

An interview with Prof. De Caro

Some European students are introduced to philosophy at an earlier age than students in the U.S. What were your first encounters with philosophy like?

I found philosophy supremely fascinating; like a fantastic game. It was deep and fun at the same time. Now, when I teach, I try to give the students this impression -- that philosophy is deep and fun.

How do teaching styles differ in the U.S. and Europe? Do you see this changing?

American students are much more active. They interrupt you while you talk about a subject you know very well and ask questions that you haven't thought of before. I like this democratic style. European students tend to be more passive. You talk and they write notes -- and only very rarely ask spontaneous questions. But this is slowly changing -- fortunately.

You've use a wide range of films in your classes. Which recent films are particularly relevant to philosophy?

Just to mention a few: *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, *Dark City*, *Open Your Eyes* (I also use them in my courses). I once went with my students to see Spielberg's *A.I.*. It presented a number of philosophically interesting points -- too bad, then, that it is was intolerably ugly.

Are there any films that you think are particularly underrated?

Old movies are by definition underrated nowadays (in the sense that almost nobody watches them). This is a pity, since the real cinema ended in the sixties. Since then there has been a deep creative crisis. Not that good movies aren't made any more; but they come mostly from independent movie-makers or small countries. As a rule, today a Hollywood movie (or an Italian movie, for that matter) is boring, dull and possibly a remake --- and much worse than the original.

What role does music play in your teaching?

First of all, I frequently ask my students to bring their favorite pieces of music to class in order to compare their different tastes and to discuss the issue of standards of taste. One student likes the Beastie Boys, another likes country music, and another Miles Davis; generally I bring Mozart. If you think for a minute about this incredible variety of taste, you can conceive of a lot of good philosophical questions coming out of it.

Do you see the history of music as having an important place in the history of thought?

Definitely. I have to say that, in my ignorance, I understand the important role played by classical music in shaping and reflecting the cultural spirit of past ages much better than I understand the cultural relevance of most contemporary popular music. But I have no doubt that it does have relevance.

What are some of the works of literature that have had the most significance for you?

The great Russian novels, above all. Once I read that President Bush said he found *War and Peace* very boring -- that he only read it as an exercise in discipline. This is utterly mysterious to me. I read the novel in four days, almost without sleep. I remember that I was moved, then I laughed, then I was thrilled. No discipline was needed.

What courses do you teach on a regular basis in the U.S.? In Italy?

In the U.S. I have taught introduction to philosophy, modern philosophy, metaphysics, Renaissance philosophy and philosophy of language. In Italy I have taught logic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of politics. My favourite, though, would be philosophy and movies. At some point, I hope to teach that.

You've published three books so far. What are the underlying themes that tie them together?

They are connected by one question: what makes human beings a special part of nature, if anything? To this question, many science-oriented philosophers would answer: "Absolutely nothing". I disagree. The difficulty is to explain exactly why.

How do you see the distinction that is currently made between analytic and continental philosophy? Which figures from each tradition are particularly important to you?

According to a very common and vulgar idea, analytic philosophy is very rigorous but discusses abstruse questions, whereas continental philosophy treats relevant questions, but in an obscure and confusing way. There is some truth in this -- but not too much. The last common ancestors of analytic and Continental philosophy are Leibniz and Kant; after them, the two traditions focus on different thinkers. Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger constitute the Continental pantheon; Hume, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein and Quine the analytic one.

My favorite Continental philosophers are Foucault and Habermas (I am also interested in Deleuze, even if I am not sure I entirely understand what he has to say). As to the analytic front, beside Frege and Wittgenstein, my favorites are Davidson, Putnam, Kripke and Strawson.

A very interesting intermediate figure is Charles Taylor.

Is there any analogue in Europe of this split?

There is exactly the same split. Moreover, there is a big interest in the history of philosophy. During my undergraduate years, I had to take an oral exam in which I had to read three big books that discussed the entire history of philosophy, plus Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. During the exam I was asked to talk about Gaunilon, Bovillus and Malebranche, with dates, titles and theories.

Have you always lived in Rome?

I have mostly lived in Rome, even if at this point I have spent, in differing periods, more than three years in Boston. If I could choose, I would live in a medieval Italian town, in Umbria or Tuscany.

Did the experiences of your family in World War II have a formative influence on your thinking about philosophy and politics?

My mother's uncle was beaten to death by the fascists. In 1943 and 1944, my father's parents -- who already had five children -- hid in their little house a Jewish family of three in danger of being sent to the concentration camps. During that period my father (who was 13 then) used to sleep on the kitchen table. No surprise, then, that I was raised hating racism, intolerance and dictators of any sort.

You have participated in conferences all over Europe. Are there any trends in European thinking, either philosophical or political, that stand out for you?

First of all, one has to say that philosophy and the humanities are under attack in most European countries. In Europe, universities are mostly supported by the national governments, which have ferociously technocratic goals. This doesn't leave much space for studying things that do not have immediate practical results. If this process continues, culture will be killed in Europe.

What period in the history of philosophy do you see as most similar to this one?

In an optimistic mood, I would say the Renaissance; in a pessimistic one, I would say the later antiquity, a period that preceded a long age of violence and ignorance. The right similarity will be seen only when we understand how this complicated period will end.