

From: David Rathbone [inrageousoutrospective@hotmail.com]
Sent: Wednesday, 6 January 2010 3:40 PM
To: jacintap@rrr.org.au
Cc: Stan Van Hooft
Subject: Philosophy Segment on RRR this morning

Hi Jacinta, hi Stan,

It's funny: when you've spent a lot of time listening to people (Jacinta, on RRR, of course; and Stan, at many conferences and lectures), you can end up with the feeling that you know them well, when in fact you've actually met them only once, as is the case for me for both of you, and in neither case through being introduced, but in both through my bowling up with some random question or other - Jacinta, at a RRR open day, and Stan, at an ASCP conference. So maybe either or both of you might remember me, more likely not.

Not that I need an introduction to email RRR! - a wonderfully open institution - to tell you that your innovation of including a segment of on-air philosophy is loudly applauded by one long-term subscriber, and to say WELL DONE on an excellent presentation. Bravo on pulling off a tough task well.

I do have a criticism, but before I state my criticism, please let me say that I think that a crucial thing about philosophy, which makes it different to religion, politics, and just about anything else you care to name, is its relation to criticism. Voltaire said it when he said: "I completely disagree with what you say, but I will fight to the death to defend your right to say it". Real philosophers attack ideas, not people, and a philosophical argument is different to a garden variety argument in that the philosophers are attacking the task of thinking, not each other. Of course academics themselves often stray from this ideal, and have some of the garden variety arguments mixed in with the philosophical kind. But the word itself means "friend (philos) of wisdom (sophia)," and philosophers befriend each other only insofar as they are able to be wise, i.e. to attack the task of thinking, and not attack each other; to entertain ideas and to re-value values; to make the implicit explicit and to say what goes without saying (within limits); to explore the limits of thought, and to see the big picture and step outside the box; these and other activities of wisdom are largely *impersonal*, and philosophers in a strange way ignore each other in philosophizing.

This by the way is a crucial difference to psychoanalysis, with which philosophy is sometimes confused. Psychoanalysis is based on talking about yourself and each other. Philosophers ignore themselves and each other, and talk instead about ideas. Of course that may lead to talking about the ideas of the self and the other, but that's quite a different thing. Perhaps Stan would disagree with me here.

All that having been said, what I'm inviting is thinking about why you felt entitled or impelled to mention Nietzsche, Jacinta, when you haven't done him the courtesy of actually reading him? In fact you are not alone, but in very good company when you talk about Nietzsche without understanding him: I have heard the august and famous Professors Hillary Putnam and Greg Restall both do the same in public forums. These are two of the world's smartest people, and including you Jacinta that makes three of the world's smartest people, but when it comes to Nietzsche, even smart people seem to lose their standards

altogether, and repeat misinformed gossip and downright confusion without so much as the bat of an eyelid. Frank Jackson (one of Australia's most famous philosophers) on the front page of The Australian newspaper said in his exit interview as he left the country to take up his job at Princeton, that studying Nietzsche lead students into middle-age dementia. This is really something to think about, and has to do with the reaction against Nietzsche at Princeton in the wake of the premature death of the great Walter Kaufmann and the inability of the succeeding generations at Princeton to rise to Kaufmann's heights of scholarship. But still, all this remains different to understanding Nietzsche himself.

Nietzsche says many beautiful and profound things about hope, a virtue which he places firmly at the core of his new values, along with love and faith. Nietzsche wants to win these three highest values back from what he sees as their exploitation by religions, and to give them a fully human meaning related solely to this life on this planet, and to emphatically deny any pie-in-the-sky after-worldly superstitions (see under heaven, paradise, nirvana, platonic ideas, Santa Claus at the North Pole, the Tooth Fairy, etc etc). To bring these words strictly back down to Earth, and to insist that we need love, faith, and hope only for each other and in ourselves and for this planet: this is what Nietzsche means in his book *The Gay Science*, in aphorism 272 when he asks himself rhetorically answering his own question: "What do you love in others? - My hopes." Might I be so presumptuous as to say that I hope that you might read the run of one-line aphorisms in *The Gay Science* starting with #171 going through to #275? It's only 100 one-liners (Nietzsche would have been brilliant on Twitter!). Anyway, if you do, you'll see that's the end of book three, and that book four begins with a little poem Nietzsche wrote for the new year in 1882:

Der du mit dem Flammenspeere
Meiner Seele Eis zertheilt,
Dass sie brausend nun zum Meere
Ihrer höchsten Hoffnung eilt:
Heller stets und stets gesunder,
Frei im liebevollsten Muss: —
Also preist sie deine Wunder,
Schönster Januarius!

