

# Connected Communities: Philosophical Communities

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*The London Philosophy Club (photo by Greg Funnell)*



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# Introduction: the two aspects of philosophy

“The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. This is what makes him a philosopher.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*<sup>1</sup>

“The history of philosophy is to a considerable extent the history of groups.”

Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies*<sup>2</sup>

Philosophy has two aspects, destructive and creative. On the one hand, philosophy is socially destructive: it challenges social and religious conventions, and makes the philosopher leave their community to find a space to think for themselves. On the other hand, philosophy is socially creative: having destabilised traditional forms of community, the philosopher creates *new* forms of community. Ever since Socrates, philosophers have challenged traditional forms of community, particularly religious communities, while trying (not always successfully) to create alternatives: the academy, the commune, the cult, the humanist group, the coffeehouse, the salon, the corresponding society, the consciousness-raising circle, all the way to the subject of this report: the grassroots philosophy clubs of today.

There is, in fact, a social history of philosophy, which sociologists and philosophers are beginning to tell. You can tell the history of ideas two ways: as the history of great minds hatching ideas alone in their garrets (to some extent this is the approach of Bertrand Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy*<sup>3</sup>), or as the history of groups, social networks and experiments in living together. This social network approach to the history of ideas is increasingly popular, thanks to the work of contemporary philosophers and sociologists like Randall Collins, Jurgen Habermas<sup>4</sup>, and, earlier, George Simmel<sup>5</sup>. Collins, in particular, insisted that “the history of philosophy can be traced through a surprisingly small number of social circles”, which Collins attempted somewhat Quixotically to map, visually. This theoretical approach comes with its own epistemology, in which ideas emerge not in detached monads in people’s heads, but *between* people, in conversation. In this way of seeing things, it is not so much ‘me’ having this idea, but rather that ideas evolve out of networks and interactions, like a circuit-board lighting up in a particular configuration. If you accept this social networks approach to philosophy, then some of the more interesting questions in philosophy become questions of community organization: not just ‘how should

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007) section 455

<sup>2</sup> Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2000) p.3

<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1945)

<sup>4</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity 1989)

<sup>5</sup> George Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1955); I would also suggest, within journalism, that both Tom Wolfe and Adam Curtis have a social network approach to the history of ideas. See for example Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1968) and Adam Curtis’ *The Mayfair Set* (BBC 2, 1999)

I live?’ but ‘how should we live together?’ We become interested in what Randall Collins called the philosopher as “organizational leader”.<sup>6</sup>



*La Nuit de Philosophie at L'Institut Francais in London*

That is why I am interested in the contemporary rise of philosophy clubs, and in the people who organize these clubs. I personally became interested in philosophy when it helped me overcome emotional problems in my early 20s. I was particularly helped by Stoicism, which is quite an individualist and self-reliant philosophy. However, in my 30s, I started to explore philosophy not just as self-help, but as *group-help*. I became actively involved in the New Stoa, a community of modern Stoics, and participated in the first gathering of Stoics for several centuries, in San Diego on April 26 2010 (Marcus Aurelius' birthday).<sup>7</sup> I also became interested in other contemporary philosophical communities - Socratic, Epicurean, Skeptic, Platonic.<sup>8</sup> And this led me to explore the contemporary phenomenon of philosophy clubs, philosophy cafes, pub philosophy groups and other grassroots ideas clubs. In late 2010, I became co-organiser of the London Philosophy Club, a free meetup group that organises philosophical talks, debates, meals and film-screenings. The

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<sup>6</sup> Collins 2000, p.4; the great modern example of the philosopher as organizational leader is Paul Kurtz, the founder of secular humanism and the modern Skeptic movement. See my discussion of Kurtz on Radio 4's Last Word: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01ngrww>

<sup>7</sup> You can watch a video of the event here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqnCaQTqQQY>

<sup>8</sup> I describe my encounter with these communities in *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations* (London: Rider, 2012)

membership of that club doubled in size in a year, from 1000 members in January 2011 to over 2000 in January 2012, making me realise the extent of public demand for such clubs. And I became aware of just how fertile the 'informal learning' movement is today, from Skeptics In the Pub to Philosophy In Pubs, from Sci-Bars to Socrates Cafes.<sup>9</sup> I also became aware of how little academic research had explored this philosophical underground. Informal learning has been described as the iceberg of adult education, in that so much of it happens below view. That's certainly the case with philosophy groups, which have expanded below the horizon of most academic philosophers.

Yet the underground is becoming easier to explore. Philosophy groups have flourished partly thanks to the internet, and to social network sites like meetup.com and Facebook. The snapshot such sites give of the grassroots philosophy scene is impressive: at the time of writing, there are 846 meetup groups that describe themselves as philosophy clubs, in 380 cities across 25 countries, with a combined membership of 125,000. Some groups might stretch the definition of 'philosophy', but it's still a striking amount. There are 229 ethics meetups, 528 Skeptic meetups, 126 feminist meetups, 660 meetups dedicated to 'intellectual discussion', 1,020 environmental meetups, and 2,162 book club meetups, many of which read books of philosophy and ideas. And that's just a snapshot: many philosophy clubs don't use meetup.com. There are several *Cafe Philosophique* clubs on the continent. There are 41 Skeptics In the Pub around the UK. There are philosophical societies and ideas cafes at many universities. There are more radical learning groups, some connected with the Occupy movement, like the Bank of Ideas, Tent City University, Cuts Cafes, as well as grassroots learning and activism groups like Transition Towns or Food not Bombs. There are an increasing number of commercial organisers of ideas events, like the School of Life, TED, Brandstof and Intelligence Squared. And there are more and more philosophy events: *nuits de philosophie* at French Institutes, the Month of Philosophy in Amsterdam, How The Light Gets In and the Battle of Ideas in the UK, the Modena philosophy festival in Italy. Clearly, something is going on in grassroots philosophy, which has not yet received sufficient academic attention.

The aim of this report is to attempt to map this grassroots landscape and to answer some questions:

- What academic research into philosophy groups exists already?
- What are the historical precedents of the contemporary grassroots revival of philosophy, and what lessons can we draw by looking at those precedents?
- How big is the grassroots philosophy universe? What are the different forms and structures that philosophy clubs take?
- What has driven the contemporary growth of philosophy clubs?
- What do people use philosophy clubs for? What need do they serve?
- What is their role, actual and potential, in well-being and mental health policy?
- How could philosophy groups develop?

In answer to the first question, not very much academic research exists as yet, although there is some. There is a lot of research on Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children, but much less on the Community Philosophy projects for adults that have grown out of it. There is substantial work on the applied ethics movement, some of which I have included in the bibliography for this report. There is also a lot of academic work on the contemporary revival of virtue ethics and its relationship to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Positive Psychology, although less on the grassroots clubs this revival has inspired.

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<sup>9</sup> Evans 2012

And there is a surprising lack of academic interest so far in Cafes Philos, the Skeptics movement, Philosophy In Pubs and other grassroots initiatives. Where the academic research exists, I have mentioned it in the report and included it in the bibliography. There is more information on grassroots philosophy movements available in newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, podcasts and videos, and I have also included some of these in the bibliography and on the website for this project, [www.thephilosophyhub.com](http://www.thephilosophyhub.com). Finally, I have also tried to supplement existing research with oral history accounts, by conducting interviews with some prominent figures in the grassroots philosophy movement, which I have included in the appendix of this report.



*A philosophy club in Grimstad, Norway, by Ellen Lande Gossner*

### **Some initial questions of definition**

There are some questions of definition that need to be cleared up before we go further, namely, what exactly is a 'philosophical community'? What, in fact, is 'philosophy'? You could write several books on this perennial query, although that's not the aim of this report. But some attempt must be made to answer the question, particularly as part of this project involves uploading philosophy clubs into a global philosophy map on [www.thephilosophyhub.com](http://www.thephilosophyhub.com) - we need to know which clubs to include in our map, and which to leave out.

Philosophy, as Randall Collins has pointed out, often flourishes in border disputes with other disciplines and activities<sup>10</sup>. It is a problematizer, a guerrilla force without a country, which asks questions of other boundaries without ever defining its own. It has a problematic relationship with religion, for example. Philosophy grew out of traditional religion, and some early philosophers like Heraclitus and Plato tried to put religious or theistic ideas on a more rational foundation. The philosophical communities created by Plato and Pythagoras are close to what we would think of today as religious cults: the members of the community committed to a particular way of life with the aim of completely transforming their personalities. Some contemporary philosophical communities are close to this religious model: the School of Economic Science, for example, which offers courses in practical philosophy, is a neo-platonic sect which tries to bring its members closer to divine union.<sup>11</sup> Many Buddhist communities might also define themselves as philosophical communities. So, perhaps, would Taoist, Muslim, Confucian and atheist communities. Christian Alpha groups might make a claim to be philosophy clubs. If we included all these on our global philosophy map, it would start to get very crowded.

Philosophy also has a problematic relationship with science, which grew out of philosophy and has often followed in its wake, finding empirical evidence for or against theories initially raised in philosophical discussions. Ever since modern science developed from 'natural philosophy' in the 17th century, philosophy has been engaged in something of a rear-guard action against the natural sciences, struggling to define a role for itself while scientific disciplines have gained in influence and status. Philosophy has either aspired to the precision and objectivity of the natural sciences, as in logical positivism, or defined itself against that precision and objectivity, as in much continental philosophy. Philosophy has a particularly close and problematic relationship with psychology, as we shall discover in this report. Psychology broke off from philosophy and became its own discipline at the start of the 20th century, and since then has established itself much more firmly at the centre of our culture as the place to look to for answers to emotional problems and existential concerns<sup>12</sup>. In the last 30 years, philosophy has tried to reclaim some of the cultural role it ceded to psychology<sup>13</sup>, and this has led to some blurring of their spheres of influence - philosophy has become more psychotherapeutic, while psychotherapy has become more philosophical<sup>14</sup>. There are, today, hundreds of thousands of self-help and personal development groups, offering everything from the Twelve Steps to the Law of Attraction. Some of these might draw on ancient philosophies, or even modern philosophies like Existentialism, to try and teach a way of life to their followers. Are they philosophy clubs? Finally, philosophy has a close and problematic relationship with politics. Many of the philosophy clubs of the past and present were committed to a political agenda - reformist, Chartist, anarchist, Marxist, libertarian, environmental and so on<sup>15</sup>. At

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<sup>10</sup> Collins 2000, p.689

<sup>11</sup> Evans 2012, pp.188-193

<sup>12</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2010)

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Lou Marinoff, *Plato, not Prozac! Applying Philosophy to Everyday Problems* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999)

<sup>14</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996); Donald Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy* (London: Karnac Books, 2010); Appiah 2010

<sup>15</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963)

what point does philosophy become political ideology? At what point does a philosophy club become a political party?

And then there are questions of the definition of 'community'. A good starting definition might be 'a voluntary association of members drawn together by similar interests' - like a club, group, school or society. But are such clubs always free or do members sometimes pay? At what point does a 'philosophy club' become a for-profit company? Can communities be online, or do their members need to meet face-to-face to merit inclusion in the category? Should they be open, as Stoic gatherings were, or exclusive, as Pythagorean and Platonic communities were? Do the members of a philosophy community need to share ethical values, or simply intellectual interests?

These are important questions for our project, because they will dictate which groups fall under our purview, and which are included on our global philosophy map. Our answer will inevitably be partial, limited, and open to challenge. Perhaps the best answer is that a philosophical community is one that calls itself a philosophical community - whether that be explicitly a 'philosophy club', or more generally an ideas or discussion group. I would go further, and suggest a philosophical community involves Socratic questioning of one's ideas and values, and recognises the role of free and open Socratic discussion in the good life. Philosophical communities may take that idea in many different directions, and may demand more or less of their members in terms of practical ethical commitment. But the idea of open, rational discussion of truth-claims and values is, I think, essential in differing philosophy groups from religious groups, political parties, or some psychotherapeutic organisations. They are not simply places for discussion about the instrumental means towards a pre-accepted end (election success, well-being, God). They are also places where our values and ends can be openly scrutinised, discussed and challenged (where are we trying to get to? Is this an end worth seeking?). That's an important distinction between philosophy and science clubs - both will, hopefully, look to evidence from the natural and social sciences, but science clubs might not necessarily bring in questions of values and ethics. When science clubs *do* discuss ethical questions like the ethics of suicide or the nature of happiness, I would suggest they qualify as 'philosophical communities'. There will inevitably be some overlap, as we shall see in our examination of Skepticism.

Finally, our definition insists that philosophy clubs are places that rely on rational arguments for or against an idea, rather than appeals to supernatural phenomena like the direct experience of the Holy Spirit. This is an important distinction between a philosophy club and, say, Alpha groups, where the discussion focuses more on members' personal experiences of God<sup>16</sup>. It is difficult to police this last border - shouldn't a person's subjective emotional experiences be part of the conversation of philosophy, particularly if it claims to enhance well-being? Shouldn't subjective evidence from meditation, for example, be included within a thorough philosophy of human nature, and if so, why not also include subjective experiences from prayer, grace or even revelation? I don't have good answers to this, other than that philosophy has historically, in the western tradition at least, defined itself against such appeals to supernatural authority (although of course, Socrates, the father of this rational tradition, also had a *daemon* who gave him ethical instructions). Again, there will be overlap between religious, spiritual and philosophical communities.

Before we start, I would like to acknowledge my thanks to all the community philosophy organizers who have helped me in my research, particularly those who attended the

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Hunt, *The Alpha Enterprise: evangelism in a post-Christian era* (London: Ashgate, 2004)

seminar at Queen Mary, University of London<sup>17</sup>. I would also like to thank Jonathan Rowson of the RSA, Charles Seaford of the new economics foundation, Paul Doran of Philosophy In Pubs, and David R. Buchanan of the Global Institute of Health for supporting this project. Thanks to Greg Funnell and Ellen Lande Gossner for letting me use their beautiful photos. I'd especially like to thank the AHRC for funding this project, and Dr Thomas Dixon of the Centre for the History of the Emotions, for all his help and guidance. Needless to say, the limitations of this report are my own responsibility. I should also acknowledge at the outset some limits and biases of my research. My limited time and resources forced me to focus on grassroots philosophy clubs in western Europe, north America and Australia, and I have not done justice to the grassroots philosophy movements in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. If one aim of this project is to identify future areas for research, then researching, comparing and connecting with grassroots philosophy groups around the world is a major task to be pursued by myself and other researchers. The global conversation between grassroots philosophy clubs is just beginning, but I hope this report will be a useful ice-breaker.



*Knut Moreto, farmer and member of Grimstad philosophy club in Norway, by Ellen Lande Gossner*

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<sup>17</sup> Videos of presentations at the seminar are available at the accompanying website for this project, [thephilosophyhub.com](http://thephilosophyhub.com)

# Part 1: A Brief History of Philosophical Communities

In this section I'm going to sketch a very brief social history of philosophical communities from ancient Greece up to the 1960s, as a background to the contemporary rise of philosophy clubs in the last few decades. Needless to say, the historical tour will be something of a gallop (as I want to get on and look at modern communities), but it may be useful to mention some of the historical precedents for today's groups, and to highlight useful sources for future research into the social network history of philosophy - a history which, to a large extent, remains to be written. Randall Collins has, of course, made an impressive start with his *Sociology of Philosophies*, although his work focuses mainly on networks of philosophy within academia, while this project is particularly interested in networks *outside of* academia, such as informal groups, clubs and communities. George Simmel's work on social networks has also inspired some useful recent scholarship on philosophical communities in the past and present.<sup>18</sup>

As I have suggested, philosophy is socially both disruptive and creative. It disrupts traditional patterns of community, by prompting people to question their shared beliefs and values. But it is also creative, helping to inspire new forms of community, new experiments in living. Both these aspects were there at the birth of philosophy, in the sixth and early fifth century BC, in the life-stories of two Pre-Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus and Pythagoras. According to Diogenes Laertius, Heraclitus left his native Ephesus in disgust at the immorality of his fellow citizens, and wandered in the fields outside the city, weeping and eating grass. He rejected his society, and his own political role within it, and became a self-exiled outcast, a citizen of no state, almost a non-human. This is an example of the social disruption of philosophy, how it disrupts traditional forms of community. Pythagoras was also a wanderer, who left his native Samos and traveled around the Mediterranean. Yet, unlike Heraclitus, his questioning and searching led Pythagoras to establish *new* forms of community, in the form of philosophical communes around Magna Graecia (in what is today Italy). His followers lived together, shared their possessions, and followed their philosophy in a secretive quasi-mystical cult.<sup>19</sup>

The life-story of Socrates, as told in the writings of Plato, likewise illustrate this double aspect of philosophy. On the one hand, Socrates was a socially disruptive gadfly, challenging Athenians to think for themselves rather than blindly accepting conventional dogma. He championed a form of rationalist non-conformist individualism, which led to Athenian society condemning him to death. On the other hand, Socrates' philosophy wasn't entirely negative, sceptical or anti-social. His life and teachings also led to *new* forms of community. Each Platonic dialogue is a description of an encounter, a spontaneous meeting somewhere in the streets of Athens where, briefly, Socrates and his conversation-partners come together to question their own and each other's suppositions. A slightly more settled example of conviviality is shown in Plato's *Symposium*, in which a group of distinguished Athenians, including Socrates, gather together to enjoy each other's company and to reason about love. This, you might say, was the first informal philosophy

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<sup>18</sup> In particular, Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani's *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley--Blackwell, 2005); and James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). See also the ongoing AHRC project researching Italian academies and their social networks: <http://italianacademies.org/>

<sup>19</sup> To find out more about Heraclitus and Pythagoras, and the modern communities they inspired, see Evans 2012, also Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1925)

club in history.<sup>20</sup> Socrates has remained the great inspiration for contemporary philosophy groups like Socrates Cafes and Cafes Philos.<sup>21</sup>



*Raphael's School of Athens (c. 1511)*

## 1.2) The Academy, the Lyceum, the Stoa, the Garden, and the barrel

In the years after Socrates' death, philosophy came to a fork in the road. On the one hand, Socrates' student, Plato, took philosophy off the streets and into the academy. Plato founded the first academic institution, called the Academy, in roughly 387 BC. It was an exclusive and secretive retreat on the outskirts of Athens, where rich male students could contemplate eternal truths away from the hubbub of the city. At the same time, another philosopher called Diogenes the Cynic started to live in a barrel in the Athenian marketplace, teaching a form of radical street philosophy which was open to anyone and situated in the heart of the city. Plato and Diogenes were supposed to have disliked each other, and to have sparred on occasion<sup>22</sup>, and they present two different models of philosophy:

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<sup>20</sup> Mary P. Nichols, *Socrates On Friendship and Community: Reflections on Plato's Symposium, Phaedrus and Lysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); also Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995)

<sup>21</sup> Marc Sautet, *Un Cafe pour Socrate: comment la philosophie peut nous aider a comprendre le monde aujourd'hui* (Paris: R Laffont, 1995); Christopher Phillips, *Socrates Cafe: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2002)

<sup>22</sup> See Diogenes Laertius 1925

academic philosophy and street philosophy. The tension between the two carries on into the present day.<sup>23</sup>

In c.334 BC, Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, set up his own philosophical school in Athens, called the Lyceum, though he also spent much of his life exiled from Athens. He put forward an ethical philosophy in which friendship and sociability played a key role. Aristotle was perhaps the first theorist of civil society, and he praised the idea of friends gathering together in clubs to reflect on the good life and the good society. Such clubs engaged the citizenry in the running of a democracy, and protected it from tyranny. The best way a tyrant could keep hold of power, Aristotle suggested, was to close such clubs down.<sup>24</sup> Of course, Aristotle, like Plato, thought philosophy should be confined to rich male Greeks - women were excluded, and his vision of the good philosophical society relied on a large population of slaves doing all the manual labour.

In the third century BC, as Greek city-states lost their political independence, Greek philosophy became less political, and more focused on healing individuals of their emotional suffering.<sup>25</sup> New philosophies appeared, such as Stoicism, Epicureanism and Scepticism, which offered their followers a way of life which (it was claimed) would lead to personal happiness and tranquillity. The Stoics were so-called because they gathered under the *Stoa Poikile*, or painted colonnade, in the Athenian market-place. The philosophy that they taught there, to whoever wanted to hear it (male and female, freeman and even slave), exhorted people to become indifferent to externals, and instead to focus on the inner good of developing their reason to become at one with the ebb and flow of the divine universe, or *Logos*. This way of life, they suggested, would free people from anxiety and help them achieve a 'good flow of life'. Stoicism was and is a rather individualistic and self-reliant philosophy, and there is little evidence of actual Stoic communities, in the sense of Stoics living together - although today there are some attempts to create Stoic communities.<sup>26</sup> Another philosophy which appeared around the same time, and which *did* inspire actual communities, was Epicureanism. Its founder, Epicurus, established a philosophical commune called the Garden in Athens, where he and his followers lived together and tried to pursue pleasure as intelligently as possible. One of the greatest pleasures of life, according to Epicurus, is friendship and philosophical conversation - this seemed to have been the main activity at the Garden. Finally, the Sceptic school argued that the root of all emotional suffering was overly-dogmatic beliefs, and the way to tranquillity was to learn to suspend judgement and cultivate doubt.<sup>27</sup>

In the second century BC, the Roman general Scipio Aemelianus helped to introduce Greek philosophy into Roman culture through his social circle<sup>28</sup>, which included the

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<sup>23</sup> On the tension between street philosophy and academic philosophy, see Evans 2012

<sup>24</sup> See the discussion of Aristotle's influence on modern philosophy clubs, below. Also Mark A. Young, *Negotiating the Good Life: Aristotle and the Civil Society* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005); and John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* (New York: NYU Press, 1999)

<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum 1996

<sup>26</sup> See [www.newstoa.com](http://www.newstoa.com), and also the Stoicism Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/2204659768/?fref=ts>

<sup>27</sup> Nussbaum 1996

<sup>28</sup> Whether there was an established 'Scipionic Circle' is still controversial. See J.E.G Zetzel, 'Cicero and the Scipionic Circle', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 76 (1972), pp. 173 - 179

historian Polybius and the philosopher Panaetius. A few decades later, the Roman author and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero paid homage to this circle, and Cicero himself did even more to integrate Hellenic ideas into Roman culture. Cicero, like Aristotle, emphasised the importance of intelligent conversation and friendship in creating a foundation for civil society. He was an major inspiration to later philosophical communities, particularly to Renaissance humanists and 18th-century social philosophers.<sup>29</sup>

When Christianity arose and eventually became the official religion of the Roman Empire, it defined itself against pagan philosophy, but also absorbed many of the Greeks' philosophical concepts and practical ideas for living a good life.<sup>30</sup> Early Christians showed great creativity in the philosophical and religious communities they developed. St Paul, in particular, showed all the missionary zeal and networking enthusiasm of later philosophy community organizers, while the Gnostics developed neo-Pythagorean religious communes, and the Desert Fathers developed a radical form of *askesis*, or philosophical practice, upon themselves.<sup>31</sup> After the sacking and collapse of the Roman empire, philosophy survived during the Dark Ages thanks to the libraries of the Byzantine empire, and to centres of Islamic scholarship, where philosophical communities took new shapes, from Almohad courts and Caliphates to Sufi communities.<sup>32</sup> In the West, Greek texts were slowly translated in monasteries from the 9th to the 11th century. Finally, in the 12th century, the study of Greek revived and the rediscovery and translation of Aristotle's works helped to inspire the foundation of universities like Bologna (founded in 1088), Oxford (1176), Cambridge (1209) and Salamanca (1218), in which university scholars toiled to unify Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology. Philosophy as a standalone subject was not taught in universities until the 19th century. Today, the university is still the home of much philosophical work, but there has also long been a tradition of philosophy outside academia.

### 1.3) Renaissance philosophy groups

In the 14th century, a more informal, accessible and sociable approach to learning grew up as independent and itinerant scholars rejected the inelegance and unworldliness of Aristotelian Scholasticism, and started to rediscover, translate and discuss other ancient texts, particularly the newly-recovered works of Plato and Cicero <sup>33</sup>. The new movement became known as humanism, from Cicero's comments in praise of *studia humanitatis*, or 'cultural and literary pursuits' and their central role in liberal education<sup>34</sup>. Humanist scholars like Petrarch, Erasmus and Thomas More celebrated learning not as a purely academic or monastic pursuit, but as a literary pleasure and refinement suitable for men of

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<sup>29</sup> Hans Baron, *Cicero and the Roman Civic Spirit in the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1938)

<sup>30</sup> Hadot 1995; also Werner Wilhelm Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 3: The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage, 1988)

<sup>31</sup> Hadot 1995, Foucault 1988

<sup>32</sup> Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)

<sup>33</sup> See Brian W. Ogilvie, 'Petrarch's historicism and the purpose of philosophy', paper for presentation at the 35th International Medieval Conference: <http://petrarch.petersadlon.com/submissions/Ogilvie.pdf>; see also the critique of Scholasticism in Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994)

<sup>34</sup> In Cicero's *Oratio pro L. Murena* and *Pro archia poeta oratio*, both available in Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Ten Speeches*, ed. J.E.G Zetzel (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2009)

the world like Cicero, which made them more polite, urbane and sociable. The humanists criticised Scholastic philosophy for its verbose and obscure literary style, and its irrelevance to everyday concerns. Humanist philosophy, by contrast, was often beautifully written, witty, and connected to the world of the court and politics. It covered everything from utopian schemes for imagined communities (such as Thomas More's *Utopia*), to practical 'how-to' manuals on manners and courtliness (such as Erasmus' *Handbook of Manners for Children* and Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*.<sup>35</sup>)

Humanist culture grew out of informal circles of friends - an early prototype of modern philosophy clubs. Such circles were something new and radical in medieval society - the sociologist George Simmel has written: "humanistic interests broke down medieval isolation of social groups and of estates...a common interest in ideas and in knowledge cut across all previously established forms and institutions of medieval life".<sup>36</sup> Humanist circles tended to be entirely male, though there were exceptions, such as the circle that grew up around Elizabetta Gonzaga in Urbino, or the circle around Elizabeth I in England. One of the most famous examples of a humanist network is the circle that coalesced around the writer Bocaccio at the Santo Spirito monastery in Florence in the mid-14th century. Another humanist circle arose at the Santo Spirito monastery a few decades later, around the figure of Coluccio Salutati, the scholar and chancellor of Florence. It included the book-collector Poggio Giovanni Bracciolini, who re-discovered many works by Cicero, and the philosopher and politician Leonardo Bruni. Salutati and Bruni developed a philosophy of civic humanism, deeply influenced by Cicero, which argued that learning should not be locked up in monasteries and universities, but should extend into the heart of cities, to create well-informed and active citizens who were able to govern their city effectively.<sup>37</sup>

#### 1.4) The academies

In the 15th century, informal humanist circles became more formalised through the foundation of academies across Renaissance Italy. The most famous academy was the Platonic Academy founded by Marsilio Ficino, and funded by Cosimo and Lorenzo di Medici. Ficino turned his estate at the Villa di Carregi on the outskirts of Florence into a recreation of Plato's Academy, with Platonic maxims on the wall and a bust of Plato in the hall. He gathered a group of scholars, artists, poets and courtiers there, who called themselves 'brothers in Plato', with Ficino known as 'the father'.

*'The celebration of Plato's birthday at Lorenzo di Medici's court', by Luigi Mussini*



<sup>35</sup> On humanist handbooks, see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

<sup>36</sup> Simmel 1955, p. 135-6; see also Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski, *Group Identity in the Renaissance World* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2011)

<sup>37</sup> Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966)

In some ways, the Platonic Academy was a religious cult dedicated to Plato's 'philosophy of love', and to the occult philosophy of Kabbalah and the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The Academy helped to disseminate Platonic philosophy through Florence and Renaissance Italy via the creations of members such as Sandro Botticelli, and Ficino cultivated connections and networks of correspondence to other courts and humanist circles across Europe.<sup>38</sup>

In the 16th century, academies mushroomed across Italy, often with wild names, such as the Dazed, the Occult, the Illuminati. These confraternities were informal groups of artists, courtiers and scholars that gathered round a patron. They often had a formal constitution, and each academy had its symbol (a practice taken up by modern fraternal societies like the Rotary Club today). They discussed and practiced poetry, philosophy, science and alchemy, and helped create an early and informal form of 'peer review' for independent scholars.<sup>39</sup> In the early 17th century, many academies became more specialized (focusing on science, music, literature, philosophy and so on) and they also formalised their relationship to the state. The Academie Francaise, created by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635, was an early prototype, focusing its research on the French language. A decade later, the Philosophical Society of Oxford started to meet, before being granted a royal charter and becoming the Royal Society in 1662. Although it was originally called a philosophical society, the Royal Society was instrumental in the birth of modern experimental science and the beginning of the disciplinary split between the sciences and philosophy.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) was founded in 1754, and has kept the sciences and humanities talking to each other, through its programme of public talks and its support for worthwhile enterprises like The Philosophy Hub.

### 1.5) The salons

In the 17th century, a new form of philosophical and cultural community arose in France: the salon. Historians often credit the Blue Room salon of Madame de Rambouillet as the pioneer: Madame de Rambouillet set up her salon in her home in Paris, as a private alternative to the court. Where the court was, at that time, sexually boorish and full of scandal and intrigue, her salon was governed by polite manners and good taste. <sup>41</sup> Salons were started by other ladies of fashion across France over the next 150 years, flourishing particularly in the mid-18th century, where they were important arenas for the development and dissemination of Enlightenment ideas and manners. The salon was supposed to civilise its members. Madame de Rambouillet's salon, for example is said by one contemporary observer to have "corrected the wicked customs that went before her [and] taught *politesse* to all those of her time who visited her". Salons taught their members the *art de vivre*, or the art of living, which meant particularly the art of friendship and of polite and witty conversation. They were also a form of emotional education - the salon of the Marechale de Luxembourg, for example, is credited by the Duc de Levis with curing its young female members of 'giddiness' while teaching its young male members to be

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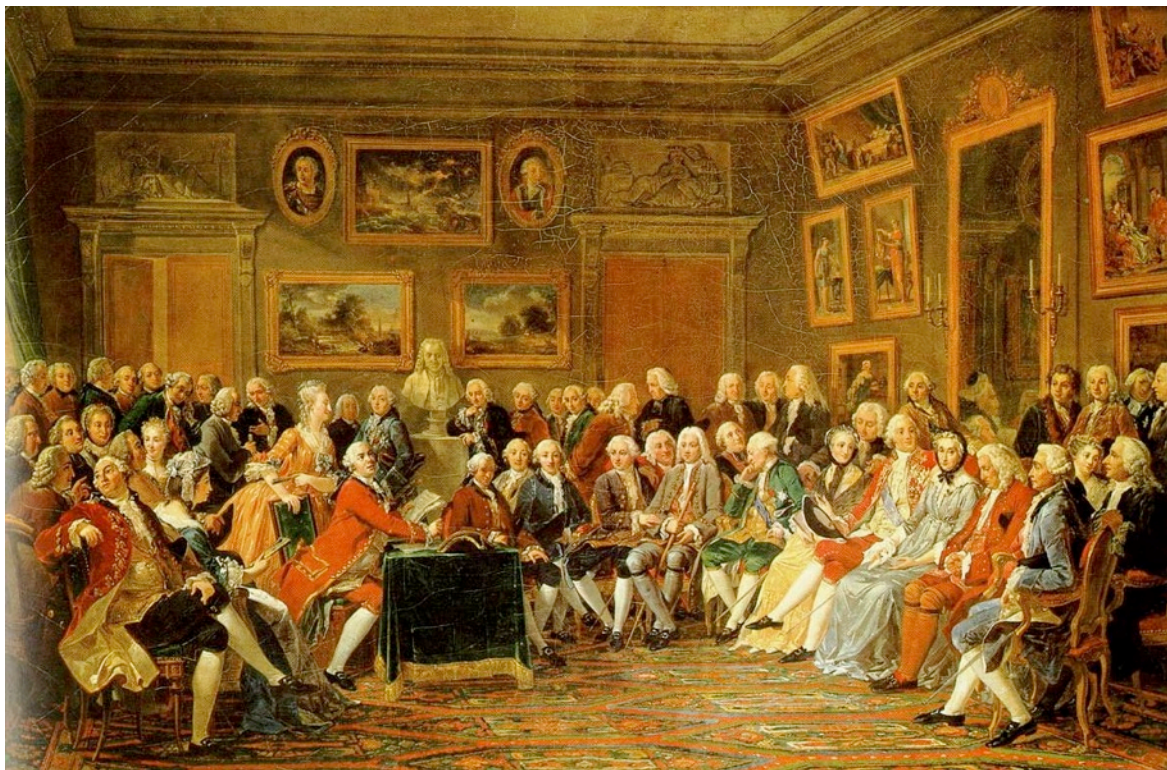
<sup>38</sup> Michael J.B. Allen et al, *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Lieden: BRILL, 2002)

<sup>39</sup> See the ongoing AHRC research project into Italian academies and their social networks: <http://italianacademies.org/>

<sup>40</sup> Michael Hunter, *Establishing the New Science: The Experience of the Early Royal Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989)

<sup>41</sup> Benadetta Craveri, *The Age of Conversation* (trans Waugh, New York: New York Review Books, 2005)

'reserved and respectful'. Salons were also useful sites for artists and philosophes to meet aristocratic patrons, and refine their ideas through conversation. The Abbe de Morellet described the dialogic process well: "Very often the one talking has but an incomplete idea, the development of which he has not followed...If he announces it in society, one of those present will be impressed and will perceive the link with one of his own ideas; he will bring them together. This rapprochement in turn excites the first speaker, who sees that his initial opinions can be further developed; and with everyone contributing to the growth of this first fund, the communal contribution will soon be enriched." Salons, like British coffeehouses, had an important political role, in helping to create the idea of 'public opinion' as something separate from the court which checks the power of government.<sup>42</sup> Monsieur Necker, the French finance minister, wrote shortly before the French revolution: "Public opinion is stronger and more enlightened than the law"; while his wife, who hosted the famous salon of her day, also suggested that public opinion had become "queen of the world".



