Booknotes

A question which worries many inside and outside philosophy is that of the relevance of philosophy to concerns outside the academy. Much of what is done as 'serious' philosophy seems to its critics to be pedantic, jargon-ridden, badly written and, in the bad sense, scholastic. Conversely would-be students of academic philosophy are often and quickly dissuaded by their professors from thinking that the philosophy they would study in university has anything to do with how life should be lived or with the meaning of life more generally. There is, though, a school of thought, often associated with the name of Pierre Hadot, to urge that it was not ever thus. Philosophy in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds was very much associated with determining how one should live, and philosophers were men of affairs and even emperors.

It would be pleasing to show, if we were able, that at least some modern men of affairs are philosophers, at least in the sense that Seneca and Marcus Aurelius were. Is it a sign of the times that two recent books have attempted to do just this, in the case of Gandhi and President Obama respectively. To take Gandhi first, Richard Sorabji's *Gandhi and the Stoics* (Oxford University Press, 2012) is engaging and illuminating, both about Gandhi himself and about Stoicism. Sorbaji does, of course, labour under one difficulty, which he admits right from the start, from the very first page, in fact. That is, that in arriving at his views, Gandhi was not actually influenced by the Stoics. Of Western thinkers, Ruskin (in 'Unto This Last'), Tolstoy and the Sermon on the Mount were directly influential on Gandhi, to say nothing of his debt to the Bhagavadgita, particularly as mediated by the Jain thinker Rajchandra. However, having formed his views and then having read the Stoics when he was in prison, what Ghandi did find was that his views 'chimed' with theirs, particularly on matters to do with universal benevolence, emotional detachment and on the need to attend to the particularities of the situations in which one finds oneself.

Sorabji claims that Gandhi was a true philosopher in the sense that he sought a consistent rationale for what he did, continually subjected his views to criticism, and, far more than many or even most philosophers, attempted to live out the implications of what he thought, while at the same time modifying his views in the light of experience. So for Gandhi, thought and practice formed a seamless whole – a very

doi:10.1017/S0031819112000587
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000587 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Stoic attitude, quite apart from the Stoic content of what he thought and did. Interestingly, while Sorabji comments Ghandi's practice of scrupulously modifying his views in response to new and unthought of situations – a practice Sorabji also discerns in ancient Stoicism – he criticises both Gandhi and the Stoics for the extent of their quest for emotional detachment, which leads both to a somewhat cold attitude to family relationships.

Sorabji's book is an original and fascinating attempt to uncover the philosophical practice underlying the life of a very public figure, and in doing so, he has much on interest to say both on ancient Stoicism and on Gandhi himself. What Sorabji does not do in his book is to change the subject. Whether we agree with him or not on the Stoic aspects of Gandhi life and thought, it is always clear that Gandhi is being considered in the light of a major philosophical tradition and its implications, all of which are taken seriously and in detail and in terms of what they actually say. Unfortunately Carlin Romano's *America the Philosophical*, (Alfred A.Knopf, New York, 2012) is able to scoop Obama and the Americans into a philosophical big tent only by a massive sleight of hand, which in effect simply changes the meaning of the word 'philosophical'. Indeed, Romano calling his tome 'America the Philosophical' would be a bit like calling a similar pot-pourri 'Wimbledon, the Home of Golf', and explaining that this is acceptable because by 'golf' we are going to mean tennis, and in any case golf is in the same general line of business as tennis. Both, after all, are games, just as what most people think of as philosophy and what Romano is calling 'philosophical' are both to do with using words to persuade people.

If this were just a matter of words meaning what I choose them to mean, in a vainglorious attempt to gain a few moments national attention, perhaps, it would not matter much. We simply could dismiss Professor Romano as the Humpty-Dumpty of Higher Education (he is 'Critic-at-Large' of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*) and move on to something else, reading some philosophy, perhaps. And perhaps it doesn't matter anyway. Few who don't have to will plough through most of Romano's 675 pages, filled as they are with tiresomely gossipy and wise-cracking pen-portraits of what seem like hundreds of thinkers of greater or lesser eminence in the world of American ideas.

Sample taken at random (from p. 501): 'Relaxing in a sparely furnished San Francisco townhouse he was sharing with friends, novelist and journalist Po Bronson, author of *The First $20 Million Is Always the Hardest: A Silicon Valley Novel*, figured as a literary pioneer in mainstreaming cyberculture. A long time player in the Bay Area's

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publishing world beyond his career as a writer… Bronson recalled a time when the literary community, while "writing left and right about all sorts of things, completely ignored this topic. They didn't see it as a real topic, a worthy topic," said the tousle-haired writer, whose hunky good looks – he resembled Richard Gere – were exploited on the back flap of *The First $20 Million…'* And so on, and on; good to know that Po's townhouse is sparely furnished, but one doubts that it, or indeed any of the other writers' apartments Romano allows us to glimpse, will ever achieve the fame, let alone the significance of a more famous sparely furnished room back in 1619.

