

Philosophy in Sydney

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Let me tell you what philosophy is about, then about how Sydney does it in its own special way.

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? Those are questions it's easy to avoid, in the rush to acquire goods and prestige. Even for many of a more serious outlook, they are questions 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.

They're philosophical questions. There's a right way to approach them – you read the writings of the classical and recent philosophers and consider carefully their arguments back and forth. There are many wrong ways to approach them, such as choosing at random among the ideas your parents or friends or gurus have, or ideas that feel good. Or you can just not bother.

Sydney has a certain reputation for superficiality in this regard. A character in David Williamson's *Emerald City* says "No-one in Sydney ever wastes time debating the meaning of life — it's getting yourself a water frontage", says If you have a Writers Festival or a conference on Happiness in Sydney, you don't normally expect philosophers to be invited. Caroline Jones' radio series, 'The Search for Meaning',

elicited the opinions of environmentalists, artists' models, former prime ministers and herbalists, but not of any philosophers. My book, [*Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia*](#), which is focussed on Sydney, was reviewed in *The Age* and *The Australian*, but not in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, where the literary editor didn't think readers would be interested.

Still, I don't know... A lot of people turned up to see Alain de Botton at the Opera House, and last year there were an amazing number of people reading Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* on the bus. Dawkins may be bad at philosophy – well, he *is* bad at philosophy – but he was certainly arguing directly about one of the classic philosophical issues, Does God exist?

And Sydney was, in a certain sense, started as a philosophical experiment. It was to get rid of convicts, sure, but there was also a high-minded vision about what should happen to them when they got here, based on Enlightenment concepts of the reformability of humanity. You can see what it was in the first seal of New South Wales. On 21 September 1791, the colony was delighted by the arrival of His Majesty's Ship *Gorgon*, bearing a quantity of food, fruit trees and cows, and a public [seal](#), extremely well executed in silver. It bore 'a representation of convicts landing in Botany Bay, received by Industry [that is, an allegorical figure in a toga], who, surrounded by her attributes, a bale of merchandize, a beehive, a pickaxe, and a shovel, is releasing them from their fetters, and pointing to oxen ploughing, and a town rising on the summit of a hill ... and for a motto, "Sic fortis Etruria crevit",' [Thus Etruria grew strong] a quotation from the description of the Golden Age in the second book of Virgil's *Georgics*. Amazing. The plan had some success, too, with a surprising number of petty thieves

turning into respectable citizens. That is very unlike the religious formations from which the United States grew. Australia has continued to have a more secular approach to its institutions, that is, philosophical as opposed to religious,. There was no established church, Sydney Grammar School and the universities were secular foundations, the state education systems were non-religious.

Whatever may be true of the philosophical shortcomings of the average Sydneysider, Sydney philosophers themselves have made a big contribution, and a distinctive one, well recognised in the wider philosophical world. We need to start with [John Anderson](#), Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney for thirty years from 1927. He was Sydney's best-known academic. He dominated the higher reaches of Sydney intellectual life for those thirty years. His students played a leading role for another thirty, not only in academia, but in politics, law, journalism and teaching.

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). It was also materialist, atheist and more interested in criticism than in synthesis or moral uplift. Sydney philosophy, especially but not uniquely, has maintained those biases.

Let me explain: to be *realist* about something, say ethics, as opposed to idealist or constructivist, is to believe it really exists, as opposed to being "in the eye of the beholder". So what about, say, forces? Among the items in the world, such as physical objects, are there also forces – or are they just a way of talking about something else, e.g.

accelerations? Here's an argument for realism about forces: put your two index fingers together lightly. Now press twice as hard. It feels different. There's no movement in either case. So you've felt a force. Therefore forces really exist. (Or ... do they? Did you really feel just a difference in shape of the fingers? ...) Well, that's the kind of debate they have in philosophy – in the part of philosophy that looks at the foundations of science.

