

Oxford Philsoc AwayDay at Pigotts Farm on Sunday 20th July 2014 – A Review by Chris Reason

A number of Oxford Philsoc members were joined by members of the Gerards Cross Philosophy Group for an away day at Pigotts Farm near High Wycombe to discuss the ethical question ‘Why be good? Can we have good without God?’ On a brilliant summer’s day, the twenty five participants sat in a circle in the barn with all the doors wide open, benignly overseen by a wooden crucifix carved by the artist Eric Gill, who lived here in the final years of his life.

We were under the firm but fair guidance of our organiser, Frank Brierley, who introduced the day. It commenced with a brief history of the farm and the artist by the current owner, Nick Wheeler-Robinson, who also gave some of us a tour of the buildings at lunch time, including the Chapel set up by Gill. Frank then introduced the format of the meeting, in which each speaker would speak for twenty minutes, allowing plenty of time for lively discussion after each talk. He later made available most of the speakers’ talks in writing.

The chairman for the day was an ‘old friend’ of the society, Prof Trevor Hussey, who gave the introductory talk, giving an overview of the main ways we can study morality and the problems associated with each. He talked about Descriptive and Normative ethics under which he listed Deontology, Consequentialist Ethics and Virtue Ethics before briefly touching on other ideas such as Contractarianism and Christian Ethics. He went on to discuss Metaethics and some of the issues it raises. For example: ‘Is, Ought and Can’; and ‘Good and Right’. He finished with some comments on physicalism and materialism.

The first of the speakers was Peter Gibson, whose aim was to ‘identify the values in normative ethical theories, and to use that to get at central values’. In a very logical but somewhat ambitious talk (given the time available), he presented a breakdown of Contractarianism, Utilitarianism, Deontology and Virtue Theory under the headings of Theory, The Good, Merits, Best Practitioners, Beneficiaries, Politics and Some Problems. In the event he could only discuss Contractarianism in detail but, as we had his handout, we could jump straight to his verdict which was accepting Virtue Theory. He finished by briefly discussing a strategy towards implementing this conclusion and some of the problems it might raise. There was much more material in this paper than could be discussed within the time limits and we look forward to future opportunities to return to the issues.

Peter Townsend was the next speaker, who chose as his subject ‘Good without God’. He based his talk on two books: ‘Religion for Atheists’ by Alain de Botton (‘which selects from religions practices and lessons that do not rely on belief to prove their appropriateness to our lives’) and ‘Religion without God’ by Ronald Dworkin (‘the jurist, who identifies what having a religious attitude may mean for those without faith’). He drew, from the first book, the arguments on ethics that did not depend on a religious view (e.g. Moral Education, Wonder, Art, Institutions, etc). From the second book he presented such ideas as Beauty and Science. He finished by discussing ethics as A Priori or A Posteriori, and concluded that an ethical system can be derived A Posteriori.

This was followed by an excellent lunch provided by members of the course (for which, many thanks), and a chance to get to know each other and to discuss the material covered so far.

After lunch, the first speaker was Greville Jones from the Gerards Cross philosophy group. His subject was 'Achieving co-operation amongst natural competitors'. He noted that, as social animals, we have evolved from small hunter-gather groups from the Neolithic and beyond, who were strongly competitive but managed to develop co-operation as a strategy which was managed within these groups. He argued that this should be our starting point in developing our ideas of ethics.

The second speaker was Paul Cockburn, who chose the subject "Persons in Relation" – What does John Macmurray's approach add to ethical philosophy? He gave a brief introduction to the man and a summary of his ideas, in which Macmurray argues for persons' being free agents having free will, and who exist primarily in relation to other persons, predominantly his/her mother. He developed this argument to discuss how this impinges on individuals' actions in later life and related it to the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. He concluded that 'we develop moral dispositions in our relations to others based on the mother-child relation. These are either aggressive, or contemplative, based on fear, or in community, based on love. Societies and nations exhibit these same dispositions, as all human social identity is defined in terms of these dispositions'.

The final speaker was Fauzia Rahman (one of the event's organizers), who talked on "Why Be Good?" a critique of Murdoch's metaethical underpinning for virtue ethics'. Iris Murdoch says we should be good for the love of good in order to rescue ethics from egoism and developed these ideas in two philosophy books ('The Sovereignty of Good' and 'Metaphysics as a Guide to the Morals'). Although not mainly thought of as a philosopher, her novels are 'populated with characters who are extraordinary and yet somehow simultaneously familiar'. Fauzia developed these ideas in detail and showed the far reaching practical implications on ethical ideas, although she did point out 'that the disadvantage of the theory is that it does not clarify which (if any) particular acts are good'.

The away day finished with a general discussion on all the material covered and, at the suggestion of one of the members, we focussed on the subject of Euthanasia (as it had been a subject for discussion in the House of Lords immediately preceding this weekend). We tried (not always successfully) to apply what we had learned during the day to this specific problem. It might have generated rather more heat than light had it not been for the fact that there was very little disagreement between the participants.

The day finished at 5.30 p.m. and we wended our various ways home with our heads full of an excellent day's discussions.