Booknotes

In 1990 Hilary Putnam wrote that 'it cannot be the case that scientific knowledge (future fundamental physics) is absolute and nothing else is; for fundamental physics cannot explain the possibility of referring to or stating anything, including fundamental physics itself'. Readers of *Philosophy* will also be aware of Thomas Nagel's doubts about the ability of our current modes of scientific and philosophical thinking to encompass the subjective at all (expressed most recently in our current issue). Even after the most strenuous efforts of contemporary philosophy of mind, many continue to feel cheated: has anything been said which throws light on just how it is that consciousness, thought and reference are possible? Have subjectivity and the intentionality of thinking been adequately characterized?

Perhaps after Putnam, Nagel and latterly McGinn, some of these questions may not seem as scandalous in 1998 as they might have done a decade or so ago. What, though, would be scandalous is the feeling that any of the questions are new, or that there is anything particularly original in our attempts to articulate them. It is a virtue of Andrew Bowie's *From Romanticism to Critical Theory* (Routledge 1997) that in it we see clearly that thoughts our generation is struggling to express almost *de novo*, as it were, were actually the common coin of the romantic thinkers of the early nineteenth century, figures such as Novalis, Schlegel, and Jacobi, who are almost totally neglected by philosophers. As Novalis put it in Kantian mode, 'Can I look for a schema for myself, if I am that which schematizes?' If we feel that not much progress has been made on this point, it may be worth recalling that Novalis also wrote (two hundred years before McGinn) that 'if the character of a given problem is insolubility, then we solve the problem by representing its insolubility'.

As Novalis puts it, representing consciousness would require—*per impossible*—that the image is painted in the position it paints itself. While we need a subject to make language more than a system of uninterpreted signs, the attempt to express this necessarily escapes the objectification of language. Or rather once it is expressed the act of origination loses its quality as act. The romantics looked to art rather than science or philosophy at this point.

How then can art help us in our predicament? The romantic idea seems to be that art (including poetry) continually renews language and expression, reminding us that forms are not fixed, but have their origins in an originating consciousness. Art reveals the disclosing and originating aspects of thought and expression, or it should do. The question, though, is what sort of art?

In certain hands, this all leads to heavy-duty sociological theorizing about the repression of language and about the alienation of bourgeois society and, in the artistic sphere, to the charlatanism of Josef Beuys, and the meretriciousness of Goldsmiths' College art and the Turner prize. Encouragingly, perhaps, one of Bowie's heroes is Wilhelm Furtwängler,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819198000114 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the conductor whose by now fifty or sixty year old recordings still convey to us the sense that the works of Beethoven, Schubert and Wagner are being created new and originally. Furtwängler's performances somehow contrive the illusion that they are essentially exploratory, even as we listen to them for the two hundredth time, and that in the works being performed we find something of what it is the romantics were seeking as they came up against the limits of language. That the autonomous subject could find such a powerful evocation in the concert halls of Berlin in the 1930's and 1940's *and* in works from the past suggests that truly original and revelatory art and, indeed, human freedom are less dependent on either a social context or on novelty than most so-called critical theory suggests. Bowie's book, interesting as it is, prompts the desire for a definitive account of the ethical, aesthetic and philosophical limitations of 'critical theory'.

One truth which 'critical theory' finds particularly hard to accommodate is the fact that where art has flourished it has often been in societies which are both authoritarian and non-egalitarian—as if the freedom and community which art expresses are ones which go deeper than the sociological and the political. To what extent might something similar be true of philosophy? This would seem to be an interesting question to consider as we move into the twenty-first century, after perhaps a half century or so of philosophy often expressly committed to conceptions of democracy, equality and universal human rights. Unfortunately, it is not one which is considered in any depth in *Teaching Philosophy on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century*. This is a thoroughly worthy and truly global collection of essays published in Ankara by the International Federation of Philosophy Societies and edited by David Evans and Ionna Kuçuradi. In the opening essay, and developing what is a widely held view both of philosophy and of democracy, Matthew Lipman says that 'democracy cannot flourish if its citizens are uncritical.' Philosophy is conceived as the means by which the citizenry is led to engage in criticism, rethink morality and generally become more modern and enlightened, justifying 'their distrust of authoritarian, non-egalitarian practices'. Not all the contributors in the book are in agreement with Lipman's views on teaching philosophy, but thoughts along these lines are explicitly or implicitly present in a number of the articles.

But what if, as at least one philosopher thought he had discovered 'it is important that as few people as possible should think about morality'? (Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 228: because such thinking is mostly soporific and where it is not, it is likely to be calamitous.) What if, in Platonic mode, the pursuit of philosophy leads to a thoroughgoing critique of United Nations human rightism? What if, contra Lipman, philosophy (and experience) lead to a measured distrust of certain non-authoritarian and egalitarian practices? Perhaps a future FISP volume might consider what philosophers from different parts of the globe think of these questions.

Another question unexplored in the FISP collection is what students of philosophy actually think of what they are taught. It is curious that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819198000114 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there are few publications which actually explore or articulate the views of students themselves. One honourable exception is *Sussex Philosophy*, a quarterly newsletter put out by the philosophers at Sussex University. It is an entertaining and attractively presented but not unserious mix of items from faculty and students, past and present. It actually gives the flavour of what it is like to be and to have been a student of philosophy at Sussex, as well as to all appearance engendering a lively sense of academic and social community. In these days of desk-top publishing etc., etc., other departments might like to copy. *(Sussex Philosophy* can be obtained from Professor Margaret Boden at the School of Cognitive and Computing Sciences, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9Q4.)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819198000114 Published online by Cambridge University Press