(Genua im Januar 1882).

You who with a flaming spear
shattered the ice in my soul
which melted now rushes to the sea
hurrying to its highest hope
brighter yet and healthier still
free for the most beloved necessity
thus I value the wonder you are
loveliest January!

(Genoa, Italy Jan. 1882)

Can you really now say that the man who wrote that thinks that "hope is evil" ? If you look at the Preface to the Second edition section 1, you'll see Nietzsche describing himself as "attacked by hope". And if you look at the start of book four, you'll see that #276 is entitled "For the new year", following on from the poem, and a deeply optimistic paragraph.

But even more, Nietzsche's whole philosophy might actually be called a philosophy of hope. His hope is that we might overcome humanity's limitations - that we can hope to become something more than human - this is the famous thought of the *Übermensch* – the thought that man is a bridge, a link in a chain, a portal to the future of a creature who transcends our comprehension, just as we transcend the ape's comprehension. This thought displaces the old superstitious conception of divinity called "God" – the thought that there is an omnipotent transcendent person who loves us and is concerned with us – and replaces it with a concept of nature's own divinity sufficiently deep to awaken the realization that, just as we should love those distant simian ancestors whose struggles enabled us to arise, the *Übermensch* will one day so love us. Nietzsche teaches that therein lies our greatest source of self-esteem, a self-esteem greater than the old pride of thinking of ourselves as the love-object of a supernatural being. Unfortunately, this was all hopelessly confused by his Nazi sister Elizabeth, who confusedly thought that the *Übermensch* was a kind of human, a "master race" of supermen and women who want to rule the planet in a political sense.

This is a hopeless confusion, but it led to the Nazi's embracing Nietzsche - only possible because they hadn't actually read him, and so those fools were actually embracing writings which condemned them. That's why I react so strongly when I hear people speaking on behalf of Nietzsche who have not actually read him. But at the same time, there's no denying that the "overcoming humanity" thought is what Nietzsche called a "dangerous idea" - the idea that humanity can not be perfected - if wrenched out of the context of what the Germans call "Bildung" (the idea that your life is like a work of art, and that life itself ought to be like creating the artwork of yourself).

Why not just hope to perfect humanity? Because that is like hoping a river will stop flowing. Change is the ultimate truth of everything for Nietzsche (here following the ancient philosopher Heraclitus). So he is very cynical of all attempts to establish a utopia (see another book of his called *Human All Too Human*, vol I #463 for what he thinks about revolutionary politics, and #215 of the third volume of that same book called "The Wanderer and his Shadow" for how he thinks we really do change - by fashion). This is where Nietzsche's cynicism plays a creative role, for he does think that within limits an amount of cynicism is necessary for a healthy mind - this he also takes from Voltaire, who parodied the gullibility of a person totally without the critical edge a little cynicism gives in his book *Candide*, as discussed on the Grapevine book club a few months back. Here's the first paradox of good and evil: too much good is bad (e.g. too much chocolate makes you sick; the doormat is a problematic personality type; occasionally, as the song says and every parent knows, you gotta be cruel to be kind; etc etc) Nietzsche was very cruel, for example, to Germany in his writings; he was also cruel to his sister: when she married an anti-semitic, for example, he refused to speak to her ever again; and he was cruel to Lou Salome when their love affair turned sour. But these cruelties he experienced as necessities, and they pained him greatly to have to enact. But then, he had a congenital benign brain-tumor growing behind his right eye all his life, the pressure from which

eventually causing the famous breakdown in Turin in '89, leaving him a vegetable for 11 years before he finally died of pneumonia in 1900. So he was no stranger to suffering, struggle and pain, and though a cranky loner, you gotta give the guy a break. But still, as a philosopher, that's beside the point: which is that everything's a mixture.