*In the Salon of Madame Geoffrin in 1755, by Anicet-Charles-Gabriel Lemmonier*

### **1.6) Enlightenment clubs and coffeehouses**

Cafés have played an important role in the social history of philosophy clubs, from the Deux Magots beloved of Sartre and De Beauvoir, to the Café de Phares where the modern Café Philo movement began. We tend to associate cafés particularly with French philosophy, but arguably the tradition of café philosophising was pioneered in England. Coffee was exported to Europe from the Ottoman Empire and north Africa in the 17th century - the first European coffeehouse opened in Venice in 1645, and the first English coffeehouse in Oxford in 1650. By the end of the 17th century, there were reportedly 2,000

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<sup>42</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989)

coffeehouses in London alone. They became sites of free discussion and debate on the arts, science and politics, and acquired the nickname 'penny universities'.<sup>43</sup> Coffeehouses helped to foment a new spirit of Enlightenment sociability, well-expressed by the *Tatler* and *Spectator* essays of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Coffeehouses rapidly evolved their own rules and codes of manners, which were often discussed by Addison in his essays. They were casual experiments in democratic self-government.

Some people took these casual experiments in self-government a step further by forming clubs. These were fraternal groups, similar to city guilds or livery companies, but based on friendship and ideas rather than common employment (in that sense, they were closer to French and Italian academies). One of the most interesting clubs was the Rota Club, a debating club set up in a London coffeehouse in 1659 by the radical politician James Harrington. The Rota Club was organised by ballot-box voting, a relatively new method of governance which Harrington argued should also be used for general elections. So the Rota Club was a sort of experimental community where experiments in living could be tried out before they were applied to the whole of society.<sup>44</sup> Many other clubs adopted the ballot box method for governance, before it was eventually adopted by most democratic societies for general elections from the late 19th century on. The Rota Club was one of many debating clubs that mushroomed across Britain during the Enlightenment, in part through the 'British elocutionary movement' started by Thomas Sheridan. By 1780, there were scores of debating clubs in London, including the University for Rational Debate, the Society for Free Debate and the Westminster Forum. Some of these clubs let in women, others didn't - so women set up their own debating clubs, like the Female Parliament and La Belle Assemblée.<sup>45</sup> As in *salons*, academies or humanist circles, the democratic idea behind many debating clubs was that people can govern themselves through rational persuasion and debate, rather than force.

Perhaps the most influential British philosophy club during the Enlightenment was the Select Society, a debating club founded in Edinburgh in May 1754 by 50 distinguished Scottish thinkers and statesmen, including Adam Smith, David Hume and Adam Ferguson. It met every Friday evening, from 6pm until 9pm, in the Advocates Library. The first speaker was Smith, whose speech failed to impress ("his voice was harsh, and his enunciation thick" <sup>46</sup>) but the Society was nonetheless a great success, and its membership rapidly rose to 130. The club held debates, and offered prizes to its members for everything from the best essay to the best invention for making cheese. The club, later re-christened the Poker Club, played an important role in the development of the social philosophies of the Scottish Enlightenment. Clubs also played an important role in spreading Enlightenment ideas across the United States - one club worth particular mention is the Junto, also known as the Leather Apron Club, which was formed in Philadelphia in 1727 by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin writes in his autobiography: "I form'd most of my ingenious acquaintance into a club of mutual improvement, which we called the Junto; we met on Friday evenings. The rules that I drew up required that every

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<sup>43</sup> Aytoun Ellis, *The penny universities: A history of the coffee-houses* (New York: Secker & Warburg, 1956); see also Brian Cowan Williams, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffee-house* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005)

<sup>44</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, 'Editorial and Historical Introductions', *The Political Works of James Harrington* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), xi-xviii; pp. 1-152

<sup>45</sup> Donna Andrew, *London Debating Societies 1776-1799* (London: London Record Society, 1994)

<sup>46</sup> John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*, Chapter VIII.9 (London: MacMillan, 1895)

member, in his turn, should produce one or more queries on any point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy, to be discuss'd by the company; and once in three months produce and read an essay of his own writing, on any subject he pleased."<sup>47</sup>

Of course, while Enlightenment salons, clubs and coffeehouses widened the philosophical conversation beyond the court and into the middling classes, there were still limits to the circle's inclusivity. The clientele for clubs and coffeehouses was almost entirely male, white and middle or upper class. Women, the working class, and the slave populations of the colonies were often excluded. Clubs could be bastions of privilege, rather than open and democratic discussion (gentlemen's clubs like White's, Brook's or Boodle's created exclusive networks for the rich, male elite). Over the course of the 18th century, some clubs became more and more secretive, conspiratorial and even cult-like: the great example is Freemasonry, which spread across Europe and North America, from St Petersburg to Pennsylvania, in the early 18th century. Freemasons called their lodges 'temples of philosophy', and they acted as networks to spread Enlightenment and republican ideas, much to the paranoia of autocratic governments and the Catholic Church. Freemasonry can be seen as an attempt to create a sort of new religion out of rational philosophy, complete with its own myths, symbols and rituals.<sup>48</sup> This effort to make a new philosophical religion would be repeated in the 19th and early 20th centuries, though without the cultic secrecy, by Positivism and Humanism.

### **1.7) Corresponding Societies and radical grassroots philosophy**

During the late 18th and early 19th century, the idea of gathering in a club or coffeehouse to discuss ideas widened from the middle classes to the working classes, and also to women<sup>49</sup>. At the same time, the conversation moved beyond the coffeehouse, and into the pub. Self-run discussion groups for the working classes have a long tradition in the UK, going back to the Putney Debates of 1647, but the movement really took off in the final decades of the 18th century, with the growth of corresponding societies. These associations were collectives of artisans and workers, who would meet, usually weekly, in a pub, to educate and organise themselves, and to agitate for reforms like universal suffrage.<sup>50</sup> Corresponding societies would often read radical texts out loud, including particularly the works of Tom Paine - appropriately enough, as Paine wrote *The Rights of Man* in the Angel Inn, in Islington, and developed many of his radical ideas in the Headstrong Club that met in the White Hart in Lewes.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Mémoires de la vie privée de Benjamin Franklin* (Paris: Buisson, 1791)

<sup>48</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in 18th-century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

<sup>49</sup> Although some 18th-century debating clubs had quite inclusive audiences - see Andrew 1994

<sup>50</sup> My main source for this period has been E.P Thompson 1963

<sup>51</sup> Moncure Daniel Conway, *Life of Thomas Paine: with a History of his Literary, Political and Religious Career in America, France and England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). p. 278



*John Thelwall speaking at a  
London Corresponding  
Society rally at Spa Fields, by  
James Gillray, 1795*

Members of a Corresponding Society paid a small membership fee, and the groups would keep minutes of the meetings. They were called corresponding societies because they would cultivate networks of correspondence with other groups around the country, to share ideas and to organise larger-scale rallies for parliamentary reform. Such groups, according to the historian EP Thompson, played an important role in educating the working classes, promoting literacy, and even perhaps improving people's self-discipline and character. Francis Place, a weaver who played a key role in organising the London Corresponding Society in the 1790s, reflected: "The moral effects of the Society were very great indeed. It induced men to read books instead of spending their time at public houses. It taught them to think, to respect themselves, and to desire to educate their children." It also taught them to think and debate ideas. Another LCS organiser, John Thelwall, wrote that a "sort of Socratic spirit will necessarily grow up, where large bodies of men assemble".<sup>52</sup>

From 1790 to around 1840, working class radical groups flourished across Britain and often attracted huge audiences. One meeting of the London Corresponding Society in the Globe tavern in London attracted such a big crowd that the floor gave way. In 1795, amid the political ferment that followed the French Revolution, the Society was attracting 800 new members a month, and had close to 80 chapters around the capital. Corresponding societies also organised outdoor rallies which could attract tens of thousands of people. Francis Place remembers one large rally in London's Chalk Farm in 1794, where he saw "an immense multitude...of all descriptions of persons - men and women...in the greatest order I have ever witnessed...they were *thinking* and *reasoning* people".<sup>53</sup> Corresponding societies attracted a great deal of government suspicion. The government employed spies to try and infiltrate the clubs, and the police would occasionally raid them and 'read the Riot Act', forcing the club to break up. Occasionally, club organisers were arrested and some were deported to Australia (which may explain that country's vibrant practical philosophy movement today.) It was during this period that the phrase 'pub philosopher' became a term of abuse - the implication being that the working class were too ignorant or drunk to be capable of philosophical thought. Yet despite the crackdowns and ridicule, the

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<sup>52</sup> Thompson 1963

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*

corresponding society movement kept going, fed into the Chartist movement, and eventually led to great historical advances in British politics, including universal suffrage and the establishment of the welfare state.

### 1.8) Mechanics Institutes, Lyceums and Chautauquas

While Corresponding Societies were self-run workers groups, there were also philosophical organisations set up by middle class philanthropists for the benefit of the working class. One such organisation was the Mechanics Institute. The first Mechanics Institute was created in Edinburgh in 1821, and hundreds of others soon appeared across the UK and Australia. Many Mechanics Institutes began by holding meetings in pubs, much like the Corresponding Societies, and also worked to educate the working class and promote literacy. The difference was that Mechanics Institutes usually had a less radical or reformist agenda than Corresponding Societies. Some socialists, such as Frederick Engels, criticized Mechanics Institutes for promoting *laissez faire* economics and not allowing alternative and more radical philosophies to be taught or discussed. Engels complained that “Here all education is...subservient to the ruling politics and religion, so that for the working man it is merely a constant sermon upon quiet obedience, passivity and resignation to fate. The mass of working men naturally have nothing to do with them.”<sup>54</sup> In fact, despite Engels’ scepticism, Mechanics Institutes *did* prove popular with the working class, and some of them survived for many decades and eventually became universities, such as Birkbeck College.

In the US, the Lyceum and Chautauqua movements were philanthropic informal learning movements, which blossomed across the United States in the 19th and early 20th century, and which typically promoted a bourgeois individualist form of self-help.<sup>55</sup> However, Lyceums and Chautauquas also played an important role in mobilising public opinion for social reforms like the abolition of slavery, prison reform and the temperance movement. But they also offered popular entertainment like magic shows or circus acts. The first Lyceum was opened by the scientist and teacher Josiah Holbrook in Millbury, Massachusetts in 1826 - the name was inspired by Aristotle’s school in Athens. Holbrook described Lyceums as “a voluntary association of individuals disposed to improve each other in useful knowledge, and to advance the interests of their schools.” Lyceums proved very popular, and by the mid-1830s there were around 3,000 of them across the United States.<sup>56</sup> They were a popular venue with Transcendentalist philosophers Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who gave over 100 lectures to his local Lyceum. Both Emerson and Thoreau criticised conventional academic philosophy and traditional religion for being too formal, theoretical, and detached from actual life - perhaps the Lyceum offered them the glimmerings of an alternative. The Chautauqua movement took the spirit of the Lyceums into the 20th century, with marquees full of lecturers, magicians, quack-doctors and well-being gurus that would either hold summer camps or travel from town to town, setting up big tents for the education and entertainment of the local citizens. Chautauquas are still going, and have inspired modern popular philosophers like Robert

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<sup>54</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1892) pp. 238-9

<sup>55</sup> See Harold W. Stubblefield & Patrick Keane, *Adult Education - The American Experience: from the colonial period to the present* (New Jersey: Jossey Bass, 1994).

<sup>56</sup> Angela Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in 19th-century United States* (Lansing: Michigan State University, 2005)

Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*<sup>57</sup>, as well as popular lecture events like TED, 5X15 and the School of Life Live Tour.

### 1.9) Marxists, anarchists, Narodniki

While Mechanics Institutes, Lyceums and Chautauquas represent the more commercial end of the grassroots philosophy spectrum, other 19th-century philosophy groups took a more radical and even revolutionary stance towards their society. Karl Marx famously poured scorn on academic philosophy, and tried to create an alternative that would be rooted in social practice. “The philosophers have only interpreted the world”, he wrote. “The point is to change it.”<sup>58</sup> Radical philosophers like Marx or Petr Kropotkin thought that grassroots philosophy should not merely help working people ascend into the bourgeoisie, as seemed to be the aspiration behind Mechanics Institutes. Rather, grassroots philosophy should develop the working class’ political consciousness, to make them realise that they were the genuine producers, and the bourgeoisie were a parasite class that would eventually be overthrown. The aim of grassroots philosophy for 19th-century socialists and anarchists was not personal well-being or corporate success: it was the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a communist utopia.<sup>59</sup>

During the second half of the 19th century, the radical movement became international, networking through assemblies like the First International in Geneva in 1866. At that meeting, the movement began to fracture into two camps: a socialist faction headed by Karl Marx, and an anarchist faction headed by Mikhail Bakunin. Both sides would blame the other for the spectacular failure of the Paris Commune uprising of 1871.<sup>60</sup> By the Second International, in 1889, the movement had entirely split, and the anarchists were ejected from the conference by the Socialists, who included Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Leon Trotsky. At the time of the Second International, Russia still laboured under a feudalist serf economy, and only a tiny ‘intelligentsia’ were interested in philosophy. Nonetheless, the intelligentsia created a vibrant network of



*An animated cafe-discussion just before the Paris Commune, from the Illustrated London News, 1870*

<sup>57</sup> Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1974)

<sup>58</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969): <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

<sup>59</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789 - 1849* (London: Abacus 1962) and *The Age of Capital: 1848 - 1875* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975)

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003)

ideas and experiments in living.<sup>61</sup> They shared ideas by meeting in discussion groups like the Tchaikovsky Circle, whose members included the anarchists Petr Kropotkin and Nikolai Tchaikovsky.<sup>62</sup> In his 1902 book, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, Kropotkin celebrated the traditions of self-help and mutual aid which he said existed all around the world, particularly in rural villages.<sup>63</sup>

The writings of Kropotkin and other Russian thinkers like Alexander Herzen and Lev Tolstoy inspired some young intelligentsia in the 1860s and 1870s to go and live among the peasants to try and raise their political consciousness. They were nicknamed *narodniki*, which can be translated as 'going to the people'. They were, in some ways, a radical version of western campaigners for popular education like the Quakers, although the *narodniki* found Russian serfs to be wary of the historical role the intelligentsia were keen to hand them. Some frustrated *narodniki* eventually formed the radical party *Narodnaya Volya* ('will of the people'), a secret terrorist society that tried to foment revolution through assassinations.<sup>64</sup> These attempts at violent revolution eventually led to the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, in 1917, and the establishment of the Soviet Union. The revolution was orchestrated by a small intellectual vanguard, and the communist society they built, it was hoped, would be a triumph of grassroots philosophy, with every member of society liberated to participate fully in the running of their community through their local soviet or council. Alas, it turned out that there was only one way in which each local soviet could vote and act: according to the Party line. What was meant to be a great revolution in grassroots philosophy turned out to be an extreme exercise in top-down bureaucratic authoritarianism.<sup>65</sup>

### 1.10) Atheists, Positivists, Humanists

If philosophy disrupts traditional religious communities, what can it put in its place? Can there be atheist communities, communities of disbelief? There have been such communities long before the 19th century - the Epicureans' Garden, in the third century BC, was just such a community, dedicated to helping its members overcome their fear of the gods and to find happiness here on Earth. In the 18th century, some salons created a private space where *philosophes* could quietly share their materialist and atheist theories, although they would be unlikely to risk declaring atheist opinions publicly. One of the most revolutionary aspects of the French Revolution was its open celebration of atheism, culminating in atheist rites like the Cult of Reason. Churches across France were

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<sup>61</sup> Berlin 1994; see also Tom Stoppard's dramatisation of Berlin's essays on the intelligentsia, *The Coast of Utopia* (New York: Grove Press, 2003)

<sup>62</sup> Petr Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1996)

<sup>63</sup> Petr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: William Heinemann, 1902) p. 157

<sup>64</sup> Berlin 1994

<sup>65</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed : What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2006) p. 234

transformed into 'Temples of Reason', which would worship 'one God only - the people'.<sup>66</sup> The cult was subsequently banned by Napoleon Bonaparte, but atheism continued to attract new cohorts in the 19th century, who created a new form of religion, Humanism, which was based around the celebration and even deification of humanity. One important group in this process was the Young Hegelians, a group of German thinkers in the 1830s and 1840s, many of them associated with the 'Doctor's Club' which met at the Hoppel Cafe in Berlin.



A cartoon by Friedrich Engels of a raucous evening at the Hoppel Cafe

Regulars included David Strauss, who wrote *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, and other pioneers of Biblical criticism. Marx and Engels were also occasional visitors and carousers, and Engels would create his own network of socialists and free-thinkers through his Sunday open-house boozing sessions at his home in Primrose Hill.<sup>67</sup>

At around the same time, a French philosopher and sociologist called Auguste Comte pioneered a science-based philosophy which he believed could cure society of all its ills. His philosophy, which he called Positivism, would include a 'Religion of Humanity', complete with festivals of humanity and other rituals, designed to develop humanity's natural altruistic tendencies.<sup>68</sup> The new religion started to spread in the late 19th century via ethical societies, which imitated the rituals of Christianity but without the belief in God. The London home of the South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, is still a popular venue for many philosophy clubs in London. These movements started to call themselves Humanist, and to meet through Humanist organisations, in the early 20th century. Humanism attracted many philosophers, from Bertrand Russell to John Dewey. In recent years it has developed into the modern Skeptic movement, which we will discuss later in the report.

### 1.11) The professionalisation of philosophy

In the late 19th century, some professors of philosophy in the UK, US and other countries attempted to turn philosophy from an amateur pursuit into a professional academic discipline, along the lines that German philosophy had already moved in the 19th century, with PhDs, lectureships, university departments and professional peer-reviewed journals.<sup>69</sup> *Mind*, the first academic journal of philosophy in the English language, was established in 1876. In the following decades, philosophy separated from psychology, and Anglo-Saxon philosophy concentrated more and more on analytical questions of logic and conceptual analysis. Academic philosophy evolved, in the early decades of the 20th century, into a

<sup>66</sup> Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (London: Random House, 1989)

<sup>67</sup> Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life* (New York: W.W Norton & Co, 2001) p. 27; see also Tristram Hunt, *The Frock-Coated Communist: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels* (London: Penguin, 2010)

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism : Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

<sup>69</sup> James Campbell, *A Thoughtful Profession* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006)

conversation between specialists, which was often only really comprehensible to other specialists. Academics in other fields would find the conversation impenetrable, to say nothing of the general public.<sup>70</sup> There were still figures within philosophy who resisted this move towards academic professionalisation and abstraction. The Pragmatist philosophers, William James, Charles Sanford Pierce and John Dewey rebelled against the move to separate philosophy from psychology and the social sciences.<sup>71</sup> Dewey in particular insisted that philosophy should resist the temptation to withdraw into an ivory tower. Philosophy, he thought, should be a form of social practice, that engaged with the social problems of the age. His political ideal was of a 'Great Society', in which neighbours would meet up for face-to-face ethical and civic discussions<sup>72</sup> - a vision of grassroots ethical philosophy which would inspire later community philosophers like Matthew Lipman and Paul Kurtz. Dewey was actively involved in education, helping to set up the laboratory schools of the University of Chicago. And he was connected to the settlement movement, particularly to Jane Addams' Hull House, which was set in a poor neighbourhood in Chicago, and was dedicated to a practical philosophy of solidarity and social action.<sup>73</sup> Similar philanthropic institutions were founded towards the end of the 19th century, with the aim of opening up philosophy and academia to the working class, including Ruskin College, founded in 1899 by Oxford University as a school for working people (mainly men). Over the next decades Ruskin College worked closely with the Worker's Educational Association, which was founded in 1907 with the support of left-wing thinkers like RH Tawney. University extension colleges were also opened at Bristol, Liverpool, Exeter and elsewhere, many of which became full universities in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>74</sup>

There were also self-run movements for worker's education, such as the Plebs League, mutual improvement clubs, and book-sharing libraries, which were particularly popular among Welsh mining communities.<sup>75</sup> In the 1930s, a popular book club was established by Victor Gollancz, known as the Left Book Club, which circulated socialist books by thinkers like GDH Cole and George Orwell, and which inspired around 1,500 Left Book discussion clubs around the country. And there were still non-conformist philosophers who pioneered philosophy outside of academia - one example is Thomas Davidson, a Scottish-American philosopher in the late 19th and early 20th century, who travelled across the United States and Europe joining and inspiring philosophy clubs, from the Radical Club of Bronson Alcott, to the Metaphysical Club of William James. He eventually founded his own group, the Fellowship of New Life in London, whose followers included Havelock Ellis and Ramsey MacDonald, before wandering back to the US to found the Glenmore Summer School for the Culture Sciences in Keene Valley, and the Breadwinners College in Boston.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See Bryan Magee, 'Sense and nonsense', in *Philosophy: Basic Readings*, ed. Nigel Warburton (London: Routledge, 2004)

<sup>71</sup> Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2001)

<sup>72</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (New York: Holt, 1927)

<sup>73</sup> Jane Addams, *Twenty Years At Hull House* (New York: Macmillan, 1912)

<sup>74</sup> Roger Fieldhouse, *A History of Modern British Adult Education*, (London: NIACE, 1998)

<sup>75</sup> Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)

<sup>76</sup> James A. Good, 'The Value of Thomas Davidson', *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Spring 2004): p. 289 - 318: <http://www.autodidactproject.org/other/TD.html>



*The  
Stockport  
Plebs  
League in  
the 1930s*

### 1.13) Self-help fills the ethical vacuum

Despite the best efforts of adult educators like RH Tawney, the gap between academic philosophy and grassroots community philosophy continued to grow in the early decades of the 20th century, particularly in the US and UK where logical positivist philosophy was dominant for several decades. Logical positivists largely ignored practical questions of ethics, and this failure created a vacuum for practical advice on how to live, which was largely filled by psychoanalysis, and by self-help. In the first half of the 20th century, self-help 'gurus' like Dale Carnegie, Napoleon Hill and James Allen found enormous audiences with their practical works on how to be a success. Their books would occasionally draw on the ancient wisdom of Greek or Roman philosophers, but tended to have the very worldly aim of getting rich, quick.<sup>77</sup> And their philosophies of success were also largely individualist, lacking in the mutual aid ethos of Victorian self-help authors like Samuel Smiles.<sup>78</sup> However, some self-help movements had more of a community ethos - the great example is Alcoholics Anonymous, a mutual aid movement which was launched in 1936. Like Dale Carnegie's seminars, it emerged out of the Protestant grassroots, and retained aspects of its religious origins. But it pioneered a technique of getting people to share their stories and encourage each other in their efforts at self-improvement - a technique which would prove popular with later philosophical communities. You may say, perhaps, that AA is not exactly a philosophical or ethical community. But if an ethical community is one dedicated to improving the ethics and habits of its members, then that is precisely what AA is.<sup>79</sup>

Following the mass destruction of the first and second world wars, some academic philosophers declared that their discipline needed to emerge from the hermetic retreat of logical positivism to re-engage with mass society. Bertrand Russell, for example, called in

<sup>77</sup> Evans 2012

<sup>78</sup> On Smiles, see Rose 2022

<sup>79</sup> See David R. Buchanan, *An Ethic for Health Promotion: Rethinking the Sources of Human Well-Being* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)

1946 for philosophy to be taught in schools, to teach ordinary people the capacity for rational ethical thinking.<sup>80</sup> Russell also wrote populist works of philosophy like his *History of Western Philosophy* aimed at raising the public's understanding of philosophy, and sharing its benefits<sup>81</sup>. A more mass-marketed philosophy, he suggested, would benefit society, by protecting citizens from toxic demagoguery, and benefit individuals, by granting them "an antidote to the anxieties and anguish of the present". British philosophers like Russell and A.J. Ayer also started to engage more with mass society through BBC radio, particularly the Third Programme, which was launched in 1946. There were some early successes in this attempt to re-engage philosophy with mass culture - particularly the involvement of philosopher Jacques Maritain in the drafting of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.<sup>82</sup> But philosophy only really burst out of the confines of academia in the 1960s, with the baby-boomer generation's entry into higher education. And it was in the Sixties that the seeds of contemporary grassroots philosophy were planted.



*The Philosophy Takeaway, a stall in Greenwich market offering free philosophy, run by London students*

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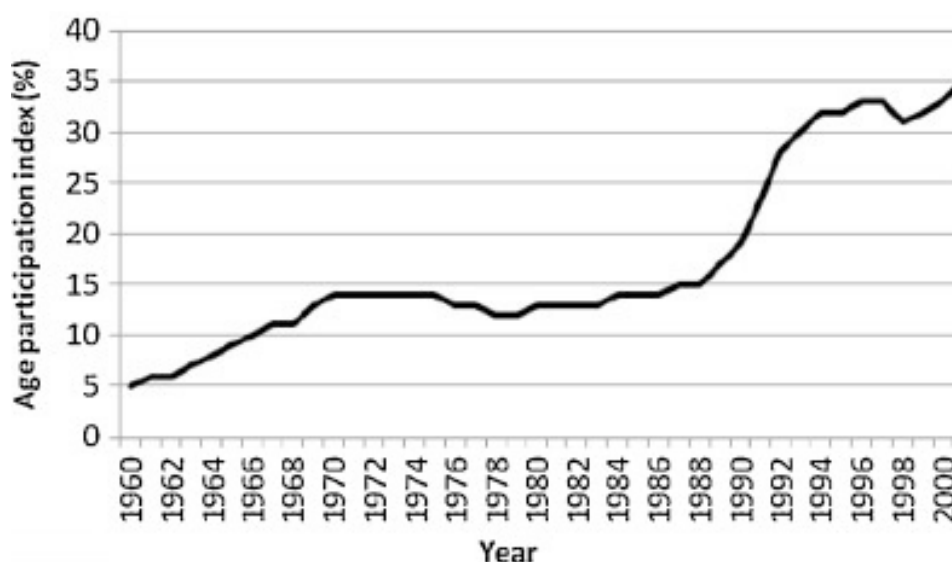
<sup>80</sup> Bertrand Russell, 'Philosophy for Laymen', in *Unpopular Essays* (London: Routledge Classics, 2009)

<sup>81</sup> Russell 1945

<sup>82</sup> James V. Schall, *Jacques Maritain: The Philosopher In Society* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998)

## Part 2) The rise of the mass intelligentsia

In the 1960s, access to higher education widened dramatically, as baby-boomers benefitted from a post-war economic boom and the expansion of the university system. At the start of the 1960s, only around 5% of OECD countries went to university. Today, the OECD average is 35%, and the figure is as high as 60% in some countries<sup>83</sup>. That expansion, particularly steep since 1990, has had huge implications for the working class, with many more people from working-class families going to universities, getting white-collar jobs and, in effect, joining the ranks of an expanded middle class<sup>84</sup>. It's also had major socio-economic implications for women, with many women getting degrees and entering the work-place. A 2009 report by the Higher Education Policy Institute found the initial participation rate in universities for 2007/8 was 49.2% for English women, versus 37.8% of men, with women outnumbering men in arts degrees two to one (although the ratio is reversed for science degrees).<sup>85</sup>



*Long-term trend in higher education in the UK, 1960-2000 (Source: D. Finegold, *The roles of higher education in a knowledge economy*, Rutgers University, 2006)*

This expansion of higher education was in part a consequence of the post-war economic boom. A new era of mass affluence was instigated by expanding youth demographics, low oil prices, a thriving consumer economy, and technological innovations in transport, computing, consumer goods and other areas. The economy shifted from an industrial to a post-industrial or knowledge economy, which created an economic demand for more highly-skilled knowledge-workers. Daniel Bell, the author of *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, predicted “the expansion of a new intellectual class”<sup>86</sup> to run the knowledge economy. This new intellectual class was given a name by the sociologist Richard Flacks:

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<sup>83</sup> OECD, *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012* (Paris: OECD, 2011)

<sup>84</sup> Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973)

<sup>85</sup> John Thompson and Bahram Bekhradnia, ‘Male and female participation and progression in Higher Education’ (London: HEPI, 2009)

<sup>86</sup> Bell 1973, p.478

the 'mass intelligentsia'.<sup>87</sup> The mass intelligentsia had a difficult birth, as the baby-boomer generation went through the academic system in the 1960s, and demanded its reform from the inside. Students and post-graduates around the world insisted that academia should "look beyond the campus" and connect with wider social issues in society.<sup>88</sup> In the US, the student intelligentsia felt empowered by its involvement in the civil rights movement, which gave them a sense that middle class students could transform mass society, and act as a political vanguard in the way traditional Marxists had conceived of the Proletariat. In 1962, a handful of American students calling themselves The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) released a manifesto for the mass intelligentsia, called the Port Huron Statement<sup>89</sup>. The Port Huron Statement called for a new 'participatory democracy', one which revitalised the public space, transforming the passive and apathetic public into what John Dewey hoped for: a Great Society in which well-informed citizens met in their neighbourhood for face-to-face discussions about the pressing social issues and ethical questions of their time. The revolution, it was hoped, would make philosophers of us all.<sup>90</sup>



*A student sit-in, 1968*

Similar clusters of student radicalism and participatory democracy appeared in other countries. In France and Belgium in the 1950s and 1960s, a group of student bohemians calling themselves the Situationists challenged bourgeois conventionality through anarchist pranks, manifestoes, street-art, and libertarian experiments in living. In Holland in the early 1960s, a Situationist-influenced anarchist group called the Provos created

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<sup>87</sup> In Richard Flacks, 'Young Intelligentsia In Revolt', *Society*, Vol. 7, 8, (1970) pp. 46-55: the anti-bourgeois intellectuals of [Marx's] day were the first representatives of what has become in our time a mass intelligentsia...By intelligentsia I mean those engaged vocationally in the production, distribution, interpretation, criticism and inculcation of cultural values.'

<sup>88</sup> Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (Chicago: CH Kerr, 1990)

<sup>89</sup> One of the authors of the Port Huron statement was Richard Flacks, who as mentioned earlier used the term 'mass intelligentsia' to describe the wave of student agitation sweeping through higher education.

<sup>90</sup> Miller 1987

'happenings' to try and liberate Dutch culture from its capitalist conventions, for example by leaving hundreds of free bicycles around Amsterdam for citizens to use.<sup>91</sup> Across the world, student radicals demanded that universities become "communities of controversy" and this call translated, over the course of the decade, into campus sit-ins, teach-ins, protests, marches and, eventually, the 1968 student uprisings. New Left students believed they were the youthful vanguard of a global revolution, which would be both an economic revolution, and also a personal, cultural and sexual revolution. The personal is political, as New Left feminists put it.<sup>92</sup>

The 1968 revolution failed in its economic aims. Capitalism was not overthrown, but instead managed to find ways to adapt and profit from baby-boomers' search for freedom and authenticity.<sup>93</sup> But the cultural revolution succeeded. The impact of the mass intelligentsia was real, and permanent. It led to what Charles Taylor called "an individuating revolution". Taylor wrote in *A Secular Age*:

we now have a widespread 'expressive' individualism. This is, of course, not totally new...Intellectual and artistic elites have been searching for the authentic way of living or expressing themselves throughout the nineteenth century. What is new is that this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon.<sup>94</sup>

Jonathan Rose noted the same phenomenon in his *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001):

the great post-war expansion of the middle class throughout the western world produced a mass-market Bohemia, making available to millions of teenagers the moral freedoms and experimental lifestyles that had once been confined to a few elite intellectuals.<sup>95</sup>

This new age of mass individualism has been criticised by communitarians like Taylor and Robert Putnam for causing the erosion of social capital and of traditional forms of community.<sup>96</sup> It has undermined the traditional family: divorce rates rose sharply from the 1960s on as women became more economically independent; birth control allowed the rise of more promiscuity outside of marriage; and new legislation meant homosexuals could stop pretending to be straight. The new knowledge economy also undermined the traditional cohesion of the the working class, because much of the working class went to university and joined an expanded middle class. The membership of trade unions and political parties also declined, because the old class divisions of the industrial economy did

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<sup>91</sup> On the Situationists and Provos, see Franklin Rosemont and Charles Radcliffe, *Dancin' in the streets!: anarchists, IWWs, surrealists, Situationists & Provos in the 1960s* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2005)

<sup>92</sup> Carol Hanisch, 'The Personal is Political', *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, ed. Firestone and Koedt (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970)

<sup>93</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), pp.477 - 483

<sup>94</sup> Taylor 2007, p.473

<sup>95</sup> Rose 2002, p.455

<sup>96</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1998)

not fit the new knowledge economy. And the 'mass intelligentsia' has been blamed for the decline of church attendance, the rise of New Age personal development, and the increasing secularism of western societies.

### **Mass intelligent culture leads to new forms of community**

But it's the contention of this report that the rise of the mass intelligentsia has not been an unmitigated social disaster. Firstly, it's created a much bigger audience for intelligent culture. Melvyn Bragg, who has popularised the term 'mass intelligentsia', tells me: "There's now evidence that over the last 30 to 40 years, a very substantial minority is prepared to put time and effort into subjects that used to be the preserve of a very small minority. That highly educated minority has grown enormously."<sup>97</sup> That in itself is to be welcomed and applauded. Our culture did not 'dumb down', as the cultural pessimists of Modernism predicted in the 1920s and 1930s. High culture was not swamped by the ignorant masses. Instead, the masses wised up, and intelligent culture became the preserve of the many rather than the few.

Perhaps the key evidence for the rise of mass intelligent culture is our patterns of leisure. As John Parker put it in a 2008 cover story in *Intelligent Life* magazine called 'The Age of Mass Intelligence': "Millions more people are going to museums, literary festivals and operas".<sup>98</sup> Attendance at Britain's museums, galleries and cultural heritage sites, for example, rose by 100% from 2000 to 2010<sup>99</sup>. Book festivals have also boomed in the last two decades. Attendance at the UK's biggest book festival, the Hay-On Wye festival, has grown from 2000 in 1988 to 250,000 attending Hay festivals in the UK and around the world in 2011.<sup>100</sup> There are now 250-300 book festivals organised annually in the UK<sup>101</sup>. Book clubs also took off during the 1990s - by 2001, their membership numbered 50,000 in the UK, according to one survey<sup>102</sup>. Book clubs are an important example of how mass intelligent culture leads to the creation of new forms of community and sociability (and also an important indicator of the vanguard role of women in mass intelligent culture - almost all the book clubs in the survey were run by and for women.)

