be associated with observable consequences. To be considered true, something must leave empirical evidence. If there is no evidence for the existence of Puff the Magic Dragon, let us waste no time in searching for him.

Another good razor is named after Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens' Razor states that things which can be asserted without evidence can also be rejected without evidence. It reminds us that the burden of proof regarding the truthfulness of a claim lies with the one who makes the claim; if this burden is not met, then the claim is unfounded, and its opponents need not argue further in order to dismiss it. We have all been frustrated by someone who, when their argument has been shown to be wrong replies, 'Well, what is your explanation, then?' You don't need to give one. And if someone is arguing without evidence, then you don't need to marshal all your intellectual resources to defeat them: you can simply reject their whole claim.

Finally, there is the timeless genius that is Hanlon's Razor. Here is a razor to live by, and one which you can trust without question. Hanlon's Razor tells us 'Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity'. We all know this is true. You will often find yourself wronged by another. It happens every day in countless forms. In the heat of the moment, you will instinctively assume that the other person did it deliberately or that they have wicked intentions. But never to attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity. They didn't mean you harm: they just didn't think it through, they just got it wrong or they were just a bit thick.

So, in conclusion, we all must navigate our path through the world of today, where we are faced with increasingly polarised debates on all manner of issues, from climate change to culture wars. I hope you will hold some of these philosophical razors or rules of thumb in

mind. These techniques can be very useful in helping us to cut through the misinformation and exaggeration we see and hear from those who seek to influence our views.

In summary: the simplest explanation is best; wild claims need amazing evidence; if it leaves no trace, it probably didn't happen; things asserted without evidence can be rejected without evidence; and above all, when dealing with other people, never attribute to malice what you can explain by stupidity.