

Oxford Philosophical Society

PHILOSOPHY - - - WHAT'S THE POINT ?

(a handout to accompany the talk given by Ann Long on Members Day, 2011)

An outline of the talk

- [1] Concerning the *tense* of our question: what *is* the point of philosophy *now*, not what *was* the point of philosophy *then* - - - this is not an *historical* question
- [2] Concerning the subject of our question: what is the point of *philosophy* now, not what is the point of somebody *studying* philosophy now - - - this is not a *biographical* question
- [3] To illustrate the significance of these two constraints, a brief outline of just *one* of the questions exercising current philosophy - - - that of the difference between 'stories and explanations'
- [4] So: how does philosophy itself measure up on a 'stories-to-explanations' scale - - - an assessment
- [5] And therefore: the point of philosophy now is - - - ?

And an addendum

'This is a record of three 'epistemological breaks' - - - in the order in which they occurred.

Break one. Up until a few centuries ago, we most of us thought that the earth was 'first planet' in a universe which was 'out there' and Other, and which spun around it for its benefit. Then came Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and the rest. And the place of the earth in the universe was decentred for ever. Though of course it made no difference to how things seemed. The sun still 'rose' in the morning, and 'set' in the evening, even at the Meteorological Office. And only with the technology of flying, and later of space travel, could we get the 'common sense' which gave us a flat-and-still earth finally to give totally away before the evidence to the contrary.

Break two. Up until a few decades ago, we most of us thought that humans were 'first creatures' in a biosphere which was 'out there' and Other, and which was made for our succour. Then came Darwin and his ilk, and the place of *Homo sapiens* in the biosphere was decentred for ever as well. Though of course it again made no difference at all to

how things seemed. Long after evolution had shown us otherwise, human animals still seemed to be of a totally other order than all the rest. Only with the technology of gene sequencing, could we get the 'common sense' which told us that neither a carrot nor a parrot had anything much in common with a *Homo sapiens* finally to give totally away before the evidence to the contrary.

Break three. Up until now, we most of us think that 'I' am 'first person', in a world which is 'out there' and Other, and which is there for me to make my way in as I choose. But now comes - - - well, let's just call it 'the train'. If you put your ear to the track, you can hear the train coming. It's the *neuroscience* train, the *cognitive* science train, the *psycholinguistics* train. It's the train which, when it arrives, will carry away all our old conceptions of what it is to be a person. And the place of 'I' in the world will be decentred for ever as well. Though of course, once again, it will make no difference to how things seem. It will still seem as though 'I' am 'in here'. And that I am in here either looking *out*, upon you who are 'out there': or looking *in*, upon my own thoughts, which, hidden from you, are in here with me. Only with the technology of - well, perhaps it will be the increasing sophistication of brain scanning - will we get the 'common sense' which tells us that 'I' am the free-willing originator of 'my' actions finally to give totally away before the evidence to the contrary.

The revolutionary nature of the decentring of the earth in the universe meant that it took many centuries to achieve: and was not without some heartache (and some burning flesh!) for those who lived (and died) through it. The even more revolutionary nature of the decentring of the human in the biosphere took two or three centuries to achieve: and in some places - for example, among creationists and in the resurrection of 'the argument from design' - is not yet achieved. And continues to create considerable angst for those who still cannot understand and accept it. But the most revolutionary decentring of all, that of the 'I' in the world, will be the hardest by far to accommodate. It will probably take place more quickly than either of its two predecessors: scientific progress does seem to be exponential. But for those who live through it, for us and our immediate descendents, it will be the hardest of all for us to get our heads around. **We will need all the compassion and tenderness we can muster for each other in our joint attempts to understand it.**

But for them: for those who, in the not-too-distant future, will start to live comfortably in the full knowledge that it is so, it will, quite literally, change their world. When as a consequence of the changed perspectives they will then command they can at last replace philosophy with science, maybe particularly *moral* philosophy with *moral* science, then they will understand why Doris Lessing, at the end of one of her futuristic novels, has one of her characters look back to us, in compassionate anguish, and exclaim: 'oh you poor animal humans!'

[a slightly modified version of the postscript to my book *Making God* (2007)]