

VIVE LA DIFFERENCE
An 800-word feature
by
TOM MACKAY

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The dumbing down backlash is thriving amidst the latest trend in café society - the Café Philosophique. Philosophy cafés have been springing up all over Europe as well as Japan and the Americas in recent years.

The Café des Phares at the Place de la Bastille initiated the idea in 1993, blossoming to a network of about 90 around Paris.

People of all persuasions are welcome to join in the debates or just listen. They are asked to suggest themes whilst blowing their foamy cappuccinos or nursing a fruity Beaujolais. Previous topics include “Is hell other people?” and “Does love make you blind?”.

The only ground rules are: you speak as an individual rather than use the arena as a platform for political or religious ends, and you respect a person’s space to express themselves.

So popular was the concept when it crossed the channel in 1998, that eager participants were turned away from the door of the first Café Philo in London. Now two young philosophers, Brian Elliot and Richard Fitch, are introducing the idea to Scotland at the French Institute in Edinburgh.

Brian, a philosophy tutor at Edinburgh University, explains: “The idea came from university where I was helping out on a kind of philosophy café. Then I read an article in *Philosophy Now* about places in London. We decided to tailor it for Scotland where philosophy has always played a key role in the higher education system.”

At the Edinburgh ‘happenings’, both he and Richard share the role of *animateur*. Brian expands: “The *animateur* keeps conversation going, ensuring any digression adds depth. It’s up to the *animateur* to open the questioning and then facilitate discussion. Our comments should be minimal and we must try not to prejudice things. But on the other hand, we want to maintain a relatively focused discussion. I’m concerned about knee jerk reactions and being bogged down in details.”

In this disjunction between control and open debate, heated discussion often flares. The theme of the first event in Edinburgh, ‘What is democracy today?’, produced a few fireworks. Lillian Kennedy (or Brzoska to use her preferred cosmopolitan sobriquet) breezed into proceedings trailing a bouquet of lilies and carnations.

She removed a feathered trilby with an exaggerated flourish, unfurling her long silver tresses. “Democracy is dancing together to the same wonderful tune,” she offered.

“But what happens when the tune changes and someone wants to dance differently?”

Duncan Simson, a retired major in the Royal Scots with an Open University philosophy degree, accused her of talking absolute nonsense.

Lillian branded Duncan a “Died in the wool liar.”

She is a formidable opponent and a fan of “open communication, continental style. I feel European and I love the café society in France. I love the way Rastas talk in a dynamic style. They’re inherently philosophical but non-elitist, unlike this educated crowd. I could do a cabaret slot here.”

Admittedly, grey hair was over represented on the first evening. The next event had more youngsters, one fashioning a concertina fan out of the pamphlet outlining that evening’s topic: ‘The Nature of Knowledge in the Age of Information.’. Lillian was absent.

“Philosophy is about masturbation,” declared one participant. “Politics is what it’s all about.” This elicited some sage nodding, whilst another contribution, “Knowledge is

the manipulation of ignorance” generated the philosophical equivalent of a whooping Jerry Springer audience (i.e., a few knowing smirks).

Wildly contrasting viewpoints proliferated. One woman’s description of orgasmic delight parried an Australian student’s joy of pure mathematics.

Retired typist, Helen Tennent, staked her claim early. “To me, knowledge is knowing yourself and it’s different for everyone.”

Duncan Simson, back for more, disagreed. “Knowledge is knowing two plus two equals four.”

Helen also divulged her lampshade theory of knowledge: “Edison invents the light bulb. Someone says it’s too bright and so invents a shade. Then someone says, ‘Let’s have an opaque bulb.’ Someone else says, ‘Let’s have a transparent lampshade.’ Is this knowledge?”

Duncan also has a theory. “I had an egg yesterday - that is history.”

A young Frenchman pronounces, “Society is a wonderful thing and that’s what we learn from history.”

“Are you dancing?” quips Helen.

Judging by the Edinburgh experiment, bizarre juxtapositions are as much a part of the Philosophy Café experience as the quest for conversations a little deeper than what's happening in Eastenders. This is no bad thing.

Brian has high expectations for the future: "To get it out into a more public place would be a good idea. This is a pilot. After the summer we're going to try and make it bigger, get a café, get sponsors. Then it will really take off."

Whilst announcing a break in the debate, Richard Fitch's flippant aside inadvertently encompasses the Café Philosophique clarion call: "Don't stop thinking."

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