The internet has played an important role in the rise of mass intelligent culture, by enabling a boom in online self-learning. The mass intelligentsia can now feed its appetite for ideas through websites like TED or Big Ideas, and through intelligent podcasts like *In Our Time*, *Philosophy Bites*, and *This American Life*. Melvyn Bragg suggests we increasingly define ourselves not so much by our class as by our habits of cultural consumption - there is a community of Radio 4 listeners, for example, or fans of *The Wire* or *Twin Peaks*.<sup>103</sup> And these communities are active and participatory. Through the internet, the public don't merely passively consume ideas created by an intellectual elite. They participate, sharing

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<sup>97</sup> Interview in the appendix

<sup>98</sup> John Parker, 'The age of mass intelligence', *Intelligent Life* magazine, Winter 2008

<sup>99</sup> The UK Statistics Agency, 'Taking part: The National Survey of Culture, Leisure and Sport Adult and Child Report 2011/2012'

<sup>100</sup> Tom Tivnan, 'Making Hay', *The Bookseller* 01/06/2009

<sup>101</sup> Tom Tivnan and Laura Richards, 'Business Focus: Literary Festivals', *The Bookseller* 18/03/2011

<sup>102</sup> Jenny Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book 2002-2003 Edition*, (Oxford: OUP, 2002)

<sup>103</sup> Melvyn Bragg, 'Class and Culture', episode 3, BBC 2, March 2012

articles, discussing them, and presenting their own ideas through blogs and videos.<sup>104</sup> They engage in a much more active, participatory and egalitarian way than was possible in, say, the 1950s, when intellectuals would opine on the BBC's Third Programme, and the masses would simply listen. The old hierarchy of the intellectual and the masses has been leveled. As David Brooks put it in the New York Times in 2008: "People in the 1950s used to earnestly debate the role of the intellectual in modern politics. But the Lionel Trilling authority-figure has been displaced by the mass class of blog-writing culture producers."<sup>105</sup>



*A workshop at How The Light Gets In philosophy festival, June 2011*

Communities of intelligent culture are growing offline as well as online. The mass intelligentsia want to meet up and discuss ideas *together*. They want to join with like-minded people, who crave intelligent discussion and meaningful conversation. Bragg tells me: "People come [to philosophy clubs] because they're interested in ideas, and also to meet other people. It's a form of community, like going to church. It becomes part of people's social life."<sup>106</sup> That's why there's been a boom in book clubs, and in evening cultural events like literary salons, debates and discussion circles, both through commercial providers of ideas events like Intelligence Squared, Brandstof and the School of Life, and through self-run organisations like the University of the Third Age, Skeptics In the Pub and the other philosophy clubs which we'll meet in this report. Anecdotal evidence suggests such clubs have grown a lot in the last 20 years. Rick Lewis, editor of *Philosophy*

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<sup>104</sup> Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (London: Penguin, 2010)

<sup>105</sup> David Brooks, 'The Alpha Geeks', *New York Times* 23/5/2008

<sup>106</sup> Full interview in appendix

Now magazine, says: “There were philosophy groups in the 1990s, but fewer, and on a much smaller scale than today. Now there are a lot more.”<sup>107</sup>

The once-proud tradition of formal worker’s education in philosophy may have declined along with the traditional working class. The Worker’s Education Association (WEA) now only provides a handful of courses in philosophy, many universities have closed their extension courses, and local councils are cutting the funding for community colleges. But informal self-run learning is on the rise. Derek Tatton, director of the Raymond Williams Foundation and organiser of a discussion circle in Leeke, says: “In one sense, formal adult education is virtually dead, because of political and social changes and the rise of a rampant capitalism not interested in education for its own sake. But we are seeing the rise of informal learning, partly through the rise of new technologies like the internet. By informal I mean it’s not publicly-funded, and is often self-run by volunteers. In that sector, there’s a lot of activity. We’ve seen the rise of informal, grassroots organisations which are doing for free what funded organisations like the WEA were doing in the 1960s.”<sup>108</sup> So the dislocations caused by the rise of the mass intelligentsia may have disrupted traditional forms of community like the family, the church, the trade union and the working men’s club. But they haven’t removed our fundamental human need for community. We have been driven to create *new* forms of community, new experiments in living together. New forms of intellectual fraternity have arisen, similar to previous forms like the 15th-century Humanist circle or the 18th-century salon, but on a mass scale, open to the many rather than the few. These communities grew in the jungle of informal education, often hidden from the view of governments, universities and formal adult education providers. They were never planned or structured from the top-down. Their motto could be ‘making it up as we go along’. We will venture further into this jungle in the next section.



*The London Philosophy Club at Conway Hall (photo by Greg Funnell)*

<sup>107</sup> Full interview in appendix

<sup>108</sup> Interview available here: <http://philosophyforlife.org/philosophy-clubs-and-the-rise-of-informal-learning-an-interview-with-derek-tatton/>

## Part 3) The contemporary grassroots philosophy scene

I now want to look specifically at the rise of philosophy clubs since the 1960s (and particularly in the last 20 years). I'm going to examine five streams that have contributed to the contemporary revival of philosophy clubs. They are:

- 1) The applied ethics movement
- 2) The Philosophy For Children and Community Philosophy movement
- 3) The revival of virtue ethics, including in CBT and Positive Psychology
- 4) The Philosophical Counseling and *Café Philosophique* movement
- 5) The Skeptic movement

I'm not suggesting that this is an exhaustive list of grassroots philosophy movements - I haven't, for example, talked nearly enough about the New Right, the philosophy of Ayn Rand, grassroots Objectivist groups and their influence on the American Tea Party.<sup>109</sup> I haven't talked nearly enough about social liberation groups in Latin America inspired by the philosophy of Paolo Freire and others<sup>110</sup>, or Steve Biko and the black consciousness movement and its role in opposing apartheid in South Africa.<sup>111</sup> Nor have I talked at all about Asian philosophy groups and the growth of the practical philosophy movement there<sup>112</sup>. I apologise for these and many other omissions but offer this research as a start, and look forward to learning about other grassroots movements.

All of the movements we'll look at arose out of the 1960s, from the expansion of tertiary education and the overspill of intellectuals from academia into mass society. More tentatively, I'd suggest they also grew out of 1960s student radicalism, and the desire of young intellectuals (particularly in the New Left but also in the New Right) to revive and improve grassroots ethical and political discussion in their society, to subject new technologies to ethical scrutiny, and to find new ways of living and working that would be creatively, sexually and spiritually fulfilling. The applied ethics movement, for example, was partly inspired by the civil rights movement, and arose out of an attempt by young intellectuals to take philosophy beyond academia and connect it to real-world problems. The Café Philo movement was to some extent inspired by the 1968 Paris student uprising - Marc Sautet, the founder of the Café Philo movement, was himself involved in the Paris uprising as a young Trotskyite student, and his philosophy sessions have been described as an attempt to re-create a 1960s 'encounter session'. Matthew Lipman, the pioneer of Philosophy for Children (P4C), was inspired by the hysteria around the Vietnam War to leave academia in the 1960s and try to improve the level of critical reasoning in his society. The revival of virtue ethics, Positive Psychology and well-being clubs grew out of the baby-boomer questioning of the 'affluent society', and the search by the mass intelligentsia for wiser and more sustainable forms of the good life. And finally, the Skeptic movement was inspired by John Dewey's vision of engaged public philosophy, and was in part a response to the baby-boomers' craze for wacky New Age beliefs.

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<sup>109</sup> See Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Right: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: OUP, 2009)

<sup>110</sup> See Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2007)

<sup>111</sup> See Gail M. Gerhart, *Black power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979)

<sup>112</sup> South Korea, for example, recently hosted the 11th International Conference on Philosophical Practice

All of these five streams are in some ways criticisms, or reproaches, of the so-called 'ivory tower' model of academic philosophy. Prominent figures in these five movements often criticised academic philosophy for being too theoretical, too specialised, too cut off from ordinary people and their concerns<sup>113</sup>. Academic philosophy (it has been argued) has forgotten the example of Socrates, who practiced philosophy out in the city, in informal dialogues, group discussions and symposia. Many of the pioneers of contemporary grassroots philosophy look back to Socrates and try to revive or even take on his role today: Marc Sautet, pioneer of Café Philos, wrote *Un Café Pour Socrates*; Christopher Phillips called his café discussion groups 'Socrates Cafés'; Peter Singer, pioneer of applied ethics, also looks back to Socrates as the paragon of applied philosophy<sup>114</sup>. Socrates is taken as an exemplar of 'street philosophy', a practical tradition which these groups supposedly keep alive in opposition to the usurper and enemy, academic philosophy. But the rivalry between 'street philosophy' and 'academic philosophy' can be taken too far. As we'll see, almost all of these grassroots movements grew out of academia, were led by academic philosophers, and were supported by the huge expansion of higher education since the 1960s. They are attempts not to destroy academia but to reform it, to extend learning to all of society. They are to traditional academia what Lutheranism was to the Catholic Church. And they can perhaps be made more vital, and more intellectually coherent, by cultivating closer links with academic philosophy. The argument that 'academic philosophy' and 'street philosophy' are engaged in a zero-sum war is sterile. Both sides need each other. Without street philosophy, academic philosophy becomes irrelevant. Without academic philosophy, street philosophy becomes incoherent.<sup>115</sup>

### 3.1) The applied ethics movement

The applied ethics movement was in some ways a response to the demand of New Left radicals in the 1960s for universities to "look beyond the campus" and re-engage with their societies. Some applied philosophers like Peter Singer have said they were particularly inspired by the civil rights movement, which seemed to prove that young intellectuals could transform the ethical culture of their times<sup>116</sup>. New Left radicals insisted on the revitalisation of grassroots ethical discussion as a counterbalance to the growing technocracy and scientific complexity of modern society.<sup>117</sup> Mass society (it was felt) had become too technocratic, too instrumentalised. It was run by political and scientific elites operating without public scrutiny or ethical constraint. With the new availability of technologies like the atom bomb, this was no longer sustainable. The world needed better ethical thinking, to hold new technologies to account.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> See for example Marinoff 1999; also Sautet 1995; Hadot 1995; Alain de Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 2000)

<sup>114</sup> See Singer's interview in the 2008 documentary, *Examined Life*, dir. Astra Taylor, Zeitgeist Films 2008

<sup>115</sup> Evans 2012

<sup>116</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Pimlico Books, 1975); see also Singer's *Ethics Into Action: Henry Spira and the Animal Rights Movement* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999)

<sup>117</sup> Students for a Democratic Society 1962

<sup>118</sup> Miller 1987

A key historical moment for the applied ethics movement was the introduction of dialysis machines into public hospitals in the early 1960s, and the informal use of 'life and death' committees to decide which patients would get access to these machines<sup>119</sup>. A famous *Life* magazine article of 1962 drew the public's attention to these committees, and their life-and-death decisions.<sup>120</sup> A sense arose among some doctors and philosophers that such ethical discussions should be more structured and philosophically well-informed.<sup>121</sup> This helped lead both to the rise of bioethics as a field<sup>122</sup>, and to a revival of casuistical or case-based ethical reasoning in analytic and popular philosophy (via RM Hare, Stephen Toulmin and others)<sup>123</sup>. Another important field in bioethics was animal rights, which arose in the 1970s, partly in response to the growth of mass industrial animal farming, and also to animal experimentation. Philosophers started to suggest that animals were persons, worthy of the same respect and dignity as humans<sup>124</sup>. Growing awareness, from the 1960s on, of the effect of industrial capitalism on humans, other species and the ecosystem led to a wider environmental ethics movement and a demand for a more ethical and sustainable capitalism.<sup>125</sup>

The animal rights movement could be seen as arising from the New Left mission to help give a voice to the voiceless and marginalized. This mission initially focused on solidarity with African-Americans in the civil rights movement, and then spread to other marginalised groups, including women and homosexuals. Feminist ethics, although a well-established tradition long before the baby-boomer generation, gathered pace in the late 1960s and 1970s partly out of some womens' sense that the New Left was male-dominated and sexist.<sup>126</sup> Feminist philosophy flourished after the New Left had evolved into various identity politics movements, and spread in part through grassroots discussion groups, known as affinity groups or 'consciousness-raising circles'.<sup>127</sup> According to one account, at its peak around 100,000 women took part in consciousness-raising circles in the US in the

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<sup>119</sup> Albert R. Jonsen, 'Introduction to the History of Bioethics', in *Bioethics: An Introduction to its History, Methods and Practice*, ed. Albert R. Jonsen, Robert A. Pearlman (Sudbury: Jones & Bartlett Learning, 1997)

<sup>120</sup> Shana Alexander, 'They decide who lives, who dies', *Life*, 9/11/1962

<sup>121</sup> Stephen Toulmin, 'How Medicine Saved the Life of Ethics'. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 25, no. 4 (1982): 736. Also Laurence B. McCullough, 'Laying Medicine Open: Understanding Major Turning Points in the History of Medical Ethics', *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 9, no. 1 (1999): pp. 7–23.

<sup>122</sup> Albert R. Jonsen, *The Birth of Bioethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998)

<sup>123</sup> Albert R. Jonsen & Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); also RM Hare, *Essays on Bioethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)

<sup>124</sup> Singer 1975; also *Animals, Men and Morals: An Inquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-Humans*, ed. Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch and John Harris (New York: Grove Press, 1974)

<sup>125</sup> See, for example, Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962); Garrett Hardin, 'The Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, 162(1968): pp. 1243-1248; E.F Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: a study of economics as if people mattered*, (London: Blond & Briggs, 1973)

<sup>126</sup> Juliet Mitchell, 'Women: The Longest Revolution', *New Left Review*, 40, Dec 1966; Nancy Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', *New Left Review*, 56, March - April 2009; Maurice Isserman & Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000) p. 295

<sup>127</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: Dial Press 2000) p. 21

1970s<sup>128</sup>. The emphasis in such circles was not so much on theoretical ethical debate, but on sharing personal stories of sexist oppression - the personal became political.<sup>129</sup>



*A New York City feminist march, 18/3/1970*

In the 1970s and 1980s, applied philosophy established itself as a credible academic field, with its own journals and professional organisations.<sup>130</sup> It also established itself outside of academia, providing bioethics training courses for medical professionals, and business ethics training courses for business people<sup>131</sup>. The institutionalisation and professionalisation of the movement led some to criticise applied philosophy for turning into what it had rebelled against: an over-specialised and inward-facing discipline<sup>132</sup>. Perhaps feminist philosophy, Queer Theory and other forms of cultural theory focused too much on reforming attitudes within the campus rather than looking beyond it. On the other hand, when applied philosophy did have an impact on society, in the health sector or the business sector, some philosophers were uncomfortable with their new-found authority.

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<sup>128</sup> Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) p.43

<sup>129</sup> Hanisch 1970

<sup>130</sup> For example, the Hastings Centre was founded in 1969, the Kennedy Institute of Ethics was founded in 1971, the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics in 1986, the Journal of Medical Ethics in 1975, the International Journal of Applied Philosophy and the Journal of Business Ethics were both founded in 1982.

<sup>131</sup> See Richard T. De George, 'A History of Business Ethics' (2005) on the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics' website: <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/business/conference/presentations/business-ethics-history.html>; on bioethics training, see Natalie Dawson, 'On Moral Grounds: Bioethics Training for Scientists', *BioScience*, Feb 2009, Vol. 59 Issue 2, p. 112

<sup>132</sup> Marinoff 2000

They were asked (and they asked themselves) what gave them the right to make moral pronouncements for society, simply because they were intellectuals?<sup>133</sup> The funding of ethics committees and ethics journals by governments and corporations also raised uncomfortable questions about the ethical independence of such bodies.<sup>134</sup>

### Applied ethics grassroots groups today

Nonetheless, the applied ethics movement can claim considerable real world impact, with affinity groups successfully campaigning for greater rights and equality for women, for ethnic and religious minorities, for homosexuals, for the disabled, and for animals in the last 50 years.<sup>135</sup> Perhaps the movement's success in achieving legislative changes has dissipated some of its energy or radicalism: the movement has gone mainstream. Queer theory, for example, has perhaps lost some of its radicalism as homosexuals have become less marginalised and more absorbed into mainstream bourgeois society.<sup>136</sup> Feminism has also become absorbed into the mainstream of developed societies<sup>137</sup>: Caitlin Moran's pop feminist book, *How To Be a Woman*, is a global best-seller.<sup>138</sup> The campaign for ethical food and ethical farming has also gone mainstream. In fact, today it is particularly associated with TV chefs like Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, who have led mass campaigns or 'food revolutions' for better factory conditions for livestock, and more nutritious, healthier cooking for schools and families<sup>139</sup>.

The ethical capitalism movement is also still thriving, particularly since the financial crisis. Like other parts of applied philosophy, it has moved in two directions - towards institutionalisation or towards grassroots activism. On the institutional side, there are now Corporate Social Responsibility managers at many corporates, ethical investment funds<sup>140</sup>,

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<sup>133</sup> Sally Satel, 'The Limits of Bioethics', *Hoover Institute Policy Review*, 159, 1/2/2010: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/5354>; H. Tristram Engelhardt, *The Foundation of Bioethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

<sup>134</sup> See Richard E. Ashcroft, 'Bioethics and conflicts of interest', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 35 (2004) pp.155-165; William Heisel, 'Ethics Journal Corrects Record, Reveals Conflict of Interest', *Reporting On Health*, 15/08/2012 <http://www.reportingonhealth.org/comment/3165>

<sup>135</sup> See Linda Hirshman, *Victory: The Triumphant Gay Revolution - How a Despised Minority Pushed Back, Beat Death, Found Love, and Changed America for Everyone* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012); Barbara Leslie Epstein, 'The Success and Failures of Feminism', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 14, 2, Summer 2002, pp. 118-125; Jerry Allen Winter, 'The Development of the Disability Rights Movement as a Social Problem Solver', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 23, 1 (2003) pp. 33-61; Singer 1998

<sup>136</sup> David M. Halperin, 'The Normalization of Queer Theory', *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 45, No 2/3/4, 2003, pp. 339-343; Joseph Huff-Hannon, 'The Gay Rights Movement Has Gone Mainstream - But Is That a Good Thing?', [www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org), 23/6/2011: [http://www.alternet.org/story/151399/the\\_gay\\_rights\\_movement\\_has\\_gone\\_mainstream\\_-\\_but\\_is\\_that\\_a\\_good\\_thing](http://www.alternet.org/story/151399/the_gay_rights_movement_has_gone_mainstream_-_but_is_that_a_good_thing)

<sup>137</sup> Rowenna Davis, 'Making feminism mainstream', *The Guardian*, 11/7/2008: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jul/11/women.women>; Anastasiya Boris, 'Rise of the Mainstream Feminist', *Harvard Political Review*, 31/5/2012: <http://hpronline.org/united-states/rise-of-the-mainstream-feminist/>

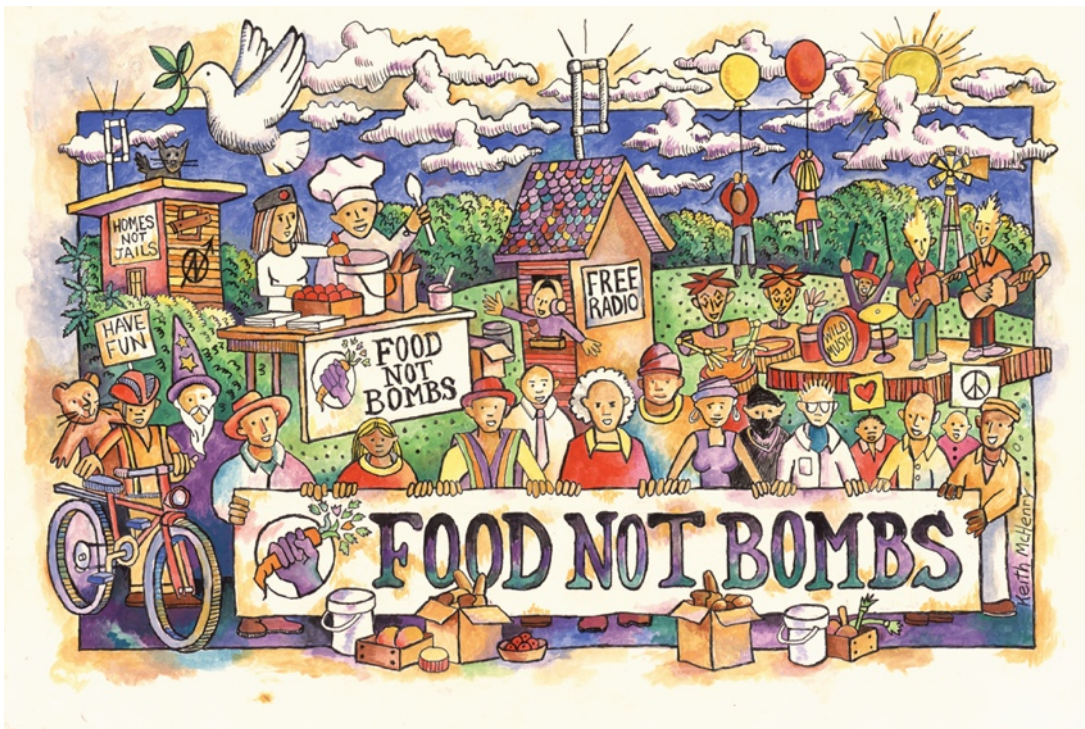
<sup>138</sup> Caitlin Moran, *How To Be A Woman*, (London: Ebury, 2012)

<sup>139</sup> See Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's 2011 Channel 4 series, 'Hugh's Fish-Fight', and Jamie Oliver's 2010 series for ABC, 'Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution'

<sup>140</sup> Russell Sparkes, *Socially Responsible Investment: A Global Revolution*, (London: Wiley, 2002)

ethics and sustainability experts at consultancies like Pricewaterhouse Coopers.<sup>141</sup> There are also ethical capitalist think-tanks and NGOs like new economics foundation (indeed, applied ethics has led to a proliferation of NGOs like Amnesty International, Stonewall, Friends of the Earth, and numerous women's NGOs across the developed and developing world)<sup>142</sup>. The institutionalised wing of the ethical capitalism movement can claim to being close to the governments and corporations whose behaviour it is trying to alter. You can only change the system from the inside, its supporters say. However, there is debate over the impact of CSR managers or ethics training courses within large corporations - some on the right argue that CSR is a distraction from a company's proper focus on shareholder profits<sup>143</sup>, while some on the left argue CSR is a poor substitute for effective state regulation of business.<sup>144</sup>

The grassroots wing of the ethical capitalism movement includes activist decentralized movements groups like Transition Town, Food Not Bombs, Reclaim the Streets and the Occupy movement. Such decentralized movements develop the New Left's vision of 'participatory democracy', and emulated the anarchist-prankster protest tactics of New Left groups like the Situationists, the Provos and the Yippies.



As the sociologist David Graeber writes of Food Not Bombs: "There is no over-arching structure, no membership or annual meeting. It's just an idea....plus some basic how-to information (now easily available on the internet) and a shared commitment to egalitarian

<sup>141</sup> Rosamaria C. Moura-Leite & Robert C. Padgett, 'Historical background of Corporate Social Responsibility', *Social Responsibility Journal*, vol.7, 4, pp. 528-539

<sup>142</sup> James McGann & Mary Johnstone, 'The Power Shift and the NGO Credibility Crisis', *International Journal of Not-For-Profit Law*, vol. 8, 2, (January 2006): [http://www.icnl.org/research/journal/vol8iss2/art\\_4.htm](http://www.icnl.org/research/journal/vol8iss2/art_4.htm)

<sup>143</sup> Milton Friedman, 'The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits', *New York Times magazine* 13/9/1970

<sup>144</sup> Robert Reich, *Supercapitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy and Everyday Life* (New York: Knopf, 2007)

decision-making and a do-it-yourself (DIY) spirit.”<sup>145</sup> Grassroots ethical capitalist movements can claim to be more participatory, less beholden to corporate interests, and more radical than the institutionalised wing, both in their policies (some parts of the movement don’t want capitalism at all) and in their non-hierarchical, anarchistic governance structures. They can point to the success of direct action in recent years against nuclear and coal power plants, GM crops, animal experimentation and corporate tax-dodging. But their movements have been criticised for sometimes lacking intellectual leadership or coherence. They could be said to suffer from the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’. Graeber writes of such groups: “The great problem has been how to translate the flow of information into structures of collective decision-making...[which means in effect] when and on what level are structures of collective decision-making required”.<sup>146</sup>

## 3.2) Matthew Lipman and Community Philosophy

Matthew Lipman is one of the most important figures in the revival of grassroots philosophy outside of academia in the last 50 years. Although his work was entirely focused on ‘philosophy for children’, it has inspired others to work on Community Philosophy with adults. There is a lot of academic research about P4C, while Community Philosophy projects have so far attracted little research interest, regrettably.

Lipman’s work on philosophy beyond academia was prompted by the highly emotional and violent generational stand-off in 1960s America over the Vietnam War. Lipman felt, in the words of his obituary in the New York Times, “that many Americans were having trouble presenting their views about the conflict cogently, and it distressed him”.<sup>147</sup> Lipman, who was at that point a professor of philosophy at Columbia University, decided his society was sorely lacking in philosophical thinking skills, and that to teach these skills, one had to start with children. So he moved beyond the campus and, in the early 1970s, started to teach philosophy to children in the New Jersey public school system. In 1974, he founded the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State University.

Philosophy for Children, or P4C, attempts to create a ‘community of inquiry’ in which children explore a philosophical question, guided by a teacher or facilitator.<sup>148</sup> They typically begin from a ‘stimulus’, which is often a philosophical story. The children are encouraged to participate, to give reasons for their moral positions, and to consider other children’s view-points. The aim of the dialogue is not to indoctrinate specific values in children, “it is rather an open-ended, sustained consideration of the values, standards and practices by which we live, discussed openly and publicly so as to take all points of view and all facts into account. It is the assumption of ethical inquiry that such discussion and reflection, taking place in an atmosphere of mutual trust, confidence and impartiality, can do more to foster moral responsibility and moral intelligence in children than any system

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<sup>145</sup> David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, (New York: AK Press, 2009) p.129

<sup>146</sup> *ibid*

<sup>147</sup> Douglas Martin, ‘Matthew Lipman, Philosopher and Educator, Dies at 87’. *New York Times* 14/1/2011: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/15/education/15lipman.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/15/education/15lipman.html?_r=0)

<sup>148</sup> Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 16

which merely acquaints them with ‘the rules’ and then insists that they ‘do their duty’.”<sup>149</sup> The community, meanwhile, becomes ‘converted’ into a “reflective community” that thinks about the world “and about its thinking about the world”.<sup>150</sup>

Lipman’s concept of the ‘community of inquiry’ was obviously influenced by American Pragmatist philosophers, particularly Charles Sanford Pierce, who emphasized the role of community discussion in correcting errors, and who developed Pragmatism through a philosophy club <sup>151</sup>; and John Dewey, who also stressed the social and communal nature of learning.<sup>152</sup> Dewey insisted that the practice of communal reasoning and deliberation was the necessary foundation for citizenship in a democratic society, a point reiterated by Lipman.<sup>153</sup> The development psychology theories of Lev Vygotsky was also an influence on Lipman’s thinking.<sup>154</sup> And there are parallels, if not direct influences, with the progressive education theories of Ivan Illich and Paolo Freire<sup>155</sup>. Further back, the foundational figure of Socrates was also a key influence for Lipman. He suggested that communities of inquiry should take Socrates’ advice to “follow the argument wherever it leads”.<sup>156</sup> Some recent research in P4C has sought to develop a form of P4C which combines a Pragmatist approach with a virtue ethics approach aimed at developing moral habits.<sup>157</sup>

## The rise of Community Philosophy

The P4C movement has started, over the last decade, to build up a body of research and evidence that suggests it improves children’s cognitive ability, improves their academic performance, and also improves their communication skills and ability to manage their emotions.<sup>158</sup> However, it’s only in the last decade that P4C has migrated into adult education to become Community Philosophy.

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<sup>149</sup> Matthew Lipman & A.M Sharp, *Ethical Inquiry* (Montclair: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1985) introduction

<sup>150</sup> Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy Goes To School* (Philadelphia: Temple U. Press, 1988), p. 20

<sup>151</sup> Charles Sanford Pierce, ‘The Fixation of Belief’, *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (November 1877), pp. 1-15; see also Menand 2001

<sup>152</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938); on Dewey’s influence on Lipman, see Lipman 1988, p.4

<sup>153</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); Lipman 1988 p.57

<sup>154</sup> Matthew Lipman, ‘Rediscovering the Vygotsky Trail’, *Inquiry*, vol. 7, 2, March 1991, pp. 14-16

<sup>155</sup> Freire 1993; Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971)

<sup>156</sup> Lipman 1988, p.xiii

<sup>157</sup> Tim Sprod, *Philosophical Discussion in Moral Education: The Community of Ethical Inquiry* (Oxford: Psychology Press, 2001)

<sup>158</sup> S. Trickey & K.J Topping, ‘Philosophy for Children’: A Systematic Review’, *Research Papers in Education* (2004) 19, 3, pp. 363-378; S Trickey, ‘Promoting social and cognitive development in schools: An evaluation of Thinking through Philosophy’ in The 13th International Conference on Thinking Norrköping, Sweden June 17-21, 2007, *Linköpings University Electronic Conference Proceedings*, <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/021/vol1/026?ecp2107026.pdf>

The pioneer of Community Philosophy in the US is Christopher Phillips, who was taking an MA in teaching at Montclair University in 1996 under Matthew Lipman, when he decided to launch a community philosophy venture called Socrates Cafés. He describes Lipman as his mentor, though he adds he was also inspired by articles about Marc Sautet and the Café Philos movement (see the interview with Phillips in the appendix). Socrates Cafés follow a similar process to Sautet's Café Philo sessions (of which more below), in that they're free and open to everyone. As in the Café Philo format, attendees pick a philosophical topic, and then discuss it and conceptualise it for two hours or so, guided by the facilitator. Participants will often bring in their own personal experiences, giving the meetings something of the flavour of a 1970s encounter session. While most Socrates Cafés happen in cafes, Phillips says Socrates Cafés work best in public spaces like public squares or libraries, as "some people, particularly homeless people, are put off by cafés".<sup>159</sup> The movement has been a great success in North America, where there are now 53 Socrates Cafés listed on meetup.com. Phillips writes: "I go to cafés and coffeehouses and diners. I go to day care-centres, nursery schools, elementary schools, junior high and high schools, schools for special needs children. I go to senior centres, nursing homes, assisted living residences. I've been to a church, a hospice, a prison".<sup>160</sup> The movement is quite decentralized - most of the Socrates Cafés around the world arose independently of him and are self-run by users. He suggests that Socrates Cafés helps people to realize "new directions of self-realization and human aspiration", and suggests the sessions "slightly resembles a church service - for heretics".<sup>161</sup>

In the UK, the community philosophy movement was kick-started by two Liverpudlians, Rob Lewis and Paul Doran, in 2001.<sup>162</sup> Paul, a retired brick-layer, took a philosophy course in his 40s at the Liverpool Community College, in 1995. Shortly afterwards, the College ended its course, and Paul realised there were hardly any other opportunities for "the lower orders" to study higher thinking, so he started his own 'introduction to philosophy' course.<sup>163</sup> An unemployed builder, Rob Lewis, took the course and developed a deep love for philosophy, and a desire to take it out into the Merseyside community, via a movement that came to be known as Philosophy In Pubs (PIPs). PIPs developed links with SAPERE, a UK charity founded by Roger Sutcliffe, dedicated to promoting P4C. Some PIPs facilitators received training in Socratic group facilitation through SAPERE. There are, at the time of writing, roughly 16 PIPs groups across Merseyside, and another 15 or so around the country. PIPs embrace the Lipman ethos of building a participatory and egalitarian community of inquiry, rather than merely listening to a 'sage on the stage' as Lewis puts it.<sup>164</sup> However, members also sometimes give talks which are then used as a springboard for group discussion.

From 2003, SAPERE members launched various other adult learning initiatives, which came to be known as Community Philosophy. The first, other than PIPs, was an initiative for the elderly run in partnership with Age Concern by Barry Hymer, a professor of

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<sup>159</sup> See the interview with Phillips in the appendix

<sup>160</sup> Phillips 2002, p.9

<sup>161</sup> *ibid*, p.8

<sup>162</sup> Evans 2012, p.12

<sup>163</sup> See the appendix for an interview with Paul Doran

<sup>164</sup> Evans 2012, p.12

educational psychology at the University of Cumbria.<sup>165</sup> That pilot project led to further work with Age Concern in Newcastle. In 2006, Graeme Tiffany launched a three-year project called the Thinking Village in partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, through which Graeme ran a philosophy group with members of a housing estate in Yorkshire<sup>166</sup>. There have also been Community Philosophy projects in housing estates in Leicester and Manchester. SAPERE has links to the critical thinking approach of Roy Van Den Brink-Budgen, which has been used successfully in prisons and young offender institutions<sup>167</sup>. In April 2012, Sapere won funding from the Esmée Fairbairn to train 54 facilitators in Community Philosophy, each of whom will try to set up two philosophy communities in the North-West. The project will then try to assess the impact of these 108 clubs on their communities.<sup>168</sup>



*Philosophy In Pubs, in Liverpool*

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<sup>165</sup> Barry Hymer & Paul Jenkins, 'The fruits of age': cross-generational learning through all-age philosophical enquiry; *G&T Update*, Issue 21, February 2005

<sup>166</sup> Graeme Tiffany, 'Community Philosophy: a project report', published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, November 2009: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/community-philosophy-project-report>; see also Sue Porter and Chris Seeley, 'Promoting Intergenerational Understanding through Community Philosophy', Joseph Rowntree Foundation 30/ 10/ 2008: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/promoting-intergenerational-understanding-through-community-philosophy>

<sup>167</sup> Roy van den Brink-Budgen, 'Juvenile Offenders as Philosophers', *Practical Philosophy*, vol. 5, 2, Autumn 2002, pp. 7-12: <http://www.society-for-philosophy-in-practice.org/journal/pdf/5-2%2007%20Brink-Budgen%20-%20Juvenile.pdf>; also Roy van den Brink-Budgen, 'Critical Thinking and Young Offenders', *Teaching Thinking* (2001) 4, pp. 24-37

<sup>168</sup> See the appendix for the interview with Lizzy Lewis

## Philosophy clubs and deliberative democracy

The theory that a successful democratic society depends on groups of friends reasoning together goes back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>169</sup>, and was more recently articulated by John Dewey, who insisted "that the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbours on the street corner to discuss back and forth...and converse freely with one another."<sup>170</sup> Matthew Lipman also argued that grassroots philosophy classes for children would make them better democratic citizens<sup>171</sup>. Interest in 'deliberative democracy' has grown in academic philosophy in recent years thanks to work on the topic by John Rawls<sup>172</sup>, Jurgen Habermas<sup>173</sup> and Michael Sandel<sup>174</sup>. Habermas in particular has spoken of the need for a revitalization of the 'public sphere', in which an informed and engaged citizenry can reason their way to consensual decisions.<sup>175</sup> However, theorists of deliberative democracy face a practical challenge: where exactly can the public come together to collectively deliberate on important political issues? Where is the modern equivalent of the 18th century salons and coffeehouses that Habermas celebrates?

