

Preface

DOES life have a meaning, and if so what is it? What can I be certain of, and how should I act when I am not certain? Why are the established truths of my tribe better than the primitive superstitions of your tribe? Why should I do as I'm told? These are questions it is easy to avoid, in the rush to acquire a water frontage. Even for many of a more serious outlook, they are easy to dismiss with excuses like 'it's all a matter of opinion' or 'let's get on with practical matters' or 'they're too hard'. They are questions that may be ignored, but they do not go away.

A small proportion of the population pursue the answers to these questions through philosophy. Philosophy doubts whether rushing ahead with practical matters is a good idea, in advance of deciding which practical matters are important, and which direction is forward. It believes that some opinions are better than others, and that it is possible to give logical reasons as to why. It inquires as to the value of water frontages, vis à vis the range of other goods proper to human nature.

Those who cultivate philosophy fall into two groups. They are the youth, and philosophers.

In the small window between the end of unquestioning childhood and the onset of the terminal busyness of working life, the inquiring young are willing for a year or two to examine their fundamental assumptions, and perhaps take on new ones. Their search may be ill-directed or incompetent, but can be intense for a time, and adults offering philosophical or religious opinions find a ready audience. In the normal course of psychological development, some world view or lack of it is found serviceable and workaday reality supervenes. But a few discover in themselves a special aptitude for the way of ideas, and become professional philosophers. They become the teachers and writers who provide the next generation with its smorgasbord of options.

The emotional charge of the big questions that philosophy examines makes the relationship between philosophy teachers and their students a powerful one, irrespective of whether the teachers are any good (or good). When the citizens of Athens condemned Socrates to death in 399 BC on a charge of corrupting the youth, they recognised the power of ideas to change what the rising generation might believe, and how they might act. When the New South Wales Parliament in 1943 condemned Professor John Anderson's statements on religion and education as 'calculated to undermine the principles which constitute a Christian State', they were well aware that the state's future schoolteachers had access to philosophical ideas almost entirely through him. When German disabled persons in wheelchairs prevented the Australian philosophy professor Peter Singer from speaking in 1991, it was because they feared his views on the permissibility of killing babies might come to be accepted — and with some reason, since his book *Practical Ethics* is widely used in university courses.

This is the story of Australian philosophers, both in their thinking and in how their thought and action influenced their students. It is a story of some remarkable achievements, of insights and arguments that truly advanced understanding of perennially difficult questions. David Armstrong's work on laws of nature, and Rai Gaita's on the foundations of ethics in the preciousness of human life, are among permanent contributions to understanding reality at the most abstract level.

Not all is sweetness and light, however. Because philosophy deals with fundamentals, to which the human mind is not very well adapted either through evolution or education, there is always disagreement about what counts as good philosophy and what as bad. Philosophy is peculiarly susceptible to an illusion like white-out in the Antarctic, where the horizon seems to be just beyond what one can see. Consequently, almost everyone who has heard of philosophical questions thinks he can judge philosophy. So philosophical reputations are often decided by popular vote, for example by totalling the adulation of undergraduates. The book contains, therefore, as well as admirable thinkers, some fast-talking charlatans and some gullible disciples, and between the two, an extraordinary quantity of overheated air.

We begin the story with the arrival of John Anderson in 1927 as Professor of Philosophy at Sydney University. Although there was an older tradition of Idealist philosophy, and long before that an Aboriginal philosophy of the land (which will be treated in their place), Anderson's arrival marked a sharp break which set Australian philosophy on its characteristic course. His philosophy was realist (in the

sense of being concerned with the ways of working of real things in the world, rather than having our ideas as the central focus of philosophy), materialist, atheist and more interested in criticism than in synthesis or moral uplift. Sydney philosophy, especially but not uniquely, has maintained those biases.

There were of course alternatives to the Andersonian style. There was Catholic philosophy — also realist, indeed more so when it came to the objectivity of ethical truths; though it had little impact in universities, it later inspired the High Court judges in the Mabo case to draw from the ethical underpinning of the law a reason for overturning the doctrine of *terra nullius*. Melbourne also resisted the Andersonian trend. The old Idealism survived longer there, and merged with the influence of an overseas guru, Wittgenstein, to produce a distinctive style of philosophy more attuned to ethics, commentary on public issues and history than the hard-edged and scientific thinking of Sydney. The University of Tasmania's efforts to keep out of the orbit of Sydney atheism led it to appoint a third-rate Christian philosopher from Melbourne, Sydney Sparkes Orr, whose affair with a student created a scandal that grabbed headlines for a decade.

But philosophy does not exist only in the classroom and adjoining offices, conference rooms and cloisters. Many of those who come into contact with philosophers in their youth take away fundamental reorientations about what is important, and follow life courses that are to one degree or another implementations of philosophical ideas. So before moving to more recent times, we examine a number of issues where the reach of philosophical ideas extends deep into ordinary life. First, the libertarian excesses of the celebrated Sydney 'Push' were a living out of at least one interpretation of the ethical views of their teacher, John Anderson, and were at the leading edge of 'The Sixties'. The second of these issues is the mind, a traditional topic of philosophy and more recently of psychiatry, psychology, literature and artificial intelligence. The theory of 'Australian materialism', that the mind is nothing over and above the brain and its workings, has been common among philosophers and some medical practitioners, but others have emphasised how unique and unlike matter the ways of the mind are. A last topic is even further from academic life. The Australian colonies were planned foundations of the age of Enlightenment, in which there was never an established church. Secular education therefore sought a replacement for religion, a philosophy to inspire the youth in the paths of virtue. It adopted a series of ideas — the Empire, the ancient classics, the Anzacs, sport, improving literature — which have moulded Australian ways of thinking in deep but unacknowledged ways.

In later chapters, as the story of professional philosophy moves beyond the small and comparatively coherent world of the mid-century, there is inevitably a certain fragmentation, as specialised, sometimes inward-looking schools have taken up particular issues. Australian achievements in realist philosophy of science have been outstanding, though little known to the public. Feminism and environmental philosophy have been at least popular. Ethics, though, has had the highest profile in recent years, as befits the importance of its subject matter. Peter Singer became Australia's best-known philosopher as a result of unusual views such as the permissibility of infanticide. Argument over euthanasia still turns more on essential philosophical disagreements than on differing estimates of the practical consequences of changing the law.

As these examples make clear, fundamentals are dangerous, in that changes in them have consequences that reach far into the depths of thought and conduct, and far into the future. That is why philosophy matters, and why knowledge of a country's philosophical past is the surest guide to where it is going.

The book has two unusual features. It is long on quotes, and it is full of footnotes. Philosophers are word-oriented people and at their best write very well. With careful selection, a book on philosophy can bring readers face to face with the thing itself: raw and well-written philosophy, without the need for dilution or homogenisation by clumsy paraphrase. The many footnotes are not for reading. They are a window into the huge mass of material that has been written in Australia on important ideas. For one thing, since a reference in this book is the only chance for many of those ideas to avoid oblivion, there is an ethical requirement to give them their opportunity. And some of the stories to be told would hardly be believable but for the invitation to consult the source. But the main reason for supplying so many footnotes is to avoid the narrowness of so many books on Australian ideas. At the very time when internet-skilled readers are used to a network of links to further information, book publishers press authors to prune footnotes to a minimum, and authors respond with a mass of poorly-supported opinions on a familiar range of topics. A real book on ideas does not hide the sources from its readers, but displays them.