

Introduction

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Whoever promotes the common good of the community simultaneously promotes their own good; first, because individual well-being cannot exist without the well being of the family, the city or the realm ... and second because being part of the family or of the city it is right to consider personal well-being in the light of what is prudent with regard to the common good.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa, IIae, q. 47, a. 10

It is sometimes said that philosophy begins with curiosity; but it would be as true to say that it starts in confusion (where any particular enquiry ends up depends on the gifts of those involved). Typically one finds oneself faced with a conflict between experience and reflection, or within thought itself. Certain things seem obviously morally impermissible say, but it appears impossible to conceive how anything could be, in and of itself, always and everywhere absolutely wrong. Justice seems to require redistributing wealth for the sake of welfare, yet compulsory taxation can also appear a paradigm of injustice: state-organised theft. Society represents itself as a voluntary association of free individuals, yet our sense of ourselves as voluntary agents is something formed by society not something antecedent that we bring to it.

So it continues. Natural rights may be as Bentham suggested 'nonsense on stilts', yet the liberal, political sensibility that he did much to form, finds 'rights' talk not just convenient but compelling. Conservatives frequently argue that tradition is the embodiment of social wisdom, yet often denounce entrenched collective practices as inimical to sound policy making. Those preoccupied with social justice often urge the need to adapt social norms to the interests of immigrant minorities while pursuing general policies that are in direct opposition to the most deeply held beliefs and values of these minorities.

Such notions and conflicts are the concerns of moral, social and political philosophy. It is tempting to say 'such are their starting points'; but the truth of the matter is that conflicts and confusions of these sorts are as much the effects as they are the causes of philosophy.

There is a recurrent idea that first thoughts are best, because somehow closer to the facts. One version of this notion is the belief

that young children have an insight into basic truths which time and education only serve to obscure. This belief is sometimes related to the conjecture that there are innate ideas – once cast in the form of an inner mental text, and now in terms of naturally evolved, because adaptive, dispositions. With or without the innateness hypothesis the notion of pre-reflective insight is deeply problematic. Thoughts are expressed in language, in particular natural languages, and these are taught and learned in a social context. Whatever innate endowment there may be, the particular style and substance of thought about the world is a product of the world itself and, to emphasise the point, the child's world is mostly a social one.

In learning language, children learn not just how but what to think. Ironically this fact shows itself in the very questions posed in the effort to elicit innocent truths from the mouths of the young. Of late there has been an interest in encouraging philosophy among children. Teachers wishing to practice this are encouraged to generate group discussion by getting the children to express their views in response to basic quasi-philosophical questions. Thus the mind–body issue might be posed by asking, 'Can you think if you don't have a brain?'; or that of justice introduced by enquiring, 'Is it fair not to give back what you have borrowed or to return it damaged?'. It should be clear enough, however, that questions such as these are heavily laden with presuppositions and assumptions, and serve more to provide than to elicit information. Asking about whether thinking is dependent on having a brain suggests a linkage between them; also young children are generally first introduced to the idea of brains via such phrases as 'use your brain' and 'don't be brainless', that is ones that suggest that something in the head is the organ of thought. Likewise with questions about 'truthfulness', 'honesty', 'justice', 'charity', and so on. Children learn these terms in ways and in contexts that communicate established ways of thinking about them; asking questions is after all a mode of education.

The implication of this is that felt conflicts between thought and experience and within thought itself are as likely as not to express historic conflicts within philosophical thinking itself. The clash between the idea that consciousness is an essentially private reality to which only the self has access, and which is at most only contingently dependent on embodiment, and the thought that one is just another material object in a material world and is best accounted for by the physical senses, is not a conflict between pre-reflective intuition and sophisticated theory but a clash between quasi-philosophical theories the initial absorption of which comes early in the learning of language: 'close your eyes and imagine watching yourself

being born' ... 'what do you mean you ... "can't imagine it"?' ... 'we'll have to have your brains looked at'.

It would be too much to say, as Wittgenstein seems sometimes to have supposed, that philosophy consists entirely in tracking down and eliminating from ordinary language confusions sown by earlier philosophy. For one thing a regress threatens: some thinking must have been pre-philosophical if philosophy ever had a beginning, as presumably it did, however vague an origin that might be. For another the process of clarification working upon our confused thinking, often brings us to the point of recognising that our confusions arise from the effort to combine ideas and ideals that enjoy independent coherence and appeal, but which stand in an opposition that could only be resolved by finding good reasons to reject one set and embrace another. Clarification is an essential part of philosophy but so too is refutation and proof. It is not enough to identify sources of conflict, or to embark upon a process of reconciliation, sometimes we need to engage in the battle of ideas with a willingness to kill off error – open up to the possibility that this may involve turning against our own previously held ideas.