There have been some recent and encouraging attempts at using community philosophy for deliberative democracy. For example, Christopher Phillips, founder of the Socrates Café movement, launched Constitution Cafés in 2011 in a bid to improve the tone and reasonableness of American political discourse<sup>176</sup>. In Europe, the 'community of inquiry' model has been used in immigration centres<sup>177</sup> and by community health organisations<sup>178</sup>. It has also influenced large-scale experiments in direct democracy, such as the Porto Alegre Experiment. The citizens of Porto Alegre meet regularly in neighbourhood, regional

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<sup>169</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. S Brodie, C.J Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), particularly the beginning of Book VIII

<sup>170</sup> John Dewey, 'Creative Democracy - The Task Before Us', *The Essential Dewey, Volume I* (Indiana: Indiana University Press 1998), p. 342

<sup>171</sup> Lipman 1988, see also Mark Weinstein, 'Critical Thinking and Education for Democracy', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 23 (2) 1991, pp. 9-29

<sup>172</sup> John Rawls, 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited', *University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 64, Summer 1997, 3, pp. 765- 796

<sup>173</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume I and II (New York: Beacon Press, 1984)

<sup>174</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998)

<sup>175</sup> Habermas 1989

<sup>176</sup> Christopher Phillips, *Constitution Cafe: Jefferson's Brew for a True Revolution* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2012)

<sup>177</sup> Craig McGarvey & David Scheie, 'Organizations Focused on Civic Participation Encourage Citizens to be Part of the Broader Community', Immigrant Participation & Immigration Reform (IPIR) 2006 Report, Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry: December 29 2006

<sup>178</sup> For example the work of El Centro de Education, Prevencion y Educacion CEPA in Holyoke, US, as described by Buchanan 2000, pp. 148 - 153

and city assemblies, to discuss and allocate spending.<sup>179</sup> Stanford University's James Fishkin has also done interesting work on 'deliberative polling', using a small group of citizens to consider and debate specific policy issues.<sup>180</sup>

Recently communitarian thinkers on the right and left have suggested the decline of the public sphere could be a result of the lack of public spaces available for citizens to assemble and deliberate.<sup>181</sup> This in part prompted the Occupy movement's strategy of seizing and occupying public or unused private spaces, and converting them into sites of direct deliberative democracy. The Occupy movement (already discussed in the previous section as an example of applied ethics) in some ways marked a return to the student 'happenings' of the 1960s<sup>182</sup>, and to the New Left's re-conceptualization of Deweyan progressive education: Occupy London had a 'Tent City University' where visiting philosophers came to speak<sup>183</sup>. Other radical movements have sought to reclaim public spaces for discussions: the Really Open University's Space Project looked to use sites off campus for adult learning, for example<sup>184</sup>. In 2012, UK Uncut created 'cuts cafes' in late 2012 for people to discuss ways to oppose government austerity measures. Other initiatives to create more public spaces for ethical and political discussions include To The Village Square in Tallahassee, Big Lunches and the Speakers Corner Trust in the UK, and the Politics Cafe in British Columbia.

### 3.3) Philosophical Counseling and the Café Philo movement

Philosophical Counseling (PC) is an attempt over the last three decades to bring the therapeutic benefits of philosophy to people beyond academia, and to set up philosophy as an alternative or rival to psychotherapy.<sup>185</sup> While it hasn't yet really taken off as an industry, it did lead to a boom in 'cafe philosophy' on the continent and around the world, which may be PC's most enduring legacy.

Most commentators date PC's origins to 1981, when German philosopher Gerd Achenbach opened a philosophy clinic in Cologne, and founded the Society for

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<sup>179</sup> Marion Gret & Yves Sintomer, *The Porto Alegre Experiment: Learning Lessons for a Better Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2005)

<sup>180</sup> James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991)

<sup>181</sup> David Harvey, 'The Political Economy of Public Space', *The Politics of Public Space*, ed. S. Low & N. Smith (New York: Routledge 2005), pp. 17 - 34; see also Benjamin R. Barber, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998)

<sup>182</sup> Tom Hayden, 'Participatory Democracy: From the Port Huron Statement to Occupy Wall Street', *The Nation* 16/ 04/ 2012: <http://www.thenation.com/article/167079/participatory-democracy-port-huron-statement-occupy-wall-street>

<sup>183</sup> Paul Stanistreet, 'Everyone Can Teach, Everyone Can Learn', *Adults Learning*, Spring 2012, pp. 20 - 26: [http://www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/adults-learning/Adults\\_Learning\\_2012\\_03\\_p20-p26.pdf](http://www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/adults-learning/Adults_Learning_2012_03_p20-p26.pdf)

<sup>184</sup> *ibid*

<sup>185</sup> Gerd Achenbach, *Philosophische Praxis* (Cologne: Juergen Dinter, 1984)

Philosophical Practice the following year.<sup>186</sup> PC was, Achenbach suggested, “an alternative to the psychotherapies”. Achenbach argues that psychology and psychiatry try to fit a person’s condition into a diagnostic framework, and then treat them through a theoretical framework, a process which philosophical counsellors find de-humanising and scientific.<sup>187</sup> In the words of Lou Marinoff, a leading American philosophical counselor, “too much of psychology and psychiatry has been aimed at ‘disease-ifying’”.<sup>188</sup> Marinoff’s 1996 book, *Plato Not Prozac*, is the most strident example of an anti-psychology and anti-psychiatry tendency in the PC movement. More moderate voices like Peter Raabe nonetheless suggest that philosophy made a huge tactical mistake when it “gave away to psychotherapy the very heart of philosophical practice”.<sup>189</sup> Philosophy, then, should descend from the ivory tower and return to its original practice of teaching people how to ‘take care of the self’, reclaiming its role from the upstart psychotherapy. But how does this work in practice? Typically, a session of PC costs roughly the same as a session of psychotherapy. However, the client or ‘visitor’ would not be shoe-horned into a theoretical approach, rather they would be listened to deeply by the philosophical counselor, who would help them achieve “clarity about their lives’ shape, the from-where, in-what, where-to”. The PC approach is “generally eclectic...rarely focusing on one philosopher or philosophic system as the exclusive source of insight”<sup>190</sup>, but practitioners of PC are clearly influenced by continental philosophers like Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Kant<sup>191</sup>, as well as by ancient virtue ethics and Hellenistic philosophy<sup>192</sup>, and John Dewey and other pragmatists<sup>193</sup>.

The movement attracted a lot of publicity in the 1980s and 1990s, helping to vocalise public unease about the boom in mood-altering pharmaceuticals like Prozac. PC attracted practitioners around the world, and societies for philosophical practice were founded in Holland, the UK, Israel, South Korea and elsewhere. Practitioners exulted that PC had ‘saved’ philosophy, that philosophy was finally “coming back into the light of day”.<sup>194</sup> However, as Julian Baggini wrote in *The Philosopher’s Magazine* in 2010, “all these organisations remain very small”, and only a very limited number of practitioners make a full-time living from it.”<sup>195</sup> Commentators have suggested a number of reasons for the movement’s limited success so far: perhaps PC was so open-minded and ‘anti-method’

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<sup>186</sup> Peter Raabe, *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice* (Westport: Praeger, 2000)

<sup>187</sup> Achenbach 1984

<sup>188</sup> Marinoff 1996

<sup>189</sup> Raabe 2000

<sup>190</sup> *ibid*

<sup>191</sup> Shlomit C. Schuster, *Philosophy Practice: An Alternative to Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Westport: Greenwood, 1999)

<sup>192</sup> Tim LeBon, *Wise Therapy: Philosophy for Counsellors* (London: Sage, 2001), Marinoff 1996

<sup>193</sup> Raabe 2000

<sup>194</sup> Marinoff 1996

<sup>195</sup> Julian Baggini, ‘Counsel of Despair?’, *The Philosopher’s Magazine*, 49, 2nd quarter 2010, pp. 57 - 62: [http://secure.pdcnet.org/tpm/content/tpm\\_2010\\_0049\\_0057\\_0062](http://secure.pdcnet.org/tpm/content/tpm_2010_0049_0057_0062)

that it ended up being whatever you wanted it to be.<sup>196</sup> Perhaps it needlessly alienated the fields of both psychotherapy and academic philosophy.<sup>197</sup> Perhaps it failed to get the institutional backing of governments because it failed to provide any evidence that it did what it claimed to do.<sup>198</sup> Whatever the reason, as a rival to psychotherapy, it has so far failed. It should be noted, in passing, that a minority of philosophical counselors resisted the movement's tendency to distance itself from psychotherapy. Elliot D. Cohen, the pioneer of the movement in the US, noticed early on the similarity between his own approach to PC, and the Rational Emotive Therapy of Albert Ellis. He has forged his own distinctive brand of PC, called logic-based therapy, based on syllogistic reasoning.<sup>199</sup> In the UK, Tim LeBon has sought to bring together PC and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy - Tim provides CBT within the NHS, and is working to develop courses in 'philosophical CBT' for individuals and groups.<sup>200</sup>

## The Café Philo movement

In 1992, a young French philosopher called Marc Sautet set up a philosophical clinic (or *cabinet de philosophie*) in Paris, charging people 300 francs an hour for his services. The business failed to take off, so Sautet branched out, launching open philosophy sessions every Sunday morning at the Cafe De Flores.<sup>201</sup> These sessions, known as 'cafes philosophique' or 'cafe pour Socrates', proved to be very popular (perhaps because they were free) and could attract capacity audiences of over 100. The attendees voted on a topic, and then examined it in an open discussion guided by the facilitator.<sup>202</sup>

The Café Philo format reminded some commentators of the 'happenings' of 1968 - indeed, Sautet was himself a young Trotskyite participant in the 68 student protests. Gale Prawda, a philosophical counselor who attended the early sessions at the Cafe de Phares and then set up her own philosophy cafe in London, said: "Café Philo tries to bring back some of that spirit [of 1968] – you could go somewhere, say what you thought, and try to understand in public what life was all about."<sup>203</sup> But perhaps the appeal of cafe philo (and, from a radical perspective, also perhaps its limitation) is that it is not committed to a particular anti-capitalist political programme, and its events tend to be more inclusive of a variety of political stances than a 1968 happening, perhaps as a result of the broader cross-section of ages and professions. Salon magazine described early Café Philo

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<sup>196</sup> Samuel Zinaich Jr., 'Gerd B. Achenbach's 'Beyond-Method' Method', *International Journal of Philosophical Practice* vol. 2, 2, Spring 2004: <http://npcassoc.org/docs/ijpp/ZinaichOnAchenbach.pdf>

<sup>197</sup> Elliot D. Cohen, 'Philosophy with Teeth: The Be Wedding of Philosophical and Psychological Practices', *International Journal of Philosophical Practice* vol. 2, 2, Spring 2004: <http://npcassoc.org/docs/ijpp/CohenTeeth.pdf>

<sup>198</sup> Samuel Knapp & Alan C. Tjeltvelt, 'A Review and Critical Analysis of Philosophical Counseling', *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, vol. 36 (5), pp. 558-565

<sup>199</sup> Elliot D. Cohen, *The New Rational Therapy: Thinking Your Way to Serenity, Success, and Profound Happiness* (Landham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006)

<sup>200</sup> See the appendix for an interview with Tim LeBon

<sup>201</sup> Sautet 1995

<sup>202</sup> Marinoff 1996, Raabe 2000

<sup>203</sup> Peter Aspden, 'Putting the Caffeine Back in Café Society', *Financial Times*, January 1998: <http://www.appa.edu/ft0198.htm>

sessions in Paris as ‘a college-town literature workshop and a Quaker meeting rolled into one, with a pinch of karaoke’.<sup>204</sup>

The format spread across Paris: on the 23rd of September 1995, 25 Parisian cafes held simultaneous events as part of a *Bistrot En Fetes* - and then rapidly spread to the rest of France and other countries around the world, propelled by the internet and by visitors to the Cafe de Phares traveling to other countries and establishing their own philosophy cafe. By 1998, when Sautet sadly died of a brain tumour, there were roughly 100 Café Philos across France, and another 150 around the world. Several varieties of the original blend emerged, including cinema-philosophy nights, cafe psychology, cafe philos-theatre, and all-night cafe philosophy events (*nuits de philosophie*).<sup>205</sup> By the late 1990s, a British and Australian variant of Café Philo had developed: pub philosophy (perhaps reflecting these cultures’ fondness for beer, and the 19th century tradition of pub philosophy found in British working class culture).<sup>206</sup> In the US, meanwhile, “its most natural venue here is the bookstore-cafe”.<sup>207</sup> Sautet’s format was one of the inspirations for both the Philosophy In Pubs (PIPs) movement in the UK, and the Socrates Cafe movement in the US, although both of these movements are, as we’ve discussed, more theoretically aligned to Matthew Lipman’s pragmatist philosophy.



*A Café Philo session at the Café de Phares, with Sautet on the left in the white shirt*

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<sup>204</sup> ‘Philosophy Au Lait’, *Salon* magazine May 13 1997

<sup>205</sup> Jacques Diament, *Les ‘Cafés de Philosophie’: Un forme inédite de socialisation par la philosophie* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001)

<sup>206</sup> See the interview with Rick Lewis in the appendix

<sup>207</sup> Lou Marinoff, *Philosophical Practice* (New York: Academic Press 2001) p.115

The PC / Café Philo movement also has links to the movement for Socratic Dialogue, launched by the work of German philosopher Leonard Nelson in the 1920s<sup>208</sup>. Sessions of Socratic Dialogue tend to be longer and more structured than a philosophy cafe session, lasting for a weekend or even a whole week, and usually involving a set number of participants (typically around 10). These more formal sorts of Socratic Dialogues have been used in companies, in political parties, by local and national governments, and in open town-hall sessions. In Marinoff's assessment, the format "furnishes ordinary people with the experience of being philosophers for a weekend".<sup>209</sup> In its public policy context, it is comparable to James Fishkin's work on deliberative democracy (discussed earlier), and the Neo-Socratic Dialogue (NSD) technique has been used for public deliberations on medical ethics and business ethics.<sup>210</sup> The Café Philo movement has inspired similar ventures in other disciplines, such as the Café Scientifique, Bars de Science and Sci-Bar movement, which began in Paris in 1997<sup>211</sup> and then spread to other countries; and Tech Cafés, which began in the US before spreading to other countries.<sup>212</sup> The 'ideas café' format has been taken up by some universities as a way of doing outreach into the local community: examples include Warwick University's Ideas Café, the Philosopher's Café at Simon Fraser University in Canada, University of Glasgow's Ideas Café, the Conversation Café at Brock University, the World Café at the University of Alberta, and the University of the Streets Café in Montreal.

## Philosophy Now and other mainstream philosophy magazines

The success of Café Philo and the public's obvious "thirst for philosophy" (as L'Expansion magazine put it in 1996<sup>213</sup>) has been fed by the creation of several mainstream popular philosophy magazines, which in turn gave the grassroots movement added impetus and organisational focus. In 1992, for example, Filosofie Magazine was launched in Holland and Dutch-speaking Belgium. Its editor, Daan Roovers, says the magazine was intended as a counterbalance to the spread of irrational New Age thinking in Dutch society. The magazine's circulation has grown to 20,000, and its popularity helped to spark a grassroots philosophy revival in Holland, through philosophy clubs, TV shows, popular books and events like the annual 'Month of Philosophy' in Amsterdam, which attracts thousands of visitors to talks and debates.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Marinoff 1996

<sup>209</sup> *ibid*

<sup>210</sup> Dieter Birnbacher, 'The Socratic method in teaching medical ethics: Potentials and limitations', *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 2, pp. 219 - 224; Beate Littig, 'The Neo-Socratic Dialogue (NSD): a method of teaching ethical questions of sustainable development', Institute for Advanced Studies, October 2002: [http://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/541/ssoar-2004-littig-the\\_neo-socratic\\_dialogue\\_nsd\\_a.pdf?sequence=1](http://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/541/ssoar-2004-littig-the_neo-socratic_dialogue_nsd_a.pdf?sequence=1)

<sup>211</sup> <http://www.sciencesessonne.fr/spip.php?article29>

<sup>212</sup> See the Wall Street Journal's recent Tech Café initiative in London: <http://blogs.wsj.com/tech-europe/tag/tech-cafe/>

<sup>213</sup> L'Expansion 8/ 2/ 1996, quoted in Diamant 2001, p. 21

<sup>214</sup> Frank Mulder, 'All of these people come here for philosophy?', *Filosofie Magazine* 9/ 2012: <http://www.filosofiemagazine.nl/nl/content/22985/index.html>; for a recent Dutch book on café philosophy, see Sandra Aerts, *Het filosofisch café in acht vragen* (Amsterdam: Cyclus, 2012)

In 1991, meanwhile, Rick Lewis set up Philosophy Now magazine in the UK while working at the laboratory of British Telecom. He tells me: “I thought there should be a philosophy magazine for non-specialists who were still interested in philosophical questions and were looking for an ethical foundation in life. I felt that by the 1990s there were many such people, because of the growth in higher education, and the increase in spare time to think about things”.<sup>215</sup> The magazine’s print and online subscribers now total over 26,000, and the magazine is distributed in the US, Canada, UK and Australia. By 1998, Lewis was running the magazine full-time, and he teamed up with a contributor, a philosophy post-grad called Bryn Williams, to run Philosophy Now Pub Philosophy evenings. They were in part inspired by Sautet’s Cafe Philos and by the London version of it, set up in 1997 by Gale Prawda at the Institut Francais. Lewis says: “Culturally, we thought the pub was more appropriate for British philosophers.” The evenings they organized followed the Cafe Philo format of open discussions on a particular question or theme.



*The Month of Philosophy in Amsterdam*

Also in London in 1998, a PhD student called Anja Steinbauer set up Philosophy For All, a grassroots movement which held monthly pub philosophy sessions called Kant’s Cave, as well as monthly debates, and monthly ‘philosophical walks’. Philosophy For All also launched a Feminism Forum. Rick and Anja met at Kant’s Cave and got engaged in 1998 (Christopher Phillips also met his wife at a Socrates Cafe, by the by - the Socratic connection between Sophia and Eros clearly survives). Philosophy Now’s Pub Philosophy evenings stopped when Williams got engaged, but Philosophy For All is still going strong. In 2004, meanwhile, a philosophy reading group in Orange County, America contacted Lewis and asked if they could set up a Philosophy Now meetup. Around 30 Philosophy Now meetups have since appeared around the world. The magazine also organised a very successful 20th anniversary two-day philosophy festival at Conway Hall in 2011.

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<sup>215</sup> See the appendix for the full interview with Rick Lewis

In 2006, Fabrice Gerschel set up Philosophie Magazine in France. By 2010 it had a circulation of 53,000, making it the biggest philosophy magazine in the world. Like Filosofie Magazine, it has successfully marketed philosophy as an ‘art of living’ for the mass intelligentsia, making it in some ways a rival of Psychologies Magazine for the ‘intelligent self-help’ market (indeed, both Psychologies and its English language sister-magazine occasionally publish pieces by popular philosophers and have helped the grassroots philosophy scene to grow). Other mainstream magazines set up in the last 20 years include The Philosopher’s Magazine, set up in the UK in 1997 by Julian Baggini; Niin and Nain, founded in Finland in 1994; Cogito, founded in Greece in 2004; and Diogene filosofare oggi, founded in Italy in 2005. These magazines have acted as a bridge between academic and popular philosophy, and have helped support the growth of philosophy clubs, and philosophy events and festivals in the last decade, like the Cité-Philo in Lille, Les Recontres De Sophie in Nantes, Philosophia in Saint-Emilion, How The Light Gets In in the UK’s Hay-On-Wye, and the Modena Festival of Philosophy in Italy.

### 3.4) The revival of virtue ethics

An important part of the revival of grassroots philosophy in the last two decades has come from a revival of the idea, in Hellenistic philosophy and virtue ethics, that philosophy can be a form of therapy for the emotions and a practical way of life. The idea of philosophy as therapy is obviously connected with the Philosophical Counseling movement, which we have already examined. However, the PC movement mainly looks to continental philosophy for inspiration, particularly existentialist and phenomenologist philosophy. The tradition I want to examine now, which I have called the virtue ethics tradition, looks more to Aristotelian and Hellenistic philosophy for inspiration. It is less anti-scientistic than the PC movement, in part due to the close relationship between virtue ethics, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Positive Psychology. It is more likely to seek a dialogue or synthesis between philosophy and psychotherapy than to suggest the two are deadly rivals, as PC has sometimes suggested. There are two streams to the revival of virtue ethics, which met in the last decade: one stream begins in academic philosophy, the other in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Positive Psychology. We’ll start with the academic stream.

In the 1950s, Anglo-Saxon philosophers in the UK and US started to return to Aristotelian virtue ethics, and to the Greeks’ idea that ethics needs to be grounded on a proper ‘philosophy of psychology’<sup>216</sup>. Historians of ideas often date the modern revival of virtue ethics to GEM Anscombe’s 1958 paper, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’<sup>217</sup>. Other key works in the virtue ethics revival include Philippa Foot’s *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*<sup>218</sup>, Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*<sup>219</sup> and, more recently, Michael Sandel’s book and TV course, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing To Do?*<sup>220</sup>. These modern virtue ethicists revived Aristotle’s idea that the good life is one which led to human flourishing. Philosophy should help us perfect our moral characters, contemporary virtue

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<sup>216</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, *Philosophy* 33, No. 124 January 1958

<sup>217</sup> Roger Crisp & Michael Slote, *Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Appiah 2008

<sup>218</sup> Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1978)

<sup>219</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury 1981)

<sup>220</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* (London: Penguin 2009)

ethicists argued, instilling good habits and practices in us, and making us better, happier and more flourishing individuals engaged in a more flourishing community. The revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics was complemented by a revival, from the 1970s on, of academic interest in Hellenistic philosophy. AA Long did much to revive classicists' interest in Stoic philosophy.<sup>221</sup> Martha Nussbaum's 1996 book *Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*<sup>222</sup> increased academic interest in Hellenistic philosophies' ideas for healing emotional disturbances<sup>223</sup>. And, last but not least, the French classicist Pierre Hadot revived interest in the Hellenistic idea of ancient philosophy as a way of life, or a daily practice of spiritual exercises designed to heal the emotions and transform the self<sup>224</sup>. Hadot also directed criticism at academic philosophy for becoming over-specialised and over-theoretical in the modern era, and losing sight of the idea that the practice of philosophy could actually transform the psyche and help people to achieve *eudaimonia*, or flourishing.

The revival of the idea of philosophy as a therapy or way of life spread, in the noughties, into popular literature. Alain de Botton's *The Consolations of Philosophy*<sup>225</sup> drew practical lessons on how to live from philosophers including Seneca, Epicurus, Socrates and Nietzsche. It was a best-seller and spawned a Channel 4 TV series in the same year, called *Philosophy: A Guide to Happiness*. While the book and TV series was lambasted by some academics as 'dumbing down' or 'selling out'<sup>226</sup> it genuinely helped many people and got them interested in philosophy, and its popularity helped other philosophers to make a living outside of academia and sell 'intelligent self-help' books on the art of living, which often look to ancient philosophy for practical advice.<sup>227</sup> In 2008, De Botton, Mark Vernon, Robert Rowland-Smith, Roman Krznaric and other popular philosophers were brought together by Sophie Howarth to create the School of Life in London, which Botton has suggested was inspired by the example of Epicurus' Garden<sup>228</sup>. The School would succeed where modern universities failed (claimed the founders) by teaching its students the art of living, through a blend of philosophy, psychology, the arts and self-help.<sup>229</sup> The School provides courses in work, politics, love and other core areas of 'the good life', and also holds 'secular sermons' at Conway Hall, the home of British humanists in London. The School has been a commercial success, with over 50,000 people taking its classes in the last four years, and it's in the process of expanding its franchise to other countries,

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<sup>221</sup> AA Long, *Problems in Stoicism* (London: Athlone Press, 1971); AA Long and David Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers Volume I & II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 and 1989)

<sup>222</sup> Nussbaum 1996

<sup>223</sup> See the appendix for my interviews with Long and Nussbaum

<sup>224</sup> Hadot 1995

<sup>225</sup> De Botton 2000

<sup>226</sup> See for example Edward Skidelsky, 'Comforting but Meaningless', review in *New Statesman*, 27/ 03/ 2000, pp. 52-54 (Skidelsky has since moved to a more sympathetic position towards practical philosophy and was himself a well-received speaker at the London Philosophy Club)

<sup>227</sup> See, for example, Mark Vernon, *Plato's Podcasts: The Ancient's Guide to Modern Living* (London: Oneworld, 2009); or Roman Krznaric, *The Wonderbox: Curious histories of how to live* (London: Profile Books, 2011)

<sup>228</sup> Evans 2012, see also the interview with Krznaric in the appendix

<sup>229</sup> Alain de Botton, 'Can Tolstoy save your marriage?', *Wall Street Journal*, 18/ 12/ 2010: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704828104576021713651690094.html>

including Holland, South Korea and Brazil. It has also teamed up with the website Mumsnet to create evening classes in philosophy and other subjects for mothers at the Mumsnet Academy. In 2011, Tom Hodgkinson opened the Idler Academy in London, also offering practical classes in ancient philosophy and other subjects. Both The Idler and the School of Life have been very active and innovative in organising events and workshops at festivals like Wilderness and Port Eliot.<sup>230</sup>



*The School of Life in London*

### **The revival of virtue ethics in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Positive Psychology**

Long before academics renewed their interest in Hellenistic philosophy, its ideas had been kept alive in the less formal world of self-help.<sup>231</sup> Authors from Dale Carnegie to Eckhart Tolle drew practical lessons from the works of classical thinkers like Epictetus, Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius, and brought them to a mass audience. Bertrand Russell's *Conquest of Happiness*<sup>232</sup> was also an early and brilliant attempt to make philosophy a practical antidote for suffering. In the 1950s, an American psychologist called Albert Ellis abandoned psychoanalysis in frustration at the lack of results he was getting with his patients, and looked around for other ways to understand and change the emotions. He was inspired, through his reading of Russell's *Conquest of Happiness*, to return to Hellenistic philosophy, and was particularly struck by a quote of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus: 'Men are disturbed not by events, but by their opinion about them.' This inspired

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<sup>230</sup> Evans 2012, see also Philip Cafaro, 'The Virtues of Self-help', *Philosophy Now*, 45 March-April 2004

<sup>231</sup> *ibid*

<sup>232</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: Liveright Books, 1996 re-issue)

Ellis' cognitive theory of the emotions, which was the cornerstone of what would later become Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). In the late 1950s, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania called Aaron Beck became interested in Ellis' work and its use of Stoic philosophy. Beck developed CBT, and tested it out using his Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). This was arguably the first attempt to put the therapeutic ideas of ancient philosophy onto a firm evidence base.<sup>233</sup>

Using the BDI in a series of randomised controlled trials, Beck and his colleagues built up convincing evidence that CBT was the best therapy for many anxiety disorders, and was as good as anti-depressants in the treatment of depression. CBT has since been used for everything from diabetes to insomnia. The evidence supporting CBT persuaded governments around the world, but particularly in the UK and Sweden, to put substantial public funds into making CBT more available through public health systems. In the UK, for example, Lord Richard Layard successfully campaigned for the government to put a total of £550 million into training 3,500 new CBT therapists. CBT was also disseminated and widely used through more informal self-help channels: through computerised CBT courses, through CBT books and audio courses, and through self-run CBT support groups and online discussion boards. In that sense, CBT was a return to the self-help ethos of Hellenistic philosophy, which tried to teach people to be 'doctors of ourselves', in the words of Cicero.<sup>234</sup>

In 1998, a colleague of Beck's called Martin Seligman argued that the self-management techniques of CBT should be used not just to help people overcome emotional disorders, but to help everyone achieve flourishing.<sup>235</sup> Seligman used his presidency of the American Psychology Association to launch Positive Psychology, which would seek to be "the social science equivalent of virtue ethics".<sup>236</sup> It would test out techniques for flourishing from ancient wisdom and modern psychology, measure their effectiveness, find which ones really worked, and then disseminate them to society. Seligman was very successful at attracting funding from governments and philanthropic bodies, and over the last few years, Positive Psychology courses had been launched in many schools and corporations. In 2010, the US Army rolled out a \$180 million 'resilience-training course', designed by Seligman and his colleagues, which every US soldier must take. And Positive Psychology has also spread through grassroots initiatives. In 2011, Richard Layard spear-headed the launch of Action for Happiness, which is an attempt to spread the science of happiness through a network of 'happiness clubs' around the world, and also to create a political movement aimed at championing pro-happiness actions and policies.<sup>237</sup> Other Positive Psychology grassroots initiatives include the student initiatives Mental Wealth UK and Students for Happiness, both in the UK. There are also 89 Positive Psychology-related groups on meetup.com (at the time of writing).

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<sup>233</sup> Robertson 2010; Evans 2012; see also, Windy Dryden & Arthur Still, *The Historical and Philosophical Context of Rational Psychotherapy: The Legacy of Epictetus* (London: Karnac Books, 2012)

<sup>234</sup> Evans 2012

<sup>235</sup> As recounted in Martin E.P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press 2003)

<sup>236</sup> Martin E.P. Seligman & Christopher Peterson, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

<sup>237</sup> Evans 2012, see also Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons From A New Science* (London: Penguin, 2005)



*Andy Gibson of Mind Apples and Lord Richard Layard at the Interrogate Festival, Dartington, October 2012*

## **The politics of well-being**

These two streams of virtue ethics, in academic philosophy and cognitive psychology, have had a marked impact on public policy in the last few years, leading some policy makers to talk of a “neo-Aristotelian consensus” in policy-making.<sup>238</sup> Classical ideas of the good life, the common good, flourishing and well-being are now ubiquitous in public policy, particularly in British politics.<sup>239</sup> However, on a closer look, there is not so much of a consensus, but rather various different forms of Neo-Aristotelianism at play in the world of public policy. On the one side, there is a more philosophical sort of Neo-Aristotelianism, found in the ideas of Michael Sandel, Martha Nussbaum, Maurice Glasman<sup>240</sup> and others, which emphasizes renewed civic activism and public ethical reasoning. On the other side, there is a more social science form of Neo-Aristotelianism, found in the theories of Richard Layard, Martin Seligman, and of well-being economists like Jeffrey Sachs<sup>241</sup> and the new economics foundation, which tries to find ways of scientifically measuring flourishing both at the individual and national scale.

These two wings of Neo-Aristotelianism have begun to engage in a dialogue in the last few years, and tried to work out the proper relationship between evidence and ethics, or

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<sup>238</sup> Richard Reeves and Jen Lexmond, *Building Character* (London: Demos, 2009): [http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Building\\_Character\\_Web.pdf?1257752612](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Building_Character_Web.pdf?1257752612)

<sup>239</sup> Jules Evans, ‘Our Leaders Are All Aristotelians Now’, *Public Policy Review*, vol. 17, 4, pp. 214 -221

<sup>240</sup> On Glasman, see Rowenna Davis, *Tangled Up In Blue: Blue Labour and the Struggle for Labour’s Soul* (London: Ruskin, 2011)

<sup>241</sup> Jeffrey Sachs: *The Price of Civilisation; Reawakening American Virtue and Prosperity* (New York: Random House, 2011)

between Is and Ought. Sometimes that dialogue has been acrimonious, as when Nussbaum criticises Positive Psychology for being reductive, illiberal, and simplistically utilitarian.<sup>242</sup> But Nussbaum herself has been influenced by the scientific evidence base for cognitive psychology in articulating her own cognitive philosophy of emotions - and has tried to find a statistical way of measuring people's capacities for human flourishing in different societies through the UN Human Development Index.<sup>243</sup> Gradually, hopefully, a respectful and balanced dialogue is emerging between academic virtue ethics and cognitive psychology: for example, I recently attended a seminar at Exeter University that brought together experts in Stoic philosophy with experts in CBT and Positive Psychology.