Anderson was also a *materialist* (meaning he thought there were only material things, not such items as immaterial minds or souls, angels, or disembodied numbers) and atheist (meaning he didn't believe in any sort of God). That created trouble in the atmosphere of the 1930s and 1940s. His statements on why education should be free of religion were condemned by the New South Wales Parliament 1943 as “calculated to undermine the principles which constitute a Christian State”. His ideas *were* “calculated to undermine” Christian principles in both senses of “calculated”: Anderson calculated they would, and they were in the absolute calculated, as in likely, to undermine them. Good to see a Parliament troubled by philosophy – and rightly: they were well aware that the state's future schoolteachers had access to philosophical ideas almost entirely through him.

And Anderson had a view of philosophy itself as primarily *critical*. He wrote:

The work of the academic, qua academic, is criticism; and whatever his special field may be, his development of independent views will bring him into conflict with prevailing opinions and customary attitudes in the public arena and not merely among his fellow-professionals.

It was said, “John Anderson had an answer to every conceivable question. It was 'No'.”

One follower wrote “As regards students, Anderson contended that the morality of criticism would reject the current talk of their 'corruption'. If this 'corruption' means a departure from established views on the part of students, then the job of the university is to corrupt the youth.”

He got on with that task himself, having an affair with a 2nd-year undergrad whom he eventually appointed a lecturer in his department.

This is a quote from [David Stove](#), a Sydney philosopher who was a student of Anderson and admired his work, while believing his influence was morally bad. It gets to the point of what philosophy is for:

The influence Anderson exercised was purely, or as purely as a human influence can be, purely intellectual. I never felt anything like the force of his intellect. Disagreeing with Anderson was (to compare it with something most people have experienced), like playing chess against someone altogether above your own class. Your strongest pieces are, you cannot tell how, drained of all their powers, while on his side even pawns can do unheard-of things; and as though by invisible giant fingers, you are quickly crushed ... He was in love with philosophy himself, and he communicated the love of it to others so effectively that many will have it while they live. This is the greatest service he did.

Yet for every person whom he made a philosopher he left ten people, I should say, with a respect for philosophy, and a recollection of what it is like to wrestle in earnest with desperately difficult intellectual questions. This may not sound much, but I think it is much. Whoever can remember what serious

thinking is like, is to some extent armed against all the enemies of education. He is armed against the acknowledged leaders of the war against education, the educationists. He is armed against educational levellers of every kind. And he is armed against systems, such as Marxism, which pretend to answer every question out of a little holy catechism, and which just for that reason often act like a revelation on unfurnished minds.

One independent thinker who studied with Anderson and wrote of his influence was Sir John Kerr.

Then there was the [Sydney Push](#), a group of intellectuals who hung around several Sydney pubs in the late 50s and early 60s, drinking and debating the evils of what they called “moralism”. They were, in Barry Humphries’ words, “a fraternity of middle-class desperates, journalists, drop-out academics, gamblers and poets *manqués*, and their doxies’. And according to feminists, a lot of sexist bastards. True, all true. But they had a number of Anderson’s students among them and they went in for some serious criticism. They had a influence they didn’t expect in creating “The Sixties”. One of their core members, Germaine Greer, produced one of the most influential Sixties books, *The Female Eunuch*. It’s unusual among the feminist books of the time in not being about reform. “Privileged women will pluck at your sleeve and seek to enlist you in the ‘fight’ for reforms, but reforms are retrogressive.” As with all true Andersonians, it’s all *criticism*.

Let's have a break: and do something more abstract and less personal. And get back to less emotionally charged questions, like whether forces exist. Two of Anderson's main students to become philosophers were [David Armstrong](#) and David Stove.

Armstrong, who like Anderson was Challis Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney for thirty years, is known for his realist theory of universals. So what are universals? The world consists of things and stuff: people, horses, water, atoms whatever. Does it also consist of the *properties* of things, such as their colours and shapes? Those properties, called universals or repeatables because they can occur in many things – are they real? Or put in a more linguistic way, do adjectives, like “blue”, name something real? ... A confusing question ... Armstrong says yes, universals *are* real – science depends on them. When Newton's law of gravity describes how bodies attract, it says they attract in proportion to their *masses*, and mass is a universal. Laws of nature, Armstrong argues, are connections between universals. And you only perceive an apple in virtue of its shape and colour, so the shape and colour must be real, as they are what is affecting your senses.