A key to understanding Nietzsche is to understand his criticism of Darwin. Sure, there's evolution he says; but who says it's the fittest who survive? The survivors! Actually, the survivors are the lucky ones, and fitness is only one factor in luck. There is no sense in which we can call evolution a simple improvement - a straight-line of development leading from the jellyfish to man, with the gradually erecting anthropoid forms familiar from high-school text-books. If you've got that copy of *Gay Science*, you'll see #54 explains how Nietzsche sees evolution like Russian dolls, with past forms nested and active in our present: our inner ape is doing his/her thing, and its inner squirrel doing its thing, and its inner fish doing its thing, all the way down to the single-cells all doing their billions upon billions of things. It's all happening right now in all of us. You only have to look at a primary school playground to see what herds, flocks, mobs and packs tend to do: they tend to ostracize the unusual and to expel the mutation regardless of whether its good or bad, "advantageous" or not.

Here's the second paradox of good and evil. Did our simian ancestors know that the best kind of way in which they would change would grow out of mutations in the vocal chords and the parts of the brain that control the vocal chords? Ask our simian ancestors what's the best way we could change, and they would answer "oh, a nice long tail to grab branches better, and an extra three fingers for scratching lice better, and an eye in the back of my head so I can see things creeping up on me". As for the offer of some fancy new vocal capacities, they would probably pass considering it a waste of a wish. But we know in retrospect that acquiring language was THE innovation that made the whole civilization thing possible. Point being, we by definition cannot yet see what it is about us that shall be significant in the future. But we do know that evolution works by great hiccups, and that we didn't exactly solve the problems of being an ape so much as transcend those problems in becoming human. The extension is obvious: the hope is to transcend humanity, not solve its problems, which in retrospect shall seem trivial. In principal, we cannot really know what is good for us, any more than children who would eat lollies and watch cartoons all day know what's good for them. But at the same time we are with good reason cynical of all dictators who would tell us what's good for humanity. And in any case, getting humanity organized is like herding cats - impossible.

Uncomprehending interpreters like Nietzsche's sister Elizabeth and her pals Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini forget at this point that the value of overcoming must be balanced with the values of love and hope in Nietzsche in specific ways if his philosophy is to be understood, and think that overcoming humanity means indifference to human life. But Nietzsche everywhere and always appeals to the sanctity of life in all its forms, and the overcoming he advocates has more in common with Diane Fossey and Jane Goodall than with Hitler and his goons. In some deep sense, understanding what the animals mean is what our future is all about. Mss. Goodall and Fossey were higher types of human precisely because they had such intimate relations with these so-call "sub-human" animals - but if *Gay Science* #54 is right, that means with their own past as active in their present. In other words, the animals give us access to ourselves. And how can we express this? Not through analysis, which remains wed to the interests of that which is to be overcome, but only

through art, which goes boldly forward despite not having the faintest clue what its doing other than following its instinct to create something somehow sublime.

Well, I've gone on a bit, but dammit it ain't everyday there's a philosophy segment on RRR. Many supportive cheers of encouragement,
DaveR.

On Wed, Jan 6, 2010 at 4:06 PM, Stan Van Hooft <stan.vanhooft@deakin.edu.au> wrote:

Hi David,

Thanks for your email. I am glad you enjoyed the segment and very impressed by the amount of reflection and commentary it triggered from you.

I think you might have been a bit hard on Jacinta, though. The quote she used was very apt for our discussion and there was no suggestion that we were discussing Nietzsche's philosophy as such. While it may sometimes be misleading to use just one quote - especially from a writer as prolific and prolix as Nietzsche - I don't think we can be asked to refrain from doing so unless we have studied the author's whole output. That's the beauty of Nietzsche's work - even a single aphorism can be thought provoking and challenging even if it is not reflective of his whole thought.

Cheers for now

Stan

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From: jacintap@rrr.org.au
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Subject: Re: Philosophy Segment on RRR this morning
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Hey David,

Thanks so much for your detailed response to this mornings discussion - apologies if you felt the need to throw anything at the radio!

I really enjoyed having the opportunity to have a discussion with Stan this morning and as I am not studied in philosophy can easily place information in a light that may not truly serve it justly.

I do however feel really excited at the prospect of being able to throw things out there that may be ill understood in the hope for clarification and a greater understanding. I really appreciate the time you have taken to discuss the topic and hope you'll tune in Jan 27th when Stan returns to take us on another jaunt.

Hope to see you around the station soon!

