

## **Present Humanism & Understanding from Cultural Pluralism and Modern Humanism**

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**14 July 2019**

The focus of The Philosophy Café program in the last six months has been social philosophy, political philosophy, and what once was called 'world philosophy'. Our aim, from the beginning in the ancient civilisation of Greece and Rome, was to achieve a public and general horizon worldview from the 'western tradition' called 'philosophy'. These same ideas were framed differently in 'eastern tradition', but we have attempted to recognise those other philosophical influences in the evolution of 'world philosophy'; and these are all umbrella terms that do not reduce disjunction between traditions and culture, but simply to recognise the fact of the globalisation in knowledge and otherwise belief. The two final sessions we have come to a long list of social and political themes of our times which are understood as concept schemas. These are all important schemas for late nineteenth and twentieth century intellectual history.

The last three sessions of discussions are a series on the various philosophic paradigms that have shaped the late modern or postmodern world (the choice of either term is what is in contention). The first session looked at different versions of nationalism which developed from the ideas of the Age of Revolution (1774-1865) and beyond. In the second session we looked at the various schemas involved in the New Imperialism and Globalisation (1870 to the present). The next two sessions went to what has been argued, in recent decades, as the passing of the Age of Modernity into the Age of Post-Modernity. From my own historiographical view, I would argue that this historical framing is too premature, and if we look at the various arguments of 'post-modern' philosophies, they are only shifting variants on modern debates of the last three hundred years or so. There is nothing really new from our position in the historical development, just different arguments that either scale radically or moderately. It is like living in fifteenth century Europe and trying to debate ideas to which we now differentiate between the different periods of 'renaissance' thinking, over its previous three hundred years (1201-1500). The last session was the first part of focusing on the late modern-postmodern argument around New Internationalism and Cosmopolitanism. In this final session for the program we go deeper into the second part of the debates, to cultural pluralism and modern humanism.

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## THE FIGHT OVER HUMANISM

The ideas of the 'human' and 'humanity' do have a long history, which should have been picked up in the various sessions of the program. 'Modern Humanism', however, came to the fore in the late 1940s and 1950s. The movement was particularly tied to development and dissemination of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The obvious spur for the interest in humanism was the horror and inhumanity of World War II. This area of international law and sociology has been problematic in the last half-century for two reasons. First, is the language of 'rights'. One side of the debate question whether the language of 'rights' is actually helpful in the vision of the society which peoples of the world wish to achieve. It is not that these critics are not empathic to the 'rights' of persons, but that the legal concepts might be part of the problem; that is, 'rights' infers a sovereignty that confers or gifts the positioning to subjects, and this bellows the disproportionate relations between persons. Much of that debate involves a tension between the political idealists of equality ('everyone is equal') and political realists of natural structure ('everyone has their unique position'). The second problem is one of the tensions between homogeneity ('we have a common humanity') and heterogeneity ('we each have a distinct identity'). Those who are invested in the 'rights' of marginalised and disadvantaged communities have been suspicious of the humanists. There is no doubt that humanists, like everyone else, have had good intentions but whose short-sightedness led to appalling and ignorant abuse.

## THE PHILOSOPHIC CHALLENGE

One of the clearest examples of that ignorant abuse has been described in Marilyn Lake's recent book. Lake (2019) explains well the racism of Australian and American Progressivists. The racial profiling was embedded in the various ideas of progressivism. Such historical insight is at the root of the suspicions from 'anti-humanist' advocates for the dispossessed and marginalised. In these debates there are also suspicions and accusations of eurocentrism towards historians of ideas. Indeed, intellectual historians have been made nervous by the 'postmodern' arguments which aim at fragmentation as a vehicle against abstractions that dominate 'others'. Philosophic historians need not be nervous. Most postmodernist arguments fall lost to its fragmentation. The inconsistency in the charge of eurocentrism becomes apparent. Indigenous cosmology is clearly culturally-centred. If we understand science in the filter of culture, then one culturally-formed science is good as another. Eurocentric history of ideas, or western philosophy, has nothing to be ashamed of, and it is as valid as the platforms to promote indigenous worldviews, *on the basis of fragmentation*. Here is the crux of the matter. Judgment requires a common measure to even question a worldview, let alone condemn it. And this is the motivation of modern humanism – to condemn evil and promote a better worldview as measured by what is our common humanity. There are those who say that even this does not go far enough, and we

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need to measure by common life-formation. That extension of the argument might be true, but its condition is necessarily an outlook of a common humanity.

## THE HISTORIES OF THE LAST HALF CENTURY

The philosophic or socio-intellectual historian has understood this debate since the renewed push of humanism in the 1950s and 1960s. First, European historians (Dresden 1968) have gone back to reconsider the first categorical rise of humanism (as a historiography) in the Renaissance. This has also followed by critical studies (Gay 1968) of the Enlightenment and humanist ideals, and the failure and hope in its histories. The works of Samuel Dresden (1968) and Peter Gay (1967) have been cited here as the foundational debates to which a mountain of literature has been added since. Added also to that literature have been a number of earlier volumes which opened up the philosophical debate. One of the key texts is a series of essays in Blackham (1963). The philosophical arguments against humanism are very contextual to different charges – the religionification of the ideology, the connection to rationalism and its flaws, the utopian idealism, and the nihilistic existentialism against Sartre's existentialism as humanism. Davies (1997), several decades later, picked up these series of challenges, both from the historiography and the philosophy. In broad terms, what is targeted are the failures of the 'Renaissance Man', the ideological tendency of the Romantics, the disempowering of modern humanists (Nietzsche and taken up by Foucault), and the economic rationalisation of the liberal humanists. There clearly historical failures, and there are clearly philosophical problems.

## THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

The two most recent and leading advocates in the debates are the social-political philosophers, John Gray (2013) and A.C. Grayling. Gray's target is more progressivism than it is humanism, but the primary problems he sees in modern humanism are the disregard to our human animalistic relationship in the eco-system, and the tendency for the humanistic outlook to be expressed as religious myth. Grayling is the best philosophical defender of modern humanism. His idea of humanism, though, is very secular, and tends to down play the religious framing in the ideas of the secular, as explained by Taylor (2007). Allowing for this shortfall in Grayling, he does have one advantage over Gray. Both are known for their social and political philosophy, but it is Grayling who has established a standing in the fields of ethics and epistemology. Epistemology has been the prime target of certain post-colonialist academics, accusing epistemology as being Eurocentric. What is telling is that the same post-colonialist academics do not make the same charge against the field of modern ethics, *carte blanche*. Ethics and epistemology, however, cannot be separated in this way. What the *carte blanche* attacks of certain academics overshadows is a very complex series of very diverse debates on the place of reason and emotion. Some of those debates have been picked up in the course of the program, and as has been revealed, I and other contemporary philosophers have taken compatibilist stances in the midst of unhelpful

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dichotomy in the debates. There is a postmodernist irony of postmodernists arguing the dichotomy of emotion over reason when they opposed the concept of dichotomy. Here we might help to create a middle ground. The liberal Grayling emphasises the modest rationality in his humanism. The conservative Gray emphasises the tempered passions of communities in preventing rationalisation devouring those human relations. Here there is no disagreement between Grayling and Gray; their two contrasting arguments support each other.

## LAYERS IN THE DEBATES

Stephen Trombly (2012) provides the philosophical survey to reveal the different layers of the contemporary debates around cultural pluralism and modern humanism. One of those layers that Trombly introduces is pragmatism (2012: 165-169). Here is another middle ground in the debates, but one that has unfortunately has introduced new problems in the understanding. It has also suffered its dichotomy from the two-halves of the American Pragmatic Tradition, the first led by C.S. Peirce and the other by William James – famously creating two different understandings of what is pragmatism. John Dewey introduces a third conception, but the tensions between the traditions of the secular Peirce and the religious James is at the heart of the problem. In a short answer, the problem is the choice of understanding knowledge (the epistemology) as reasoned (or interpreted) symbols or as passionate (or meaningful) beliefs; the structure or the content. From the former, we have the logicism of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell (2012: 171-173). In the latter, we have the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (2012: 182-184), as well as the existentialism of Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre (2012: 198-202, 209-215). Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber also bring a religious dimension to this side of the debates (2012: 214). For mid-twentieth century, much of the debate between the two sides forged what is known as the ‘Analytic-Continental Divide’. However, most of that previous divide has disappeared as analytic and continental philosophers engaged each other in the last half of the century.

The old divide was also lost because of the fact that so-called ‘continental philosophy’ was again restructured in different directions (2012: 225-229). There was the ‘German’ neo-Marxist Frankfurt School of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, and Herbert Marcuse, and there was the ‘French’ Schools. There are really two French Schools, although the public faces of the discourse confuse the different arguments. The first is the post-structuralism (2012: 230-232) of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes. The arguments here are very narrowly focused in linguistics, textual studies, and anthropology, and very strangely for post-structuralists, the claims are uniformly thrown over all societies. In fact this was the challenge taken up by the second school, the French postmodernists (2012: 232-237) with Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. The postmodernist’s fragmentation is really a response to the previous de-structuring but with the former’s need

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for a holistic narrative. The postmodernist reject the concept of the 'grand narrative'. There certainly a colonializing problem in that homogeneity. However, the next step that Trombley explains has also created problems for itself (2012: 237-240). Trombley speaks of the "subjectivity amid the debris of a post-empirical, post-analytic, post-post-structuralist world" (238) and the role of Julia Kristeva. Certainly, a big part of the problem is that there are too many 'posts', such that there is very little understanding of what 'post' conveys. One can say make this claim affirmatively in all its negativity through epistemology. The postmodernist contempt for epistemology will come back to 'bite her' or 'bite him'. Another big part of the problem is, again, not knowing how to relate reason and emotion, since much of the theorizing (reasoning) is rooted in Freudian psycho-analytics, a much contentious field on its interpretation (or rationalizing) of emotion. Here the figure of Hannah Arendt is a moderating and helpful figure, who is Kristeva's subject of interest (as Trombley points out, 237). Arendt straddles a conventional approach in Continental Philosophy (and with strong analytic talent) and a challenging skepticism towards 'bland' normative psychology. One of her key challenges is how much evil can lurk in the middle range of 'normalcy'.

### Concluding Remarks

As Trombley points out in his conclusion (243), we have seen the entertaining clowns of thinkers, who talk in the 1990s of the 'dead of philosophy', as well as the end of history, the death of the author, and the destruction of the text to heroics of the image. Yet here we are today in The Philosophy Café. In the recent decades, a less romanticised area of study has emerged around personhood and personal identity. As we discussed at the last session, it is the exploration of interpersonal relationship, ideas of 'Self' and 'Other' together, which will be the most insightful place for thinking about cultural pluralism and modern humanism. Emmanuel Levinas and his idea of the 'Humanism of the Other' is a good starting point. Even if we disagree with Levinas' proposition of 'Ethics as the first philosophy', the main criticism of modern humanism has been its ethical failures. Here, we have hope for our common humanity.

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