

Radical Thinkers

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY IN THE CONSERVATORY

BY CAROLINE WISEBLOOD MELINE, PH.D.

When I tell people that I teach at Curtis, they expect to hear about my instrument. Then, when I say I teach philosophy, they are surprised. I am surprised, too. I am surprised at what interesting discussions I can have in my classes because the students are so lively. I wasn't sure they would have enough energy left over from their challenging musical studies for challenging academic courses, but they do.

Philosophical readings require serious effort that sometimes resembles decoding. Take this passage from Charles Darwin that was featured in my recent course titled Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Frankl. Writing in his 1871 book *The Descent of Man*, Darwin said:

The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable—namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as in man.

First we need to ask, what kind of statement is this? Darwin was a scientist, specifically a biologist, not a philosopher. So the students must figure out not only what the sentence is saying, but also why it is important for them to read it in a philosophical context. Furthermore, they need to find out what it means to engage with any content in a philosophical way.

Darwin's statement says that the human moral sense is an outgrowth of the social instincts of nonhuman animals, after passing through the larger intellect possessed by man. It is a statement about the origin of morality, and it is radical. Why is it radical? The answer to that question points to the central reason for Darwin's philosophical importance. The underlying message in the quoted passage is that humans are not unique beings, not even in our morality, which continues to be a controversial idea.

Another controversial topic in philosophy is free will. In the Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Frankl course we were finally working on Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*. Victor Frankl (1905–1997) was a Holocaust survivor, and his classic book tells about his own experiences in several concentration camps between 1942 and 1945; it includes a section explaining logotherapy—a form of psychotherapy Frankl developed before the Second World War. The crux of logotherapy is that no matter how bad a situation someone is in, the person has a choice in how to respond. Logotherapy helps people to find meaning in their lives as the central therapeutic technique. That is where free will comes in.

Frankl wrote this: "Is that theory true which would have us believe that man is no more than a product of many conditional and environmental factors—be they of a biological, psychological or sociological nature? Is man but an accidental product of these?" Then he answered his own rhetorical questions by claiming emphatically that man is more than the sum of influences that affect him. Frankl concluded that "Fundamentally...any man can, even under such [concentration camp] circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually."

My question, though, was: Can all men do this? Why should we believe this is possible? Is it enough just to tell someone, "Your life can be improved if only you will see that you can make it meaningful"? The other three thinkers we studied had various ways of explaining human nature, and in none of their theories are humans free in the way that Frankl theorized.

The students took their time to consider these questions. In the end, the class did not settle the issue of free will, as it probably cannot be settled, except in the process of living one's own life. But this is the kind of opportunity philosophy offers for taking to heart who and what we are, as we do what we do. ♦

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Caroline Wiseblood Meline's current course at Curtis is People, Animals, and Ethics.

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