

Conference Reflections

The 5th International Conference on Philosophical Practice (ICPP), entitled 'Thinking Through Dialogue', was held at Wadham College, University of Oxford on 27–30 July 1999, organized by the Society of Consultant Philosophers (later the SPP). This section republishes reports of personal experiences at the conference from several participants: conference veterans, first-timers, and conference organizers.

Veterans: Jess Fleming & Dries Boele

Jess Fleming

My first observation is that while quite a lot of old-timers who have been attending the conferences since the first one in Vancouver in 1994 were at the conference in Oxford—for example Lydia Amir, Jon Borowicz, Dries Boele, Stanley Chan, Jos Delnoij, Ora Gruengard, Ida Jongma, Anders Lindseth, Lou Marinoff, Petra von Morstein, Anette Prins, Shlomit Schuster, Eite Veening, and myself (I have attended all five: Vancouver, Amsterdam, New York, Bensberg & Oxford)—there were of course a lot of new and relatively new-comers such as John McHugh, Warren Shibles, the growing Norwegian contingency, and too many others to mention here, there were also some old-timers missing, for example, Gerd Achenbach (and other, younger, Germans such as Michael Schefczyk, and Patrick Neubauer), as well as the Israelis Rachel Blass and Ran Lahav, and my North American colleagues, Ken Cust, Paul Sharkey, James Tuedio, and David Jopling, just to name a few. On the one hand it is encouraging that so many people are becoming interested in philosophical counselling & philosophical practice, but on the other hand, I think it is regrettable that so many who have taken a leading role in the past didn't make it this time for whatever reason. Above all, I regret that my good friend and colleague, Vaughana Feary, couldn't come due to her serious illness. Vaughana's intelligence, kind-heartedness, and big smile were missed by many who know her, not to mention her articulate and civil voice in all matters concerning philosophical counselling.

As always, I heard a lot of discussion about the pros and cons regarding certification and licensing; at least this time (unlike the past two conferences) the discussion was generally civil and rational, rather than vitriolic and emotional. There has always been the question what, if any, academic training in philosophy (or "philosophical counselling") should be required of someone thinking of practising philosophical counselling. I personally think that Ernesto Spinelli is right (in *Demystifying Therapy*) that it is the counsellor's "way of being" in the world, rather than any theoretical orientation or training, which is crucial. Being-with colleagues such as Vaughana, Ida, Dries, Lydia, Anders, and Will Heutz makes me think that it is indeed how one lives out one's life, rather than what one says, which makes the difference. Hence, I myself, always enjoy the social side of these gatherings, partly in the hope that the goodness and wisdom of others will somehow rub off on me. I continue to be pleased that more and more people see the obvious value of Asian philosophy in philosophical counselling, and am pleasantly surprised to overhear people speaking of Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and

so forth. In my own talks I have always tried to say and show the importance of humour and irony, and I am glad that I saw and heard a lot of people trying to be funny.

In regard to how the Oxford conference differed from others in the past, I think Karin Murris, Elizabeth Aylward, Trevor Curnow, et al. did a fine job, and especially appreciate two things which I think should be continued at all future conferences:

1. Distributing the papers in advance so we can read them and then focus on discussion and dialogue, and
2. Holding actual counselling sessions so we can really see how others handle clients and their problems.

I was also intrigued by the talks on philosophy for children, which I don't know much about, and which has not been (to my recollection) included in our past conferences. I think Emmy van Deurzen's talk was very well received, and I myself always get a real kick out of hearing her speak, or perhaps I should say being in her presence while she recounts her own experiences as an existential counsellor. She is another good example of someone whose presence can be inspiring and encouraging, with her wit and candour. I thought her talk was an excellent way to bring the conference to a conclusion. The post-conference business meeting was conducted in a cordial and co-operative manner, I thought, and I'm happy that Ted (Welch) agreed to do the NIPP networking for us all, and that the Norwegians will host the next conference, but I personally wish we could have decided to meet yearly as usual, rather than wait two years for the next get-together. Next time I look forward to seeing my old friends, my new friends, and making other new friends.

Dries Boele

What I first of all liked very much was the combination of a beautiful location (University and Oxford), good weather, nice people (many of them I have met at other International conferences), interesting lectures and workshops and the bar life in the evening (it was very nice that we could stay outside the conference building; in New York for example we had to go somewhere else. It will be this combination that I will remember.

Interesting was the contrast with the conference in Germany last year. Many lectures then were boring, especially the keynote speakers, because they didn't know how to present their lecture (all read) and often these speakers were university professors who didn't have a clue what practical philosophy was, but nevertheless they thought they had the right to say everything about it. Very irritating. This was not the case in Oxford. Most keynote speakers were philosophical practitioners themselves and the others had an interesting presentation (I am thinking here of Richard Smith and Eulalia Bosch who were both excellent). On the negative side, the *café philo* was a flop. I had dinner then with some non-philosophers who said that all their prejudices concerning philosophy and philosophers were confirmed by this 'show'.

Some workshops were good (interesting views and experiences), others bad (especially the presentation). It was a pity that the idea of texts available beforehand so that we could discuss more and more precisely, didn't work at all. I turned my workshop into a discussion with that idea in mind, but I found I couldn't rely on people having read my text. There were also too many workshops at the same time for my liking, but it was not possible to organise it otherwise.

What I liked was the absence of discussions about the difference between philosophical counselling and psychotherapy (at least in the lectures and workshops I attended.) At the other conferences this was often an issue. I liked as well the presence of different forms of philosophical practice: counselling, Socratic dialogue, philosophy with children, dilemma training, philosophy in business. This was also different from Germany. Three years ago in Leusden, Holland, we had the same formula: the model being the philosophical practitioner who often combines several practices if he wants to earn his or her money with it.

