

# PHILOSOPHY, PHOBOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

Works by Nigel Pleasants and Ian Hunter are considered in such a way as to display key relevant features of their version of philosophy and to facilitate a conceptualisation of phobosophy. This process leads to the conclusion that we might be wise to treat sociology, along with many other forms of human activity, as creative activities rather than as forms of meticulous description.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is a condensed version of a yet to be completed and published article and I should stress that what is intended to be conveyed by the term phobosopher will be made clearer as the paper proceeds.

Hunter helps us to get started when he writes:

We had to treat the central tenet of this argument – philosophy's claim to open man's empirical finitude to the irruptive infinity of being - as itself a symptom of a particular historical phenomenon: a philosophical ascesis associated with the cultivation of a particular intellectual persona. (Hunter, 2006, p. 112)

While Hunter's task was to project a clearly delineated outline of the particular persona of the phenomenologist, the philosopher, in order that we might distance ourselves from that persona, my task is to begin to draw Hunter's persona, the persona of the phobosopher, out of the shadows. My work is less like a forensic examination and more like the development of a preliminary hypothesis that may help stimulate and guide more detailed investigations to follow. However, from the phobosopher's perspective such a strategy is highly questionable, as is intimated by Pleasants in the conclusion of his work on Critical Social Theory when he states that: 'The kind of philosophy practised by Critical Social Theorists serves only to obscure the nature of real social and political problems by attempting to solve them through transcendental theoretical representation.' (Pleasants, 1999, p. 182). Arguably Pleasants's claim is too strong for while a philosophical approach might obscure, and it is very important to draw that fact to readers' attention, to claim that it serves only to obscure goes too far. Efforts to engage in transcendental theoretical representation (one form of theorizing), even if only by chance, may generate some real solutions for real social and political problems.

## 2 DISCUSSION

Pleasants's (1999) specific claim 'Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy, and my critique of critical social theory, make no claim to superior ontological insight, and are therefore best characterised as immanent critique' (p. 31) may be sustainable, but I think it is reasonable to suggest that he, following Wittgenstein, does lay claim to a 'superior insight', and this is the insight that philosophers/social theorists should neither seek ontological insights nor hold them to be tenable. Indeed Pleasants frequently exemplifies this approach, as for example, when he argues that: 'Critical social theory is

constituted by just that mode of (essentialist, transcendentalist, metaphysical) mode of theorizing to which Wittgenstein was most implacably opposed' (p. 31).

Pleasants is also describing a particular method, a method he describes as consisting of '... *a priori* theorizing on transcendental conditions that are deemed to hold universally.' (Pleasants, 1999, p. 38) and he goes on to say 'And this is precisely the method and conception of philosophy that Wittgenstein sought to subvert' (Pleasants, 1999, p.38).

The matter of method is important for Hunter focuses not only upon the persona of the philosopher but also upon the processes used in the cultivation of such a particular intellectual persona.

These are matters of the greatest importance for sociology for in effect they generate differing definitions of its subject matter and its methods. In relation to transcendence for example, Pleasants writes that:

...both tacit knowledge and the tacit rules of social structure are, ontologically *transcendental*. They are transcendental in two senses: firstly, they transcend the awareness of individual consciousness, and, secondly, their existence is inferred through Kantian reasoning; that is, their existence is deemed necessary to explain the observed regularity, coherence and meaningfulness of social life. (Pleasants, 1999, p. 61).

In relation to the Critical Social Theorist's ontological version of the human actor Pleasants (1999) writes that:

... Giddens and Hayek present their picture of tacit knowledge as an anthropological condition of the human subject as such. But by representing consumer and entrepreneurial behaviour as epistemically and normatively privileged *knowledge*, they *ipso facto* grant their moral and political approval to the form of social organization which generates it ('the first step is the one that altogether escapes notice'. (Wittgenstein 1968: section 308)". (p. 92)

'the first step is the one that altogether escapes notice' What an extraordinarily powerful little phrase and how unsettling especially when we are reminded by Harrison (2006) of Calvin's argument that the fallen mind "wanders through various errors and stumbles repeatedly' and thus 'betrays how incapable it is of seeking and finding truth" (p. 223). And of Gaukroger's (2006) reminder of Bacon's remedy when he "... argues we need to start further back, as it were, with a radical purging of our natural characters, in order to shape something wholly new" (p. 29).