It's very encouraging that politicians and policy-makers are taking seriously classical conceptions of the good life. Aristotelian politics and well-being economics demand that we ask serious questions about what it means to live well. In some ways, such questions are a product of the 1960s, and that decade's widespread questioning of the 'affluent society'.<sup>244</sup> The risk, however, is that Aristotelian politics and well-being economics become too top-down and technocratic, and that the movement translates in political terms into a handful of self-appointed, unelected experts telling the general population how to be happy in the right way. Citizens could end up having their well-being or resilience



Michael Sandel giving a talk to 5,000 people in South Korea  
(photo: South Korean Times)

measured and quantified by automatic questionnaires, and the results impacting their employment chances, or even their benefit payments. It could end up as a form of illiberal moral paternalism, masquerading as objective science.<sup>245</sup> That's why it is important to leave room for people to dispute, disagree, and make up their own mind.<sup>246</sup> In that sense, grassroots philosophy clubs potentially have an

important role to play in making the politics of well-

<sup>242</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Who is the Happy Warrior? Philosophy Poses Questions to Psychology', *The Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. 37, S2, pp. S81 - S113: [http://mfs.uchicago.edu/institutes/happiness/prereadings/nussbaum\\_happy\\_warrior.pdf](http://mfs.uchicago.edu/institutes/happiness/prereadings/nussbaum_happy_warrior.pdf)

<sup>243</sup> In Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), and also *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge: Belknap 2011)

<sup>244</sup> J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958)

<sup>245</sup> Evans 2012; see also Jules Evans, 'Democratising the Well-Being Movement', *Open Democracy* 6/ 5/ 2011: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/jules-evans/democratising-well-being-movement>

<sup>246</sup> See Sandel 1998

being less illiberal and instrumentalised, and more pluralist and democratic.<sup>247</sup>

### 3.5) The Skeptic movement

Skepticism is a vibrant grassroots movement dedicated to critical thinking and the debunking of irrational beliefs in the public sphere. Skeptics might balk at the classification of themselves as a philosophical movement, as they usually see themselves as pro-science and even, on occasion, anti-philosophy.<sup>248</sup> Nonetheless, philosophers have played an important role in founding and supporting the movement. Modern Skepticism grew out of Humanism and atheism, and some suggest that, together, these three groups form a larger 'Community of Reason' <sup>249</sup>. But atheism is single-issue, while Humanism attempts to be a positive belief-system or even, in the late 19th and early 20th century, a pious 'religion of humanity' with its own hymns, creeds and rituals. Skepticism by contrast confines itself to merrily debunking others' truth-claims, particularly belief in wacky phenomena like UFOs, Big Foot, astrology and so on. Skepticism is both more irreverent, and more aggressive, than traditional Humanism, and also arguably more media-savvy and entertaining, thanks to the many magicians and comedians in its ranks. However, it could be argued that the broader Humanist movement has learnt from the success of Skepticism, and now also has a less pious and more irreverent and entertaining public face, organising science, comedy and music shows like the Night of 400 Billion Stars.

The modern Skeptic movement was launched by the philosopher Paul Kurtz in the late 1970s. Kurtz was an academic and a leading Humanist, who was inspired by John Dewey's belief that philosophy should venture beyond the ivory tower and grapple with the great problems of society. Kurtz was worried by the enormous popularity of New Age and paranormal beliefs in 1970s America, symbolised by the sudden fame of Uri Geller, and felt this trend needed to be opposed by critical and rational voices, particularly in the mass media. In 1976, he established the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) at the American Humanist Association annual convention.<sup>250</sup> CSICOP's other founder members included the magician James Randi and the writer Martin Gardner. CSICOP's charter called for the establishment of a network of Skeptics to investigate claims of the paranormal, as well as a magazine (initially called *The Zetetic*, then *Skeptical Inquirer*) and conferences to spread Skeptic thinking. In the 1980s, CSICOP started to establish local groups: the first was in Austin, Texas in 1981. CSICOP organizers travelled the world, building networks of correspondence and inspiring the foundation of other Skeptic organisations and local groups in the UK, Australia and elsewhere. The magician James Randi, in particular, played a tireless missionary role, nurturing the global Skeptic community both through his TV appearances and tours, and through his correspondence with Skeptics around the world. His visit to Australia in 1980, for example, inspired the foundation of Australian Skeptics and its Skeptic magazine. He

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<sup>247</sup> See Buchanan 2010 for a discussion of grassroots ethical reasoning and its role in de-instrumentalising public health policies

<sup>248</sup> See the appendix interview with Massimo Pigliucci

<sup>249</sup> *ibid*

<sup>250</sup> Paul Kurtz, *Skeptical Odysseys: personal accounts by the world's leading paranormal inquirers* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001); George P. Hansen, 'CSICOP and the Skeptics: An Overview', *The Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, vol. 86, January 1992, pp. 19 - 63; Michael Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and other Confusions of Our Time* (New York: WH Freeman, 1997)

has also encouraged the UK's Skeptics In the Pub movement, through his friendship and correspondence with Sid Rodrigues.<sup>251</sup>

The Skeptic grassroots movement really took off in the noughties, thanks to the internet, which enabled Skeptics to organise into groups, and to communicate with each other via podcasts, blogs, forums and email lists. The grassroots of the movement started to blossom, without any intervention from national organisations like CSICOP. In 1999, philosophy PhD Scott Campbell launched Skeptics In the Pub in London, inspired by Australia's Philosophy In Pubs and Science In Pubs movements <sup>252</sup>. In the last two years, over 15 Skeptics In the Pub groups have been set up around the UK, bringing the total number to 41, at the time of writing. Skeptics In The Pub events typically feature a well-known speaker giving a talk for around 40 minutes, followed by a question-and-answer session and general drinking and socialising. Scott says: "The events tended to be less serious than Humanist events. They were not very solemn at all, more jolly and drunken."

<sup>253</sup> In 2003, the James Randi Educational Foundation started to hold an annual conference, called The Amaz!ng Meeting, which hosted a mixture of scientists, magicians and comedians. TAM has run every year since then, and attendance has grown from 150 in 2003 to 1650 in 2011 <sup>254</sup>. Other Skeptic, atheist and free-thinking conferences include Skepticon, CSICON, Skeptical, NorthEast Conference on Science and Skepticism (NECSS), the European Skeptics Conference, and the World Skeptics Congress. There are even Skeptic cruise-ship package holidays.

### **Skepticism's 'teething problems'**

The Skeptic and atheist movements became noticeably more aggressive in their attitude towards organised religion following 9/11, after which New Atheists like Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins wrote best-selling books attacking and ridiculing Islam and Christianity. This new aggressiveness towards organised religion made some Skeptics uncomfortable: Paul Kurtz, the founder of the movement, resigned "under duress" from CSICOP (by then called the Centre for Scientific Inquiry) after protesting against the organisation's "mean-spirited ridicule and criticism" of religion, including its sponsorship of 'Blasphemy Day'.<sup>255</sup> Others complained that the movement was becoming scientific, close-minded, anti-philosophical and even anti-intellectual <sup>256</sup>. The movement is also going through a internal wrangle over the continued gender imbalance in the movement (around 70% of the members of Skeptics in the Pub are male<sup>257</sup>) and the perceived misogyny of some male Skeptics online and at Skeptic events.

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<sup>251</sup> See the appendix for an interview with Sid Rodrigues

<sup>252</sup> See the appendix for an interview with Scott Campbell

<sup>253</sup> *ibid*

<sup>254</sup> TAM attendance statistics provided by email from Tim Farley, research fellow at the James Randi Educational Foundation

<sup>255</sup> See Erich Vieth, 'Expelled founder Paul Kurtz explains his departure from the Center for Inquiry', *Dangerous Intersection* 2/10/ 2010: <http://dangerousintersection.org/2010/10/02/expelled-founder-paul-kurtz-explains-his-departure-from-the-center-for-inquiry/>

<sup>256</sup> Massimo Pigliucci, 'The community of reason self-assessment', *Rationally Speaking* 08/2012: <http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/the-community-of-reason-self-assessment.html>

<sup>257</sup> According to a survey by Rodrigues, available here: <http://carmenego.wordpress.com/2009/08/17/women-and-ethnic-minorities-at-skeptics-in-the-pub-london-follow-up/>

An incident involving Rebecca Watson being propositioned in an elevator <sup>258</sup> (since canonised as ‘elevator-gate’) led to a bitter, vitriolic and on-going debate within the community about the degree to which the atheist, Skeptic and Humanist communities are sexist.<sup>259</sup> These criticisms (or self-criticisms) are not new. Soon after CSICOP was founded almost 40 years ago, one of its founders, Marcello Truzzi, resigned in protest, saying it was not objectively investigating paranormal activity but instead was banging the drum for a materialist world-view while suppressing any data that didn’t fit that world-view.<sup>260</sup> In the 1980s, psychic and paranormal investigators criticised Skeptics for being aggressively scientific and rude, and also for the movement’s dominance by white middle-class men. They also noted the movement’s Manichean sense of ‘Us versus Them’, and its almost apocalyptic rhetoric.<sup>261</sup>

The global Skeptic movement is still not entirely agreed on its policy goals (unlike Humanism, it has never published an official Skeptic ‘manifesto’), and there are signs of political differences between European and American Skepticism. In the UK, Skeptics have successfully campaigned to reform English libel laws after one of its prominent members, Simon Singh, was sued for libel by the British Chiropractic Association (Singh won the case).<sup>262</sup> The British Skeptic community also recently supported the ‘Science is Vital’ campaign to protect government funding of science <sup>263</sup>, and has waged public campaigns against the truth-claims of homeopathy.<sup>264</sup> The Skeptic movement here is less concerned with reducing religion’s influence on politics (the Church of England is not a powerful political force anymore) and more concerned with promoting evidence-based politics – see *The Geek Manifesto*<sup>265</sup> for a recent rallying cry. American Skeptics, by contrast, tend to be libertarians, or even Ayn Randians, who are suspicious of government intervention. Some prominent American Skeptics are also climate skeptics.<sup>266</sup> And American Skeptics are often more passionate in their dislike of religion, probably because they are a small and marginalised minority in America’s Puritan or even fundamentalist religious culture <sup>267</sup>.

Perhaps these issues of identity have become more pressing as the community has grown in size, and started to mean more to its members. As more people self-identify as Skeptics and feel emotionally affiliated to a ‘Skeptic community’, arguments over the identity and

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<sup>258</sup> First discussed in Rebecca Watson, ‘On Naming Names at the CFI Student Leadership Conference’, Skepchick 28/ 6/ 2011: <http://skeptichick.org/2011/06/on-naming-names-at-the-cfi-student-leadership-conference/>

<sup>259</sup> See Adam Lee, ‘Atheism’s growing pains’, *Salon* online 6/10/ 2012: [http://www.salon.com/2012/10/06/atheisms\\_growing\\_pains/](http://www.salon.com/2012/10/06/atheisms_growing_pains/)

<sup>260</sup> Hansen 1992

<sup>261</sup> *ibid*

<sup>262</sup> See <http://www.libelreform.org/>

<sup>263</sup> See <http://scienceisvital.org.uk/>

<sup>264</sup> See <http://www.1023.org.uk/>

<sup>265</sup> Mark Henderson, *The Geek Manifesto: Why Science Matters* (London: Transworld, 2012)

<sup>266</sup> However, for a recent conversion from climate skeptic to activist, see Michael Shermer: <http://www.michaelshermer.com/2008/04/confessions-of-a-former-environmental-skeptic/>

<sup>267</sup> See <http://atheism.about.com/od/atheistbigotryprejudice/a/AtheistsHated.htm>

governance of that community become much more emotionally-charged. This is the paradox of the 'Community of Reason' – as soon as it becomes a genuine community or 'family' to its members, it becomes less rational, more tribal, and more subject to emotional internecine arguments and schisms. Despite this differences and divisions within the Skeptic movement, it has achieved remarkable success in spreading a 'thinking culture' beyond academia. The Skeptic movement has helped to spread 'geek chic' or 'geek power' - one notes that in popular culture today, it is often the geek or the scientific nerd who is the hero, while the jock has become a figure of fun. Perhaps the geeks are helping to make public policy more evidence-based, very slowly. And, in America, it is gradually becoming acceptable to admit you don't believe in God: the number of self-professed atheists quintupled between 2005 and 2011, though it is still just 5% of the population.<sup>268</sup>



*Skeptics in the Pub, London*

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<sup>268</sup> WIN-Gallup International Poll, mentioned in *The Economist*:  
<http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2012/08/atheism>

## Part 4) What do philosophy clubs do for their members?

There are two ways to answer this question: by asking philosophy club organizers, or by asking their members. They might well have different answers. In fact, the limited available evidence suggests they have quite similar objectives in attending clubs. The available evidence so far is, firstly, a survey in 1999 by Jacques Diament of the 284 members of 10 Café Philos in Paris <sup>269</sup>; secondly, an email survey of 28 organisers of philosophy clubs by me for this project; thirdly, a survey by Sid Rodrigues of the members of London Skeptics In the Pub<sup>270</sup>; fourthly, an informal questionnaire which new members of the London Philosophy Club fill in, which asks them their reason for joining the Club; and finally, anecdotal evidence from philosophy club organisers and members.

Firstly, what sort of people are going to philosophy clubs? The limited evidence offers different answers. Diament found that Cafés Philos members in Paris in 1999 were mainly women (61%), mainly over 50 (65%), above average in education, and mainly living alone (60%). Sid Rodrigues' survey of attendees of London Skeptics In the Pub showed it attracted a broader demographic, with 25% under 29, 23% in their 30s, 20% in their 40s and 25% aged 50-64. Members were 72% male and 27% female; 40% university educated and 34% with a post-graduate degree; 82% atheist; and 97% white. Out of the 100 people who joined the London Philosophy Club in the first two weeks of September 2012, 52% were women, and the demographic spread was similar to London Skeptics In the Pub. Of the 100 new members who joined the Club in the first three weeks of October 2012, 17% are of ethnic backgrounds other than white.<sup>271</sup> This is encouraging to those concerned by the gender bias in academic philosophy, where less than 20% of academic philosophers are female<sup>272</sup>: grassroots philosophy clubs, by contrast, appear (with the exception of Skeptic groups) to be slightly dominated by women. Hartley's survey of book clubs also found them to be dominated by women, to a much greater extent. I would suggest, tentatively, that women are at the vanguard of the mass intelligentsia, and are a critical force in the formation of new philosophical communities.

### Where do philosophy clubs happen?

Anecdotal evidence, and evidence from meetup and The Philosophy Hub, suggests that different countries prefer different sites for philosophy clubs. In continental Europe, the café became the home of the new grassroots philosophy movement in the 1990s. When the movement spread to the UK, it was originally launched in the cafe of the Institut Francais in London, as a sort of export of French culture (even though the habit of coffeehouse philosophising was arguably a British invention of the 17th century). However, British and Australian groups tended to prefer to meet in pubs.<sup>273</sup> In the US, meanwhile,

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<sup>269</sup> Diament 2001

<sup>270</sup> Rodrigues' survey is available here: <http://carmenego.wordpress.com/2009/08/17/women-and-ethnic-minorities-at-skeptics-in-the-pub-london-follow-up/>

<sup>271</sup> See [www.londonphilosophyclub.com](http://www.londonphilosophyclub.com)

<sup>272</sup> Brooke Lewis, 'Where are all the women?', *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 4/9/2009: <http://philosophypress.co.uk/?p=615>

<sup>273</sup> See the interview with Rick Lewis in the appendix

cafés in bookstores have been a popular site for meetings.<sup>274</sup> Philosophy clubs have also met in many other venues: libraries, hospitals, homes for the elderly, prisons, schools and universities, parks, town halls, occupied public spaces, restaurants and festivals. And the movement has flourished online too: through email lists, Facebook groups, and virtual worlds. There are a handful of philosophy groups that meet in Second Life, for example<sup>275</sup>. Graeme Tiffany, who has run philosophy clubs in housing estates, rightly emphasises how important settings are to the accessibility, tone and outcome of philosophy clubs.



*A philosophy picnic in Hyde Park discusses 'can people be truly altruistic', July 2011*

## **Why do people attend philosophy clubs?**

The 1999 survey by Diament asked Cafés Philos attendees why they attended: 62% said to challenge their ideas and find new ways of thinking; 42% said for conviviality; 26% said to learn about philosophy; and 17% said to find answers to the big questions of life. Among the club organisers interviewed for this project, the most typical response was that they hoped members got a chance to think intelligently about their beliefs and the beliefs of others. So there is a Socratic motive to philosophy clubs: people want to examine their beliefs, to consider alternate perspectives, and to learn how to live better. And there's a strong social motive: people want intelligent conversation because it's fun, and convivial, and introduces them to new people. To some extent, philosophy groups may be some sort of substitute for organised religion<sup>276</sup>. I'll explore some of the motives people go to philosophy clubs in more detail now.

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<sup>274</sup> Marinoff 2001

<sup>275</sup> See <http://philosophyforlife.org/pow-philosophy-on-second-life/>

<sup>276</sup> See Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: a non-believer's guide to the uses of religion* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012)

#### 4.1) For learning

The most obvious reason people attend philosophy clubs is to learn about ideas. According to Diamant's survey, 26% of attendees at Cafés Philos said they attended primarily 'to introduce themselves to philosophy and to improve their knowledge', 17% said 'to find answers to life's questions', and 62% said 'to discover other ways of thinking'. People's desire to discover new ideas is particularly obvious in clubs like the London Philosophy Club, Philosophy For All or Skeptics In the Pub, where expert speakers are invited, often from academia, to give a talk and share the fruit of their research. Commercial ideas events, like talks at 5X15 or Intelligence Squared, also seem to be primarily an opportunity for people to listen and learn from expert speakers, in that the opportunities for audience participation and group discussion are limited. Nonetheless, the learning offered by these clubs tend to be informal and unstructured - more a buffet than a four-course meal. Some philosophy clubs are looking at providing more structured courses - the School of Life, in fact, began by offering six-part structured courses in themes like Work, Love and Politics.<sup>277</sup>



*Lord Robert Skidelsky discusses 'How Much Is Enough?' at the London Philosophy Club, September 2012*

#### 4.2) For sociability, conviviality and fun

Contemporary clubs often combine talks with socialising, drinking and eating. One of the most common reasons new members give for joining the London Philosophy Club is to meet like-minded and interesting new people. The biggest philosophy meetup, New York Philosophy, holds monthly 'cocktails and conversation' events and also 'philosophy house parties' for its 2,600 members. Drinking together is an important part of Skeptics groups like Skeptics in the Pub and Drinking Skeptically. Eating together is also an important activity for grassroots ideas clubs: one popular meetup, the New York Philosophy Now group, which has over 1000 members, holds monthly dinners. The London Philosophy Club has also recently started holding philosophy dinners, in addition to our usual pub meetings. The idea of 'feasts of philosophy' goes back to Plato's *Symposium*, though more recently the practice was developed by philosopher and historian Theodore Zeldin, whose organisation, Oxford Muse, organises 'feasts of strangers', in which strangers can gather at a meal and follow discussion topics from a 'conversation menu'.<sup>278</sup> This practice has since been used by the School of Life, the How The Light Gets In festival, the London Philosophy Club and other philosophy organisations.

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<sup>277</sup> See the appendix for an interview with Roman Krznaric, one of the founding faculty of the School of Life

<sup>278</sup> *ibid*

Philosophy clubs have also experimented with formats involving other arts, such as cinema, music and comedy. Conway Hall held a philosophy and cinema festival in 2012, and there have been Cine Philo events in France for over a decade. The School of Life's live tour combined talks with music, while Skeptic and Humanist events often bring together scientists with musicians and comedians like Robin Ince, Ricky Gervais and Stephen Fry - other philosophy clubs could take a leaf from their book to make philosophy events more entertaining. University College London's Bright Club, which combines stand-up comedy with brief, funny presentations by PhD students, is another interesting innovation.<sup>279</sup> Grassroots science events have also experimented with combining talks with cabaret and theatre - see in particular the Enlightenment Cafe project, held in the Old Vic tunnels in 2012. This emphasis on combining learning and entertainment harks back to the 19th-century American tradition of Lyceums and Chautauquas, where thinkers would share the stage with musicians and circus acts <sup>280</sup>. I personally think philosophy events could be a lot more multi-media, combining ideas with music, video, theatre and even dance for a more immersive live experience.

*A conversation menu from Oxford Muse*



#### 4.3) For belonging

I suggested earlier that philosophy clubs can be situated in the rise of the mass intelligentsia since the 1960s, and the attempt of that demographic to create alternative

<sup>279</sup> <http://www.brightclub.org/>

<sup>280</sup> Stubblefield and Keane 1994

communities to make up for the decline of traditional forms of community (the church, the family, political parties). More generally, humans want to belong to groups and to escape loneliness, which the philosopher Jean Vanier has described, rightly in my opinion, as the great sickness of modern civilisation.<sup>281</sup> Even people attracted to highly libertarian and individualist philosophies like Objectivism or Stoicism still want to join communities of like-minded people: there are 45 Objectivist meetups around the world, in which members discuss the ultra-individualistic philosophy of Ayn Rand.

Philosophy clubs could be seen as an attempt to provide an alternative to church for the non-religious - a place where they can congregate with other curious minds to find fellowship and belonging. Anecdotally, I have worked with two philosophy clubs - the London Philosophy Club and the NewStoa - both of whom are led by people who came from strict religious upbringings that they rebelled against. Philosophy clubs were, for these people, both a way of rebelling against religious communities and also an attempt to recreate those communities in a less dogmatic and harmful form. That may be true of other philosophy groups, particularly Skeptic and Humanist ones: there are 188 meetups that describe themselves as 'recovering from religion'. The School of Life, an ideas school set up in London by several freelance philosophers, also presents itself as a secular alternative to religion, and it holds monthly Sunday Sermons at Conway Hall, much as secular Humanist organisations have done since the late 19th century. Alain de Botton, one of the founders of the School of Life, has also mooted the construction of 'temples for atheists'.<sup>282</sup> Anecdotally, some people do appear to see the School of Life as a genuine community and alternative to organised religion.

In the US, where only 5% of people are openly atheist, and atheists are a disliked and distrusted minority<sup>283</sup>, Skeptic groups provide an important sense of belonging for a marginalized group. Barry Karr of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry says (in words I've quoted already): "People feel a strong sense of belonging. They love to see their friends at Skeptic meetings, and say it's like their family." Massimo Pigliucci says: "People need social support. A lot of people I met [in the Skeptic community] had troubled early experiences with religion. They felt alone, weird, ostracised, and they looked for community and a place where they feel safe and accepted."<sup>284</sup>

More broadly, philosophy groups may provide a form of extended family as a substitute for more traditional families. We note that in Diamant's survey, 60% of attendees of Café Philos in Paris lived on their own. It is also noteworthy that, in my experience, most philosophy club organizers tend to be either unmarried or without young children, and that organizers sometimes stop running clubs once they 'settle down': running a group and raising a young family seem to be somewhat incompatible (although there are honourable exceptions). Diamant's survey suggests philosophy clubs can provide community for elderly people who have retired, whose children have grown up, and who want to keep learning and socialising. The retired and the elderly played an important role in the expansion of book festivals since the 1990s, and in the rise of self-run learning organisations like Philosophy in Pubs and the University of the Third Age. Some of the

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<sup>281</sup> Interviewed in Evans 2012

<sup>282</sup> Alain de Botton 2012

<sup>283</sup> Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, Douglas Hartmann, 'Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society', *American Sociological Review*, April 2006 vol. 71 no. 2, pp. 211-234

<sup>284</sup> Interview in appendix

early efforts to extend Philosophy 4 Children to adults took place in homes for the elderly<sup>285</sup>. But philosophy groups can also provide support and stimulation for people *within* more traditional family structures, like young mums. Niki Barbary Bleyleben has set up a network of grassroots discussion groups for young mums who feel socially marginalised and who want to access social support and intelligent conversation.<sup>286</sup>

Some people seek belonging and community in philosophy clubs when they have recently moved to new cities. Although, the labour market hasn't become significantly more flexible in the last 30 years, people are increasingly migrating to large cities like London and New York for employment and study<sup>287</sup>, and it's noticeable that many London Philosophy Club members are recent arrivals in London and the UK, often foreign students, who are looking to make new friends and strengthen their social circles. Philosophy clubs are also popular with entrepreneurs who are looking for social support to help them start their own projects and companies, networking opportunities, and also forums to consider and promote ethical business practices.<sup>288</sup>

#### 4.4) For empathy

Philosophy groups can be places not just to 'meet like minds', but also to meet and connect with people from different communities, classes and backgrounds. Conversation between strangers can enhance the participants' empathy, their ability to see the other person's point of view, and to take their viewpoint seriously and appreciate them as a person. That was the thinking behind Theodore Zeldin's Feast of Strangers, which have brought together different groups, like CEOs and homeless people or managers and employees at companies<sup>289</sup>. Graeme Tiffany's three-year Community Philosophy project in a housing estate in Yorkshire also tried to create empathy between different groups - in this instance, the older and younger members of the estate, to learn each other's names and life-philosophies, and to reduce the fear and mistrust on both sides. Tiffany writes: "intergenerational Community Philosophy can build social solidarity and challenge cultural intolerance, thus contributing to community cohesion, and it can contribute to communities feeling safe, thus contributing to community safety. Moreover it does this without recourse to the 'hard power' sticks of coercion, authority, enforcement and sanctions, or the carrots of providing incentives or reward for involvement...A more positive 'soft power' thesis, in which faith in people, of all ages, enjoying each other's company for its own sake is encouraged, may, it seems, be justifiably promoted."<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> See Hymer & Jenkins 2005

<sup>286</sup> See Niki's brief presentation at the seminar for this project at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyYKsKEH3rQ>

<sup>287</sup> See the Office of National Statistics' Migration Statistics, for example: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/migration1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/february-2012/msqr.html>

<sup>288</sup> See for example the China Entrepreneur Club, dedicated to 'the guidance of businesses to the right path': <http://www.daonong.com/English/index.htm>; see also Escape the City: <http://escapethecity.org/>

<sup>289</sup> See the interview with Roman Krznaric in the appendix

<sup>290</sup> Tiffany 2009



*The London Philosophy Club (photo by Greg Funnell)*

Tiffany emphasises the idea of community philosophy as a form of social research by communities on themselves - learning from each other, articulating each other's perspectives and concerns, and working to improve the community. That's also the ethos behind a project run by Norfolk LINK at three prisons in Norfolk. The project has set up 'Health and Well-Being Boards' at the three prisons (HMP Norwich, HMP Wayland and HMP Bure), where inmates can engage in a dialogue with prison officials and raise concerns about mental health services within the prison. Empathy here is both an end-in-itself and also hopefully a means to social action (in this case, improving the mental health services in prisons).<sup>291</sup>

#### **4.5) For well-being / resilience / flourishing**

At the simplest level, philosophy clubs bring people together to learn and have fun together, and that's good for their well-being. The Office of National Statistics' well-being surveys have found that adults involved in adult education tend to be more satisfied with their lives than those not involved.<sup>292</sup> There is also a strong empirical correlation between feelings of social connection to others, and personal health and well-being.<sup>293</sup> Local philosophy groups introduce us to our neighbours and give us a sense of belonging to our local community, which also contributes to our personal well-being and the well-being of our community. Philosophy groups are good for the organisers too - at least in my personal experience, they give you a sense of confidence in your ability to organise events, attract good speakers, and create something that others find enjoyable and meaningful.

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<sup>291</sup> See the report 'The Provision of Mental Health Services Commissioned by NHS Norfolk', by Karl Hills, Norfolk Link, October 2011: [http://www.norfolklink.org.uk/files/downloads/prison\\_report\\_1.pdf](http://www.norfolklink.org.uk/files/downloads/prison_report_1.pdf)

<sup>292</sup> Office of National Statistics, 'Education improves the well-being of both young and old', ONS 5/ 7/ 2012: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/mro/news-release/education-improves-the-well-being-of-both-young-and-old/measuring-national-well-being---education.html>

<sup>293</sup> See for example John F. Helliwell and Robert D Putnam, 'The social context of well-being', *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci.* 2004 September 29; 359(1449): 1435–1446.

Philosophy groups can be a place for people to share their stories, and to feel heard and supported. This was one of the ‘functions’ of feminist consciousness-raising circles, which were particularly popular in the 1970s, and a similar technique is often used by self-help and mutual aid groups like Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>294</sup> Critics might suggest such ‘story-sharing’ is not particularly philosophical, nonetheless, it’s one of the things people use philosophy clubs for. Grassroots philosophy involves more of a mingling of the personal and the theoretical than academic philosophy has hitherto done. The sharing of personal stories and experiences can be particularly useful for people who have gone through a traumatic experience and want to talk about it, to get a perspective on it, to make sense of it. We note that meetup.com, the website that has more than any other helped community philosophy groups to grow, was launched in New York following September 11. Philosophy cafes were also a popular venue for public discussions in Japan following the March 11 earthquake in 2011. One survivor told a local magazine: “Dialogue is the most important lifeline, after food and gasoline.”<sup>295</sup>



*The Philosophy Cafe @Fukushima after March 11 (photo by The Asahi Shimbun)*

It’s an open question as to whether philosophy groups could (or should) provide more structured therapy for emotional problems.<sup>296</sup> Looking back to the origins of philosophy in the fifth century BC, the ancient Greek philosophers - particularly the Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics - clearly thought of philosophy as a form of therapy, which cured practitioners of the toxic false beliefs that cause suffering. Socrates likewise suggested philosophy

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<sup>294</sup> See Julian Rappaport, ‘Narrative Studies, Personal Stories and Identity Transformation in the Mutual Help Context’, *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, June 1993, vol. 29, 2, p. 239-255; and Thomasina Jo Borkman, *Understanding Self-help / Mutual Aid: Experiential Learning in the Commons* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press 1999)

<sup>295</sup> Kazuya Omuru, ‘Philosophy cafes provide forum for discussing March 11’, *The Asahi Shimbun* 11/6/2011: <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/opinion/AJ201106110847>

<sup>296</sup> Hadot 1995, Nussbaum 1996, Evans 2012

could teach people to take care of their souls (which is where the modern word 'psychotherapy' comes from). Philosophers in the ancient world learned how to examine their beliefs through dialogues and conversations, and they lived in philosophical communities of shared values and shared practices. Could philosophy clubs do that today?

The Café Philo movement grew out of the Philosophical Counseling movement, so there were questions early on about whether cafe philosophy was a form of group philosophical counseling. Raabe, Prawda and others insisted it wasn't, because people come to philosophy cafes with many different intentions, not necessarily a desire to be 'cured' of suffering.<sup>297</sup> And yet many philosophical counselors accept that going to philosophy cafes *can* be therapeutic<sup>298</sup>, by giving people a space to be heard and to listen to others, while also being asked to examine and articulate their beliefs and give a rational account to them. That process of Socratic dialogue helps us to live a more 'examined life'. However, you could argue that this sort of general Socratic discussion might help us reflect on our beliefs, but is unlikely to alter any deep-rooted habits of behaviour.

Other philosophy clubs have tried not just to create a room for Socratic discussion, and also to teach some of the cognitive and behavioural techniques found in ancient philosophies and in some talking therapies like CBT, in order to teach a genuine 'art of living' to people. This, of course, is a different and more structured project to the more open Socratic inquiry of the Lipman tradition, and is more influenced by the revival of virtue ethics. The attempt to teach the art of living has been attempted, in various ways, by the School of Life, the Idler Academy and Life Clubs, three commercial organisations that teach 'ideas for life' in London.<sup>299</sup> Action for Happiness, meanwhile, has formed 'happiness clubs' where people can both discuss their ideas about happiness, and also learn techniques from CBT and Positive Psychology. Windy Dryden, a leading cognitive therapist in London, has started a CBT meetup group that provides open workshops each month.<sup>300</sup> CBT has also been embedded in 'resilience training' programmes - the largest example is the US Army's \$180 million Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme.<sup>301</sup> Also in the US Army, Major Thomas Jarrett pioneered a course called Stoic Warrior Resilience Training in Iraq during the Second Gulf War, and ran a club called the Socrates Cafe in Baghdad, where soldiers learnt resilient-thinking techniques from CBT and ancient Greek philosophy.<sup>302</sup> On a smaller scale, the Young Foundation has tried to teach CBT-based resilience courses to former gang-members, and to the elderly.<sup>303</sup> And finally, some corporations have pioneered adult education courses for employee well-being, such as

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<sup>297</sup> Raabe 2000

<sup>298</sup> See Phillips 2002, Marinoff 1999, Raabe 2000

<sup>299</sup> Evans 2012

<sup>300</sup> See Dryden's presentation at the seminar for this project: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Mdt\\_FzGnDg&feature=share&list=PLx1il\\_bKDuxFZdUygMZrkAZQFLUmYcSrs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Mdt_FzGnDg&feature=share&list=PLx1il_bKDuxFZdUygMZrkAZQFLUmYcSrs)

<sup>301</sup> Martin E.P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being - and How To Achieve Them* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2011)

<sup>302</sup> Evans 2012

<sup>303</sup> See the Young Foundation's projects, 'Face Up' and 'Full of Life', here: [http://www.youngfoundation.org/our-ventures?current\\_venture=2036](http://www.youngfoundation.org/our-ventures?current_venture=2036)

Google's 'Search Inside Yourself' course or Zappos' employee courses in Positive Psychology.<sup>304</sup>

The risk of these more structured approaches, of course, is that they end up drilling people in 'happiness by rote-learning', and sacrificing the more open Socratic inquiry beloved of Lipman, Achenbach, Sautet and their disciples. Ethical discussion can be replaced by unexamined therapeutic assumptions and instrumental techniques, which the experts simply spoon-feed to the masses. Graeme Tiffany, at the seminar for this project, objected to the blending of community philosophy with psychotherapy, which he thought risked coercing philosophy into the service of politically-convenient diagnostic criteria. Kathryn Ecclestone has also warned of the rise of 'therapeutic education',<sup>305</sup> in which unexamined or simplistic notions of mental well-being and mental sickness are forced on schoolchildren. And James L. Nolan warned in the late 1990s of the rise of the 'therapeutic state', in which governments used the language of therapy and well-being to justify illiberal interventions into people's lives and minds.<sup>306</sup> Clearly there are risks to arguing that community philosophy should be used to enhance 'well-being'. Philosophers might ask, rightly: 'what do you mean by 'well-being', and what gives you the right to impose your definition on anyone else?' Another risk of suggesting philosophy clubs can be therapeutic is that people might bring really serious emotional problems to a club, on which the other members and moderator are not qualified to advise. Worse - their advice could be actively harmful. Unscrupulous or unethical club organizers could take advantage of others' vulnerability to exploit them, or to publicise their own quack remedies (just as hucksters used to do in 18th-century coffeehouses or 19th-century Chautauquas). One only needs look at the number of 'Law of Attraction meetups out there (2,995 on meetup.com) to realise the potential for bad ideas to spread via social networks. And there's also a broader risk about how one frames philosophy: if it is presented as being all about personal fulfillment and 'care of the self', then it could lose sight of its social and civic dimension<sup>307</sup>.

