

## Society for European Philosophy, Lancaster University, 16–18 September 1998

### Search for a project

The professional aims of the Society for European Philosophy are clear. If, in contrast, the aims of its conference are fuzzy, so much the better. As the conference showed, SEP is no Leviathan body, its administrators not the controlling head of obedient limbs. The call for papers invited people to convene panels of their own choosing, and apparently none was turned down. If this meant that the conference lacked a coherent guiding theme, it may have been a small price to pay for a moment of democracy. And whilst no one involved in 'continental' or 'modern European' philosophy would expect these names alone to confer thematic unity, the form of disunity was nonetheless interesting.

For many people, schooled in the discipline of analytic philosophy, the initial attraction of continental philosophy had to do with its connections to the everyday world of the embodied subject, to its *existential* relevance. Against the apparent irrelevance of linguistic analysis, continental philosophers – or at least commentators on the continental philosophers of the twentieth century – talked freely of politics, of the political, and even (perhaps too often) of revolution. This was revolutionary. In some polytechnics, for example, allegiance to continental philosophy felt like saying 'fuck you' to the values of Oxbridge. Ironic, then, that it is precisely the same charges of political and existential irrelevance, and institutional and intellectual elitism, that are now being levelled at continental philosophy.

The disappointment some feel with continental philosophy has to do with the way in which it appeared to annex itself to Left politics, only then to abandon the latter as unfashionable or unreconstructed. But continental philosophy has also always been Hegel *without* Marx, Heidegger *without* Derrida, and, in Britain at least, a rebel without a left-wing cause. There are plenty of conservative continental philosophers. They are not traitors but heirs to a conservative, continental tradition. SEP's representation of continental philosophy does not therefore automatically put it on the side of the angels, any more than talk of 'the political' automatically lines one up with the Left.

One thing at least is well established. It has been a feature of continental philosophy to stress a relation to the history of philosophy and a certain self-conscious historicity, against the ahistorical pretensions of (the historically and culturally very specific) analytic tradition. It would not therefore be inapposite to ask continental philosophers to reflect on their own social-historical position – which doesn't only mean their own position within the traditions of European philosophy. Presupposing any such position to be dynamic and culturally situated, this means reflecting on what one is doing and why, and where it is going. One answer may very well be: I am furthering my career. But it is also possible to answer in terms of larger philosophical or political *projects* and, consciously or not, it is at the level of the project that the most fundamental disputes emerge. Disputes help either to clarify projects and strengthen them, or to expose them as incoherent, perhaps dubious. The point is, one has to be able to discuss them at this level first; then let the fighting begin.

It is wrong to imagine that colours nailed to the mast equals intellectual inflexibility or the forced subservience of independent *philosophia* to a rigid political taskmaster. All serious philosophical work is driven by a project and it is as well to be honest about it (except, of course, when making funding applications to conservative bodies). This helps to

explain why it was that both philosophically and politically the most interesting points of the SEP conference were often a result of the audience response to papers. Eckart Förster's plenary address was a case in point.

Förster's paper was an immensely accomplished and scholarly tracing of 'Transformations in Kant's Doctrine of God'. That Förster does this work means that the rest of us don't have to – if, indeed, we were capable of it in the first place. In the discussion, however, other concerns were voiced. Members of the audience alighted on the discussion of happiness in Kant – central to Förster's argument – and asked about the distinctions Kant makes between persons and humans, where the latter – notably women – are said not to be fully autonomous, and hence dependent upon the person of their husband

for the full realization of happiness. In effect, Förster refused to comment, not because he is a 'sexist' but because, one suspects, he could not (would not?) see the relevance of these comments to his philosophical project. His interlocutors, on the other hand, were involved in intellectual projects inseparable from, perhaps even primarily driven by, a commitment to a certain sexual politics, according to which these passages in Kant could not but be relevant.



Whether or not it was the intention of the organizers to foreground this question of the project in the plenary session, its topic, 'The Future of Metaphysics', was grand enough to invite it. And here, as elsewhere, it was when a sense of a project started to emerge that things began to get interesting. To take just one example, Christine Battersby's impassioned defence of a feminist metaphysics, unafraid to do original things with the notion of 'essence', was all the more engaging for the fact that one could see what she was trying to do and why, whether one agreed with it or not.