Reference to Descartes' stove heated room takes us neatly to the serious and seriously contestable claim which underlies Romano's book. For the premise on which it is based is that in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Richard Rorty showed that the Western philosophical project, identified with Descartes, but actually dating back to Socrates and Plato is bankrupt. There are no eternal verities on such matters as truth, goodness, the nature of the mind or God, and certainly no arguments which will take us to them. Most of what passes for philosophy in the academic world, and most of the most professionally recognised philosophy has not realised this, or has not realised it sufficiently, and consists of what Romano charmingly calls 'a lineup of epistemology fanatics' (p. 157).

What has to be done in these circumstances is to follow Rorty rather than the epistemology fanatics of the academy, and, further back, the questioning rhetorician Isocrates of ancient Athens rather than that relentless pursuer of right answers, Socrates. This philosophical turn, philosophy stripped of epistemological hubris in Romano's phrase, would actually chime rather well with the characteristic American suspicion of formalistic argument, as well as with John Dewey's optimistic liberalism and endless problem solving untroubled by anything as hard edged as authoritative truth, and also with the Darwinism (which both Rorty and Dewey espoused), according to which we, and our theories, just survive (for a time) without being mirrors of the world or bringing with them criteria for their truth.

No doubt all this could be given a high-sounding philosophical articulation. Romano is straightforward at least, cutting to the quick. Philosophy, as he conceives it, and what makes *America The Philosophical*, is the practice of the sensible human persuasion of others without bowing to eternal human verities (p. 158), truth being a matter of decisions arising from consensus (p. 560). The little word 'eternal' is here all-important, for in decrying 'eternal' verities, Romano is implicitly embracing the view that 'truth' changes with

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the changing consensuses underlying the decisions made at one time or another. This view is what, in other circles, is known as relativism. This is why, in talking of persuasion, as we did earlier, it is critically important to distinguish persuasion by means of argument and attempted proof and demonstrated truth, or at least as close to truth as we can get, from persuasion without truth, persuasion by means of – well, persuasion. Only the former deserves the name of philosophy, for the rest is the stuff of journalistic ephemera, advertising, myth-making and political propaganda.

Romano's discussion of John Rawls is instructive at this point. He does spend some time outlining Rawls's theory of justice and giving objections to it, and showing how, over the years Rawls's modified his position to a more consensualist, less foundationalist view. Indeed Romano not only devotes more space to Rawls than to almost anyone else, save perhaps Rorty and Susan Sontag (more on her shortly); rather rarely for this book, the reader unacquainted with the thought of the thinker in question might actually get some reasonable grasp of what Rawls is on about from Romano's discussion. Romano concludes, though, that in the end Rawls' theory of justice does not work in its own terms. But, rather worse, nor, for all the academic work he has generated and for all his undoubted philosophical ability, did Rawls manage 'to convince Americans of principles they choose not to accept' (p. 560). 'Sophisticated academic philosophy (failed) to "justify" Americans into philosophical unanimity, rather than catalys(ing) us into brash nitpickers who make the US the world's top agora of arguers.' (p. 590)

Criticising Rawls in this way is rather like blaming Kant for not having convinced the European powers of the Napoleonic era that making peace might be better than making war. It says nothing whatever about the validity of the categorical imperative or indeed of Kant's fundamental distinction between the human world and the world of science. So Rawls could still be right, despite failing to engage the general American public, for which Romano castigates him. However, the final nail in Rawls' coffin, according to Romano, is that by now not even his most devoted students are still able to defend him. But if this is indeed so (and from where we stand it certainly does not seem to be), might not the reason be that Rawls' particular brand of left-liberal theorising is just a wrong account of justice, a case of persuasive re-definition rather than a sound philosophical analysis? In which case, having discovered that it is wrong, what we would have is actually a profoundly important philosophical result. One can hardly find a socialist or social democratic politician in the western world who is not even now attempting

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to implement some version of Rawls' vision of justice, and will, like as not, attempt to defend what he or she is doing by appeal to Rawlsian considerations about fairness. But if what Romano tells us is true, then they are all wrong, and disastrously wrong, because their welfarist policies impinge on millions.

