

## *Epilogue      Stove on Why Have Philosophers?*

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*This is David Stove's review of Selwyn Grave's History of Philosophy in Australia (1984)*

THE author of this book was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Western Australia from 1961 to 1981. He is so absurdly modest a man that his own name is not mentioned once in the book, although he gives space to scores of lesser lights than himself. Never mind: his name will not be forgotten now, at least while philosophy survives in Australia. For philosophy feeds constantly on its own history, and Selwyn Grave has written a splendid history of philosophy in this country up to 1980. How this feat was possible in a book of 252 pages, I do not understand. Grave combines institutional and individual history with detailed accounts of many hundreds of articles, books and conversations. He leaves out very little of importance, and is always accurate and fair, and still contrives at the same time to be readable. Since he has done it, it would be idle to brood over how he could possibly have done it. But the labour entailed by first surveying, and then organising and compressing the material of this book, can have been nothing short of colossal.

What impression such a book must make on non-philosophers, I tremble to think. All these inexpressibly weird questions, about numbers, properties, individuals, space, time, causation, minds, possibility, probability, necessity, obligation, reasons, laws, God ... Not only are the questions weird individually, but collectively they form a mere chaos, defying all attempts to reduce them to a rational sequence. And then, none of the questions ever seem to get finally answered. It is a distressing scene, when you stand back and look at the whole of it. What is most painful about it is, the contrast it

presents with science, looked at as a whole. In fact it is scarcely possible for anyone, reading a book like this, not to wonder why there should be such things as philosophers at all; or at least to wonder why there should be so many of them, all paid huge amounts of money taken from other and more useful people.

The latter question is absolutely unanswerable, in my opinion. But the former I believe I can answer. The vital clue to keep hold of is that people, and that includes all scientists, are only people after all: poor forked complicated creatures like yourself. Take Professor AB, our distinguished geneticist, member of the such-and-such, winner of the so-and-so: what a very clever man *he* must be! Well, so he is, in a way, but he is no glassy essence of genetic knowledge; he is lots of other things as well, and one of them is, that he happens to be a Methodist half-wit. Or take CD, a top physicist; but he also happens to take Uri Geller seriously, or believes that the latest physics vindicates Berkeley's spiritualistic philosophy. Professor EF of pure mathematics, approaching retirement, begins to drive his busy colleagues wild by asking questions like 'What the hell are numbers, anyway?' GH finished up as an economist but the mainspring of his life was a vision he picked up from some 19th century philosophers, of a paradise in which 'the toiling masses' come into their own. (He hasn't noticed that, where he lives, they knocked off toiling long ago.) The Professor of History, IJ, cannot always silence his own perplexities about historical inevitability, and finds himself asking, as philosophers do, what the truth-conditions are of a statement like 'Hitler would have won the war, if he had not attacked Russia'. KL, the Professor of Medicine, is drawn by his own new technology, if by nothing else, into agonised deliberations about the duties of a doctor to his patients. And so on.

In other words, intelligent people, left to themselves, will philosophise anyway, late or soon, whatever special field of intellectual work they are engaged in, or even if they are engaged in none. The impulse to philosophy is in fact so natural and so strong that nothing is known, short of totalitarian terror, which can absolutely repress it. In a non-totalitarian society, then, philosophy *will* be done, and the only remaining practical question is how, or by whom, it is likely to be done best.

And here comes in the final fact. There are philosophers who have thought longer and better about the ethics of medicine than the professor of medicine ever had time to do. There are philosophers who have thought longer and better about the two-slit experiment than physicists have. There are philosophers who have thought longer and better about the foundations of mathematics than a mathematician is ever likely to do. And so on. I am conscious that a

philosopher cannot say this of his profession without betraying a certain arrogance. Nevertheless it is literal truth. And it is a sufficient justification for the existence of a class of persons especially trained in philosophy.

As a class, philosophers are never well-regarded by their university colleagues. The charge against us used to be, that we were lost in cloudy generalities. Nowadays it is usually the reverse: that we neglect 'the great questions' in favour of minute and pointless technicalities. This charge is not true, but it is entirely understandable that it should be made. The standard of rigour in philosophy has risen very steeply in the present century, and this fact on its own is sufficient to account for the breaking-up of single big questions into many smaller ones, and the consequent slowing down of the whole process.

To the outsider, who cannot see the wood for the trees, the business naturally looks as though it could never have the remotest connection with anything that matters, so a theoretical chemist, for example, is apt to look at you and think, 'There goes another blasted philosopher: what *do* we feed those fellows for?' Well, such thoughts are not irrational; but they are wrong. At the same time as they despise us, our colleagues are also rather afraid of us. This too is not without a rational foundation! In argument of any kind, philosophers are *hard men* (some of whom are women), and most people do not care to tangle with us more than once or twice. In our company, as in another and more famous company of which the national poet sang, 'The man that holds his own is good enough'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> D. Stove, 'Why have philosophers?', *Quadrant* 29 (7) (July 1985): pp. 82–3; other philosophers on philosophy in B. Muscio, 'Our philosophical heritage', *AJPP* 2 (1924): pp. 153–63; H. Laurie, 'A plea for philosophy', *Victorian Review* 5 (Nov 1881): pp. 76–89; D. Braddon-Mitchell & J. Thomas, 'I earn therefore I am', *Australian Society* 8 (8) (Aug 1989): pp. 28–31; D.M. Armstrong, 'Continuity and change in philosophy', *Quadrant* 17 (5–6) (Dec 1973): pp. 19–23; J.J.C. Smart, 'Why philosophers disagree', in *Méta-philosophie: Reconstructing Philosophy?*, ed. J. Couture & K. Nielsen (Calgary, 1993), pp. 67–82; J. Passmore, 'Demarcating philosophy', in *Méta-philosophie*, pp. 107–25; A.B. Palma, 'Philosophizing', *Philosophy* 66 (1991): pp. 41–51.