Cheers,

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RE: Philosophy on RRR
From: **David Rathbone** (inrageousoutrospective@hotmail.com)
Sent: Tuesday, 12 January 2010 5:41:58 PM
To: jacinta parsons (jacintap@rrr.org.au)
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Thanks Jacinta, your response is greatly appreciated - I was worried that, as Stan put it, "I'd been a little hard on you" - something I thought soon *after* I pressed the send button. Actually your cheerful reply has sat here for almost a week unread, as I've been in a recording studio all week and unable to get at a computer, so I was worrying unnecessarily. As usual.

You say you're not schooled in academic philosophy, but by your reply you show that you *do* get it: you didn't take my criticism personally, and THAT'S what I reckon philosophy's all about. We need to criticize each other (and ourselves) in order to be able to see our own blind spots, but that's only possible if we don't take the criticism personally. I would go so far as to say that criticism is actually essential to philosophy, and that with no critical challenges, there's no thinking. Being able to have an argument that isn't also a fight: that's the constant challenge, and *that* challenge is a pretty good definition of wisdom methinks. And we all know wisdom isn't something that happens once, and is then permanently achieved (unlike religious conversion, enlightenment, salvation etc), but that, like health itself, is an inherently elusive ideal that can at most be striven for in every situation, and with a bit of luck approximated more closely than yesterday, but never absolutely, and never as finally achieved, and is never achieved at all alone, but always only in dialogue. That's two important ways philosophy is different from religion. A third way is the important difference between students and disciples.

This guy Socrates tried living like this in Athens around 450BC, and he succeeded insofar as he convinced a handful of others, who became his students; but he failed insofar as he pissed the Athenians off so much that they executed him on the charge of corrupting the youth. By "corrupting" read "teaching them to see through hypocrisy", and you get the picture re the demise of this "gadfly" (his name for himself, along with "midwife"). No doubt you've heard of his most famous pupil Plato. He wrote down much of what he heard in a literary genre which he himself invented, called the dialogue, which he adapted from the drama, which itself had been invented only about fifty years earlier.

Some say Socrates is largely a myth made up by Plato, and the dialogues are Plato's indirect way of making a profound point about the relationship between fact, fiction, and thinking itself. Others read Plato like a gospel, and think he is a mere mirror perfectly reflecting the exact historical Socrates. But either way, I myself do not agree with Plato/Socrates' basic teaching - that the good, the true and the beautiful are one. I'm too suspicious of what gets called beautiful and why - based largely upon the beautiful yet bad people I have known - along with a healthy suspicion that our aesthetic sensibilities are engineered in order to exploit us (see under punk rock).

So much for good and beautiful, which in my experience are chalk and cheese. As for truth, there are I reckon three ways to think. In philosophy they're called absolutism, relativism and perspectivism. For an absolutist, there is only one truth - the way reality really is - and philosophy struggles to reach as clear a grasp on as much of that as possible. Absolutism: exactly 1 truth. Relativism denies this, with lots of arguments that I won't launch off into here, but ends up maintaining that that there is only partial truth at most. Relativism: less than 1 truth.

Perspectivism on the third hand argues, to the contrary of relativism, that there is always MORE than one truth concerning any given situation, and that the one truth you select as THE truth is governed by your interests, in the same way that the map you chose of a place from among the many "true" maps is governed by your interests - say, a street directory for driving, a Board of Works map for working on the sewers, a Telstra map for tracing the cables and powerlines, and so on. This doesn't mean any old map is as good as any other (that's relativism), but it does mean there are always many, and perhaps always infinitely many, ways to map any region of actual reality, and truths must be filtered through values to account for how reality appears to us, and to understand what it is.

I try to explain how this relates to the philosophies called "existentialism" and "idealism" in this here blog - I call it a blog, but it's not really a blog, as I am yet to figure out enough HTML to enable a comment-leaving function. So for now it's really just an on-line archive of my attempts at public philosophy - largely (but not exclusively) in the form of emails to RRR presenters as it turns out - although not deliberately! - it just somehow evolved out of all those wonderful "throw something at the radio" moments (as you put it so aptly Jacinta) that a RRRaholic like me encounters from time to time. You just have to expect this sort of thing if you run the kind of awesome open institution that RRR is!

Cheers and staying tuned as always, DavidR.