Some people, including cognitive therapist Tim LeBon and myself, are trying to develop a balanced approach, where people can both learn evidence-based techniques for changing themselves, while also discussing the various different ethical visions of well-being and the good life that you can use those techniques to reach. And just because a group is concerned with 'self-help' doesn't mean it has to lose sight of civic reform and political activism - indeed, the history of mutual aid shows the personal can be improved in conjunction with the political. Philosophy clubs can bring a democratic, self-help spirit to the pursuit of well-being, in line with the DIY ethos of the ancient Greeks. They can teach people to be 'doctors to themselves' as Cicero put it, and to come up with their own definition of the good life rather than being shoe-horned into experts' official definition of what's good for them.<sup>308</sup> Philosophy clubs can also be a place where people can share their progress in changing themselves and in moving towards personal health or well-being goals, like Weight Watchers. The Quantified Self movement, which has 89 meetups

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<sup>304</sup> Tony Hsieh, *Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion and Purpose* (New York: Business Plus, 2010)

<sup>305</sup> Kathryn Ecclestone and Denis Hayes, *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (London: Routledge, 2008)

<sup>306</sup> James L. Nolan, *The Therapeutic State: Justifying Government at Century's End* (New York: NYU Press, 1998)

<sup>307</sup> A point made at the seminar for this project by Graeme Tiffany

<sup>308</sup> Evans 2012

around the world, is a great example of how this sort of DIY grassroots movement can help make us all 'doctors to ourselves'. The movement has the very Socratic slogan 'self-knowledge through numbers'.<sup>309</sup> In such groups, people design their own measurements of well-being, rather than being forced to fit into outside experts' definitions and measurements.

#### 4.6) For civic and political education and mobilisation

Philosophy clubs can strengthen civic ties. At the simplest level, they can do this by introducing people to other people who live near them. Any local club does that, from Rotary Clubs to Women's Institutes, and when you bring together people from a local community regularly, you help them to know each other, trust each other, organize and try to change their community for the better, and perhaps philosophy clubs can sometimes bring people together who might not normally talk or listen to each other.<sup>310</sup> While the biggest philosophy clubs flourish in big cities like London or New York and have thousands of members, there are many philosophy clubs that work on a smaller scale in local communities. Philosophy In Pubs, for example, runs through small clubs of 10 or so people, who meet regularly in local neighborhoods around Merseyside. Philosophy clubs and societies can be an expression of local pride in the culture of your community, and its connection to the 'Great Conversation' of philosophy. Think of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, for example, or the Newcastle Philosophical Society, or the Malmesbury philosophy festival, or (further back) the Lunar Men of Birmingham<sup>311</sup> - such clubs assert the civic and intellectual vibrancy of their neighbourhood. They put your community on the map.

Philosophy clubs can also be situated within the tradition of civic republicanism that stretches back to Aristotle.<sup>312</sup> I argued above that contemporary philosophy clubs can be contextualised as a descendant of 1960s New Left groups, with their vision of Deweyan 'participatory democracy'. The 1968 revolution didn't succeed, of course, and one could see the rise of less radical philosophy clubs in the last 20 years as political fall-out from that failure: aging baby-boomers meeting up to reflect serenely on the good life, rather than agitating for political revolution. But such a characterisation is unfair to the continued civic vibrancy of the grassroots philosophy landscape. Grassroots ideas clubs are still a useful means for 'consciousness-raising' in pursuit of social change. Transition Town, for example, is a grassroots movement that tries to raise awareness in local communities about the threat of climate change, while also helping communities shift to a more sustainable and low-carbon economy. There are over 2,000 Transition Town groups around the world, according to the organisation.<sup>313</sup> The Occupy movement is also an

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<sup>309</sup> <http://quantifiedself.com/> ; see also Melanie Swan, 'Emerging Patient-Driven Health Care Models: An Examination of Health Social Networks, Consumer Personalized Medicine and Quantified Self-Tracking', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* , 6(2), pp. 492-525: <http://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/6/2/492/htm>

<sup>310</sup> Tiffany 2009, Porter & Seeley 2008

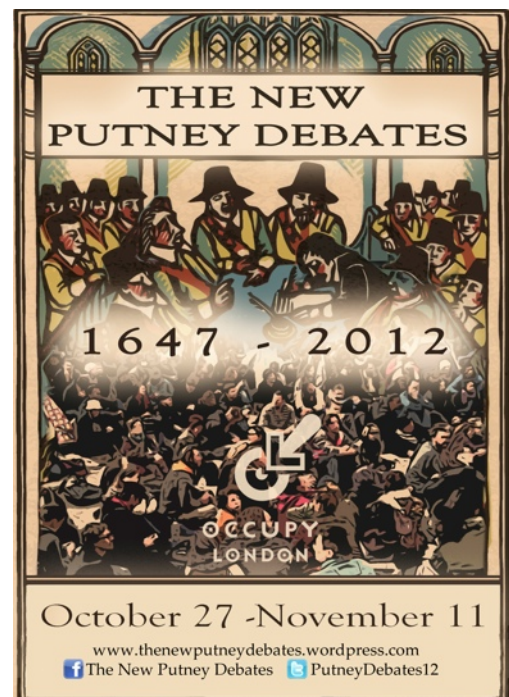
<sup>311</sup> See Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: Five Friends Whose Curiosity Changed the World* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002)

<sup>312</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavelian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism* (London: Routledge, 2002)

<sup>313</sup> <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/>

example of the continued vibrancy of SDS' vision of participatory democracy. In 2011, Occupy camps around the world tried to practice direct democracy based on group participation and consensus decision-making. They also lived out a radical experiment in simple communal living, rather like the Cynics of antiquity.<sup>314</sup> Critics suggested the movement was so grassroots and non-hierarchical that it failed to put forward any leaders or a practical and coherent programme for change<sup>315</sup> (perhaps an example of the so-called 'tyranny of structurelessness'). But the Occupy movement succeeded, arguably, in reviving the idea of using public space for civic debate. It shifted the political debate decisively, focusing public attention on income inequality and the excessive power and wealth of the financial sector. And it also challenged the conventional idea of the university and demanded a more communal and socially engaged educational model, much as the New Left did in the 1960s.

But grassroots participatory democracy is not solely a phenomenon of the Left. The New Right also arose in the 1960s, and practiced similar techniques of community organization, even if it was inspired by very different philosophies, such as the libertarian philosophy of Ayn Rand.<sup>316</sup> That grassroots mobilisation of the New Right helped to pave the way for the Thatcherite and Reaganite reforms of the 1980s, and you can still see the political muscle of grassroots libertarian organisations in the US in the Tea Party movement. Grassroots ideas groups can be taken in many different political directions, then, from local community groups campaigning for allotments, to underground cells agitating for violent revolution. A question for such groups is how to find the right balance between open inquiry, and political dogma. The SDS, for example, started as a very open-ended and Socratic community, and then over the course of the Sixties the political position of some members hardened into inflexible Maoist dogma. Another challenge is finding the right balance between horizontal inclusiveness and vertical leadership - you want your community to be as 'big tent' as possible, yet you also want it to be able to organize itself to campaign for specific goals. We'll consider these questions further in the next section of the report.



*The New Putney Debates, a series of political, economic and philosophical discussions organised by Occupy London in 2012 to mark the 365th anniversary of the Putney Debates.*

<sup>314</sup> Evans 2012

<sup>315</sup> See Arthur S. Brisbane, 'Who is Occupy Wall Street?', *New York Times* 12/ 11/ 2011: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/opinion/sunday/who-is-occupy-wall-street.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/opinion/sunday/who-is-occupy-wall-street.html?_r=0)

<sup>316</sup> Rebecca E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right and the 1960s* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); see also David Brooks, 'The Wal-Mart Hippies', *New York Times* 4/ 3/ 2010: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/05/opinion/05brooks.html?adxnml=1&ref=opinion&adxnmlx=1350914855-1t0dpHEWNke5k+j5dKawwA>

## Part 5: Possible ways forward

Philosophy groups are a fun and positive contemporary phenomenon. They show that, contrary to the ruling narrative that our culture is 'dumbing down', hundreds of thousands of non-academics want to spend their free time learning about and discussing philosophical ideas. Philosophy clubs have changed the shape of philosophy, making it more social, more popular, and more diverse, particularly by correcting philosophy's centuries-long gender imbalance. Yet the movement could be more than it is today - more meaningful and enjoyable for the people involved in them, and perhaps more inclusive and significant for society. In this final section, I'd like to consider how philosophy groups could evolve. Obviously, one of the strengths of the movement at the moment is its diversity and its anarchy, so it would be Quixotic and even harmful to try and herd the movement in a particular direction. What follows are simply paths that philosophy groups could choose to take.

### 5.1) Developing stronger links with academic philosophy

Firstly, groups could develop by establishing better links with academia. Grassroots philosophy has often clashed with academic philosophy, but the mutual animosity is gradually diminishing, as both sides recognise they need each other. Philosophy groups are potentially an important bridge between universities and society, and the connection is useful both for the general public *and* for academics: philosophy groups get access to academics' expertise and learning, philosophy groups get access to the resources of universities (their rooms, their teaching, their access to funding opportunities, their networks) while academics, particularly PhDs, get to overcome their sense of loneliness, social isolation and disconnection from wider society, and perhaps become 're-moralized' by a sense of social relevance and mission. Academics are often willing to give up their time to extension activities, but feel constrained by the necessity of proving their worth through more formal academic channels in line with the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This is ironic, and regrettable, when one of the aims of REF is to increase the impact of research on "economy, society, public policy, culture and the quality of life". Supporting grassroots philosophy groups can be a way for universities to revive their traditions of extension and liberal adult education, and to reaffirm their identity as places where life's big questions are discussed. Speaking personally, I was extremely hungry for philosophical discussions on 'life, the universe and everything' as an undergraduate, and was surprised and disappointed by the lack of such conversations in classes or outside of them. Undergraduates might be afraid to seem pretentious in initiating such conversations, but are still hungry to participate if places for philosophical discussion are provided. Some academic philosophy departments *do* provide such spaces - most departments run 'philosophical societies', often run by undergraduates, which invite leading philosophers to give talks. Such initiatives are to be applauded, though they are often another venue for academic-style lectures, rather than an forum for a more personal discussion about what it means to live a good life.

So how could universities facilitate such discussions? One way is if they provided free courses in practical philosophy or the 'art of living' for undergraduates. Some American universities provide such courses for freshmen (Stanford University provides an open

course in the art of living<sup>317</sup>, Harvard offered a popular course in Positive Psychology<sup>318</sup>, and Yale offers a course online and offline in the philosophy and science of human nature<sup>319</sup>). We are running a pilot course of that kind at Queen Mary, University of London in 2013. Such courses could teach both ethical ideas from ancient philosophy and evidence-based techniques from cognitive psychology and neuroscience. Universities could also offer such courses to adults in their local community and online. The rise of the mass intelligentsia means the demand for self-learning and informal adult education is only going to get bigger. Universities should seize that opportunity rather than lose out to private-sector providers like TED, the Khan Academy or the School of Life (although such organisations could helpfully be seen as potential partners rather than rivals). As a first step, universities could make sure more of their philosophical expertise is available online. Open University is a good example in this respect: its courses account for 25% of the top 100 free courses available on iTunesU, and the Philosophy Bites podcast made by OU professor Nigel Warburton has been downloaded several million times<sup>320</sup>. Universities could team up with creative broadcasters and animators to create YouTube friendly ten-minute videos on philosophy. There is also a wide-open space for the creation of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)<sup>321</sup> in practical philosophy. If such a course was creative, intelligent and funny, it would be hugely popular.



*The Philosophy Cafe at City School of Toronto*

<sup>317</sup> <http://www.artofliving.org/stanford-university1>;

<sup>318</sup> Tovia Smith, 'Finding happiness in a Harvard classroom', NPR, 23/ 2/ 2006: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5295168>

<sup>319</sup> <http://oyc.yale.edu/philosophy/phil-181>

<sup>320</sup> <http://philosophybites.com/>

<sup>321</sup> For example, Mackness et al, 'The ideals and reality of participating in a MOOC', in Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Networked Learning (Lancaster: University of Lancaster 2010), p. 266 - 27

## 5.2) Connecting grassroots philosophy to mental health services, and to the workplace

As we've seen, many governments and organisations are now trying to increase the 'well-being' or 'flourishing' of their citizens or employees. I situated this new 'politics of well-being' within a revival of virtue ethics, partly through CBT and Positive Psychology. I've warned that the politics of well-being could be illiberal and dangerous if done badly. Governments, corporates and well-being experts should not, in my opinion, simply tell their citizens or employees what well-being is, and force them to fit into official pre-fabricated definitions of flourishing. I suggest that philosophy groups could play a role in democratising the politics of well-being - groups could be places where people help themselves and each other to learn evidence-based techniques for well-being, and also to practice open Socratic enquiry as to what the good life is. Philosophy groups could, perhaps, be places that empower people to learn about and examine different philosophies of the good life, and come to their own definition, rather than being shoe-horned into an official government version.

Speaking personally, I was greatly helped by a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy support group when I struggled with social anxiety and depression in my early 20s. The support group didn't even have a therapist present - instead we followed a CBT audio course, shared our stories, practiced exercises together, and encouraged each other on. That experience when I was 24 was perhaps my first taste of community philosophy, and it gave me an abiding sense of what people can do for themselves and each other. The risk with CBT and Positive Psychology is that they instrumentalise Greek philosophy, empty it of moral content, and lose sight of the importance of practical ethical reasoning in the good life. They also risk putting forward an atomised, over-individualised construct of well-being, which loses sight of the importance of community in many ancient Greek philosophies (particularly Aristotelianism). Philosophy groups might be a way to bring these ethical and communal aspects of virtue ethics back into the politics of well-being.<sup>322</sup>

Grassroots community groups play an increasingly important role in public mental health policy. If you look at the new mental health strategies in England, Wales, Scotland and other countries like Canada, there is a strong emphasis on self-help and mutual aid, and on health services linking up with local community organisations to help people help themselves and each other. This links in very well to the self-help and mutual aid ethos of grassroots philosophy groups, which teach people to be 'the doctors of themselves' as Cicero put it. Philosophy was a practical form of self-help in the ancient world, both for individuals and communities. Likewise, in the 18th century, groups like Benjamin Franklin's *Junto* were a practical, peer-led form of mutual improvement. In the 19th century, groups like Corresponding Societies and friendly societies helped working-class people to learn how to take care of themselves and each other. In line with this centuries-old tradition of mutual aid, philosophy groups could provide communities for people who are looking for more than mere CBT techniques, and who are seeking places to share their stories and their questions about the good life. They could also be places that link up people recovering from mental illnesses to other local groups, in volunteering or sports or the arts.

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<sup>322</sup> See Jules Evans, 'Democratizing the well-being movement', *Open Democracy*, 6/5/2011: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/jules-evans/democratising-well-being-movement>

And they could even be places that allow people with mental health issues to reflect on their situation and come up with collective civic responses.<sup>323</sup>

There is already some precedent for practical philosophy groups or courses playing a role in mental health policy - Tim LeBon, the cognitive therapist and philosopher, has run courses on well-being and the good life, which combine CBT with philosophy, and Tim thinks such courses in 'philosophical CBT' could perhaps fit in to the mental health services landscape, perhaps in the NHS' 'well-being centres'. There would be challenges of course. CBT, as its delivered in the NHS, follows a very tight script, with therapists expected to diagnose users within the first session, and then having just six sessions to help them get better. At each session, the user has to quantify their recovery, or lack of recovery. Both the therapist and user are under pressure to see results quickly. In other words, the process is quite different to an open Socratic reflection on the nature of the good life. It would be unfortunate if practical philosophy groups also became over-quantified and rigidly dogmatic in terms of process and outcomes - this is a real risk of attempting to connect grassroots philosophy to public policy. On the other hand, psychotherapists might worry that philosophy groups might undo all the progress users have made through a structured CBT course. Is it appropriate or safe for people who have recently come through emotional crises to then reflect on the meaning of life? If done badly, it could conceivably destabilise their identities at the precise moment they need some stability. These are genuine risks. Nonetheless, I think practical philosophy groups could, and probably will, play some role in local well-being services, through community peer-led groups which provide a form of 'philosophical CBT'.



*The Dallas  
CBT meetup,  
October 2012*

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<sup>323</sup> On peer-led self-help as a civic mobiliser, see Simon Duffy, 'Peer Power: An Evaluation of the Personalisation Forum Group', The Centre for Welfare Reform 2012: <http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/uploads/attachment/337/peer-power.pdf>

I also think practical philosophy could play a role in employee well-being. At the moment, there are two different initiatives in corporate human relations: corporate ethics training courses, and employee well-being or stress management courses. I am interested in combining these two courses, to teach employees cognitive and behavioural techniques for resilience, while *also* creating a space for more open Socratic enquiry into what it means to be a good company, how companies can go wrong, how to support a company's ethical culture. If you look back at the history of adult education, there have always been companies that have supported a liberal model of lifelong learning, like Rowntree's and Cadbury's, or Ford in the US, or indeed the US Army.<sup>324</sup> It seems to me that the best way to teach business ethics is to show that 'corporate ethics' isn't just about complying with regulation, but more deeply it's about building a good and fulfilling life. Likewise, 'stress management' or employee well-being doesn't merely involve learning some instrumental behavioural techniques for self-management, but more deeply is about building a strong character. Finally, employee well-being programmes should, I suggest, be structured as dialogues or conversations between different levels of the company. They could be ways for employees to 'talk back', and make suggestions about how to run the company better, more efficiently, and more ethically. It would be useful to look at the example of Rowntree's, which in the early 20th century designed one of the first 'employee well-being programmes', with evening classes, sports, libraries, and 'suggestion boxes' where employees could suggest ways to run the company better.<sup>325</sup> Some academic philosophers may throw up their hands at this point and suggest I am commercialising philosophy and degrading it by dragging it into the world of corporate human relations. I hope not - I'm merely suggesting directions that grassroots philosophy could develop.

### 5.3) Re-finding a sense of social mission and care

While there is much to welcome in the rise of a mass intelligentsia who are happy to spend their leisure learning and discussing ideas, the trend is arguably relatively confined to the middle classes. It grew out of the expansion of tertiary education from the 1960s, and the expansion of the middle class. That's changed the character of adult education in the UK, making it both more informal and more bourgeois. The older and more proletarian traditions of adult education like the Worker's Education Association or university extension colleges like Oxford's Ruskin College have gone into decline (or at least, they tend to provide vocational training rather than philosophy courses). They've been replaced by more informal, self-run clubs and slick commercial organisations like the School of Life, which are more middle class in their audience, charging £20-35 for their events.<sup>326</sup> John Parker wrote in his article on 'The Age of Mass Intelligence':

Adult education and debating societies used to mean draughty halls and comfortless benches. The School of Life, in contrast, looks like a designer shop and the Intelligence Squared debates take place, says O'Grady, "in the most comfortable leather seats northern Italy has to offer".<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Fieldhouse 1998, Stubblefield & Keene 1994

<sup>325</sup> Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree 1871-1954* (New York: Greenwood Press 1974)

<sup>326</sup> See the interview with Derek Tatton in the appendix

<sup>327</sup> Parker 2008

Jonathan Rose, author of *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, bemoaned the disappearance of the culture of grassroots proletarian self-education in the modern day. He ends his book with a section called 'What went wrong?', chronicling the deep disappointment many Socialists felt in the 1960s when the socialist utopia failed to appear, and a bourgeois consumer society appeared in its place. He discusses the story of Jack Dash, for example, a Communist who organised "a sort of industrial Socrates forum" with other dockers to discuss Marxist philosophy in the 1930s. Dash finds himself disappointed by Sixties' culture's consumerism and lack of Socialist principle and discipline - William Morris usurped by Andy Warhol.<sup>328</sup> Another figure in Rose's book, blacksmith Jim Turnbull, dreams in the 1930s of a socialist utopia where there would be "a permanent free symphony concert" open to all. "You'll see the time, son, when the symphonies of Beethoven and the operas of Mozart will be played in public halls everywhere", he says. By the 1960s, however, he appears to his nephew "like a defeated general" - defeated by the baby-boomers' libertine pop consumerism. "What went wrong?" he asked.<sup>329</sup>

From another perspective, of course, you could ask *what went right?* Today, Classic FM is the most popular commercial radio station in the UK, the BBC Proms attract record attendance figures each year, and The Sun newspaper provides free tickets to the Royal Opera House.<sup>330</sup> And Jack Dash's 'Socrates forum' has been imitated by philosophy clubs around the world. The academy was successfully stormed, transformed, and opened up. Jonathan Rée, another leading historian of proletarian philosophy, said in a talk to the London Philosophy Club: "The future of philosophy is in clubs like this."<sup>331</sup> The auto-didact tradition which Rose mourns did not disappear: it became a mass phenomenon through the growth of self-learning online and offline. Perhaps you could even say that the revolution succeeded - it's just that, when the children of working-class families went to university, they did not choose to build a socialist utopia. They chose to join the middle class. Nonetheless, it's hard not to feel that something was lost - that sense of a historical social mission which the old proletarian mutual improvement clubs had. Rose is right, perhaps, to criticise the "weekend bohemianism"<sup>332</sup> of the mass intelligentsia, because its sense of social mission is often so limited, so class-bound. When confronted with Alain de Botton's latest project to launch a 'hotel for the soul' in the Swiss alps or on the beaches of Tenerife, one may wonder if adult education and philosophy clubs have become *too* comfy in their Italian leather seats, and too much of a lifestyle boutique for the affluent middle class.<sup>333</sup> Aren't there pressing ethical and political issues that philosophy clubs should address, beyond helping the affluent cope with 'affluenza'?<sup>334</sup> Roman Krznaric, one of the founding faculty members of the School of Life, says:

The main task of philosophy clubs is to turn into collective movements of social change, which are capable of tackling the great problems of our

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<sup>328</sup> Rose 2002, p. 458

<sup>329</sup> *ibid* p. 456

<sup>330</sup> Parker 2008

<sup>331</sup> Jonathan Rée, 'Power to the People: Philosophical Societies and Societal Change', talk given to London Philosophy Club, 3/ 10/ 2012

<sup>332</sup> Rose 2002 p. 463

<sup>333</sup> De Botton 2012

<sup>334</sup> Oliver James, *Affluenza: How to be Successful and Stay Sane* (London: Vermillion 2007)

age. Look at what they did in the past – at how the Circle of Tchaikovsky in 19th-century Russia drew thinkers together and helped to inspire socialist and anarchist movements. That's the potential of philosophy clubs – they need to escape the obsession with lifestyle. We need to wean ourselves off the contemporary obsession with happiness. It's framed in too individualistic terms. If we just obsesses about our own lifestyles, I don't think we'll get very far.

A useful research priority going forward might be to explore further the social philosophies of pioneers such as John Dewey, Jane Addams, Simone Weil, Jean Vanier, Paolo Freire, and Joseph & Seebom Rowntree in the light of contemporary grassroots philosophy, and to examine how their ideas were connected to social practice. Their philosophies may offer valuable contemporary lessons for how grassroots philosophy groups can be vehicles for communities' self-exploration and self-advancement. It would also be interesting to research and connect with grassroots philosophy movements in Latin America, where philosophy typically has a more social orientation. The best way to research this area, of course, is through practice and experimentation on the ground, in local communities, in prisons, in asylums for the mentally ill and other contexts. We hope, in the next two years, to be able to try out philosophy groups in different context and communities, to see what works and how communities can use them to meet their needs. One of the biggest challenges for philosophy groups, particularly if they are serious about becoming alternatives to religious communities, is whether they can be places not just of rational debate, but of care and nurture. Can philosophy teach us not just to care for ourselves, but to care for each other? Can we learn, as communities, to care for people who are sick, or broken? Can we build communities not just of reason, but of compassion and love? As the philosopher Mark Vernon put it in a recent sermon: "Are you going to treat philosophy not just as an intellectual pursuit, but one that puts your heart on the line too?"<sup>335</sup>

*Jean Vanier (centre) with L'Arche community in Ipswich*



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<sup>335</sup> You can hear Mark's sermon here: <http://sainteds.podomatic.com/>

#### 5.4) Keeping the conversation going, and widening it

Geoffrey Klemptner, one of the pioneers of philosophy outside of academy in the UK in the last 20 years, says: “There are lots of different grassroots philosophy organisations now. But they tend to pass each other like ships in the night, without really connecting. It would be good for more of a conversation to develop between them.” As Geoffrey says, there are surprisingly few connections between philosophy groups. One of the aims of this project has been to develop more links, and I think we’ve succeeded in that, partly through this report, which hopefully gives people a bird’s-eye view of what other groups are up to; partly through the website [www.thephilosophyhub.com](http://www.thephilosophyhub.com), which is designed to link up philosophy groups from around the world; and partly through the seminar we organised at Queen Mary, University of London, which brought together 20 or so community philosophy organisers from around the country, to share their experiences: hopefully we can make that gathering an annual event. Philosophy festivals are another wonderful way to bring groups together - it would be great to develop seminars and festivals that bring together philosophy groups from around the world. And I’m very aware that this report has insufficiently covered grassroots philosophy in Asia, Africa and Latin America. I am also interested in how to develop the format of philosophy gatherings, in order to make them as immersive, interactive and enjoyable as possible. Science and skepticism events are leading the way, it seems to me, in their combination of education, music, comedy and socialising. It would be interesting to take it even further, and to see what can be done with new technology, to enable the audience to vote on philosophical questions, for example, or to combine video, animation and live talks. The moments when philosophy has typically resonated most deeply with the public consciousness is when it’s been presented in combination with other art forms. I hope, finally, that philosophy groups go out and experiment wildly, then share their experiences with the rest of us.

*Skeptics in the Pub Boston (photo: Rebecca Watson)*



# Appendix: Oral history accounts of the rise of grassroots philosophy

## 1) Melvyn Bragg, broadcaster

**Jules Evans:** In your TV show on class and culture, you used this great phrase 'the mass intelligentsia'. What do you mean by that phrase?

**Melvyn Bragg:** There's now evidence that over the last 30/40 years, a very substantial minority is prepared to put time and effort into subjects that used to be the preserve of a very small minority. That highly educated minority has grown enormously.

**JE:** Why?

**MB:** Three main reasons: the expansion of education, the rise of intellectual leisure activities among the elderly, and mass broadcasting, particularly via the internet.

Firstly, the huge expansion of people going to university. Saul Bellow once said he only wrote for people who went to university, but in the US that's 30 million people. In the UK, back in 1960, only 5% of people went to university. Now it's closer to 40%. So it's something like a 900% increase. It's colossal. That's the foundation. It's one of the reasons the UK is so good at theatre – because we have brilliant theatre schools. So we now have an enormous number of well-trained minds. There are huge sections of the population willing and able to take on ideas. It's a massive shift.



Secondly, the trend of using your leisure for intellectual activities has gained traction and purpose. It started with older people, who, upon retiring, decided that rather than sweltering on some beach in Spain, they'd rather go to a book festival, or do a course at the University of the Third Age. It started with the elderly and then spread to other age groups and became cross-generational.

Take the growth of book festivals for example. There are now over 300 literary festivals in the UK. When I went to the Edinburgh book festival in the 1960s, around 4,000 people turned up. Now, it's more like 250,000. People come from all over the world. You also have Cheltenham, Hay, and many smaller festivals which still attract good crowds. We started a festival in Keswick 12 years ago. Initially it attracted perhaps 2,000 people. Now it's more like 40,000.

And now you've quite rightly identified this new phenomenon of ideas clubs and philosophy clubs, which reminds me of the great literary-philosophical societies of the 19th century. People come because they're interested in ideas, and also to meet other people. It's a form of community, like going to church. It becomes part of people's social life.

Then, finally, the third reason for the rise of the mass intelligentsia is the internet and mass broadcasting. I'd like to identify in particular the strange case of Radio 4. I became presenter of Start the Week 21 years ago. Back then, there would be 9 people on it, mainly from the theatre. We completely changed it. We bought in lots of scientists and historians. And the audience went up and up. Then, in 1998, we launched In Our Time, with the aim of providing a platform for public intellectuals at an accessible time. Including scientists in particular – 37% of the contributors were scientists. We were given the Thursday morning slot, called the death slot. And the audience went from 500,000 to 2.5 million. The programmes also went onto a website archive, and have since been downloaded over 20 million times. And I hear from many ideas clubs around the country who use it as a resource for their discussions. The Open University has also used new technology like the internet to reach a bigger audience. It's one of the great world successes – the leading open university in the world.

So something is going on – I think it's the rise of a mass intelligentsia. But the government is completely unaware of it. It has no grasp that this is going on, and that it's not accidental, but built on the expansion of higher education. Our country's two great success stories are our world class universities and one of the greatest creative economies in the world. And the government is not helping them grow.

## **2) Roman Krznaric, founding faculty member of the School of Life**

**Jules Evans:** Would you say there is such a thing as a 'practical philosophy movement'?

**Roman Krznaric:** Yes, though it's a very broad movement. What's happened is that over the last 20 years there's been a revolutionary rise of interest in the question of how to live. And that question has taken a practical focus in many ways, through philosophy clubs and organisations like the School of Life and Oxford Muse.



**JE:** Why is there this interest in the question of how to live? Why now?

**RK:** A number of factors spring to mind. Firstly, in the last decade or two, there's been a flux or crisis in the art of living because of rapid technological changes, like the growth of online dating and social networks, which are raising new issues about how we conduct our relationships. Questions about how to live have also arisen because of the perceived

failure of consumerism to deliver the good life, and due to advances in medical technology which mean we're living longer than ever and having to think more about how to spend the extra years granted to us. Another factor is that people are rethinking their lifestyle choices in the face of the growing threat of climate change.

And finally, I'd suggest these questions have become more prominent as an unintended consequence of the Freudian revolution. We've just emerged from a century of psychoanalysis, of a therapy culture that says look inside of yourselves. That inner gaze has not done enough to solve the dilemmas of life. So we're beginning to look outside of professional therapy for answers, and we're looking to more communal places like The School of Life or the London Philosophy Club.

**JE:** A lot of those questions about the good life, it seems to me, were asked by student radicals in the 1960s. One of my hypotheses is that the practical philosophy movement is in some ways the child of 1968.

**RK:** Perhaps. Though of course the 1970s was the Me Decade, when self-obsession reached new heights. It's reflected in the rise of things like Erhard seminars training, Maharishi communes, therapy culture. Peter Singer writes about this in *How Are We To Live?*<sup>336</sup>, where he notes that all his academic colleagues are on therapy, spending a quarter of their salary on analysis. He thought they were being too inward looking in their search for the good life.

**JE:** So do you think self-help is just selfish and narcissistic?

**RK:** There are competing streams in the broad self-help movement. In the 1970s and 1980s, you see a very commercial version of self-help emerge, which is all about scrambling up the corporate ladder. Then, as a counter to that, you have a more spiritual form of self help, people like Ram Dass, and the simple living movement which arose in the 1980s. The dominant stream, however, was the commercial / corporate form of self-help.

**JE:** Tell me how you got into this area.

**RK:** When I was 17, I discovered Bertrand Russell and read his books. Then, from 1989 to 1992, I studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford. I discovered to my horror that the great questions of how to live were not addressed in an Oxford PPE degree. This was a great disappointment. I'm not certain that academic philosophy has changed much since then. Academic philosophy has mainly failed to respond to the public demand for guidance as to how to live, and has lost the Ancient Greek ideal that philosophy is something that should be applied to the dilemmas of everyday living.

After graduating from Oxford, I travelled for a couple of years, then I did a masters in Latin American Studies. Following that I did a PhD in political sociology, and began university teaching, mainly in the fields of sociology and politics. I didn't at that point have any intention to be a philosopher, or write popular philosophy books (in fact, I don't really think of myself as a philosopher). But I came to believe that the best way to achieve social and political change was not through big structural changes such as new laws or institutions, but rather that the biggest changes in history came through changes in individual relations, through the flowering of empathy. I became very interested in empathy, as a meeting point

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<sup>336</sup> Peter Singer, *How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995)

between the art of living and social change. And that led me to leave academia, because at that point empathy couldn't easily be researched in academia. It was seen as a psychological phenomenon, and I saw it as more complicated and as involving many different disciplines. I also wanted my investigation to be more practical and to affect people's lives.

**JE:** So you left academia. It strikes me that many interesting intellectuals of your age left academia – Alain de Botton, Adam Curtis, George Monbiot. Why the diaspora?

**RK:** By the late 1990s, to be an intellectual and thinker, you had to escape from the bureaucracy of academia. Take George Monbiot. He could easily be a professor in a range of academic fields – he has enormous scholarly acumen – but my sense is that he feels more intellectual freedom outside of academia, and has more space to pursue his political activism (he has, though, been a visiting professor at several universities). I feel that *The Wonderbox* is no less rigorous than an academic work. But academics have always been suspicious of popularising or outreach, particularly in history. Historians are embarrassed to look into the past and find lessons for today. Or they think history can teach us how to organize big political systems, not so much provide life lessons on the individual level.

**JE:** So what options were there for thinkers outside of academia in the late 1990s?

**RK:** By a fluke, my partner, a development economist, had a research assistant who was working with Theodore Zeldin. I'd read Zeldin's *Intimate History of Humanity*<sup>337</sup> and thought it was one of the greatest books I'd read. I'd heard a talk by him about conversations on the radio. Then I discovered that Zeldin had an organisation in Oxford, where I lived, called Oxford Muse. I went to meet him one evening, at a dinner organized by my partner's research assistant. He liked me, I liked him, and I was intrigued by what Oxford Muse was trying to do – create conversations that promoted mutual empathy.

**JE:** What is Zeldin like?

**RK:** I thought he was one of the most amazing and original thinkers I'd met. I worked with him for three and a half years, and what I really noticed was how he would question absolutely everything. He would come into The Oxford Muse and say 'right, today we're going to re-invent the insurance industry', or he'd say 'there's a problem with money, we need an alternative'. Then he'd spend months trying to come up with an alternative. He incorporated his daily experience into his ideas, and he never described The Oxford Muse the same way twice. My time working with him was enormously intellectually invigorating.

**JE:** Tell me about his Feast of Strangers project.

**RK:** They're basically what The Oxford Muse calls Conversation Meals, using a Menu of Conversation containing questions like 'What have you learned about the different varieties of love in the course of your life'. It's very philosophical – you try to get strangers to talk about how they see the world and themselves. We would try to draw together different groups, like CEOs and homeless people. Or, within companies, we would create conversations across hierarchies. Zeldin thinks that, in a conversation between two people, it is possible to create a tiny bit of understanding and equality – that's how you change the world, using a microcosmic strategy, one conversation at a time. Another thing we did at The Oxford Muse was to create written portraits of people around Oxford, where

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<sup>337</sup> Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London: Random House, 1997)

they describe themselves and their philosophy of life in their own words. We recruited hundreds of volunteers to talk to people, and created a book called Guide to the Unknown University – revealing the lives of people from every walk of life who exist around Oxford.