Philosophers *per se* tend to be attracted to the most general form of questioning. A judge may be concerned with what punishment to impose; a philosopher will be likely to ask whether punishment itself is or, better, *can* ever be just. A general may be troubled by the conduct of a military campaign; a philosopher will ask whether war can ever be justified. A finance minister may wonder about the social impact of a fiscal measure; a philosopher is likely to ask whether the state is essentially an economic device. But philosophers are not the only ones to be attracted to framework issues. Theorists in other fields such as politics and economics, and social and cultural commentators also aspire to a broader and more topographical view; one of wide range that also discerns the prominent and often recurring features of the field. Also philosophers have of late become aware of the interest and value in engaging in more detailed, topic-specific enquiries.

This range of interests and approaches has developed significantly in the last three decades in recognition of a number of pressures and precedents. The Second World War effected tremendous changes in economic and political arrangements, in moral and religious consciousness and in common human experience. The decade immediately following was given over to efforts at resettlement, but by the 1960s it was clear that the old frameworks had been badly damaged and might not be reconstructable or again enjoy general allegiance. Where free politics was an option it moved to the left,

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while at the personal level a greater individualism tested moral conventions. The American (US) experience was perhaps the most traumatic; desegregation, race riots and the civil rights movement, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Watergate, the abortion issue and so on, forced social theorists to try to give some general description and explanation of what was happening, and caused philosophers to wonder whether purely abstract speculation about mind, language and reality left undischarged intellectual and moral responsibilities. After all, the great figures of the subject, such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, and Hegel, had all engaged moral and social questions and certainly not regarded this as extra-curricular activity.

The most significant moment of development can be dated; it occurred in 1971 with the publication of John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. For the first time in the English-speaking world since Mill, a first-class philosopher had made moral and political issues a main focus of his work. The effect in America, Britain and beyond was and remains considerable. Philosophy began to be deployed in guiding the conduct of life. It soon became common to speak of 'applied philosophy', though some would dearly wish to see that fact undone. The expression suggests a two-stage process: first the philosophy is worked out; second it is applied. Besides demeaning the efforts of those who try to engage practical questions this conception overlooks the possibility that philosophy might arise from, and stay with, practical issues, finding it methodologically more appropriate to use concepts peculiar to the issues in question rather than to replace them with highly general abstract ideas, such as those of the right to liberty, or of the principle of non-maleficence.

Whatever its name, self-conception or methods, the 'practical turn' in philosophy has now produced important work of lasting value. That was already clear to those familiar with the situation in the US, and it was becoming evident in Britain when in 1983 the decision was taken at the University of St Andrews to establish the Centre for Philosophy and Public Affairs. Launched the following year with a major conference on *Ethics and International Relations*, supported by the US/UK Fulbright Commission, it set out from the start to encourage philosophers to engage in questions of practical import by inviting them to give public lectures and seminars in St Andrews and beyond, and by appointing them to visiting fellowships. At the same time it sought to persuade those in public life and in social institutions to take an interest in the philosophical dimensions of their professional work.

Over the years the leading moral, social and political philoso-

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phers of the English-speaking world have lectured under the auspices of the Centre: Anthony Quinton, John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Alasdair MacIntyre, Neil MacCormick, Anthony Kenny, Bernard Williams, Mary Warnock, G. M. (Jerry) Cohen, Onora O'Neill, Charles Taylor, Roger Scruton, Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum and Derek Parfit. Mindful of the aim of having those outside professional philosophy reflect on the values and principles relevant to public policy and practice, prominent politicians, journalists and religious leaders have also contributed to lecture series.

Until 1997, however, there had not been an opportunity to bring members of the two constituencies together. It was with pleasure, therefore, that the Centre learned of the Royal Institute of Philosophy's decision to support, as one of its annual conferences, a meeting in St Andrews on the theme of *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Thanks very greatly to the encouragement and help of the Royal Institute of Philosophy's Director, Professor Anthony O'Hear, the conference proved a success. The papers given or developed out of it now appear here as a publication of the Royal Institute of Philosophy. The range of topics covered and styles of approach is quite wide but there is a common underlying concern with the way in which contemporary Western society and its political culture has been shaped, and its policies and practices directed, by broadly philosophical ideas. Whether philosophers or not every contributor shares the belief that philosophy needs to be brought to bear upon the conduct of public affairs.

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