

TRAVELLING PHILOSOPHY

Richard L. W. Clarke

Those who break a tradition first hold it in awe. (Derek Walcott)

In an important essay, “Traveling Theory,” the late Edward Said notes that, like “people” (226), “ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another” (226). Noting the need to “specify the kinds of movement that are possible” (226), Said suggests that this “circulation of ideas” (226) may take the form of “acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing or wholesale appropriation” (226). He concludes that a “theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different from another period or situation” (226) not least because the “movement into a new environment” (226) necessarily involves “processes of representation and institutionalisation different from those at the point of origin” (226).

I begin with this short summary of Said’s thesis because it tackles a crucial issue, partly metaphilosophical and partly historiographical in nature, that has concerned me a lot over the last few years and which boils down simply to this question: how are ideas transmitted from one person or context (socio-cultural and / or historical) to another? Implied in this is another question: what is the precise nature of the relationship, if any, which links our ideas to a particular social and / or historical context? This in turn leads to another issue that has plagued philosophers in the Western tradition since at least Plato: is the source of consciousness internal or external to a human being, innate or acquired? When phrased in this way, it quickly becomes apparent that implicated in this is another, perhaps more easily recognisable question which continues to resonate quite strongly among so-called Post-colonial theorists in general and Caribbean theorists in particular: are any of our ideas our own, that is, original and unique to us? This issue, worded in a myriad different ways, is, I would suggest, at the very heart of all our attempts in the Caribbean and other Post-colonial regions to arrive at a grasp of ourselves and of our own particular contributions to human civilisation as a whole. These are, of course, ultimately also questions of a profoundly spiritual nature that address nothing less in the final analysis than the significance of human existence.

If we are to even begin to address some of these questions, a useful starting-point may be to unpack and interrogate many of the assumptions which inform Said’s claim that ‘theory travels.’ Several questions, which in turn spawn others, occur to me, few of which I can even try to answer in the limited time allotted to me but which nevertheless still need to be posed:

- a) What exactly is this thing called a ‘theory’ which is alleged to travel in this way? Is it synonymous with an ‘idea,’ as Said seems to maintain? If so, what precisely is an idea? What, in Aristotle-speak, is its ‘cause’?
 - i. Is the source of our ideas internal to human beings? If so, are ideas universal, unrestricted to any particular group? Does the mind work in a common way for all humans?
 - ii. Is the source of our ideas external? If so, are our ideas localised, peculiar to the particular community which we inhabit? Is the mind culturally specific, as it were?

- b) If the latter, how should we conceptualise the precise nature of the relationship between a given idea and
 - i. its spatial (geographical, social, cultural) location?
 - ii. its temporal (historical) context?
- c) Does the term ‘philosophy,’ by extension, signify an agglomeration or concatenation of theories or ideas? If so,
 - i. Is philosophy a universal given? Does the sign ‘philosophy’ merely label a fixed referent, to be precise, an omnipresent set of ideas (e.g. concepts of right and wrong) and certain immutable methodological procedures for verifying these ideas (principally, the application of logic) common to all humans?
 - ii. Or is philosophy a much more malleable and localised phenomenon, responsive to the variegated pressures of cultural, social, and historical circumstance in the way that Said thinks? Do the ideas which philosophy treats and the methods by which this is accomplished necessarily vary from context to context?

I do not propose to rehash in any detail here the answers to these essentially metaphilosophical questions which I have attempted elsewhere, not least on the occasion of the inaugural Cave Hill colloquium. I am not sure that anyone can offer definitive answers. I don’t claim to possess what so many philosophers seem to in their arrogant and adamant dismissal of points of view with which they disagree: the ability to step outside the box, the prison-house of consciousness, and adjudicate in an Olympian manner which theory corresponds most closely to the brute facts of reality. The only thing that *may be* definite is the fact that on these matters the two dominant camps in the contemporary philosophical establishment, the Analytic and the Continental, hold very different views that are each the legacy of specific intellectual inheritances, conceptual frameworks and vocabularies and that when particular paradigms gain ascendancy and, ultimately, what some might term a hegemonic stranglehold, alternative points of views are banished to the periphery of contemporary philosophical acceptability.

Suffice it to say that the former camp tends to answer ‘yes’ to (Ci) above, that is, to think of philosophy as a universal and immutable endeavour, and favour a scientific approach, to be precise, the application of scientific method to a wide range of other problems (the nature of language, of knowledge, of right and wrong, etc.). This is why, in the Caribbean context, Analysts often seem to prefer to speak less of a specifically ‘Caribbean philosophy’ than, as a former colleague of mine once did, of doing ‘philosophy in the Caribbean.’ By contrast, Continentalists answer yes to (Cii), that is, to think of philosophy in a much more culturally specific manner. Informed by poeticist and / or historicist emphases, that is, by the tendency to see philosophy as more akin to a form of literature and / or to emphasise its social and historical determinants, Continentalists are often more prone to conceive of ‘Caribbean philosophy’ as an ontologically unique phenomenon and, as such, distinct from that which obtains in Europe, for example, or Africa. It should be obvious that the divisions in contemporary philosophy reflect the tensions between what C. P. Snow terms the ‘two cultures’ of the humanities and the sciences which continues to divide academia.