**JE:** So you left Oxford Muse in 2006.

**RK:** Yes, I felt it was time to move on. I wanted to teach my own courses on the art of living, so started to do that.

**JE:** Where?

**RK:** Well, in the beginning I couldn't find a venue, so the first courses were held in my kitchen. I covered topics such as love, time, work and empathy, and particularly approached them through the lens of cultural history. How can looking at the past help us rethink our approach to everyday life? I also wanted to encourage creative and adventurous thinking about how to live. Gradually, those classes shifted into the public realm. The QI Club in Oxford was looking for new public events, so I began running evening workshops there. My first one was on Love and the Art of Living. I tried to make them as participatory as possible, to get away from the academic seminar format. My main advice is never to speak for more than 20 minutes before you give the audience an opportunity to participate. Try to make ideas accessible and get the audience to work on them. For example, if I was teaching a course on love, I'd not only speak about the history and philosophy of love, I'd get people to draw 'love maps' depicting the different kinds of love in their own lives. I thought hard about teaching and the structure of workshops.

**JE:** To what extent did you feel you were doing something new and unusual?

**RK:** I didn't know anybody else doing those sort of classes. I knew of the School of Economic Science's courses in practical philosophy, but that's different. Then, in 2007, Alain de Botton, who knew about my work at The Oxford Muse, got in touch to talk about the possibility of setting up some kind of 'university of life'. This is what eventually became The School of Life. Its first director, Sophie Howarth, was the driving force behind shaping the intellectual approach and feel. She asked me to develop one of the five core courses that The School of Life was going to offer, on the topic of work. The love course was developed mainly by Mark Vernon and Alain, the family course by Charles Fernyhough and Rebecca Abrams, politics by Maurice Glasman and myself, and play I believe grew out of Sophie Howarth's ideas. Other thinkers such as the philosopher Robert Rowland Smith were also involved. They were all designed to be six week courses, or intensive weekend courses.

Preparing the launch of the School in 2007 and 2008 was a very wonderful period of my life. I wrote a 100,000 word course handbook for the work course, drawing on literature, philosophy, history, anthropology. People don't realise how much intellectual work went into the School of Life. We'd all draft sections of courses, then come together to discuss them, try out classes, hammer out ideas. It was done very professionally, and required a lot of hard work to get right. We were trying to do something that had never been done: to create a university of life, which was an alternative to mainstream university, intellectually vibrant and absolutely practical. Most of the people that Sophie Howarth recruited and that Alain got onboard were trying to develop their ideas and careers outside of academia. But they were all academically very well qualified: Robert Rowland Smith had been a fellow of All Souls, Mark Vernon was a PhD, Maurice Glasman was a lecturer at London Met,

Rebecca Abrams had published books on family relations (while also teaching creative writing at Oxford University), and Alain got a double starred first in history at Cambridge.

**JE:** How was it funded?

**RK:** The idea was that funds were available to get it going for the first few years. There were debates about pricing, and about balancing financial sustainability with accessibility. We felt the courses were affordable – a lot cheaper than the cost of doing an Open University degree, for example. We had to charge, though, to make the School self-sustaining. We also wanted it to expand – the idea was always not just to have one School of Life, but one on every high street.

**JE:** Was it Sophie's plan at the beginning to make it more of a social enterprise?

**RK:** Well, Sophie came from the Tate Museums' public engagement programme. Her idea was that The School of Life should strive to be as community-orientated as possible. Although not set up as a charitable foundation, it was certainly not intended that it should be a great profit-making enterprise. Sophie eventually left to start a family, rather than because of any disagreements. The School of Life is now very lucky to have Morgwn Rimel as the director, who is doing a great job taking it forward.

**JE:** How has the School done?

**RK:** It's now almost four years since it launched. It's been amazingly successful. Approximately 50,000 people have come through its doors. It is clear that there is a real hunger for public spaces where people can think about the big questions of everyday life.

**JE:** Has it changed since the launch?

**RK:** The core vision is still there, the practical model has changed. Initially it was focused on these six-week courses or intensive weekends. But we noticed people would sign up but not be able to go every week. So we incorporated more individual classes in the evening. But the quality and intellectual breadth of the content hasn't altered.

**JE:** Tell me about the Sunday Sermons.

**RK:** I think there was a recognition that people love community and ideas, and there's something wonderful about the sermon tradition, but we wanted to do it for the modern age. And they've been packed out since we launched it. I could never have predicted that public hunger for ideas.

**JE:** Do you think the School of Life is a community?

**RK:** I think people come not just to get good ideas for their lives, because it makes them feel they're not alone. People turn up and realise there's a large group of like-minded people who care about how to deal with the dilemmas of life. The hunger for shared community is part of the grand transformation that's happening now – the escape from extreme individualism and the age of introspection, and the recognition we need to nurture our social and communal selves. It's happening in many forms – in philosophy clubs, in Transition Towns, and so on.

**JE:** People have criticised the School of Life as being a bit commercial, a bit lifestyle-obsessed.

**RK:** I don't think it's commercial, it's driven by ideas. But it doesn't necessarily yet have as much of a collective ethos to it as it could have, that strong sense of collective ownership among the people who attend. If The School of Life is going to thrive in the long term, I think it needs to develop that. Is The School of Life a community? Yes, but not yet fully realized. You often see the same people coming to classes, sermons etc, but they're not necessarily creating their own self-sustaining communities once they step back outside the door.

**JE:** How involved are you in the School now?

**RK:** Not hugely involved right at the moment because I'm working on a new book. But I still teach classes and courses, and am involved in some of the larger events we do, such as conversations with visiting thinkers like the recent interview I did with Brené Brown at Conway Hall. I also authored one of the School's six new self-help books, on *How to Find Fulfilling Work*, and went on tour with my fellow authors. I understand the School is going to be opening branches in Australia, Brazil, and the US over the next year or so, although I'm not directly involved in that.

**JE:** So how do you think the practical / grassroots philosophy movement will grow?

**RK:** I think the great task of philosophy clubs is to turn into collective movements of social change, which are capable of tackling the great problems of our age. Look at what they did in the past – at how the Circle of Tchaikovsky in 19th century Russia drew thinkers together and helped to inspire socialist and anarchist movements. That's the potential of philosophy clubs – they need to escape the obsession with lifestyle. I think we need to wean ourselves off the contemporary obsession with happiness. It's framed in too individualistic terms. I think we're going through a great revolution in our understanding of the self, and are realising we're wired for empathy and mutual aid. If we just obsesses about our own lifestyles, I don't think we'll get very far.

**JE:** Do you think philosophy clubs could help tackle climate change, for example?

**RK:** I think of our failure to tackle climate change as an empathic failure. It's a failure to step into the shoes of other people today – especially in developing countries who are suffering the impacts of climate change – and of future generations. We're hopeless at empathising with people who will be alive in 2100. I'm going to continue my work on empathy to try and contribute to that grander project.

**JE:** You're planning to set up an empathy museum?

**RK:** Yes, it will be the world's first. We need new institutions in public culture. The Empathy Museum may start by existing online, offering downloadable exhibits. I'm interested in the Human Library Movement, which began in Denmark in 2000. You go along to the library on a certain day, but instead of borrowing a book, you borrow a person for conversation, who tells you their story and answers your questions about their life. I'd like to create a downloadable kit so you can put on events like Human Libraries or Conversation Meals in your own community, school or organisation. Then the museum can be put on everywhere by everyone. It breaks down the old static model of the museum and makes it more participatory. I'm also an advocate for teaching empathy in schools. And perhaps the next

revolution for practical philosophy, which grew up outside of university, is to take it back into universities. They need to be reinvented.

### **3) Geoffrey Klempner, Pathways Philosophy School**



**Jules Evans:** When did you decide to be a philosopher outside of academia?

**Geoffrey Klempner:** I went to University College, Oxford, in 1976, to do a Masters under John McDowell. I had a rather strange relationship with him, because his arm was somewhat twisted to take me on as a student. And quite quickly I felt I didn't belong in academia. I didn't like the competitiveness among dons, and felt the really interesting issues were often buried or ignored. I once remarked to John that I'd only be happy if I set up

my own philosophy school.

**JE:** Do you think that your personality played a role? Perhaps you are not a very institutionalised person.

**GK:** Yes, maybe. I didn't like to be one of a pack, I preferred to go it alone.

**JE:** So you decided to leave academia and be an extra-academic philosopher. Were there such things in the 1980s?

**GK:** I had no idea. I decided to write a book, so I went on the dole in Oxford and then in Brighton. I ended up in Sheffield, and made contact with the philosophy department there. Then I started to teach philosophy classes with the Workers Educational Association (WEA) in Sheffield, which was a real breakthrough. It meant I was no longer going round in circles in my head. Suddenly I had to come up with ideas and lessons for my students. I persuaded them to come to my flat and we worked through my book chapter by chapter. I could never have done it on my own - it was the dialogue with my students that helped me to do it.

But I was still on the dole, still having to go to these awful job interviews. So I decided the sensible option was to launch something of my own, not least to get family credit and no longer have to go to job interviews. So I set up Pathways in 1995, as a school of philosophy offering six correspondence courses: introduction to philosophy, philosophy of mind, ancient philosophy, philosophy of language, moral philosophy, and metaphysics. I took an advert out in the Guardian and The Times, and attracted three students. So then I had to write the courses.

**JE:** You hadn't written them yet?

**GK:** I didn't have my own computer. So I used a computer in Sheffield University and churned out the units. I was very strongly motivated to do it because I had an expectant student waiting for it at the other end.

**JE:** How much did a course cost?

**GK:** The original price was £160, now it's £240. It's very good value for money - there are 15 units in each course, students get 800 words plus feed back for each unit, plus feedback to five essays from the mentor. But before the website, I was only breaking even after paying for the newspaper ads.

**JE:** When did you launch the website?

**GK:** In 1998. Sheffield University gave me a booklet on how to programme HTML and I did it myself. The website changed everything. Pathways finally became financially viable. I mean, my income has never been more than a junior lecturer, but given how enjoyable the work is, and the fact I don't work very long hours, I think it's quite reasonable. It's a balance. Today, the sites get roughly 3500 hits a day, and about eight new students a month. Since 2003, we've also worked with the University of London providing tuition for its international diploma in philosophy, which brings in an excellent calibre of student.

**JE:** Since then, you've set up quite a few philosophy websites.

**GK:** Yes, I'm kind of addicted to making websites. I've set up a dozen or so, including [The Electronic Philosopher](#), [Ten Big Questions](#), [PhiloSophos.com](#), [Ask a Philosopher](#) (that site gets about 30 questions a week and we answer six of them), [Gallery of Russian Thinkers](#)...I've built between 3 and 4,000 pages on the net, including some really weird fringe stuff.

**JE:** One of the bits of this vast landscape that I like is the [GlassHouse Philosopher Notebook](#), which is sort of the Diogenes in your virtual city. Tell me about that.

**GK:** It was an experiment - I decided to be a philosophical counsellor to myself, and that the only way to do this was completely in the open. At that time, I had a wife and three daughters [his wife, June, has since passed away], I was struggling financially, my wife was totally uninterested in philosophy. And I was trying to understand my life as a philosopher in relation to my life in the world. I kept it going for 140 pages, stopped, then started again, then got interested in something else.

**JE:** Some people's vision of philosophy outside of academia is as a kind of therapy or counselling, in which the teacher and the student bring all of themselves to the practice of it - their emotions, their problems, their psyches. Is that anything like what Pathways does? Do students bring their personal lives into their essays?

**GK:** There's a kind of rule that I'm not a therapist or a philosophical counsellor. I'm here to debate problems of philosophy. Being so prominent on the net, you're a magnet, and you will attract people with issues. But we try and put philosophy centre-stage. The justification for doing philosophy is that you need it, you're gripped by its problems. It's not there to make your life better. I know there are other traditions where that is the goal, but I come from a tradition of analytical philosophy, which isn't like that.

**JE:** The courses are correspondence courses - and you'd argue that letters have a great history in philosophy...

**GK:** Yes, they're a fantastic way of provoking philosophical thought, and have been used by everyone from Seneca to Descartes. Live dialogues are terrific, of course, but it's very rewarding to have time to sit down and compose a letter.

**JE:** And today you have other people who volunteer as 'mentors'.

**GK:** Yes, a dozen or so.

**JE:** Are they paid?

**GK:** No, they volunteer, and they themselves get to do courses for free.

**JE:** How do you do quality control?

**GK:** All correspondence is forwarded to me, and there have been cases where I've had to write and say 'this is not good enough' or the students have complained. There was also a case where a student was sexually harassing a teacher. On the whole it has worked well, and we have around 500 former students of the school.

**JE:** So what advice would you give to people looking to set up philosophy schools?

**GK:** Well, it was really important to me that I didn't expect it to make money. If you need money, there are better ways to get it. Perhaps you have a rich wife or a sponsor, then that's terrific. Then you can invest massive amounts of time into building something up. And the wonderful thing about the internet is that, over time, it rewards good content. It rewards those with something to say.

**JE:** How do you see philosophy developing outside of academia?

**GK:** Well, clearly there are lots of different organisations now, like Philosophy In Pubs, the University of the Third Age, the School of Life. But they tend to pass each other like ships in the night, without really connecting. Philosophy inside academia has institutions, like peer-reviewed journals, for some sort of quality control. At the least, it would be good for more of a conversation to develop between philosophy organisations outside of academia. But a lot of these organisations depend on the quality of the people attending it and running it. If you just gather a lot of people together in a pub, you can end up with inane chatter. Yes, everyone has something worthwhile to say, but it doesn't always just come out by itself.

#### **4) Lizzy Lewis, development manager, SAPERE**

**Jules Evans:** SAPERE has several years' experience of running Philosophy for Children groups. How new a development for SAPERE is Community Philosophy for adults?

**Lizzy Lewis:** In a formal sense, it's fairly recent. Most of the work we've done has been Philosophy For Children, in schools. But what we do in schools works just as well with adults.

**JE:** So what forms has Community Philosophy taken?

**LL:** There have been a number of initiatives over the past decade. For example Barry Hymer, an educational psychologist, got funding and ran a project with Age Concern, running a philosophy group for some elderly



people. It was very successful and was made into a film. There was subsequent work in Newcastle with Age Concern. And another Community Philosophy project was focused on raising achievement in a deprived area of Leicester. A group of mums formed a 'women of wisdom' circle on an estate in Leicester. There's also been some Community Philosophy in prisons, through the work of Roy van den Brink Budgen, who works a great deal in critical thinking. Graeme Tiffany also ran a project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on intergenerational understanding, through promoting conversations and relationships between disaffected/dissatisfied young people and disaffected/dissatisfied adults. There's also been a project working with a Housing Association in Manchester, for which we adapted one of our courses. There has been SAPERE training at the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in London, and the British Museum. And then, of course, SAPERE has been working with Philosophy In Pubs (PIPs), and have trained some of their members as facilitators.

**JE:** What's the difference between SAPERE's approach to philosophy for children, and the approach of the Philosophy Foundation?

**LL:** The Philosophy Foundation isn't from the Matthew Lipman tradition. Peter Worley feels strongly that you need a philosophy degree to teach philosophy in schools. The main difference is that we train teachers starting from scratch, whether they have a philosophy degree or not. And it's a whole school approach whereas the Philosophy Foundation usually use a philosopher-expert.. In the Lipman method, the ownership of the process by the children is key. Peter is more inclined to present philosophical questions and issues.

**JE:** And what's the difference between P4C and 'critical thinking skills'?

**LL:** Critical thinking is more about strategies for reasoning, it tends to be exercise-based, and about problem solving. There's less dialogue and it's less community-based.

## **5) Paul Doran, national coordinator, Philosophy in Pubs**



**Jules Evans:** Why did you start studying philosophy?

**Paul Doran:** I was around 45 years old, a self employed (and unemployed) bricklayer, I had five kids, and was grafting like mad, living a typical working class life, but at the same time, a feeling of needing to know what was going on in life began to occupy me. I had always had these thoughts, but now there was urgency to them, something to do with my getting older and wanting to acquire some real understanding before I died. I started doing some history lessons at a local

night school and from there went on to do an access course. I was lucky to catch the last access course that offered philosophy (1991/92) - it was removed from the curriculum the following year. After passing the access course, I went on to study philosophy at University

of Liverpool. From there I went on to do a teaching degree, as I was keen to teach philosophy, especially to ordinary working people.

Two things struck me about philosophy: One was how incredibly useful and fruitful it was in helping people understand life; how it could dissipate various kinds of worry, and Two: how inaccessible it was to people, especially people from a working class culture. Since the access course stopped teaching philosophy, there was nowhere in Liverpool (besides HE) where you could go to learn about philosophy. Only now is there signs of a couple of courses emerging in Continued Education.

**JE:** What are the origins of Philosophy In Pubs?

**PD:** Philosophy In Pubs, or the idea of doing philosophy in public, grew out of a local Further Education class I was teaching. It was an introduction to philosophy course (the only one in Liverpool) – the course attracted on average around eight mature students, which, at that time, meant you had a viable course; these days that is not the case, those eight people would go untutored in their chosen subject today (you need 12). Anyway, a young man of thirty-odd years old, joined the course, his name was Rob Lewis. At the end of the ten week course, as with many FE courses, the group met at a local pub to socialize and celebrate the completion of the course. It was on just that occasion that Rob suggested to me that it might be a good idea to try doing philosophy in a pub. He was referring in particular to the problem of bums on seats, the idea being that you might attract more people to philosophy if you did it in the pub. I thought this was a great idea, so together, along with another chap (Michael Naidoo - who was on that particular introductory course) set out to make it a reality. This was in 2001.

**JE:** How did you go about making it a reality?

**PD:** Rob Lewis played a leading role in the initial stages, contacting the manager of a city centre pub and organizing a press interview. The Philosophy Club, as it was called then, was the first of its kind (as far as we and local press knew) so it got a good local coverage. Also Rob had been in contact with SAPERE, and it was SAPERE's methods of facilitation (Community of Enquiry) that we adopted to help us practice our philosophizing. SAPERE have played a big role in PIP development, in particular their chairman (as was) and founder Roger Sutcliffe. Slowly, through the efforts and commitment of Rob, myself and Michael, we had three groups up and running in as many years. Gradually more and more people began to become involved, and PIPs (as it came to be called) became more of a phenomenon on Merseyside – there are now fourteen PIP groups in the area, soon to be fifteen, and forty all together in the country, which is growing steadily.

**JE:** How do you facilitate a community philosophy group well?

**PD:** Well the ideal is to facilitate 'well' all the time, but circumstances can make this difficult. There are various ways of facilitating. Anyway, for me, the first thing you do is to make people feel welcome and relaxed. Then deal with any notices there may be. Introduce and hand over to whoever's presenting the stimulus. Once stimulus is presented, ask if there are any clarifying questions, once that is done, decide with presenter and group which method would they like to use at this point: 1) go around the group asking each member what their first thoughts are, and then go into the main enquiry, or 2) go into pairs/groups (depends on numbers) and discuss the stimulus and come up with a question that challenges or deals with any assumptions etc in the stimulus piece. The pairs/groups come back to main enquiry, the different pairs/groups explain the thinking

behind their questions, the main group vote for which question they want to use, usually which is most philosophic.

During the enquiry the facilitator will gently encourage everyone to participate, and also challenge any contributions that require justification etc. Also, she will endeavour to summarise the different points made and where the discussion has taken them. Then towards the end begin to close things down by asking for final thoughts/comments, which involves asking whether people have moved from or altered their initial position regarding the topic, and what they thought of the process, etc.

As I say, there are various ways and methods involved in the Community of Enquiry method, but the main thing for me is that serious philosophic thought has gone on, people have had to stop, have been stumped in a way, and have had to apply some critical and creative thinking - the Community of Enquiry method greatly aids this process. The idea within PIPs groups is that everyone has a go at facilitating, and that everyone helps the facilitator to facilitate. Ideally everyone endeavours to stick to good discussion guidelines, taking note of the 5 C's, of which I can only remember four: caring, critical, cooperative, creative, etc.

**JE:** How do you see the grassroots philosophy movement developing?

**PD:** I'm not sure. At the moment my feeling is that it will keep growing as long as there are committed individuals to keep the groups running. The growth in Meetup groups is encouraging, and I am hoping to get along to a few of these types of community philosophy groups to see what methods they use and how they practice. PIPs has been going 11 years, and have grown slowly just by helping people who have contacted us. But recently we have been more pro-active and have been asking our website subscribers to give us their location – not their address – just the area, town or city they're from. This way we have been able to build up a picture of where on the map of Britain there are clusters of individuals, living in close enough proximity to each other who might be interested in starting a group of their own. Significantly, SAPERE are running a very hopeful six-month pilot project to train 66 trainee facilitators. There will be three cohorts of 22 people each, operating out of Merseyside, Greater Manchester and the Leeds/Bradford area. Each trainee is committed to starting a community philosophy group, and running it for six months (the idea is that these groups will carry on past the six months). PIPs are very much involved in this, so it will be very interesting to see how things transpire.

**JE:** Do you think philosophy groups could be helped by funding?

**PD:** I have worries in this area. Obviously funding can help community philosophy. The funding that Sapere have acquired from Esmée Fairburn is fantastic. Essentially it is funding that will ultimately allow and promote the critical engagement of hundreds of people in civic and political life. The trainees running their groups will help people use philosophic method to understand and deal with social and political problems in their areas of work and life in general. Having said that, there are problems about dependence on it, or feeling that funding is needed before you can do anything. My own personal worry is about how deft established institutions connected to funding bodies can be in adopting movements, and persuading them to follow certain prescribed routes. Moreover, it seems to me that when groups move towards the mainstream, which can be a consequence of funding, they become less able to determine the terrain of action and discussion, and in the end become less inclined to. This view is probably due to my age and witnessing so little *real* change, most change being that of *degree*. However, when I see young minds

working as they are in this area, I realise real change is possible, so maybe I should relax a bit on this.

**JE:** What about the relationship between philosophy groups and universities?

**PD:** It is argued that community philosophy, or community philosophers, don't need academic philosophy in order to philosophise. While that might often be the case, I believe keeping in contact with the latest academic understanding and institutions helps community philosophy. Moreover, that the separating of community from academic philosophy is wrong headed, and 'unproductive' - the situation should be seen as one of mutual aid, a balance, they can and should, aid and challenge each other.

Eight years ago, we realized there were two big resources in Liverpool which we were not utilizing - the universities. We approached the philosophy department at Liverpool University and asked if we could hold an enquiry group there, the head of department at the time: Dr Michael McGee was happy to let us use a seminar room for this, and so the Friday Forum was born. In the early years of this group, every now and again, we would invite lecturing staff to present a stimulus, but it would be done as in Community of Enquiry mode rather than lecture, this proved quite interesting for both PIP members and department staff. The Friday Forum is an example of how academic and community philosophy can work well together, it has been going strong since 2004 and shows no signs of stopping

However, despite that experience with our university, a major problem is that universities, in general, are following a particular economic and commercial imperative, rather than a societal or educational one. Only three years ago we (representing the citizens of Liverpool) along with the students and staff of the university had to mount a defensive action and argument to keep philosophy at the university. It was argued by the vice chancellor and other business minded members of the senate the university might close the philosophy department. The department was not closed, apparently due to the weakness of the opposing arguments, but it is a pointer to the sort of thing that tends to dominate the thinking of many of those who administrate our universities.

## **6) Martha C. Nussbaum, Ernst Freund professor of Law and Ethics, University of Chicago**

**JE:** How much would you say has changed in terms of the level of interest in Hellenistic philosophy, in academia and among the general public, since the beginning of your career?

**MN:** You need to look at the longer trajectory. Hellenistic philosophy was absolutely central to the education of any cultivated person in Europe and North America from around the 17th to the late 19th century, so you did probably read some Plato and Aristotle, but you were much more focused on



Roman authors. Lucretius, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Cicero above all, were authors that really shaped the thinking of a lot of public life in not only continental Europe but Britain and the US. Stoicism had an enormous influence on the Founding Fathers, for example. So the question is really: why did it go out of fashion? And it's really because of the influence of Hegel and Nietzsche. They were taken as guides, and they made Plato a much more central figure. People were also focusing more on Greece than Rome, and of course the Hellenistic Greek texts are just lost, they're fragments, so people forgot about Hellenistic thinkers.

The revival of Hellenistic philosophy was very self-conscious. It was started above all by a group of philosophers in the generation before mine, led by Richard Sorabji, Miles Burnyeat and Jonathan Barnes, who decided 'well Plato and Aristotle have now been exhausted, they've been mined for their philosophical significance, we should move on and do something where we can make a creative contribution'. So they got people together to have these meetings called *Symposium Hellenisticum*, and I was lucky enough to be invited to the first one, in Oxford. It was around 1980 or just before. They published a collection of essays shortly after, called *Doubt and Dogmatism*, which is quite a famous book. Then every three years they held a similar meeting. I didn't give paper at the first one because it was on epistemology, which is not my thing. But the third symposium was on ethics, and I did give a paper, and was on my way, because I decided to write book about it.

**JE:** Would you say there has been a revival in the general public's interest in Stoicism?

**MN:** The humanities curriculum has still not internalized it. Look at the typical Great Books curriculum, which is two years of liberal arts study. That's where a member of the general public would make contact with Stoicism, but the curriculum still doesn't reflect the revival of interest in Hellenistic philosophy, it's still focused very strongly on Plato and Aristotle, and then it might go quickly over Augustine and Aquinas, but sometimes it still leaps straight over to Descartes. So there's not very much Hellenistic philosophy in the average Great Books curriculum. They don't focus on Rome in general, and that's what you have to do if Hellenistic thinkers are to be read. Of course, Lucretius is always loved, so he's an exception, but that's because people think of him as a poet rather than a philosophical thinker.

**JE:** In your book, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* [2001], you describe your position as neo-Stoic...

**MN:** I've got to correct this – there are two parts to the Stoic view on emotions, the descriptive part and the normative part. What I call neo-Stoic is the descriptive view of what emotions are like, but I certainly reject the normative view.

**JE:** So what do you think Stoics got right and wrong?

**MN:** Are we talking about the descriptive view?

**JE:** Let's start off there.

**MN:** With that, I think they have a very powerful position about the role of judgments of value in emotions, which has now been amply supported by psychological research into the emotions, and I show that convergence between Stoic philosophical analysis and modern psychological analysis, which focuses on what psychologists call appraisals, that

is, evaluations and their role in emotions. That part the Stoics got brilliantly right, and a lot more detail about particular emotions they also got right.

What you need to do, to make it a defensible philosophical view, is to correct their view that animals and small children don't have emotions. That's not correct, so you have to revise that view so that emotions still have a cognitive / evaluative character but it's the sort of cognitive character that animals and children could have. Secondly, the Stoics are also not very sensitive to cultural variation in emotion, so you have to learn from anthropology and put that into the neo-Stoic view. And finally, because they didn't think you had any emotion until you were sixteen, which is a very implausible position, they didn't care about development and how that influences emotions, and we do have to care about how emotions develop from infancy through childhood into adulthood. So we have to draw on developmental psychology and psychoanalysis.

**JE:** So can you combine the Stoic cognitive model with a more psychoanalytic model, or are they contradictory?

**MN:** It depends which psychoanalytic view you use. If you use the view that the goal is always pleasure, then it's much harder to make a connection. But if you use the view from objects relations theory, according to which children have complex cognitive attitudes to objects, such as anger, grief and envy, that sort of view that you get in Klein or Winnicott meshes very nicely with the basic way that Stoics view the world, and it also make sense of the fact that children do have emotions.

**JE:** *Upheavals* draws some great parallels between Stoicism and modern psychology and neuroscience. How rare is that? How much of a dialogue is there between classical academia and modern psychology?

**MN:** If you're talking about classicists, it's an individual matter. If you're talking about philosophers working on emotions, it happens all the time. You wouldn't think of publishing something on the emotions without becoming at least aware of what's going on in neuroscience. Sometimes philosophers do it too often. They think neuroscience solves all our philosophical problems, whereas I think it gives us helpful hints, but doesn't replace the need to do hard philosophical work, and also doesn't replace the need to go back to developmental psychology and psychoanalysis, which some neuroscientists don't like at all. So you need a judicious sense of what it can solve and what it can't.

**JE:** What did the Stoics get particularly wrong?

**MN:** I already told you three big things that are wrong in the descriptive view. Turning to the normative view, Stoics think the correct attitude is that nothing is worthy of serious concern except our rational nature, nothing outside of us, not our political culture, not our friends or our children, none of that is really worth serious concern, so we shouldn't get upset when bad things happen to them. It's hard to argue with that because it's a very complete view and internally consistent in most ways. So if we produce an argument that will shake a modern Stoic, it needs to show something of importance to the Stoics themselves that the Stoic view can't explain. I try to show certain things Stoics want to say – for example that we should care about our country and should be committed to defending it – which contradict their view on externals, so in the end they can't defend their theory. It's not simple, you need to take a long time to show that, but I think you can show that, even on its own terms, it's not entirely successful.

**JE:** So the Stoic position that all externals are indifferent is untenable?

**MN:** The Stoics think you should never mourn, for example. Cicero reports that a good Stoic father says, if their child dies, 'I was always aware that I had begotten a mortal'. Now, Cicero is one of my favourite thinkers of all time, and I find it very interesting to look at his letters when his daughter died. Just before she died, he had been writing typical letter of Stoic consolation to a friend who had lost a child. But when his own daughter died, he was absolutely devastated. He says to his friend Atticus again and again, 'I can't do normal things'. Atticus says 'this is not seemly, not fitting, you should not mind this so much', and at one point Cicero says 'it's not only that I can't go about my normal business, it's also that I don't think I ought to'. So he made un-Stoic judgments about both his daughter and the Roman republic. He lost his life trying to save the Republic. If he hadn't stayed in Rome so long trying to criticize Mark Antony, he wouldn't have been assassinated. He lived his life for both these things – his daughter and the Republic – and both were lost. What I find admirable is that he really wrestled seriously with the norms of Stoicism, and saw that they could help us correct an inappropriate kind of worldliness – he saw a lot of people go wrong because they were too ambitious, too competitive, too attached to worldly goods. But about the things we really love, and rightly love, we shouldn't be Stoic.

**JE:** So even if we don't accept the Stoic view of externals, we can still use Stoic methods of therapy?

**MN:** The therapy they have in mind is that you can't really improve your life without understanding what's worth valuing and what isn't. It would have been better if everyone learned all this in the first place, but since, according to them, people live in a highly corrupt culture, they don't learn right values, so they have to be given therapy, which consists in weaning them away from money, status, competitive goods of all sorts, and this will undo the damage of anger, jealousy and so on. All of that seems reasonable; it's only when they take it so far that they say we should lose love of children, family and so on. There I part company with them. But it doesn't mean their methods of weaning people away from unwise values is useless.

**JE:** In *Upheavals*, you argue that Stoics are part of what you call an anti-compassion tradition, as opposed to a pro-compassion tradition. Could you unpack those ideas a bit?

**MN:** Sure. When people read figures like Nietzsche, who say you shouldn't have pity, they read that it means you should be cold and hard-hearted. That's not it at all. Nietzsche tells us he's following a whole slew of people like Seneca, Epictetus, Kant. These people think that what you rightly value is your own good will and rational purpose, and that external things shouldn't upset you so much. And then they say 'OK, if you yourself are not deeply upset when you lose money or status, then you shouldn't pity or have compassion for someone else who loses those things. If you think you shouldn't be upset when you lose a child, then when someone else loses a child, you shouldn't feel compassion'. Marcus Aurelius says, if someone is upset, and you know they have wrong values, you can treat them the way an adult treats a child – you can console the child, while understanding that the child is upset over nothing. That's the Stoic view. In other words, you have to be consistent. You can't say 'I'm going to get rid of anger, jealousy, hatred, but I'm going to keep compassion, because it's so nice'. No, what they say is, the best thing to do is get rid of your unwise attachments to externals, so you won't feel compassion, but you also won't want to hurt people, or to retaliate against them. You will be detached. So Seneca writes to the young emperor Nero on mercy, saying you should be gentle and merciful, but in the middle of the letter is an attack on compassion. Compassion is this soft

thing where you care too much about what's out there. And they think in that is the seeds of anger, jealousy and ultimately cruelty.

**JE:** It seem to me that Stoics' problem with emotion is it is either attachment or aversion, either a running towards or a running away from something. But could we argue that compassion could be something more Buddhist, that could not involve attachment or aversion, and rather be an attitude of disinterested concern, which we could integrate into a modern Stoic approach?

**MN:** Sure, you could. It depends how you define it. Some people do define it like that. But then it's not really an emotion at all, because it doesn't involve the idea of a deep attachment to an external object and a mental upheaval about the fortune of that object.

**JE:** And it doesn't necessarily involve the judgment 'this shouldn't have happened'...

**MN:** Exactly, or the idea that this person has suffered some important damage. No, you're supposed to think these things really aren't that important. But you can still have an attitude of concern, that's right.

**JE:** Turning to your 1997 book, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Do you think Stoic techniques of learning to control our emotions should be taught in schools?

**MN:** The part of Stoic therapy I would like to focus on is the Socratic part, the commitment to self-examination, the relentless scrutiny of traditional values. That's what I appropriate from the Stoics. The part that says 'now we can use this to go into people's emotional lives'...I'm not sure that's appropriate in a university, it's more appropriate for small children. The other thing I'd want to appropriate is the Stoic sense of the whole world as a series of concentric circles, and that we should become increasingly aware of the broader world to which we belong. That you really can teach in university curricula, you can talk about the world economy, about different world cultures, different world religions and so on. So that's a very important thing we can borrow from Stoics.

**JE:** The Stoic idea of cosmopolitanism?

**MN:** Yes. We're citizens of a whole world order. We're not just members of one family, town or nation, but of the whole world. We're increasingly interdependent on important issues such as the environment, so there are now even stronger reasons for seeing oneself as cosmopolitan than there were in the days of the Stoic. We can't escape from the fact that what we do affects lives on the other side of the world.