That is one example of Sydney-style realist argument.

Next let's do some logic, looking at the work of David Stove, the Anderson student quoted earlier, who also became a philosopher at Sydney University. Since the ancient Greeks, they've been discussing the syllogism, an argument such as the following.

Suppose you have premises

All men are mortal

Socrates is a man

Then you can conclude with certainty: Socrates is mortal. It's impossible that the premises, "All men are mortal" and "Socrates is a man" should be true and the conclusion, "Socrates is mortal" should be false. That sort of deductive logic is well understood. It's essential in mathematics, for example.

Now suppose instead that you have the premises:

99% of men are mortal

Socrates is a man

What should you conclude about whether Socrates is mortal? Well, you can't be certain, since (according to the premises) some men are mortal and some not. Still, surely it's *likely*, given that the vast majority of men are mortal, that Socrates is mortal. That's the sort of reasoning we use all the time when we say: nearly all plane flights land safely, so I'm relaxed on takeoff, or, most sufferers of disease X who take drug Y are cured, so it's worth taking it in my case. So what is that "likely"? Stove said, it's a matter of strict logic, just like the syllogism. He was one of the rather few people to explore the field of non-deductive logic, or logical probability. He argued that with those concepts, you could solve the "problem of induction", which is the question why, having observed that all swans so far have been white, that gives you reason to believe that the next swan will be white.

OK, I'll let you off any more of the really abstract stuff. Let's get back to something where everyone thinks they're an expert, ethics. There, the debates are particularly intense between realists (who think there's an objective right and wrong) and constructivists or relativists (who think ethics is a matter of tribal custom or evolved behaviour that could easily have been different. Obviously that has major consequences

for how you go about solving ethical conflicts. Anderson had *a* realist view of ethics, but a very peculiar one. He thought that some things were objectively good, such as – you guessed it – criticism, but he didn't think it followed that anyone *ought* to do those things: he thought there were no “oughts”.

The more usual form of ethical realism has been mostly pursued by Catholic philosophers. Their view is that ethics is based on what they call “natural law”. That doesn't mean, “If God had meant us to fly he would have given us wings.” It means more like: persons have an inherent worth, and therefore, for example, destroying one is an evil. The former Governor-General, Sir William Deane, explains it like this:

The basis of natural law is the belief that some things are innately right and some innately wrong, flowing from the nature of things, including our nature as human beings. That approach provides a philosophical basis for seeing such things as human rights as going deeper than any particular act of Parliament or what have you. That is not exclusively Catholic. It runs through Christian belief.

Deane's approach has had consequences for Australia. He and another Catholic judge steeped in natural law theory, Sir Gerard Brennan, were the leaders of the High Court in the Mabo decision, which overthrew precedent over aboriginal land rights in favour of a deeper moral value in the law, the equality of persons.

Only last year, the University of Notre Dame, Sydney, held an excellent [conference](#) with all the world's leading thinkers on natural law ethics. The issues are still live.

Most of what I've been talking about is a long time ago. I tend to see a decline since the old days when giants walked the earth, but perhaps someone younger than myself will

be better able to discern great minds in the current generation. Professional philosophy in the last forty years has certainly expanded, and it has made a lot of money by venturing into fields like business ethics and bioethics. But it has been subject also to many stresses. There was a wave of post-Sixties Marxism that created trouble in the 70s, leading to the celebrated Split of the Sydney University Philosophy Department. Then there was the juggernaut of French-inspired [postmodernism](#) from the 1980s, a form of resentment-fuelled constructivism that questions all attempts to reach the truth. Its end has been often predicted but is not yet in sight.

Still, virtue is not wholly extinct. At all Sydney's universities and beyond, there are serious philosophers who get on with the job – for example, those in Sydney University's [Centre for the Foundations of Science](#).

You might like to join them.