On the philosopher's side a purging practice is exemplified by Husserl's commendation of the transcendental reduction, the bracketing out of all everyday interests, as characterized by Hunter in his critique of phenomenology (Hunter, 2006). However, I am arguing that on the philosopher's side a purging practice is similarly present, though it is differently directed. It is represented by Hunter and Pleasants commendation of a transcendental reduction of a very different kind; that is a bracketing out of all that is transcendent. Pleasants is critical of the above detailed specific ontological picture of the individual in as much as he argues that it leads to contradictions and/or absurdities in Giddens's account, but he is also critical of ontological pictures consisting of transcendent, universalistic, essentialist theoretical entities.

When discussing the version of theory (and in this sense philosophy) that he seeks to differentiate himself from Hunter writes the following:

...This attitude is skeptical towards empirical experience (in a more or less Kantian way), but also towards a priori formalisms – which it regards as foreclosing a higher level ('transcendental') experience – and hence cultivates openness to breakthrough phenomena of various kinds. It will be argued that this attitude is

characteristic of a particular kind of intellectual persona sustained by a certain inner discipline and that providing an account of this persona and discipline is central to, without being exhaustive of, historical reflection on the moment of theory... (Hunter, 2006, p. 81)

By redirecting the questions Hunter raises to display what he is not we can begin to sketch a silhouette of what he is, a sketch that, while excluding some options, has parameters that are broad and vague and allow a wide range of possible positions. In effect it is analogous to a stage in the development of an identikit picture such as an observation that the person under consideration was not bald. This information would exclude one option from the possible identikit image but allow a potentially large number of others. Consequently we have far more to do beyond this brief paper to generate more specific defining characteristics. However, Hunter provides us with some further preliminary hints as to how we should proceed when, in relation to phenomenology, he suggests that:

... we must shift our attention to the means by which we are induced to enter into a certain kind of questioning and to cultivate a certain inner distrust of available knowledge. This entails asking such questions as, What kind of relation to myself do I establish when I seek to suspend commitment to my existing 'natural' knowledges and experiences? What is it about me that is called into question and targeted for transformation as a result of this process? What kind of spiritual or intellectual exercise do I perform on myself when I undertake the transcendental reduction? And to what kind of persona do I aspire on the basis of this inner exercise? With such questions, which derive from a certain form of intellectual history, we open a space for the history of theory. (Hunter, 2006, p. 84)

The last sentence is of considerable importance here for I would contend that Hunter could be read as being far far too modest for the reader could be misled by the form of Hunter's statement into thinking that the space for the history of theory derives solely from a certain form of intellectual history. However, in my view we need to stress that Hunter plays an active and significant role asking these questions even though his manner of writing about this might inadvertently or advertently blur or hide this fact. I think this may be important for it may illustrate how human creativity makes the space for contingency. It might be that we could accept that there are such things as natural laws and that therefore natural events follow in a sequence determined by those laws and in this sense are not contingent, however, human action, because it has creative potential, on occasions moves in a different way and it is this different way that creates the contingent nature of human history. However, Hunter's space for history seems strangely limited for while questions about the persona and the spiritual exercises that sustain it are commended there is no mention here of questions concerning the broader social configuration which sustains them.

Pleasants and Hunter, who in this paper I am referring to as the phobosophers, certainly have their differences, but they do share an opposition to that version of philosophy which involves a priori theorizing, that version which is about atemporal essences/universals. They are opposed to the search for wisdom where wisdom is claimed to be grounded in some form of ahistorical knowledge. They do not seek wisdom in the above sense and have an aversion to such activities and a scholarly aversion to those who engage in them.

The phobosopher is one who would argue that history is no more than contingent events and hence that to seek to move above or behind these to seek general or universal principles misses the point, but misses it in a very dangerous way for it opens up the possibility and perhaps the probability that a plethora of conflicting but unprovable beliefs and systems of belief will invade and occupy this space as the space is (mis)construed as a void/a gap needing to be filled.