**JE:** You've written that the goal of political society is to enable citizens to search for the Good Life in their own way. Do you think the state has any role in terms of giving guidance as to what constitutes the Good Life?

**MN:** I'm in strong agreement with John Rawls that the state has to show equal respect for all different reasonable comprehensive views of the good human life. The only way can do that is via the principle of non-establishment, which means no particular religious or comprehensive ethical view should be the basis of political principles or statements. But we can have a partial ethical view that's the basis of our political judgments, so we can all overlap on that and speak together in terms of that, because after all our political principles themselves have a moral content. So what would that involve? Ideas of equal respect,

support for human needs, human rights and so on. So there's a political part of the good human life that we can talk about and that the state certainly should persuade people about. So, for example, last Monday the university closed for the birthday of Martin Luther King. It does not close for the birthdays of racists. Having a national holiday for King, and not for racists, is a form of public persuasion, but it's right, because racial equality is at very core of the political conception that we all share, whether Protestant, Catholic, atheist, Hindu or what have you.

**JE:** What about the idea that you find in Stoics and in Martin Seligman [founder of Positive Psychology], that the state and state schools can provide some guidance as to how to find *eudaimonia*?

**MN:** Well, *eudaimonia* is a contested concept. What the state can do is provide some comparative studies of different traditions, and maybe show some things such as 'if you want to achieve the following, this is how go about it'. But to advocate one particular comprehensive concept of *eudaimonia*, whether religious or secular, a public institution shouldn't do that. But certainly, in a philosophy course, you can try to show what considerations might make one conception more attractive than another. And when I teach criticism of utilitarianism, that's what I try to do. But if I was president or a supreme court judge, I would never stand up and say 'I think utilitarianism is an impoverished world view'. I would focus on the political conception we all share.

**JE:** Is Positive Psychology going too far down one particular road, of advocating one definition of *eudaimonia* and then propagating it?

**MN:** It's not intended to be political, it's for people's personal lives. I've been talking about limits on political speech.

**JE:** But it is taught in schools.

**MN:** Is it?

**JE:** Yes. In the UK, for example, the government is considering putting it into the national curriculum.

**MN:** Huh...Well, it isn't here, but I guess I would be troubled by that. Seligman is a lot more subtle than most of people who talk about happiness. He has philosophical training, and asks questions about what it really is, he's pluralist about different religions, so it's much more open to contestation than many simpler views. But i still think it's too determinist. The state should not be telling you how to live your life beyond a certain core of political principles. The only thing about Seligman is he thinks we should be happier, that we're too sad. But I actually think, certainly in the US, that people should be a lot sadder than they are. The reason they're rather jolly is they don't think about the suffering of others, they don't think about the injustice suffered by others. I want to raise the level of sadness and anger in my students rather than diminish it.

**JE:** You're an expert in therapeutic techniques in Stoicism, Epicureanism, Scepticism, Platonism and other traditions. Are there ones you've found particularly effective or ones you've used in situations in your own life?

**MN:** Well, when I observe my life, I think, 'How is what I'm going through here related to these views?' You can see that in *Upheavals*, where I talk about my mother's death.

Sometimes when I get upset about some temporary thing, I do think 'you know how you characteristically over-estimate the seriousness of this'...But I'm not sure whether I needed to read the Stoics for that, or whether I always knew it. The parts of Stoicism that appeal to me are when they tell you to get rid of excessive attachment to money and reputation, but that doesn't happen to be my problem. My upheavals come from attachment to particular people or politics, and that's the part where I reject Stoicism. So that's why I don't find myself using Stoic therapy.

**JE:** Some of the leading writers on Stoic thought at the moment are women – yourself, Julia Annas, Nancy Sherman. Does that dispel the view that Stoic values are somehow 'masculine' values? Is that a wrong view, or even a sexist one?

**MN:** Probably. I don't think any one view of values is masculine or feminine. The Stoics didn't either: they wrote treatise on how the virtues of men and women are the same, and they defended complete equality of the sexes in their ideal city. It's what Mary Wollstonecraft observed in her critique of Rousseau: people put up a stereotype of women as highly emotional or sentimental, but in fact just it's just a stereotype. They can be just as rational. And of course, Mary herself was deeply influenced by Stoic thought.

## **7) Rick Lewis, founder and editor of Philosophy Now magazine**

**Jules Evans:** Tell me about the founding of Philosophy Now.

**Rick Lewis:** I studied physics with philosophy of science at university, then worked as a physicist at British Telecom Research Laboratories. I became very interested in ethics, in the meaning of life. Not having a religious faith, I was aware that ethics needed an underpinning. Also, when I was new at BTRL, a guy at the office invited me to a friend's retirement party. His friend been at the company a while. We got talking and he opened up, and said, 'I think I've wasted my life. I've worked here 35 years, and I should have done something else.' I was 23, and I thought 'how awful!' So at 26, I did a Masters in philosophy at the University of York. Then I went back to BT to work on underwater optical cables again.

There were lots of very interesting people in the laboratory, without a background in philosophy, but who were interested in different philosophical questions. This made me think there should be a philosophy magazine for laypeople. So I printed 2,000 copies of the first issue of Philosophy Now, in 1991. I didn't know anything about magazine publishing. I distributed it by phoning around newsagents and bookstores mainly in Cambridge and its environs. Then Libby Purves wrote about it in the Times, and it took off from there.

**JE:** Why did it take off?

**RL:** I think it was an idea whose time has come. There have been lots of times where I thought I don't really know how to do this but it's working anyway. If it was a different time, I probably wouldn't have had that luck. Why did it work in this period or era? Because there are lots of people looking for an ethical foundation. Because of the growth in higher education in general. Because people have more spare time to think about things.

**JE:** Was it time consuming, putting the magazine together?

**RL:** Very. I realized by Issue 3 that I couldn't do it and hold down a full-time job. So I took voluntary redundancy in 1992. I wasn't sure it would work. But I'm very stubborn, and didn't want to give up. So I worked part-time in a factory, then worked in the Kings College London philosophy department. By 1999, I was able to go full-time again on the magazine.

**JE:** So when you started the magazine in 1991, were there many philosophy clubs?

**RL:** There were some, but fewer, and they were smaller in scale. Then, in November 1997, Gale Prawda held the first Cafe Philos at the Institut Francais in London. She'd met Marc Sautet in Paris, attended his Cafe Philos, and brought the idea back to London. I went along with our book reviewer, Bryn Williams, who was doing a PhD in philosophy at KCL. We both thought that, culturally, this would work better in the pub. We both liked pubs, and Bryn had once worked in one, he thought people already talk about ideas in the pub, why not run a philosophy group there. But we were very influenced by Cafe Philos, so we thought 'let's pick a theme, and have a discussion'.

Bryn really got into it - he set up another philosophy cafe in Costa Cafe in Soho. He enjoyed the whole process of discussion and was genuinely interested in people's ideas. He got to the point where he thought popularising philosophy was more important than his PhD! However, eventually he got engaged and dropped out of the scene.

**JE:** How did you hear about Philosophy For All?

**RL:** In 1998 another bloke at KCL asked if I'd heard about a new organisation called Philosophy For All, which was just about to launch. So in May 1998 I went along to their first meeting, which they called Kant's Cave, and which was held in a room above a pub. That's how I met Anja Steinbauer, who set up Philosophy For All - we got engaged in August 1998 and have been married ever since. Philosophy For All is a very different approach to Cafe Philos. You have a talk by an academic, followed by Q&A, followed by general discussion. It's more about connecting academics to the community. They have quite a few people at their events – 80-100. If it's a general open discussion like Philosophy Now Pub Philosophy was, it works pretty well for 20 people or so, but is trickier with larger numbers.

Philosophy For All got bigger and bigger, so we thought we'd close our Pub Philosophy events and support Philosophy For All's meetings instead. It holds meetings every week, including philosophy film nights, a feminism forum, philosophy walks, philosophy debates. It absorbed a lot of people who might have started their own group. But there were still various groups working on the periphery, some of which are still going, like the Kingston group and the Pinner group.

**JE:** How did all these Philosophy Now Meetup groups start around the world?

**RL:** Well, the magazine is distributed in the US, UK, Canada and Australia. In 2004, a local discussion group in Orange County, California got in touch, they wanted to base their meetings on articles in Philosophy Now, and they also wanted to organise their group through Meetup.com. When they did that, through a quirk of the Meetup.com website it created the opportunity for people in other cities to create Philosophy Now groups as well, and these groups started appearing around the world - eventually including the Philosophy Now New York dinner meetup, run by Massimo Pigliucci.

**JE:** And you've started running events too?

**RL:** Yes, we held a 20th anniversary Philosophy Festival at Conway Hall last year, with the participation of many London-based philosophy organisations, including Philosophy For All and the Royal Institute of Philosophy. We had 1500 people attend over the course of a day. We also put on a debate at the How The Light Gets In festival in Hay on Wye this year.

## **8) Graeme Tiffany, independent education consultant**

**Jules Evans:** How did you get into community organising?

**Graeme Tiffany:** I have been a volunteer in my community for as long as I can remember. Doubtless, an intrinsic motivation was nurtured by encouraging youth workers who held that community service was a reasonable expectation of all young people. Years of this laid the foundations for projects undertaken under the stewardship of my peers and I. In my twenties, it was pointed out to me that being a community worker was a career option. I'd no idea this was possible. Everything I have ever done since has been in that context, although, professionally, I now see myself as a community *educator*. In fact, I'd love to be involved in an enquiry about the term 'community organising' ...

**JE:** What then got you into philosophy, and community philosophy?

**GT:** I did professional training as an informal and community educator. It was the philosophical dimensions of this that really hit the spot; I guess I just liked arguing – which was something that was not encouraged in my culture. This catalysed a belief that philosophy, and particularly the practice of it, was and should be regarded as a form of pedagogy. Indeed, the concept of praxis particularly appealed; therein the idea that it was possible to put theory (based on the conclusions drawn as to what we *ought* to do) into practice, and vice versus.

**JE:** I've read the report on your Community Philosophy project, and enjoyed it very much. When you turned up in the estate, did you have pre-existing relationships there or were you coming to it fresh?

**GT:** Not really, beyond a few folk I'd talked to when I spoke at a seminar on anti-social behaviour which was held on the estate. In theorising Community Philosophy, I've always maintained that it - kind of - works the other way round to Philosophy for Children. I figure many of those interested in P4C simply look for the nearest 'captive audience', which means school. The problem, as I see it, is that working in these institutional settings invariably (although, I accept, not always) means there are constraints: sometimes to what can actually be said and enquired into, and often to what might happen with the conclusions drawn. I ask: how often does P4C literally change the life, culture, ethos and daily focus of the school and the community beyond? I judge that, especially in this day and age, with its target-driven educational cultures, this is, very, unlikely.

In community work, all hangs on the quality of the relationships you are able to develop. You have to take responsibility for the contact-making and nurturing these relationships. There are no captive audiences. The prize though is that, once secured, these relationships have a life of their own (I call this social autonomy: I want to wrest the

concept from the clutches of individualism) and there can be throughput to social action – efforts to change things.

I'm not so naïve that I don't recognise constraints in community work settings, but I maintain that there are greater possibilities for taking action (changing things) on the basis of the conclusions drawn in philosophical enquiry. It is the potentiality of philosophy as a stimulus and catalyst of social action that intrigues and motivates me.

**JE:** What were people's reactions when you said you wanted to involve them in a community philosophy project?

**GT:** I had a bit of a battle with my staff about using the word philosophy in our project title; in their initial attempts to build relationships and articulate the project's aims they came up against some cynicism. This was entirely as I expected, but I'm glad we persisted. I believed that using the word philosophy would act as a provocation to people. And so it was; people asked 'what are you on about?' And conversations began.

**JE:** Why was philosophy important to that project?

**GT:** It broke the mould of decision-making, that is so often, frankly, boring, uninviting, and dominated by the 'usual suspects'. Bear in mind, I've always defended the usual suspects; without them many communities would be stuffed. I just want to mix it up with a few other voices. We'd all benefit then. And people value philosophy because of what it does to them and the others they engage with; it teaches us it's OK to argue, and that is important for getting things done. Thinking *is* a form of action.

**JE:** For those three years were you mainly working on that project with that community?

**GT:** The project was there, week in, week out. I probably worked 2 days a week on it, but the staff were present throughout. We tried to have several things going every week. Our work received attention and we looked outwards to find others with similar interests. So, as things developed, we got together with others from around the country. That added another dimension to the notion of 'community development'.

**JE:** Is it important and necessary for community philosophy projects to be that in-depth and long-term?

**GT:** No I don't think so, but I do like the idea that communities can use Community Philosophy as and when they see the value it in. I worked on a project in Sunderland that used Community Philosophy to bring young people of different ethnic backgrounds together. One of the Asian workers told me that, sometime later, a conflict had occurred between two groups of young women, and that they had asked to use CP to explore what had happened, and why. Nice that. Similarly, I've done working using CP as a research methodology, including in a project to try to understand young people's involvement in street violence. I'd like to see CP become a widely used methodology.

**JE:** Have you worked on or with other community philosophy projects since then?

**GT:** Sure, I have used CP in loads of community settings. Recently, for example, I facilitated an enquiry among the senior management team and board of directors of a voluntary association. A philosophical discussion ensued about a mission statement based on the voluntary association of community members. The implications of being

increasingly involved in contract-based work with young people and adults who *had* to be involved (e.g. in alternative education programmes for pupils excluded from school, or adults involved in drug treatment programmes) had never been talked about. Two opposing streams of consciousness emerged; one that it was essential that everybody the organisation worked with was involved through their own volition; the other, that this stance was no longer appropriate – some people had been so affected by dependency cultures that pressure needed to be put on them. It'd be easy to say that a schism occurred, but these people had been in conversation for years and years without ever getting round to discussing what I might venture was a 'real issue'. At least it's out there now and the discussion is continuing. This is an example of when CP can have a raw edge, and demonstrates the need to take often great care in its facilitation. P4Crs talk about working with controversial subjects; there are parallels there.

**JE:** Tell me about the importance of place to community philosophy. Do you think there has been a decline in public space, and if so, what can be done about it?

**GT:** I guess I am as much a geographer as philosopher and community worker at heart. Of course, space and place can be conceptualised widely. I am sensitised to physical, public spaces because I worked as a street-based youth worker for many years. I have witnessed its privatisation and the advent of an extraordinary level of state-sanctioned control in these settings. Many young people, and adults, have been displaced on the basis of a 'move 'em on' culture. I'm concerned there are parallels in the 'space to think'; there are more and more messages that there are things we shouldn't be discussing. It's as if they are off-limits. I'm not surprised about the use of social media; in part, it seems a reaction to this. But, somewhat ironically in philosophical terms, it brings with it extraordinary ethical tensions: can people learn to communicate in these ways that are ethically defensible? Likewise, the growth of grassroots philosophy-inspired groups. People do want to engage with the big issues. These organisations will continue to pick up the slack where whole sections of education are closed down due to an obsession with employability. We will see a new era of Romanticism as people celebrate science, condemn scienticism, and assert that there are other values that are important; and whole swathes of life for which the big questions have no definitive answer - but are important nonetheless.

**JE:** What ways would you like to see community philosophy develop? What obstacles or hazards do you think it needs to avoid?

**GT:** I'd like to see it develop in response to the conclusions drawn from its use. Simple enough process; trust people, respect their participation. The challenge for its integration into public policy is that we are so obsessed with outcomes that process becomes irrelevant. You'd be hard pressed to find a government minister who could get their head around the idea, that in some (perhaps many) situations process is actually more important. Much of this seems to hang on attitudes to uncertainty; is it something to be feared, or celebrated? Can we go with the flow (of philosophical process), and trust to what comes out (which would be my definition of an outcome)? Certainly I'd see CP researching social reality, informing decision-making, and evaluating what happens (a wonderfully cyclic system perhaps?).

**JE:** Do you think community philosophy should not be a form of therapy either for individuals or the community? Do you think practical philosophy is at risk of becoming too individualised (personal well-being)? At the same time, it *is* a useful resource for personal resilience, isn't it?

**GT:** I love it when people say “, isn’t it?” I’m not going to diss this stuff if folk are finding value in it, but I ask questions of all things therapeutic given my strong sense that that implies individually-focussed. For me, there’s always a cultural and societal (structural) dimension beyond that of the personal. The narrative of the individual dominates; policy discourse invokes more and more words like resilience and entrepreneurship. It’s as if all problems and all solutions reside in the individual. I’m a bit more of, as I say, a community man, who wants to speak up for the damage wreaked on individual lives by the ideological flight from the social, and for something more ‘pro-social’ - as the way to respond to challenges and build upon dreams in pursuit of a good society.

## **9) Massimo Pigliucci, philosopher, organizer of Philosophy Now NYC meetup**

**Jules Evans:** In your blog, Rationally Speaking, you described Skepticism as part of the ‘Community of Reason’. What do you mean by that?

**Massimo Pigliucci:** It’s really three overlapping communities: skeptics, atheists and humanists. There are some differences between them, but lots in common. They all, at least nominally, put reason at the forefront of what they’re doing.

**JE:** Tell me about the three groups, their histories, and their differences.

**MP:** Well, modern Skepticism appeared in the late 1970s, around the establishment of Skeptical Inquirer magazine. The Skeptics were originally interested in debunking some of the fluffy New Age thinking that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. But it has significantly expanded its sphere of influence to apply Skeptic thinking to other areas like social science or politics or religion. Atheists think of themselves as a movement but all we have in common is a rejection of the supernatural. Atheists have a wide variety of views politically, from progressive to libertarian to Objectivist. Finally, secular Humanism starts from a secular perspective and takes it in a progressive political direction. Its humanitarian principles are found in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. It arguably emerged as a response to the horrors of World War I, and the failure of the League of Nations. You can trace its development back to the Fabians, and to figures like HG Wells and George Bernard Shaw.

**JE:** Do these three groups really constitute a community?

**MP:** My anecdotal experience is that there is a large overlap. You see a lot of the same people and the same speakers at Skeptic, atheist and humanist events. Atheists tend to be skeptical of the paranormal and so on. Most Skeptics are also atheists or at least agnostics, and are sympathetic to a rational and empirical view of the world. And secular



humanists are by definition secular and explicitly endorse the application of science to the problems of the world.

**JE:** What do Skeptic community members do together?

**MP:** There's involvement at different levels. There are more formal local and national groups, which might hold formal lectures or large conferences; and there are informal discussion groups, book clubs, Skeptics In the Pubs and so on.

**JE:** And the aim of these groups is mainly to learn?

**MP:** Learning is a part of it. But it's more than just a science club. It's also because people need social support. I meet a lot of people in the community who had troubled early experiences with religion, who felt alone, or weird, or ostracised in their local community. They're looking for an alternative community, a place where they feel safe and accepted.

**JE:** Is that why Skepticism is a more vibrant grassroots movement in the US than Europe, because Skeptics feel more marginalised in the US?

**MP:** Yes I think so. I've been a member of Skeptic groups in New York and in Knoxville, Tennessee. My impression is places like Knoxville are where you find the stronger groups, with larger numbers, precisely because they feel under threat. I grew up in Italy, where I never heard of organised atheist groups, because in Rome, even with the Vatican nearby, religion is not a big issue.

**JE:** In the UK it's considered weirder to be religious than secular.

**MP:** Yes, Skeptics in Norway told me it was more acceptable to say you were gay in Norway than religious.

**JE:** Clearly the internet is a big part of the Skeptic movement's vibrancy. Skeptic blogs, including your own, attract hundreds of comments.

**MP:** Yes, you got a lot of comments on Skeptic blogs. Sometimes the comments are straightforward insults, people who feel like they can be jerks when their identity is hidden. I've written a blog for 10 years, and the blog is moderated to keep the tone of the discussion civil. What you see is that a lot of the commentators are very smart, and you develop a productive relationship with your readership over the years. And the comments section tends to be self-moderating – if someone says something silly, other people will correct them. In general, the internet makes for a sense of community. It means that at any time of the day or night, you can log on and find someone to interact with. The negative side of that is communication is sometimes not as civil as it might be.

**JE:** Would you characterise Skepticism as a philosophical movement?

**MP:** I think most members would say it was a scientific movement. There's a lot of misunderstanding of philosophy within the community, in part thanks to the outright hostility towards philosophy expressed by some Skeptic figures like Lawrence Krauss. It's sometimes a form of anti-intellectualism. Take Sam Harris' recent book, *The Moral Landscape*, in which he tried to answer some moral questions. There was no discussion of previous moral philosophy in it. Harris said in a footnote that he wasn't going to engage in philosophical discussion because it 'increases the boredom of the universe'. Imagine if it

was the other way round, and a philosopher said they weren't going to engage with neuroscience because it 'increased the boredom of the universe'.

**JE:** You're both a scientist and a philosopher. Is there a clear line between the two fields?

**MP:** You can't draw a clear line between them. That's always been the case, since Aristotle. A lot of philosophers subscribe to the view that some areas of philosophy are placeholders for science – philosophers go to the areas where there is no clear way to empirically answer the question, until that way arrives and can be empirically tested. That's what's happened in physics, in psychology, and it's happening now in philosophy of mind, where you see a transition at the moment between philosophers and cognitive scientists. When one field gets ceded to scientists, then you see the formation of new parts of philosophy, such as the philosophy of psychology or the philosophy of science. Philosophy is a broader exercise which informs science itself. Data are theory-dependent. That doesn't mean anything goes. It means it's not just a question of getting the facts. You also need to recognise there are issues of ideology and epistemology underlying theories. Of course, sometimes philosophers rub scientists the wrong way, and cause a particular scientific field some problems. Take the controversy about evolutionary psychology, where philosophers have challenged the credibility of the entire field.

**JE:** It seems strange that the Skeptic movement should be so hostile to philosophy, when it was partly started by philosophers like Paul Kurtz. Anyway, you have written that the Skeptic movement suffers from a 'failure of leadership'. What do you mean by that?

**MP:** The Skeptic movement has some prominent leaders or figureheads. And some of them engage in anti-intellectualism regarding certain areas of intellectual endeavour, particularly philosophy. Or they engage in unnecessarily harsh or offensive language. I don't think it helps, that sort of incivility. And then there are some Sceptics who indulge in Skepticism to the point of being unreasonable – for example, they express Skepticism about human-caused climate change. I ask them, on what basis? Do you understand atmospheric physics? It's a form of anti-intellectualism.

**JE:** Is that sort of mindlessness the consequence of a growing community? What I mean is, when a community gets so big, its values can harden into unexamined dogmas.

**MP:** Yes, perhaps it's one price you pay for a larger and stronger community – some of the voices may not be as aware as others. The movement is growing in numbers, for sure. So there are some growing pains. And there are people who don't know the history of the movement – young people come in, with a lot of enthusiasm, who aren't aware of what we've been doing for the last 30 years. But it's still a vibrant conversation. A growing trend within the community, for example, is asking what sort of social issues the movement should address, beyond debunking New Age charlatans. The movement is also finally waking up to feminism.

**JE:** So tell me about the New York philosophy meetup you run.

**MP:** I started it five or six years ago, when I moved to New York. I wanted a public outlet outside of academia. I contacted Rick Lewis of Philosophy Now magazine, because he had the idea of starting meetups all over the world. Basically people sign up to go to a dinner. Usually there are 15 to 20 places then a big waiting list. I pick a topic or other people suggest one. I usually put up a short article beforehand. Then we sit down, and have a symposium-style discussion for a couple of hours. Sometimes we organise larger

events at larger venues – we did one on the science and philosophy of free will, which had around 500 people, who chose to give up their Saturday afternoon in New York and pay for a ticket for an intellectual discussion. The New York meetup has been incredibly successful. We have over 1000 members, and we're not even the biggest philosophy club in New York. So the next time an academic colleague complains that they can't talk about philosophy to the general public, I'll take them to the meetup.

**JE:** How good is academic philosophy at this sort of outreach?

**MP:** On average, academic philosophy departments are pretty damn bad at outreach, which is unfortunate. When I talk to senior colleagues about the meetup, the look of indifference or contempt is pretty obvious. They think it's a waste of time – any time producing a podcast or an event is time not spent on writing the next book or journal article which will be read by five people. But a good number of colleagues now have blogs or podcasts, or they're happy to talk at public events. For example, we did an event at the New York Public Library on para-consistent logic, and a colleague of mine came to talk. It was packed. He was amazed. The younger generation, of course, is more aware of the internet and of popularising efforts like those pop culture and philosophy books. The older generation look at it and think 'oh my gosh, you're cheapening the field'. But that's silly. They're doing what scientists have done for years, which is improving the public understanding of the subject.

## **10) Scott Campbell, founder, Skeptics in the Pub**

**Jules Evans:** When and why did you start Skeptics in the Pub?

**Scott Campbell:** I started it in 1999, when I came to London to do a post-doc in philosophy at UCL. I was familiar with the Philosophy in Pubs movement in Australia. I hadn't been but it sounded a good idea. There was something called Science in the Pub run by the ASC [Australian Science Communicators]. I thought it would be better if done as a grassroots initiative rather than by a big corporation. I thought the Skeptics should do it.

**JE:** Tell me about the Skeptics movement at that point in Australia.

**SC:** The Australian Skeptics were a big and active group. They owned a magazine, and were a very organized group. It was quite top-down in that it had a national committee and some funding. It had been inspired by James Randi's visit to Australia in 1988. So, in short, I thought I might be able to do a 'Skeptics in the Pub' in the UK when I arrived there.

**JE:** How did you go about finding people to attend?

**SC:** I didn't know anyone in the UK when I arrived, so I went to sci-fi meetings at the Florence Nightingale, a pub in Waterloo. I thought the sci-fi fans might be interested in Skeptics in the Pub, that this might be a quick way to get people together. The idea was that speakers would give a talk for 30 to 50 minutes, then you'd have a drinks break, then a long discussion afterwards. My idea was to create sort of a discussion group, like a philosophy seminar, but social too.

**JE:** And what was the aim of it, for you?

**SC:** I thought it would be fun and interesting intellectually. I thought other people would enjoy it too. I knew a lot of people who had enjoyed university, and who hadn't had the chance to do a post-doc, but who still wanted to stay intellectually stimulated. I didn't have a clue it would become such a big thing.

**JE:** Tell me about the first meeting.

**SC:** The first meeting we invited Wendy Grossman, founder of The Skeptic magazine in the UK. She gave a general talk about Skepticism, then we had a long discussion. To publicise it, I sent out emails about philosophy lists and through sci-fi circles, put posters on campuses and a few around London. We had 50 or so people turn up, and asked them to make a small donation.

**JE:** Was it enjoyable, running Skeptics in the Pub?

**SC:** It was definitely very satisfying. It was enjoyable socially, and I learnt stuff. Plus it was satisfying that people really looked forward to it. I felt like I achieved something. London is a great place to run something like that, because it has so many intelligent, interesting people there, and a great transport network.

**JE:** What did your academic colleagues think of Skeptics in the Pub?

**SC:** Within academia it was seen as a bit unusual. But younger grad students were into it.

**JE:** How long did you run Skeptics in the Pub?

**SC:** I ran it for a year, then went back to Australia after completing my post-doc, but helped to run it by email. Nick Pullar [an Australian philosophy graduate and IT businessman] came in and ran it for a few years, then Sid came on and ran it.

**JE:** Who were the Skeptic crowd in those days?

**SC:** A lot of the Skeptic crowd tended to be mostly scientists: psychologists, physical scientists, chemists, not a lot of philosophers - I was trying to attract them but it was a waste of time - they often looked down their nose at it. A lot of philosophers these days only like to talk to other philosophers. We also attracted civil servants, teachers...it was generally middle class professional types. There were probably more men than women, but still quite a few women. It was mostly younger people. A lot of the Fortean Times [a magazine about paranormal activity] would come to - it was a very good natured event. They weren't solemn occasions at all, and tended to be very jolly and drunken.

**JE:** So in that sense different from Humanist events?

**SC:** Yes perhaps. There's not as much overlap between Skeptics and Humanists as you'd think. Humanists tend to be a bit more serious, more pompous perhaps or philosophical. I'm not sure Skeptics and Humanists always liked each other. Skeptics saw Humanists as people who wanted to build substitute religions, like humanist funerals.

**JE:** Are you still involved in the Skeptic movement?

**SC:** No, I haven't been involved much for years. You lose interest after a while - there's only so many times you can read an article on Uri Geller. I'm married now, with kids, so don't have so much free time.

## **11) Sid Rodrigues, organiser of London Skeptics in the Pub**

**Jules Evans:** How did you get into Skepticism?

**Sid Rodrigues:** I was interested in magic when I was younger, like Paul Daniels, Penn & Teller. I saw James Randi Psychic Investigator in the early 1990s. I bought his book, saw the address in the back, and wrote to him on the off-chance of a reply. A month later, I got a reply back, and kept up a correspondence with him since I was 15. He'd send postcards from his travels - from Denmark or Holland for example. He's a massive hero to me.

When I was at university, I got an email from him, which said he was in the UK for a week or so, in Oxford, staying at 'Richard's'. It dawned on me he meant Richard Dawkins. He invited me to go meet him there. I was 18. So I went to Oxford, knocked on the door, and it was Romana from Dr Who [*Dawkins' wife is the actress Lalla Ward, who played Romana in Doctor Who*]. And there was Randi and Dawkins, chatting in the living room. It was like three improbable things in one day. Anyway, I saw Randi give a talk at Oxford University, where Dawkins was professor of the public understanding of science. The thing that struck me, though, was that he got followed round by nut-jobs who thought they had psychic powers.

**JE:** Was Skepticism a grassroots movement back in 1995?

**SR:** Not really. Not until 1999, when Scott Campbell started Skeptics in the Pub. I went along to the early ones, with Wendy Grossman, Richard Wiseman and Chris French. You'd get 20 or 30 people there. It was a nice crowd, though it tended to be all white, and mainly middle to old age. The speakers were entertaining - Richard Wiseman in particular was very funny. Scott then left to go back to Australia, and handed it over to a Kiwi, Nick Pullar, who held the reins for five years or so. By 2003 or so, the London community had around 250 people signed up to the email list.

Nick left in 2007 / 2008, by which point a sort of committee were running Skeptics in the Pub, not very well. I said we needed to move to a bigger venue, as by that stage you'd have 70 people trying to get into a 40-capacity room to see Jon Ronson. One woman fainted down the stairs, the room was so crowded. Eventually I found a bigger venue with a capacity of 200. In 2008, Skeptics In the Pub went global, through my then-wife, Rebecca Watson, who was a Skeptic blogger and broadcaster. I'd met Rebecca at The AmazIng Meeting, James Randi's annual event for Skeptics. Basically I bullied her into organizing a Skeptics in the Pub in Boston, and publicising it through the podcast she co-presented, Skeptics Guide to the Universe. The same year, Drinking Sceptically started in the US. Then in 2009, The AmazIng Meeting was held here in London. That gave a huge boost to the Skeptics movement in the UK, and helped to inspire a lot of other Skeptics in the Pub groups around the country. There are now something like 40 SitPs around the country, and perhaps over 100 around the world.

**JE:** How did the movement spread?

**SR:** People would sometimes get in contact and ask about setting up a Skeptics in the Pub wherever they lived. I'd say there are just three rules: find a speaker, find a venue, attract people to the talk. The groups differ quite a lot in terms of the size of the audience and the tone of events. Some are more cantankerous or aggressive than others. Others are a bit more Humanist in terms of promoting open, friendly debate.

**JE:** So is there a wide range of views in the Skeptic movement?

**SR:** Yes, once something becomes very popular, you get a whole spectrum of opinions and personality types. Skepticism has so many facets and sectors, especially in the States. You might be into the science, but still be a misogynist, or a racist. At the moment, the movement is going through some 'teething problems', particularly related to the 'elevator-gate' incident involving Rebecca. A large proportion of US Skeptics are libertarian Skeptics - including people like Michael Shermer and Penn & Teller. They also tend to be white, middle class and well-off. Speaking personally, I'm more of a social justice Skeptic. Some Skeptics are into confronting and ridiculing religion, others are not. Most Skeptics I know were annoyed by Richard Dawkins' God Delusion, which was as subtle as a sledgehammer.

My feeling is you can debunk foolish beliefs using science, but still come across as a nice person. But Skepticism has gone through dark patches where it's more like 'let's laugh at the idiots'. And some Skeptics are fairly forthright, basically 'I'm right and you're wrong', so if you disagree with them they never talk to you again. There is a minority of idiots in the Skeptic movement, but they're the most vocal people. Any community goes through teething problems. When something gets so big, with so many adherents, everyone is happy to voice their opinion. Sometimes trying to organise the Skeptic community is like herding cats. People don't like to be put into boxes. There are so many facets to Skepticism. Some people are more into scientific Skepticism, but it has spread into other areas, like law and public policy.

**JE:** Tell me about the role of grassroots Skeptics in libel reform.

**SR:** It started when Simon Singh wrote a Comment is Free article about chiropractors. The British Association of Chiropractors said they'd sue him unless he retracted it. Simon knew other Skeptic writers who'd had libel problems, for example Ben Goldacre. The libel laws here were so harsh that it was difficult to say anything. So anyway, Singh decided to fight the suit, and to try and reform libel law. He managed to get Sense about Science involved - he was a trustee of that - as well as Index for Censorship and English PEN. And all the Skeptics in the Pub groups got involved too, not just here but around the world. So we got 60,000 signatures on a petition to change the libel laws here, which hadn't been changed in 300 years. The libel reform movement managed to get a bill onto the Queen's Speech last year [although campaigners say the Coalition government's new bill is not yet adequate to protect journalists]. There have also been Skeptic campaigns against homeopathy, eg the 10.23 campaign, where various Skeptics in the Pubs groups took a 'homeopathic overdose' at the same time, to prove that homeopathic pills didn't do anything. We had 150 people outside Conway Hall one Saturday morning eating handfuls of Boots homeopathic pills. As a result, Boots stopped stocking certain remedies, though they still do sell homeopathic pills, but most don't make health claims on their packaging.

**JE:** Do you think Skepticism could become more coordinated here in the UK?

**SR:** It will happen, but it will be slow. At the moment, people have their own ideas, and there's no coordination. People feel they've made their mark with their own local Sceptic in the Pubs, and don't want that taken away from them.

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