Booknotes

It is a commonplace that students (and teachers) of analytical philosophy learn little about wisdom, or indeed about the history of philosophy as a discipline searching for wisdom. Rather less common are sustained attempts to account for this state of affairs. This is unsettling enough in itself, in that it makes it hard to see that philosophers of to-day are actually in the same line of country as Plato or Aristotle or Augustine or Spinoza or even Nietzsche. But equally unsettling is the absence of philosophical explanations for this change in the ambition of philosophy, as it argues a degree of unreflectiveness on the part of those whose main professional concern is supposed to be self-reflectiveness.

In this context Nicholas Capaldi's *The Enlightenment Project in the Analytic Conversation* (Kluwer, 1998) is to be welcomed, for, though not expressed in those terms it is very much about why philosophy has ceased to be a quest for wisdom. Capaldi's thesis is that the Enlightenment ushered in a conception of human nature and, hence, of philosophy which is in a deep sense suicidal to philosophy. What goes under the name of analytic philosophy to-day is the descendent of that conception.

The enlightenment conception involves naturalism (the world of nature is self-explanatory, needing no divine agency; we understand ourselves as part of the world of nature), scientism (physics is the basic science and human self-understanding secondary and derivative); empiricism (experience is to be construed not phenomenologically, but as the internal processing of external physical structures); dissolution of the self (putative subjects are actually concatenations of sub-objects which are not selves); and the fact-value distinction (theoretical knowledge is primary; value judgements do not refer to structures independent of agents).

In its denial of selfhood and insistence on the primacy of scientific investigation, this conception of human nature makes a certain type of philosophy impossible. In particular it makes it impossible to treat the preconceptual basis of any type of experience or knowledge (including scientific knowledge) as itself constituting knowledge or pointing to truths not accessible in scientific enquiry. It would make the type of reflection in which Plato engages in *Phaedo* illegitimate, mere 'folk psychology' or 'stone age metaphysics', as indeed it would be if we were no more than aggregates of matter responding to stimuli from other bits of matter.

Enlightenment pyschology also, according to Capaldi, has political and social consequences. The ultimate goal of human existence is happiness in this life (so, utilitarianism and secularisation). The institutional practices most conducive to the happiness in question are individual rights, market economies, the rule of law and toleration of (rationally undecidable) ultimate ends. Human beings are to be understood mechanistically; hence evil behaviour is the result of bad socialisation. Social technology can create utopia, provided that it is run by enlightened administrators and technicians.

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Of course there remains a tension between the libertarian-free market version of Enlightenment thinking and its collectivist-socialistic political wing. But actually both are ideal types. In most countries of the affluent West, we live in a 'Third Way' in which the market maximizes individual choice at the consumer level at the same time as a new élite maps out our cultural and, in the broad sense, philosophical landscape. As Capaldi puts it, 'this new élite comprises engineers, doctors, lawyers, educators, accountants, statisticians, air traffic controllers, etc., in a word, technicians. This group is the élite not only because it plays a key role in the maintenance of our institutions but because it believes itself capable of exercising the role of critically reviewing our fundamental cultural values. It believes that it deserves to exercise this critical function because it is rational, methodical, and liberated from past traditions.'

A technicist, historically unreflective ethos also pervades analytical philosophy. Philosophy ceases to explicate the existential and moral foundations of our living together. Instead it produces quasi-scientific theories, more interested in their 'results' and implications than in what makes it possible that we might be doing philosophy or science or any other activity. Yet despite immense labour, sophistication of input and intellectual brilliance, the results have been minimal (if 'results' are what we are interested in). 'Think', says Capaldi, 'of the abandoned enterprises of Frege, Russell, Carnap, Davidson, Chomsky, etc. It would be difficult to imagine physicists honouring their colleagues for hypotheses that failed to work.'

The upshot is not just a crisis in analytic philosophy itself (though not, it has to be said, a crisis many of its most successful practitioners would recognize as such). It is that 'analytical philosophy has abrogated the traditional role of philosophy in higher education of providing an integrated view of knowledge and values, of the humanities, and of higher education itself. It has abandoned this role to philistines, political ideologues, and to utopian technocrats'. We are thus deprived of 'the major institutional resource for reconstituting our culture'.

This is strong stuff, but it is cogently argued by someone who has a formidable grasp of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Professional philosophers ought to attend to what Capaldi is saying, although it is a consequence of his analysis that they will not, because they have been trained not to take seriously the questions he is raising. Analytical philosophy will doubtless go on, as will other aspects of our technicised culture, and in matters of medical ethics, politics and the rest, analytical philosophers will continue to give the technicists the advice they want to hear.

But all is not therefore hopeless. Cultures have rarely been reconstituted by 'institutional resources'. Perhaps the thought that our culture could or should be is a vestige of Enlightenment thinking in Capaldi himself. Rather than *aude sapere, for* those persuaded in any way by Capaldi, or for other reasons mistrustful of our Enlightened institutions, *aude exire* might be the best advice.

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