Copious Corruption

Tamás Pataki

W. Martin Davies

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SIR WILLIAM MITCHELL (1861–1962): A MIND’S OWN PLACE
Edwin Mellen Press, US$129.95hb, 454pp, 0 7734 6733 5

James Franklin

CORRUPTING THE YOUTH: A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY IN AUSTRALIA
Macleay Press, $59.95hb, 465pp, 1 876492 08 2

Socrates was executed in 399 bc, charged with refusing to recognise the state gods, introducing new divinities and corrupting the youth. The indictment was probably politically motivated. The philosopher was closely associated with the recently deposed oligarchy led by the murderous Critias, and he had taught Alcibiades, who betrayed the state. Later, Aeschines rebuked the Athenians: ‘You put Socrates the Sophist to death because he was shown to have educated Critias.’

At his trial, Socrates rebutted the charges of impiety and the prosecution’s attempt to link him with sophists and natural philosophers. The natural philosophers (or scientists) had a reputation for atheism. The teaching of many of the sophists was morally subversive, and most were, in today’s idiom, moral relativists and anti-realists. They taught that morality was a matter of convention or artifice, and that the world we experience is conditioned in one way or another by our own nature. The greatest of them, Protagoras, said: ‘Man is the measure of all things.’ Socrates, who was pious and not a relativist, distanced himself from both groups, but his perseverant questioning of moral foundations and his insistence that what passes for knowledge requires rational support. This idea has become the genius of most subsequent science and philosophy. It is what makes philosophy and science ultimately so utterly different from faith-based religions.

Sex had nothing to do with Socrates’ conviction, though that is not James Franklin’s view. In his new book, Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy, he says that the charge that provides the main title of the book is ‘absolutely true’. Socrates, he thinks, sexually corrupted the youth. The putative evidence is an amazing misreading of Plato’s Symposium. According to Franklin, Socrates argued that it would be ‘a lot better … if the wise handed on knowledge for sexual favours’ instead of money. This is a bad gaffe — the lesson of Symposium is the opposite of Franklin’s contention — but it sheds considerable light on what follows.

Corrupting the Youth is a long, ambitious and in some ways original work. It is, to my knowledge, the first serious attempt to paint philosophy — very broadly construed — into the cultural landscape of Australia. It recounts the history of academic philosophy, from the arrival in 1927 of the formidable Scottish philosopher John Anderson, to some of the salient developments in the last decade. But the narration also includes much that is interesting on ‘the implicit philosophy’ embodied in secular education and culture, as well as some of the activities of the prominent figures who created, taught and criticised philosophy in this country. Since Franklin has a taste for the sensational, these activities, with few exceptions, fall into the fold of folly, fracas and peccancy.

In the academic line, the book begins with a discussion of Anderson’s moral and social philosophy and, more briefly and derivatively, the metaphysics that underpins it. There follow chapters on the philosophy of mind and science, in which Australian materialism and scientific realism are featured; on environmental philosophy and Franco-feminism; on Catholic philosophy, moral philosophy and practical ethics. Interspersed are brief discussions of logic, semantics, psychoanalysis and a few other things. In some of these areas, Australians have made distinctive and sometimes influential contributions, and they are aptly highlighted. This tour is good only in chunks. Many howlers and frivolities vitiate it and make you wonder if the guide knows where he is: licentious Socrates is just one example. Franklin’s sweep is wide but not deep. He describes the views of his subjects but rarely provides the arguments that sustain them.

Franklin tries, improbably, to relate the story of Australian philosophy largely from an internal perspective. For example, Anderson, who had a significant impact in Australia, was influenced by the first revolutionary wave of Analytic philosophy, by G.E. Moore’s and Bertrand Russell’s repudiation of idealism, their robust realism and pluralism. He was quite untouched by the second wave (and some of his ablest students were alike in this), the linguistic turn articulated by Wittgenstein: philosophical problems arise because we misunderstand the logic of our language. That turn rapidlydivaricated and transformed the way philosophers approached every branch of the discipline, and their understanding of the discipline itself. Franklin doesn’t discern how deeply those developments affected the practice of philosophy in Australia, even in Sydney. Australian philosophy has sometimes been original, but mostly it has companioned external trends, and the presentation here often appears shallow because there is no backdrop against which it can acquire depth. It is astonishing to find in such a long, heavily referenced text no mention in the index of Quine or Hare.

In Franklin’s story idealism is the bogey, and he harasses it in most of its incarnations. It is defined as ‘the doctrine that all is ideas: there is no truly physical world out there at all’. That’s a slack characterisation in any case, but if he is to bring his favourite targets into view he requires something broader, a Protagorean anti-realism in which our apprehension of the world is conditioned by products of mind, such as language and culture. Postmodernists, in his scheme, are linguistic...
There is no shortage of argument in W. Martin Davies’s *The Philosophy of Sir William Mitchell*. Mitchell was a remarkable figure whose life spanned 101 years (he died in 1962) and progressed from professor of philosophy at the University of Adelaide to vice-chancellor and chancellor. He is little known as a philosopher: his writing was not always lucid, and he was overshadowed by Anderson and the developments in Linguistic philosophy mentioned above. That obscurity Davies has set himself to remedy, in a long, detailed and carefully argued study. It is a book for specialists. Sensitive to idealist concerns, deeply interested in science, Mitchell is as remarkable for the range of influences he absorbed as for an originality that in many ways is discernible only now against the backdrop of contemporary developments. Davies exposes not only Mitchell’s views but also those of important contemporaries he has anticipated, particularly in cognitive science, developmental psychology and philosophy of mind. Mitchell has been neglected as an idealist from which our scientifically minded contemporaries have nothing to learn. Davies succeeds admirably in showing that to be an error, and in doing so recasts the historical landscape of Australian philosophy.