

PHILOSOPHY AND HAPPINESS

I once knew a man who had a wonderful desk calendar. Each day as he turned the page he would be confronted with a new and thought-provoking aphorism from some wise person of the past. So, on October 5th he would read, 'The unexamined life is not worth living'. On August 7th he was told 'Become who you are!'. Back in July he was urged to 'know thyself!', while just last week he mused over 'No pain, no gain'. He thinks it makes him a wise man and lets him live his life more fully, but of course, it doesn't. He finds each nostrum impressive but, like New Years resolutions, they fade into the past while he busies himself with his immediate concerns. Very seldom do these sayings strike deep into his thinking so as to shake him out of his daily pattern of life.

The thinking that shapes the way we live our lives used to be called 'philosophy' before modern academics appropriated that term to describe a somewhat more esoteric branch of pure scholarship. 'Philosophy' meant 'the love of wisdom'. It sought a rational understanding of the world and of our existence in it which would be the basis of our living a fulfilling and responsible life.

Alain de Botton's television series, *Philosophy – a Guide to Happiness* (screened on the ABC in 2002) and the best selling book on which it is based, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, revive this understanding of philosophy. They present six discussions in each of which a particular philosopher is invoked in order to provide insight and encouragement for problems which threaten happiness in human life. So we have an episode on how Socrates might help us deal with unpopularity, how Epicurus thinks that consumerism does not lead to happiness, how Seneca might help us face

frustration, how Montaigne faced feelings of inadequacy, how a broken heart might be relieved by thinking about Schopenhauer's views on romantic love, and how Nietzsche's philosophy can help us cope with insurmountable hardship.

On the screen we see de Botton visiting the places where his chosen philosophers lived while he tells the stories of their lives and explicates relevant themes from their philosophies. Some professional philosophers who have reviewed the book have complained that the explications of the philosophers' thoughts are superficial. Others have said that he seeks to edify us by describing the exemplary and dramatic lives of these philosophers rather than explaining their arguments in all their depth. But such charges need to be evaluated in the light of de Botton's aims. He is not a scholar in the history of ideas. He is using a popular medium to show us how to use philosophy to help us live our lives more satisfactorily. And besides, philosophical critique of the pursuit of wealth as an unnatural and socially formed desire (expressive even of the fear of death) needs to be heard today.

But is the series much more than an elaborated desk calendar with pithy sayings?

What process of thinking does it introduce to us so that its philosophical nostrums can have more than a superficial impact? Is the series merely *about* philosophy or does it encourage us to *do* philosophy? Certainly, de Botton presents some of the arguments of the philosophers, but does his discussion delve deeply enough to engage our own thinking to a degree necessary for changing our approach to life? For example, do we really think that the young shopaholic whom we meet in the Epicurus episode will be dissuaded from his compulsive behaviour by being told what really matters in life?

And do we think that the angry driver of the Seneca episode will become calmer if we

tell him that he needs to lower his expectations? Nowadays we would recommend therapy for irrational behaviour rather than philosophy.

The classical philosophers taught that authentic and self-generated changes in a life could only result from a lengthy process of deep thought about not only the self and the stresses of daily life, but also about the very structures of the cosmos of which that life is a part. Socrates sought to begin such a process by unsettling the everyday opinions of those with whom he debated. The practical advice of Epicurus was based on a view that the world had no purpose and that, therefore, only the present moment was of supreme value. Seneca was a Stoic who urged us to align our lives with that force of reason which he believed ruled the natural world.

Most classical philosophers founded quasi-monastic communities in which their ideas formed the basis of 'spiritual exercises' through which adherents withdrew from worldly concerns, meditated upon death, and sought serenity by controlling the emotions. Modern non-academic philosophers like Montaigne, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche isolated themselves from society in order to reflect intensely upon themselves and the processes of which their lives were a part. They rejected the blandishments of the everyday world. For all these thinkers philosophy was a way of life.

So how can philosophy as de Botton understands it touch our lives today? How can we learn to understand ourselves in the context of a deep and empathetic understanding of reality? Socrates has taught us the first step: interrogate received opinion with rational argument. Think for yourself and do not blindly follow the doctrines of others, whether they be those of new age gurus or television presenters. Plato and the other classical philosophers teach us to seek a metaphysical conception

of reality into which we can place our own existence. But do not succumb to the temptation of turning such a conception into a dogma. Philosophers do not preach enlightenment or seek disciples.

Modern philosophers remind us that the self is not a *thing* to be known but a *project* to be. And it may not be just our own individualistic project but rather a project arising from the being of reality itself. The self is not an entity described for us by social and psychological sciences, but an identity that we are constantly making and revising. Once again, it would be a mistake to imprison ourselves in the categories of convention, doctrine, or theory.

How can we achieve such profound philosophical thinking? In a literate and individualistic culture such as ours one would think immediately of reading books. And there are an increasing number of accessible books and even popular magazines on the market. Try *What Does It All Mean: a Very Short Introduction to Philosophy* by Thomas Nagel, or *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy* by Simon Blackburn.

But it is through discussion and debate with others that philosophy has its deepest impact. Philosophy courses in universities increasingly include units that discuss issues of this kind and there are many suitable adult education programs (but avoid any that require dogmatic commitment). Many primary and secondary schools now have philosophy programs. The university of the third age (U3A) runs reading and discussion groups. In Europe and the USA there are emerging forms of philosophical practice that include philosophical counselling, professionally facilitated Socratic Dialogue, and 'Café Philosophy'. Some of these activities have reached Australia. Philosophy can still be a way of life for us today.

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