NEWS

The Situation of Philosophy in South Africa

There has been no 'Graceland' for South African philosophy. While Mhaquanga music may have been brought to the forefront of international music by Paul Simon, no such powerful indigenous South African philosophy pervades the universities of this country. This is not to say that there has not been a development of an African consciousness and awareness. Out of the development of black consciousness and independence we should soon begin to see the development of new views of the universe and man's place in it. Unfortunately for philosophy at the moment, it is the theatre and literature which have captivated the interest of black liberation.

On the whole, South African philosophers are more orientated towards international concerns. As in most other countries, the interests of philosophers in South Africa range over a broad area: from issues in analytical philosophy such as the mind/brain identity thesis, the Philosophy of Language and Theory of Knowledge, to the more concrete concerns of Marxists such as class struggle, economic and historical determinism. Phenomenology and existentialism have had their influence at many universities in this country. Hermeneutics too has played its part, and contemporary readings of psychoanalysis such as that offered by Lacan have entered the debates. We must not omit the study of the history of philosophy with philosophers from Plato to Kant forming the foundation of most studies of philosophy in this country. The debate between Modernism and post Modernism has come to occupy a more central position in South African philosophy with issues such as the death of man, the limits of subjectivity, the overcoming of humanism, the denial of origins and so on generating much excitement.

It would be incorrect, however, to form the impression that philosophers in South Africa are unresponsive to the social and political situation of this country. The social and political crisis has demanded much questioning and thought from which philosophers cannot remain free. It has promoted concern about the meaning of democracy. Racism and the question of human rights have increasingly become causes of concern. Along with this, reflection has been directed towards the relation between various sub-cultures, ethnic groups and ideologies of the different people of South Africa. These issues are dealt with from both a humanist and a nationalist perspective, with the latter recognising the unjustness of apartheid but continuing to call for the maintenance of separate identities of the various groups.

With the increased possibility of violent confrontation between the various racial groups, ideologies or classes (the terms used in this instance depend on one's theoretical framework and outlook for post-apartheid South Africa), attention has been directed towards forms of violence such as war, revolution and nuclear threats, with the principle of compulsory military service proving to be a high profile focal point. On this issue debates range from duty to one's country to unwillingness to perpetuate the unjust system of apartheid.

In this respect it is interesting to note the increased interest shown by academics and intellectuals in Marxism. Where once interest in Marxism was sanctioned only by a few universities, it has over the last few years acquired a much broader appeal. As P. Kirsten has noted in an issue of the *South African Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 2, No. 3, 1983) commemorating the centenary of Marx's death, and calling for a more open-minded attitude towards Marxism: 'Ideological bias, public ignorance and academic indifference have long handicapped a serious and open-minded debate about Marx and Marxism in this country...'

A debate currently under way, particularly at Afrikaans medium universities, revolves around the relation between Marxism and Christianity. An element of this debate is the endeavour to separate Marxism from Soviet communism, the identity of which is entrenched in the minds of many South Africans. By freeing Marxism from its uses by Lenin and Stalin, it is hoped that Marxism may be used to understand some of the conflicts and aspirations of people in this country. This view has been expressed by a leading academic, J. J. Snyman, when he claims that 'Marxism is not a conspiracy of agitators from beyond our borders, but the revolutionary onslaught which we are currently experiencing, as well as the growth in popularity of Marxism in some of the groups in our land has at least some causes in our own back yard' (*Ideologie en Teologie*, quoted from a one-day seminar presented on Christianity and Marxism at Rand Afrikaans University held on 27 March 1987. The translations from Afrikaans in the text are my own). It is ironical to note that in this respect black liberation theologies have largely been inspired by Marxism and have thus approached the relation between Marxism and Christianity from an alternative perspective.

Different philosophy departments in South Africa have different interests and foci. Some of the departments do not focus on the issues dealt with above. Thus for example the Philosophy Department at the University of Witwatersrand, which has a predominantly analytic focus, leaves such issues for discussion in the Department of Political Science or in post-graduate programmes in the field of Social Theory, which offer the possibility of integrating the more politically and socially oriented philosophy into a general curriculum. At other universities, such as the Rand Afrikaans University, social and political philosophy can be studied from within the Department of Philosophy, while at universities such as the University of Natal, the disciplines of philosophy and political studies are combined in one department. In many respects it is difficult to separate political and philosophical concerns.

If in conclusion I may be permitted a personal speculation, it is that the political and social situation in South Africa demands a reconstruction of man's conception of himself, his relation to his fellowmen and to nature. Present political ideologies do not seem to accommodate all the nuances in the South African crisis. A new vision not only of the relation between races or systems of government, but of man's place in existence, of the inspirations and driving forces of man's existence, is called for. We need a vision of African man. What we are asking for is not a nonracial society but a society with goals and values beyond the confines of race; not a society defined in reaction to or purely against apartheid and colonialism, but a forward-looking society with affirmative and not inhibitive goals. Surely the philosopher has a major role in initiating such a reconstruction.

