

## **Where We Are At – Ancient and Modern Thought: Living Philosophy in Contemporary Times**

WHERE DOES 'CARE' FIT INTO OUR THINKING?

ARE WE JUST REGURGITATING THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST IN THE REVIVAL OF ANCIENT PHILOSOPHIES?

**9 February 2020**

In this essay and discussion we are looking at the relationship between the recent revival of ancient philosophies and modern philosophical history. It is an essay based on my work in ['Brisbane Thinkers 1859-2009'](#).

### **THE ESSAY**

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There is a growth of new groups over the past few years, on the Meet-Up network, and on other places in social media, which is part of a general revival of ancient philosophies: stoicism, epicureanism, hedonism, with other ancient schools of thought in skepticism or nihilism. Much of the information, lessons, and discussion are of a high scholarly quality among educative websites. Other parts are revolving around therapeutic thinking, and here the quality is very mixed. Psychology is one of the most troubling areas of philosophy, swinging between mysticism and scientism.

This essay is a little different to the philosophical history essays previously presented. It cuts to the global discourse which had occurred in the local past of Brisbane-Queensland. At the outset, however, I need to make a philosophical position, which is repeated here from my published blog, ['The Past as Instinctive and the Past as Thought'](#).

Perception as animal instinct is 'as it happens'; 'one moment after another'; a habitual succession of association. As Hume points out, we do not perceive causality. It is the thought which constructs our human reality. Association becomes more structured and more tightly experienced, as time-space, and thus we constructed the thought of causality. This is not to say that reality is merely the idea within human cognition nor does it say that reality is arbitrary, hopelessly limited and shaped by human cognition. Historically, we have good reason to suspect the 'something out there', reality, beyond the control of mind as

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both an individual and collective term. It is only that it can never be grasped outside of our thought. And here is a key difference between the instinctual and thought. What we may call good instinct is well-attuned to that external reality. Thought requires internal reasoning, a process that is real, but is at a distance to any external reality, what is inescapably beyond our own thoughts. Fortunately, our mind has the ability to challenge our internal reasoning, a self-propelling skepticism, or as Bernard Williams and Derek Parfit phrase it, 'pulling on our boot laces in an attempt to hold ourselves in mid-air'.

It is this philosophical position that unravels the confusion in the modern therapeutic thinking, caught up in the revival of ancient philosophies. The reasoning is internal but ought not to be the same sophism that we have from the ancients. The better philosophers, in the movements towards ancient schools of thought, point out these problems of ancient sophism. The skepticism is qualified and revisable to new evidence. It is not the global skepticism of contrarians. Williams' and Parfit's approaches require a certain trust to the cognitive skills which is shared and collegially reviewed – that is, it is social, and not blindly libertarian. It is a philosophical movement between Plato and Aristotle, between instinct (disposition) and thought (or what we term as 'reflection'; for all the problems in the metaphor). And indeed, for the historical educated, it is a movement between the ancient and the modern.