There are other questions with equally important implications, I would suggest, for the development and institutionalisation of philosophy as an academic discourse in the

Caribbean. First and foremost, what precisely does it mean to claim that a theory and, by extension, philosophy *travels*? This in turn raises the question: do theories really ‘travel’ at all? Are the questions posed by philosophers essentially the same everywhere and at all times, the impetus behind which is a universal human condition? If there is change in philosophy, it is conceptualised in terms of ever greater access to the truth about things, ever greater clarity: as Rorty points out, philosophers in this tradition tend to think of their discipline as developing in ways analogous to the “history-of-science-as-the-story-of-progress” (58), that is, in the direction of an ever greater rapprochement with the Real. This is why, as with the natural sciences, the study of contemporary solutions to certain recurrent problems is privileged over what, from the vantage-point of the present, must appear to be merely a prior history of muddled anticipations, half-truths, and downright errors. This view gives rise, I would suggest to the palpable neglect of the historical dimensions of philosophy in programmes that are mainly Analytic-oriented. In such programmes, courses in the history of philosophy are often not mandatory, by contrast to those that focus on selected problems (mind, language, etc.) as a result of which students can conceivably graduate without having engaged with many of the key figures in the history of philosophy. These emphases are borne out by the programme of a conference on the historiography of philosophy to be held next month by the British Society for the History of Philosophy at Cambridge: Analytic philosophers with an interest in the history of their discipline are few and far between, outnumbered by Continentalist and Pragmatist colleagues who evidently attribute far more importance to the imperative of historicity.

It is also possible to deny theory the ability to travel not because the form and content of thought is universal but because of the opposite: its cultural specificity. From this point of view, human civilisation consists in so many discrete indigenous and, ultimately, incommensurable thought-systems that pre-exist inter-cultural contact. Sometimes, such encounters are conceptualised as tragedies in which alien perspectives are artificially imposed on others that are henceforth forever effaced, while at other times they are viewed à la longue durée as romances of sorts the climax of which consists in the archaeological resurrection of effaced thought-systems. (See David Scott’s most recent book which addresses the tendency to conceptualise the colonial encounter by means of such tropes.) Do attempts to compare speculations, for example, on the nature of right and wrong in eighteenth century England and fourth century Africa accordingly attempt to forge connections where none exist and wrench phenomena out of their unique and original contexts? Are they, as such, examples ultimately of that ‘violence’ which Foucault claimed, ‘discourse does to things’?

However, if philosophy does in fact ‘travel’ in the sense intended by Said, how exactly should one conceptualise the nature of the relationship, if any, between ideas that have undergone a process of geographical and cultural relocation (e.g. speculations on the nature of right and wrong in *England* and in the *Caribbean*, respectively)? By the same token, how should one conceptualise the relationship between ideas that have undergone historical modification (e.g. speculations on the nature of right and wrong in the *eighteenth* and *twentieth* centuries, respectively)? Moreover, what is the nature of the relationship, if any, linking these two processes, spatial relocation and temporal modification? Is the metaphor of ‘travel’, one predominately of migration or journeying in *space*, adequate to the task of also offering an account of how ideas change over *time*, as Said seems to assume? Should one conceptualise the nature of intellectual ‘time travel’ in quite the same way as one would a

putative 'journey through space'? Is the process of geographical, cultural and social relocation [the cause of; the effect of; identical to; synonymous with; consubstantial with; coterminous with; similar to; analogous to; unrelated to; etc.: *choose one*] that of historical modification? In other words, do ideas change *because* they shift location, or do they change places because they are modified, or are the two processes unrelated? For example, should we understand changes between the way we conceptualise the nature of right and wrong in *eighteenth century England* and in the *twentieth century Caribbean* as a function of a shift in location, or vice versa? Is it possible to think of this relationship in terms other than that of causality? Perhaps most importantly, can change, strictly speaking, be spatial in nature (do things change merely by being relocated) or is change by definition a temporal phenomenon?

These are dizzying questions which require detailed responses that exceed the limitations of time and space which I face here but which I have developed elsewhere. I would just indicate briefly that in terms of those dominant assumptions (not least expressivism) which currently inform our thinking on these matters, the shadow of Hegel in particular looms large, and ironically so for a racist who sought to deny Africans a place at the table of reason. I should mention, too, by way of conclusion that many of these assumptions can be and are in the process of being questioned and rethought. It is possible to think of intellectual history in other than expressivist terms.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Austin, J. L. *How To Do Things With Words*. The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955. Ed. J. O. Urmson. Oxford: Clarendon, 1962. 2nd Ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms." *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (1980): 57-72.
- Henry, Paget. *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Rorty, Richard. "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres." *Philosophy in History*. Ed. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner. Cambridge: CUP, 1985. 49-75.
- Russell, Bertrand. "On Denoting." *Mind* 14 (1905): 479-493. Rpt. in *Logic and Knowledge: Essays, 1901-1950*. Ed. R. C. Marsh. London: Allen and Unwin; New York: Macmillan, 1956. 39-56.
- Said, Edward. "Traveling Theory." *Raritan* 1.3 (1982): 41-67. Rpt. in *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983. 226-247.
- Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: the Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Snow, C. P. *The Two Cultures and A Second Look: an Expanded Version of the Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. The Rede Lecture, 1959. Cambridge: CUP, 1964.
- Strawson, P. F. "On Referring." *Mind* 59 (1950): 320-344.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1953.