Steven Segal

Human Nature: Issues in Philosophical Anthropology

Middlesex Polytechnic, 3, 4 and 5 April 1987

The conference was divided into six rather densely packed, and often overlapping sessions. The first session included a characteristically forceful statement by Mary Midgley of the necessity for some concept of human nature, and, more specifically, for one which recognises the illumination which can come from human/animal comparisons and from Darwinian biology. Opposed to Mary Midgley's theme, but in very different ways, were Roger Harris, arguing for the distinctiveness of human social labour, and Anthony O'Hear, presenting a case for considering 'high' (in contrast to 'popular') culture as a uniquely rich source of insight into human life and experience.

The session which must have given the organisers the most headaches was the set-piece confrontation, in session 3, between Roger Scruton and Stephen Rose. In the event this was a somewhat bizarre episode, in which Stephen Rose criticised sociobiology as the intellectual basis of the 'New Right' and Roger Scruton presented a rather orthodox dualist critique of sociobiology on *behalf* of the New Right. This rather acrimonious session followed a rather more amiable discussion, between David Levy, Francis Dunlop and Peter Osborne on the special tradition of 'philosophical anthropology' associated with Max Scheler. Session 4 was a joint presentation by Len Doyal and Ian Gough of their work on human needs and welfare politics. It was for me, if not 'the', then certainly 'a' highlight of the conference. The occasion provided an opportunity for them to 'flesh out' and defend (against some quite hostile questioning) their highly pertinent and very original perspective.

Unfortunately, but predictably, the last two sessions, on the Sunday, suffered somewhat from reduced attendance. Roger Trigg and I introduced a more direct discussion of the theme implicit throughout the conference - the relevance of biology to human social life. In effect, both of us argued that some biological input is necessary but not sufficient for an adequate account of human nature, but we differed quite sharply as to the specific biological approaches which might provide this necessary component.

The final session, on sex and gender, was in some respects the most interesting in the conference. Joanna North presented a well-argued case for a naturalistic view of human gender-differences. Paradoxically, this was aimed against what was called 'the radical approach', in which a strong distinction is made between (biologically determined) sex differences and (socially constructed) gender differences. As Janet Sayers' carefully presented reply demonstrated, this distinction is highly controversial and problematic *within* feminism, the label 'radical' being commonly applied to feminists who would be broadly sympathetic to Joanna North's own naturalism.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the conference was the co-presence of several philosophers of the 'New Right', associated with the *Salisbury Review*, together with quite a band of stalwarts of the political Left. The Scruton/Rose session certainly generated more heat than light. Anthony O'Hear's espousal of 'high' culture upset quite a few of his audience, and the session on human needs was interrupted by a bizarre and irrelevant reading of an East European dissident text by one of the audience. Apart from these isolated incidents, the debates were surprisingly civilised, if often rather at cross-purposes. I suspect that one of the reasons why this was so is that philosophical positions do not neatly correlate with political ones. Scruton's neo-Hegelian cultural determinism clearly upset adherents of the radical individualist strand within the New Right, whilst the closest approaches to 'biological determinism' were advocated by representatives of the political Left, and the strongest advocacy of nature/culture dualism came from the Right. Mary Midgley's dead-pan definition of the enlightened as 'that class of persons who read the *Guardian*' will stay with me for some time.

Ted Benton

Applied Philosophy

Take an enormous Victorian half-timbered mansion, a Bank Holiday weekend, several members of the Radical Philosophy Collective and friends, an assorted medley of other philosophers, and what do you have? Answer – a slightly surreal event, namely this year's conference of the Society for Applied Philosophy, held at Gregynog in Wales from 22-24 May.

The Society for Applied Philosophy, and its journal, arose from a desire to show that philosophy is relevant to practical and social issues; the birth of the Society was, I think, related to the desperate situation of many philosophy departments in this country who were, and are, facing reduction and closure, and to a belief that philosophy must work hard to shed its 'ivory tower' image. But the notion of 'applying' philosophy, as a specific enterprise, depends on a notion of 'pure' philosophy which is somehow unconnected with or independent of social relationships. And the slightly surreal nature of the conference derived from the difficulties of real dialogue between those who saw philosophy simply as a useful 'tool' which could be 'applied', and those who saw it as *already* shot through with assumptions, about such things as gender, for example.

The theme of the conference was *Sex, Gender, Feminism and the Family*. A broad brief; and the papers ranged over a very wide and disparate range of topics, from surrogacy and the problem of parental 'rights' over children, to discussions of gender and class and philosophy and feminism. The conference was, at times, polarised into those who adhered to the analytical model of philosophy as a 'tool' and those who did not. The polarisation was both philosophical and political, and at their worst, the discussions generated such things as jibes at the Communist Manifesto and travesties of what 'feminists' think, which revealed the difficulties of communication between those for whom a Marxist or feminist approach, however problematic, is fundamental, and those who regarded this with extreme scepticism or distaste. A prize for the worst solecism (for which he apologised afterwards) must go to the retired Oxford philosopher, R. M. Hare, who wondered out loud during one of the discussions whether 'feminists' read philosophical books.

But there were some good papers and discussions too, and as usual, the value of the conference was by no means limited to the scheduled sessions. A great deal of meeting, discussion and exchange of views took place at other times, and was most enjoyable. For me, the highpoints of the conference sessions were, I think, Sue Mendus' wonderfully clear and interesting paper on J. S. Mill's view of marriage, Morwenna Griffiths' cool and clear review of recent work on feminism and philosophy, and Lynne Segal's barnstorming look at conflicts in feminist thinking.

Jean Grimshaw