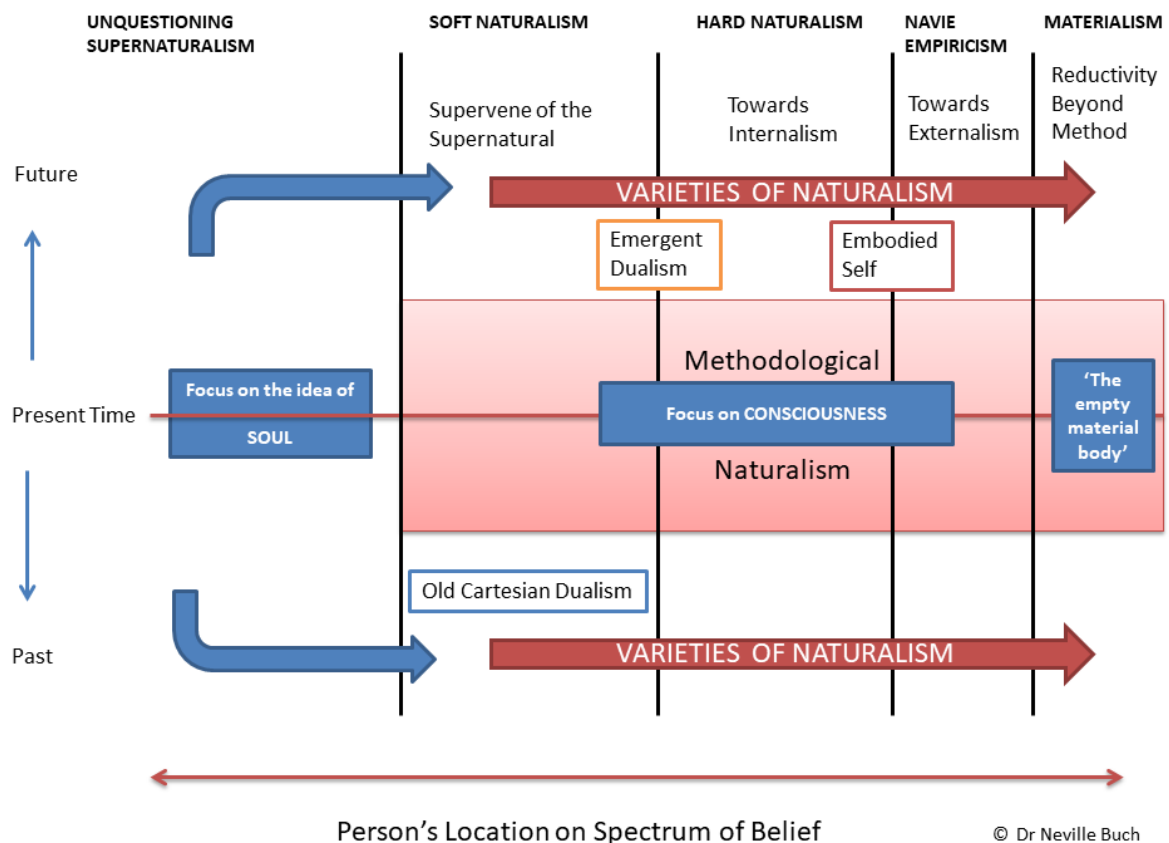
A collection of Brisbane thinkers, across two centuries, demonstrate the ancient-modern movement. There was in Queensland, and many other places, what historians have recently termed the 'Long Nineteenth Century'. The idea is that the cultural and social ethos, in a particular place, is extended into the next chronological period because of an established and collective resistance to societal changes in ideas and thinking. In my work I also refer to the 'Long Early Twentieth Century'. The [Brisbane Thinkers 1859-2009](#) MBH sub-project has 71 thinkers in the first round. In what follows is an analysis of the history recorded on those thinkers, to highlight several ancient and modern philosophy categories, and to show that modern interpretations of these philosophical positions have been problematic. The order of the analysis moves in a roughly chronological order within the philosophical theme.

### **Naturalism**

The revival of Aristotelian naturalism is now somewhat dated, back with Alasdair MacIntyre's critique, *After Virtue* (1981). However, the concept is still popularly propagated on social media in groups which discuss science or the philosophy of science. Confusion on

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naturalism has been added by the complexity from the European Enlightenment and what is usually described as the Scientific Revolution. Problems of a naive empiricism come from modern versions of naturalism. In the attempt to overcome much of the confusion, I have produced this graph (for more information, see [Mapping Locations on the Mind-Brain Belief Spectrum](#))



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One of the outcomes from the modern version of naturalism in the long nineteenth century was the land settlement movement. Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) first identified what Ross Johnston called, 'The Call of the Land' in Queensland. If there is a premium on a natural order in thought, then environmental naturalism will come to the fore. Land became the chief asset in the society since it was where human life dwelt. There were those in the land settlement movement who attempted to overcome the discriminatory economic arrangements through socialism, such as William Lane (1861–1917). Unfortunately, the land settlement experiments failed with having both radical and conservative financial backers. That is one problem from naive empiricism with an emphasis on tangibility. Another problem can be seen in the activities of Nickolai Maclay (1846-1888). Recently, from the work of Paul Turnbull with Cressida Forde and Jane Hubert, Maclay has been shown as a

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grave-robbing anthropologist. In 1886 he and his family returned to Russia with twenty-two boxes of 'specimens'. Aboriginal persons were treated as fauna. Charles de Vis (1829–1915), as the curator of the Queensland Museum, established the colonial 'western' understanding of the local fauna.

Added to these versions of naturalism (land ownership as a basic human asset, and racism in the technical sense of the abstract schema), was the more philosophical version in the form of rationalism. Heber Longman (1880-1954) was active in the Queensland Rationalist Society. He was also Director of the Queensland Museum (1918-1945), President of the Royal Society of Queensland (1919, 1939) and the Queensland Naturalists' Club, Vice-Chairman of the Great Barrier Reef Committee, member of the Australian National Research Council, Fellow of the Linnean Society of London, Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, and corresponding member of the Zoological Society of London. Early in his career he published his book, *The Religion of a Naturalist* (London, 1911). In Longman's text we can see ancient ideas getting distorted in the modern interpretation; particularly demonstrated for the category of 'religion' from the contemporary work of Timothy Fitzgerald (2000). James Vincent Duhig (1889-1963) was another leading voice for a rigid-kind of modern rationalism in Queensland.