Actually it is to say the least unlikely that Romano actually disagrees with the general tenor of Rawls' thought. If there is an ideology underlying his book (and there surely is), it is the secularist, materialistic and relativistic non-judgementalism which so characterises our time, or at least our time as refracted through the organs of ostensibly educated opinion. It is only that, unlike Rawls and the philosophers, Romano doesn't believe that it (or anything else) can be given a philosophical basis. The best we can do, it appears, is to engage in attempts at mutual persuasion about whatever happens to seem important at the time. So, into his philosophical arena are welcomed figures as diverse as Hugh Hefner, Christopher Hitchens, Edward Said, Bill Moyers, Robert Coles, Paul Fussell, Max Lerner and, at greatest length of all, the already mentioned Susan Sontag, to say nothing of assorted cyber-thinkers, gays, women, Native Americans, African Americans (men) and African American women. Nothing wrong with a big tent, of course, but the way Romano attempts to fill it is the profoundly unphilosophical one of scouring his various categories to find figures to fill it largely on the basis of their possessing what in UK equality law we have come think of as 'protected' characteristics, rather than on the cogency or originality of what they have to say. And when a figure of orthodox or accepted philosophical provenance makes it into the big tent, she'd better be careful; Martha Nussbaum (from 'women') is ticked off for 'emulating the bloodless style of her former teacher and colleague and colleague Rawls, for Rawlsian abstraction had its limits in an America that demanded facts, vitamins, fireworks and color in its thinky prose.' (p. 418)

As might be expected, though, Romano's philosophical big tent is not as capacious as America itself. There appear to be few if any explicitly religious thinkers in it, and certainly no proselytizing evangelicals or doctrinal Catholics. Islam is conspicuous by its absence, as are tea-partyers, right to lifers and opponents of gay marriage. There may be a gesture at even handedness in the sense that Ayn Rand and Camille Paglia are included (like Professor Nussbaum, included under 'women', which would have infuriated Rand), and Said and Chomsky are chided for extremism. But while Hannah Arendt and Harold Bloom are in, the equally significant Allan Bloom and Leo Strauss are not, apart from a couple of mentions in passing. And where is Tom Wolfe, to balance Sontag's erstwhile hero-worship of

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Castro and Guevara and her estimation of North Vietnam as enjoying a genuine, substantive democracy 'much of the time'? The trouble is that Romano, having stood the philosophical establishment down pretty well *en bloc* has no real criterion for those he wants to admit into the American Philosophical. In case anyone were still in doubt by page 596, their minds would be finally put at rest by an epilogue of truly monumental bathos in which, on the basis of some crowd pleasingly emollient but scarcely profound or challenging presidential speeches (written by whom?), President Obama is styled the nation's 'philosopher in chief'.

President Obama is not George W. Bush. No doubt Romano and people who think like him are grateful for that, but, it hardly makes him a Marcus Aurelius (c.f. Romano, p. 605). Unlike Sorabji on Gandhi, Romano makes no attempt to show anything actually or substantially in common between the President and the Emperor beyond a very generalised common commitment to cosmopolitanism, which in Obama's case is little more than the standard liberalism of our day. Nor does he show that the President is intellectually or philosophically on the same level as David Lewis or Saul Kripke or Thomas Nagel or Jaegwon Kim or Alvin Plantinga, American philosophers mentioned by Romano only *en passant* or not at all, but who have wrestled manfully and with hard won originality with some of the deepest problems of logic and metaphysics, with the nature of language and of mind, and with God – matters which hardly seem to register on the Romano radar, but whose rational pursuit is what makes the truly philosophical game one worthy of playing. But all this is hard, hard, hard, and hardly to be communicated to the great American or indeed any public in 'thinky' prose or indeed without working on it. Of course there are professional deformations surrounding academic philosophy, and, given the nature of the difficulties, the timelessness of themes and the limitations of our minds, there are unlikely to be final solutions to any of the major questions. But to think that these things are worth pursuing at the highest level is not a symptom of epistemological fanaticism. It is rather a sign that just occasionally, even in liberal and pragmatic America, even in Romano's book, the revellers might be reminded of the existence of another, more serious way of experiencing. Thus the egregious Sontag (of all people) described the effect of the mere presence of Goethe at a certain dinner party in Naples in 1787. But, as Sontag pointed out with uncanny accuracy, to Sir William and the future Lady Hamilton and the others at that dinner, every Goethean gesture was a *reproach*, rather as even a page of any decent philosophy would be to *America the Philosophical*.

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