Philosophy as a Way of Life: Rediscovering the Past for a Better Future

John Adams & John H Spencer

We had nine Ph.D. student panels (two being parallel) made up of either three or four speakers and, as far as possible, organised for compatibility. The first panel was on the theme of philosophy as a way of life, contemplating the ancient sense of philosophy, contrasting it with contemporary philosophy and asking whether most professional philosophers are philosophers in the etymological sense of ‘lovers of wisdom’. David Leech, from the Department of Theology at Cambridge, set the tone for the postgraduate presentations by showing us that erudition and analytical rigour can be combined with deeply personal insights and meaningful questions relevant to us all. (A full list of all the abstracts can be found at http://www.liv.ac.uk/Philosophy/events/conferences/2004/gspc/index.htm. A publication of selected papers will follow.)

What is probably of most interest to readers of Practical Philosophy is the work of Pierre Grimes and Finn Hansen. Grimes has spent several decades developing what he calls ‘Philosophical Midwifery’ (PM), which has its roots in Plato’s Theaetetus but is also pervasively influenced by Plotinus and Proclus. The core aspect of PM is the pathologoi, which is a sick or false belief unknowingly held that causes us to repeat old patterns and dramas every time we encounter circumstances similar to those in which we first accepted it. Because the pathologoi is invisible to the person it is blocking, it acts as an insidious barrier whenever we attempt to pursue personally significant goals, and so we become masters at rationalising our failures. We acquire the pathologoi in our childhood at a moment when we are open, receptive and trusting and our authority figure (usually a parent) appears to be knowing and caring while disclosing their view of reality apparently for our benefit. The authority figure was probably not knowingly giving us a false view of reality, just acting out of her own pathologoi; but when we try to persuade others of something that we ourselves do not know, then that is sophistry. Grimes argues that it is the art of Platonic philosophy to rescue us from the clutches of the pathologoi and sophistry.¹

In opposition to the interpretative models in psychology and similar forms of therapy, Finn Hansen writes in his abstract that ‘Philosophical Counselling should not be confused with therapy, problem solving or educational training.’ Rather, ‘It is a practice that opens up a space for inquiry into ethical, value-based and existential questions without becoming utilitarian. The result of merging philosophical thought and real-life practice is neither a hybrid between philosophy and psychology nor a crossbreed of philosophy and pedagogy, but philosophy “proper”. The Philosophical Counsellor is

creating a safe and encouraging environment for the ‘guest’ (which is a term Hansen prefers to ‘client’ or ‘patient’) to question her own value system and way of life, her own assumptions about reality. This openness and freedom from methodological constraints, Hansen argues, is much more conducive to encouraging the guest to lead a philosophical life. Such a life is not a search for ‘psychological self-realisation,’ but is a ‘search for wisdom.’ The highest aim, Hansen claimed in his presentation, if we can properly speak of aims, is for the client to come to a state of ‘wonder.’ Many people at the conference seemed to be unfamiliar with the developments of philosophical counselling, so it was beneficial for everyone to hear these different views.

Hadot reminds us that the ancient philosophers never gave up trying to transform society and serve their citizens. With the enthusiastic participation of all those involved, we were able to live up to the ancient philosophical requirements of ‘a common effort, community of research, mutual assistance, and spiritual support.’ What our conference demonstrated was that petty prejudices can be set aside and research from various traditions (and not just analytic and continental) can be brought together constructively within a supportive atmosphere.

More broadly, philosophers need to engage with academics in other disciplines, and must overcome the fear of writing from a personal perspective (and asking such questions as ‘Is the nature of reality Good?’ and ‘What is love?’). And as far as possible we should stop hiding behind unnecessarily recondite terminology. As Hadot writes, ‘Ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists.’

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2 Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 1995, p. 274.