

Practical Philosophy: Journal of the Society for Philosophy in Practice

www.practical-philosophy.org.uk

PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

Volume 6, No. 2

Autumn 2003

JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY



FOR PHILOSOPHY IN PRACTICE

Frontiers of Philosophy in Practice

www.practical-philosophy.org.uk

www.society-for-philosophy-in-practice.org

Book Reviews

Edited Trevor Curnow

Practical Philosophy Autumn 2003, Volume 6, No. 2, Pages

Todd May

Our Practices, our selves, or, What it means to be human

University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, pp. x + 206

ISBN: 0271020865 (pb) £14.50

‘This is a book about who we are’ (p. 1). But who are we? In Todd May’s view, in order for us to learn the answer to this question we have to carefully look at the social practices in which we all are, to various degrees, engaged. Who we are is in no way determined before we are immersed in the various contexts of life, but emerges precisely as a result of this immersion. Our selves are not some pre-established, ready-made entities, mysteriously given to us at birth, but the complex result of our encounter with the world around, as well as with our own intellectual concerns, moral dilemmas, and social-political needs. As a consequence, according to this line of thought, who we are should be considered not in any rigid terms, but in terms of becoming and process. For May the key concept to understanding this process-like nature of ours is that of practices: ‘by understanding the role that practices play in our lives, we can learn much about what we do, how we think about ourselves and our world, and why we sometimes find ourselves in the intellectual dilemmas that confront us’ (p. 3).

May defines a practice as ‘a regularity (or regularities) of behavior, usually goal-directed, that is socially normatively governed’ (p. 8), and, in the three ample chapters of the book, he explores the ways in which practices ‘largely determine’ our lives. Chapter One (‘Our Practices’) is a general introduction to the problem of practices in which the author carefully sets the stage for his approach. At a more specific level, practices are considered in connection with the related issues of community, civil society, and culture. In addition, May talks extensively in this chapter about two ‘illusions’ (the illusion of ‘the secret self’ and that of ‘the metaphysical depth’) that ‘keep us from recognising who we are,’ our attention being thus forced away ‘from our daily social engagement with the world’ (p. 40). Chapter Two (‘Our Practices and our Knowledge’) is dedicated to the problem of knowledge (especially to the thorny issue of justification). In May’s view, ‘knowledge happens in the context of practices’ (p. 79) and in this chapter he boldly attempts to offer ‘a picture of knowledge that moves from away from foundations to practices, and ... from truth to justification’ (p. 134). Relying on some notions he takes from Kuhn, Gadamer, Wittgenstein, and Robert Brandom, May develops a seductive theory of knowledge, placing the concept of practices at its very centre. Moreover, our practices as pursuers of knowledge are constantly seen in terms of their dynamic qualities and interconnectedness: ‘they are tied together by their goals, by the people participating in them, and by the inferential connections among their claims and theories ... they are dynamic, evolving wholes, not rigid ones’ (p. 101) Finally, Chapter Three (‘Our Practices, our Morals, and our Politics’) is dedicated to those practices occurring in the sphere of our moral lives, in politics and in whatever relates us to the sphere of power. Conceiving of power very much in the way of Michel Foucault (to whom May is openly indebted), the author develops a series of interesting thoughts about, among other things, *constraining* vs. *restraining*: ‘The idea of constraint (as opposed to restraint) involves not only the act of repression but also the creative act of making something, of forming it’ (p. 174).

May’s book displays many remarkable accomplishments, of which I would like to single out only two here. First, towards the end of his book he offers an example of excellent social philosophising on what might be called the collective solitude of our time. The public sphere, under the increasing dominance of ‘technological capitalism’, tends to lose its traditional features, becoming more and more ‘privatised’: ‘We are decreasingly in physical contact with our fellow citizens. We see them less (although we may see many images of them), we hear them less, and we share the same space with them less’ (pp. 194-5). Who we are is more and more determined by the laws of the market, becoming a matter of buying and selling. With admirable intellectual honesty, as well as with unconcealed concern, May recognises that some day technological capitalism may come to explain who we are better than the practices approach does.

Secondly, as Garry Hagberg rightly observed in the book's blurb, it book might well serve as an excellent *introduction to philosophy*. The book is remarkably well and lively written, its style being colloquial in an agreeable and elegant manner, which makes even the most difficult problems dealt with seem accessible. On reading his book, I kept thinking that May must be a really great teacher of philosophy. And what might particularly appeal to an inexperienced philosophy reader is the deep sense of humility the author displays throughout the book. Finally, I was definitely taken by the author's tremendous sense of humour. As it is well known, humour is not a very common currency among philosophers. This is precisely why May's sharp irony (safely doubled with self-irony), satire, incisiveness, as well as his constant amused gaze at the humorous side of life renders this a truly rare philosophy book. To give only an isolated example, when starting the section on practices and politics, May thought it appropriate to make the following introductory remark: 'It is a little strange for me to be writing about politics at this moment. As I write this, the U.S. president is about to go on trial in the Senate for lying about having an affair with an intern, many of his accusers are turning out to have had affairs themselves, and the function of government seems to have become to discover who among the opposition is sleeping with whom' (p. 169).

Costica Bradatan