### Modern Classicism

There is a history in the revival of ancient philosophies. It is not new. It happened in the 'Renaissance' and the 'European Enlightenment'. It happened as the Classicist movement in the development of British 'public schools'. Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) was the principal architect, and writers, like Francis Adams (1862-1893), were fervid disciples. Will Morris (1878-1960) was the founding headmaster of the Church of England Grammar School (East Brisbane). John Cole, the biographer, claimed that Morris decried the creeping exclusiveness of some 'Great Public Schools' but the pedagogy betrayed Morris' confused idealism – his own interpreting of ancient stoicism for the modern age (referred further on).

There were different versions and interpretations of the Classics. John Barrett, the founder of St Joseph's College, Gregory Terrace, brought one version in the model of the 'Catholic gentlemen' from John Henry Newman's particular kind of Catholicity. The British education system was highly meritocratically elitist, with only the intellectually gifted able to move through the scholarship system. Reginald Heber Roe (1850-1926), headmaster of Brisbane Grammar School, and Queensland Inspector-General for Education, used the classicism to

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differentiate between those destined to higher education against those who were destined to technical education. The binary has created problems for educationalists over the centuries.

It is not that there was no counter-weight to classicism in Queensland. The alternative was just as bad, and only made the binary worse. Several of the Queensland leaders were pushing education in the utilitarian direction. Joseph McKenna, the Under-Secretary of the Queensland Department of Public Instruction (1923-1936), had a mission for an 'a sturdy and intelligent rural peasantry'. Herbert Watkin (1898-1966) was Director-General of Education (1957-1964). Although, in the end, he would oversee major reforms in the system, he had long held out in favour of the status quo, which had been set in place since McKenna's day. Queensland historians contributed significantly to the problem with a utilitarian-orientated 'Oxford View of History' which focused on economics and what is called 'Political Science'. Henry Alcock (1886-1948), as the first Professor of Modern History, established that perspective at the University of Queensland. The long historical affair was only exasperated in a 'Them versus Us' mentality. John Michie was the foundation Professor of Classics at the newly established University of Queensland and worked in collaboration Governor Sir William MacGregor, "...against the utilitarians, who wanted a university that would meet Queensland's practical requirements rather than one embodying traditional academic attitudes from the old world" (Malcolm Thomis, 1985).

Classicism seeped into Queensland culture. It was carved into the City Hall tympanum, created by Daphne Mayo (1895–1982), as a pageant of colonial conquest, known as, 'The Progress of Civilisation in the State of Queensland'. However, there was no straightforward relationship in the culture. John Manifold (1915–1985) was an unusual classicist, in that he was one of the leaders of the Brisbane Realist Writers' Group. These national writers can be seen as left-wing modernists attempting to re-connect to the old rural working-class roots; at least in the perspective of Manifold. In a sense, Manifold was trying to overcome the problematic binary. He was a strange mixture of high and low culture. Unfortunately, Manifold's vision suffered historiographically from the nostalgia of the romantic thinkers.

### **Stoicism**

Modern stoicism came of classicism in the long nineteenth century. One of the first to bring the stoic inculturation to Queensland was Will Morris. Morris was an ardent classicist, and viewed life from uncompromisingly romantic, heroic and idealistic perspectives. Those

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perspectives were distorted by the notion of 'muscular Christianity' and the nineteenth century British classical education with its reinterpretation of Spartan valuing; praising the rugged individual but rejecting sentimental collectivism.

### Concluding Remark

"I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care" (*Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*) is the Epicurean epitaph, which is not exact to what Epicurus said. The problem with modern readers is first the mistranslation, creating a too literal interpretation, but it is also that there is much nuance thought that has come over the centuries of interpretation and that is not understood. Lacking in the popular revival of stoicism is a detailed philosophy of care; what might be expected among the better modern theologians in the 'Jesus' tradition. Modern philosophers have also given better attention to concept of care (or as the studies are named, the 'ethics of care'). These philosophers include Carol Gilligan, and the important insight is that the idea of caring has changed since ancient times. Epicurus did have ideas of 'care' but in many ways the reader is presented with a patriarchal concept: "'He is your father.' This means that you are called upon to take care of him, give way to him in all things, bear with him if he reviles or strikes you" (30, trans. Matheson). Epicurus' ethical teachings had an indirect impact on utilitarianism in the nineteenth century, and that is the historical source of the local misunderstanding.

If the revival of ancient philosophies are to have value for the modern reader, the frame of therapy should be considered, but it cannot be left at that perspective. History is what is needed.

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