Anglia Polytechnic University hosts the next conference in September 1999. Let's hope it won't just be another date in the academic diary.

**Stella Sandford**

## **Counselling the victims**

The sign between the hall of residence in which I was staying and the building in which the SEP conference was taking place read: 'History, Philosophy, Religious Studies... Counselling'. The arrow for each pointed in the same direction. Whatever may be happening in History and Religious Studies these days, the first annual conference of SEP did indeed turn out to be the site of a certain kind of counselling for European philosophers. To understand why, one needs to know a little more about SEP.

SEP was established in 1997 to further the aims of those engaged in the study of European (or 'continental') philosophy within British Universities. Feeling that the analytic-dominated philosophy panel of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) failed to take European philosophy seriously, those concerned established SEP to defend the European/continental ground and create an organizational basis for persuading the RAE philosophy panel to give European philosophy its due. The conference was the first attempt to put this organizational pressure into practice. Whether this will work, come the next

RAE, is less certain than the fact that the conference was, for me, a disappointment in many other ways. For the fact that SEP's origins lie in the marginalization experienced by those practising European philosophy led to an uncomfortable claim to victimhood by many of those within British philosophy departments. The conference was a counselling of this collective victim, to help it come to terms with its past and give it a healthy orientation towards the future. However, the victim's predisposition to simultaneous self-promotion and self-flagellation undermined many of the things the conference, and SEP itself, might more usefully be.

As part of its opening session the Society had one panel on 'What is Continental Philosophy?' Instead of a staunch defence of the kind of things that SEP members might be engaged in, we were offered one paper on what continental philosophy isn't, one paper on its irrelevance, and one paper on its Englishness. All were done in a lighthearted (even lightweight) style. Now, it is sometimes a pleasure to hear papers with a lighter tone and a hint of self-deprecation, but, as one member of the audience pointed out, sitting through the panel was rather like listening to Jewish New Yorkers talk about themselves. Part of the very *problem* is that European philosophy is laughed at by the analytics; to respond with humorous self-deprecation in a panel expected to explore the nature of continental philosophy is a little too much like loading the enemies' guns.

Many of the other panels revealed an ultimately damaging view of what 'European philosophy' is as it is understood in Britain. For the most part, papers consisted of textual exegesis and increasingly mundane levels of scholasticism about a remarkably few writers in the philosophical tradition. Virtually all of these writers were German or French. Surely a conference put on by a society that was genuinely *for* 'European' philosophy would make an attempt to include discussion of the state of philosophy in other countries. Would it be too much to expect a SEP conference to have a panel on philosophy in Spain, or Italy, for example? One reason why this is unlikely to happen at future conferences lies in the nature of its organization. Those seeking to give a paper were expected to propose a whole panel jointly with others. This precluded the organizers from playing an active role in shaping panels in innovative ways.

The vision of European philosophy manifested so far by SEP is both limited and depoliticized. Because it has partly been the political engagement of European philosophy (or philosophers) that has led it to be rejected as 'unphilosophical' by an analytic-dominated academy, one response has been to evacuate political and social issues from the practice of European philosophy. The outcome was a conference so stripped of any hint of politics that one wonders whether European philosophers really did live in a tub. Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and so on were discussed as though they had never written a political word in their lives. In the plenary session on 'Transformations in Kant's Doctrine of God' it suddenly dawned on everyone that the French Revolution occurred some time during these transformations. This revelation appeared to frighten both the speaker and a significant part of the audience, as though the nasty stuff of history had arrived to spoil our scholarly fun. The one panel that had an explicit political edge to it – on 'The Poverty of Fetishistic Society' – generated an audience of four. If Marx had shown up (without Engels), he would have had trouble finding someone to buy him a drink at the bar.

SEP's background lies in a perceived lack of pluralism in the philosophical community, but it replicates this lack in its own philosophical focus. The key to the emergence from the status of collective victim is a certain recognition from the analytical tradition which SEP so despises, a recognition to be measured by a dissemination of that tradition's institutional power. But when it boils down to it, this turns out to be little more than the search for academic posts and research funds. To the extent that SEP encourages this – in its demand for more jobs and cash – its continued 'victimization' should perhaps not fail to surprise us.

**Mark Neocleous**