

Guest Editorial: Open Letter

Dear Renford,

I am writing to you, without any apology, because of a remark I lately heard made by one of the many unemployed young philosophers around, one who has now been forced, after years of trying to survive in the profession, to retrain as a computer programmer. He said, 'Of course we can manage, of course we shall survive, it would be ludicrous to moan. That is not what matters. What matters is the low standing that philosophy turns out to have today. This is why the profession is looking for leadership. And it doesn't get it.' Somebody said, 'If Ryle were alive, things would surely be different?'

I thought, on hearing this, 'Yes, where are the clear public statements by leading philosophers about why philosophy matters? Where have they told us why it is not a trivial subject, not an outdated ritual, not a pedantic, incomprehensible waste of time, not, when things become hard, the obvious and proper first candidate for the chop?' We were, of course, brought up to think it vulgar to mention these things in public. It was not supposed to be necessary, and we were largely occupied in quarrelling with each other. We have lived on the capital of splendid past propagandists (from Plato on). We have not noticed how these ancient bastions have been eroded, in the public consciousness, by potent changes in the past century—by the worship of specialization, by the worship of science combined with a view of it which plays down its philosophic aspect, by the delusion of a simple modernity so confident as to need no argument—as well as by changes in the nature of philosophy itself. The old truths are still there. But at present they are unrecognizable to a great part even of the educated public in this country. They need to be thoroughly rethought and restated.

Obviously, all this is more visible to those of us who are now jobless, or in departments currently being wrecked, than to the rest of the profession. That is why, quite on my own hook, I am sending this letter to a number of leading British philosophers. As I say, I make no apology for doing it, because they can so easily throw the thing in the bin. What I am suggesting is something slightly different from the political and administrative campaigning which is being carried on by organizations like the National Committee for Philosophy and PLATO, though I think it would be of great value for that work and may even be necessary for it. I am saying that we ought to do some public philosophizing. And it will have to break with the tradition, prevalent through most of this century, of being blandly negative—of

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repeating that philosophers are *not* sages, not dogmatic authorities, not qualified to tell timeless truths about the meaning of life. Nobody thinks that they are. The situation now is the opposite one. People—not just politicians and university administrators, but the general public—have very little idea what philosophers are supposed to be doing at all, apart from a vague impression that it is something pointless and out-of-date. (The determined attempt of my own university to unite its departments of Philosophy and Religious Studies illustrates a typical attitude to both.) We need to explain what we are doing and—if we believe in it—why other people ought to believe in it too. As a fairly marginal and eccentric philosopher myself, I am under no illusion about how much ice my own efforts in this direction are likely to cut—though I shall continue them. But I see plenty of other people of whom this would not be true, and it is to them that I send this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Midgley