Fox- Morcillo (1526/8-60) "...argued that the search for truth would ultimately end in complete frustration rather than happiness, reasoning that it was simply not possible to understand the ultimate causes of things in the present life" (cited in Condren et al., 2006, p. 211). However, the phobosophers go further by arguing that the search for truth in the sense of ultimate causes, essences, timeless universals, is far worse than just a cause of frustration, a cause of unhappiness, it is actually a process that prevents us from seeing what we can learn from specific historical events.

My point, however, is that in some senses humans can seek to be philosophers or they can seek to be phobosophers and doubtless many other characters as well. Hunter is arguing not that we cannot seek to be philosophers but that we would be better off not seeking to be philosophers, we would be better off not seeking knowledge in the form of universals etc. for doing so actually inhibits our chances of knowing the things around us. These phobosophers are of course not the first thinkers to have a distaste for metaphysics, however, as Hunter and the phobosophers will no doubt agree, the predilection for philosophical/metaphysical abstractions is far from easily abandoned. As Poovey (2002) suggests: "With every claim to identify a law-abiding abstraction that explains what can be seen by reference to that which cannot, we re-inscribe the social imaginary that positions the human capacity to imagine order at the foundation of society itself." (p. 58).

### 3 CONCLUSIONS

I have been engaging in a constructive enterprise of creating a composite identikit type picture of the phobosopher by considering, amongst other things, the implications of Hunter's ways of differentiating himself from the specific persona, and the processes used in the cultivation of the particular intellectual persona of the philosopher. It is crucial that the creative aspect of such an enterprise is foregrounded lest in some way it is imagined, proposed or simply assumed that such items can be found readymade on the sidewalk of history solely through a methodical process more akin to fishing amongst the contingencies than sculpting.

I have made up the word phobosopher, it is, as they say, a neologism. I have not just come across it, nor have I made it out of nothing, but I have made it up/ created it through a process of synthesizing previously unrelated terms.

In this paper I have tried to write from a place between the approaches of the philosopher and the phobosopher, a far from a comfortable place, especially when each of the diametrically opposed sides has astute, courageous, erudite, scholarly and well-intentioned champions who can draw upon expansive virtually unlimited sources of tradition and scholarship for sustenance and weaponry with which to counter their opponents.

Furthermore, I am reminded of Laursen (2002) who writes: 'How should the ordinary person choose a belief? Whatever may be the original ambition to examine the foundations of doctrine and authority, he or she inevitably yields to the weight of education and prejudice.' (p. 146) Of Curtis (2006) who intensifies our discomfort by pointing out that both Socrates and Erasmus recognized the dilemma that 'the best teller of the truth is also the best teller of lies'. (p. 103). Of Condren (2006) who adds a further discomfiting dimension when he reminds us it is not only those who lie but also those who believe lies that should be reprovved (p. 103).

In effect the quandary is being faced by all of us and Hadot (1995) helps us to consider this when he reminds us of Goethe who said: "Ordinary people don't know how much time and effort it takes to learn how to read. I've spent eighty years at it, and I still can't say that I've reached my goal" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations with*

*Eckermann*, trans. John Oxenford, 2 vols. 1850, 25 January, 1830.. 109). Kuhn makes matters even more demanding when he suggests that:

“When reading the works of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them. When you find an answer... when these passages make sense, then you may find that more central passages, ones you previously thought you understood, have changed their meaning.” (Kuhn 1977: xii. cited in Pleasants,, 1999, p.15)

A key difficulty with such advice is, of course, how does the reader decide who is and who is not an important thinker!

Perhaps, if we modestly acknowledge that sociology, along with many other human activities, is a creative activity rather than a form of meticulous description (see Pleasants, 1999, p. 25) that might help us to get started. Rather than being grounded in and limited, on the one hand, by efforts to transcend history by dealing in universals (philosophy), or on the other by efforts to use history in a manner that unnecessarily constrains us by refusing to go beyond the detail (phobosophy) sociology could then be about stretching and extending what we have been bequeathed through tradition in order to create something new.

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