What is the Point of Philosophy?

16th February 2015

British Academy, London

A SEMINAR ARRANGED BY
AXEL AND MARGARET AX:SON JOHNSON FOUNDATION
WHAT IS THE POINT OF PHILOSOPHY?

What is the point of philosophy? The physicist Stephen Hawking wrote recently that philosophy is dead, which, given that physics was originally just an outgrowth from philosophy, might be considered rather high-handed. Nearly 2,700 years ago, the early Greek philosophers asked what the forces and principles underlying material things were, and thereby distinguished reality itself from how it appears to us; only then, as the various scientific disciplines became demarcated, did they split off from philosophy. Does that mean that philosophy per se is now redundant? Or does it, instead, remain the core, determining method of enquiry? Without it the different areas of knowledge and expertise can very easily lose sight of what they’re actually dealing with — that often happens in the area of mind with neuroscience and biology. Surely philosophers are still needed to tussle with key questions as to what experts in any area are really talking about?

But how should philosophy be taught, and at what stage? In Britain, it used only to be taught to a small group of humanities students at university level. In 1986, there began to be a philosophy A level, and, increasingly since then, philosophy has been taught to younger and younger children. Yet are any of these age-ranges actually learning to philosophise? Philosophy A level students sometimes simply learn their notes by heart as they do in other subjects, and without having grasped essential concepts while with small children it is easy for the subject to degenerate into a vacuous or confusing mess. As for so-called ‘popular’ philosophy, it is liable to be purveyed by bland entrepreneurs. In schools, Philosophy is often taught hand in hand with Religion, which can be the antithesis to the open-mindedness which philosophy requires.

And what of the history and theories of Western philosophy — aren’t they an important part of the cultural heritage we should be transmitting to future generations? What role does popular philosophy play in modern life? Why are the principles of Western philosophy so remote to the majority? And what role does and should popular philosophy play in modern life?
The Ax:son Johnson London Seminar Series

Monday 16th February 2015

5.15 pm  REGISTRATION & DRINKS

5.25 p.m.  Opening

What is the Point of Philosophy?

Moderated by Jane O’Grady

Tim Crane  Philosophy as a form of Understanding
Rebecca Goldstein  Why Diminish the Resources of Reason just when Reason is needed more than ever?
Greg Radick  The Argument from Science
Claire Fox  Against the New Instrumentalism
Stephen Law  Enlightened Citizens
Simon May  Philosophy as Architecture

6.45  Discussion

7.30  DRINKS & DINNER
PARTICIPANTS

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