I think the international meeting at the end was a success, despite the heated debates sometimes (I know I contributed to it as well). I am glad that we initiated the NIPP. I think it is a good instrument to discuss and to stay in contact with each other. (I hope it will not deteriorate...) Important for me is as well that the NIPP is not connected with a society or association in particular. (I hope this will be respected in the future.)

I hope also that we will have a small study conference next year, on a special theme, somewhere in Greece, France or in the Trans-Siberian Express. I already have some ideas for it. One or more such small conference will satisfy other needs than a big International Conference. Both are interesting and necessary. For me a big International Conference has to offer the opportunity for everybody to present his or her research, what they discovered and explored since the last conference. For me the conference in Oxford was such a conference! A study conference has another purpose, can be more specialised, with only people who like the subject.

When I compare the Oxford conference with the previous ones, I still see a lot of development. I like that. It keeps philosophical practice a fresh and renewing movement. I hope it will take a long time before it becomes established with its elite of respected fossils and its sanctuary for its pioneers and all such horrible stuff. In every country where the conference is held, it means an enormous impulse for the development of philosophical practice in that particular country. Karin Murriss did a very good job. I know others helped a lot, but I think her energy and will were indispensable.

I like very much the absence of politics at the conference. In New York and in Bensberg politics spoilt the atmosphere: societies and individuals trying to gain influence -secret networks and meetings, etc. Maybe we have left that behind us. (I am not sure, but well, let's hope.)"

First-timers: Lucy Traves & Ted Welch

Lucy Traves

At first, the conference was a very strange experience for me. To be back in Oxford again (where I studied for my first degree) attending lectures and seminars, but

without the strain of essays and tutorials, it seemed like some days out of time. It was like going back to my first few weeks at University. Here was a huge pile of people, more than I could have possibly imagined, who were interested and fired by the same issues as me. Some had known each other for some time (like 2nd and 3rd years) and there was the feeling of conversations, dialogues that had been going on for some time before my arrival.

As an English speaker, with precious few language skills, I was put to shame by other attendees. I find it difficult enough to find the precise words to convey what I want to say in seminars at the best of times—and I was speaking about this with someone, who said “yes, indeed, English is my fourth language—and sometimes it can be hard”. So, a big thank you to everyone for carrying proceedings on in English!

Like many others I was most disappointed that Gerd Achenbach couldn't make it. The lack of good translations of his papers means that I feel that I haven't been able to get a sufficient grip on his thought—and that thought informs the work of so many people I met and admired at conference, so I feel a huge lack. However, there were so many excellent seminars and lectures that I didn't weep for too long.

I was going to write that the main lack that I felt was that of practical work—but looking at my notes perhaps this isn't as true as I had thought. In parallel session 2, I went to Anette Prins 'Philosophical Exercises'. It was a very fun session to attend, as well as our minds moving, we had to move and interact with each other, I await Anette's book with much impatience. In parallel session 4, Stanley Chan discussed how he uses different concepts of time with the terminally ill. Although, this was 'chalk and talk' (in this case some very well prepared slides)—I felt that this really got to the nub of things. Rather than speaking about how one should 'do' philosophical counselling, Stanley spoke about what he actually 'did'.

When I have spoken to friends about philosophical counselling, many have asked me, how can speech using abstract concepts actually 'help' people? I realise that there is some debate about whether philosophical counsellors should think of themselves in that way, but Stanley's talk was a good demonstration of the effects of philosophical counselling on a person's life.

Ida Jongsma, Dorine Bauduin, Richard Smith and Will Heutz all spoke about the use of philosophy in a business context. I found it fascinating to contrast their different perspectives—each of them conjured up a picture of a rider in the circus pounding around the ring with a foot on one horse and one foot on another. I especially enjoyed Will Heutz as I felt that he rather gave of himself. Another lecture that gave me the same experience was that of Eulalia Bosch 'A Philosophical Approach to Contemporary Art'. I could have listened to her for far, far longer.

I'm very much looking forward to the next conference—and I'm determined to brush up my languages!

Ted Welch

There were participants from more than 20 countries, although there were only about 150 people. The small scale meant that people did not tend to fragment into specialised cliques, as seems to have happened in the recent philosophy

conference in Boston with its 3,500 participants. The human scale was echoed by the venue, Wadham College, Oxford. This rather idyllic setting, with tree-shaded lawns was made even more pleasant by hot, sunny weather.

The conference consisted of a number of plenary sessions and sets of parallel sessions which were either talks or workshops. Some main themes were the nature and uses of dialogue and the uses of philosophy in counselling, consultancy and education. Talks included such titles as: "Prozac vs Plato," "Philosophical counselling and Chuang Tzu's philosophy of love" and "Dialogical uses of metaphor." Workshops included: "Creative writing and mind-mapping", "Dialogue and multi-cultural issues" and "Philosophical questions in Organisations." It was also possible to book a personal philosophy counselling session.

The first plenary session was "Error, not Truth?" a presentation by Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss. It began with the showing of a video of children (about 9 years old) discussing their views on philosophy. This led to the reading of a dialogue between Joanna and Karin about the video. The dialogue had originally taken place via e-mail. Karin said that in thinking about the issues between getting e-mails, she had developed ideas about how she wanted the dialogue to go. However she had realised she hadn't really entering been into the spirit of the dialogue and so tried to be more open to the way the dialogue between them developed.

This self-reflection about the process of philosophising, particularly through dialogue, was echoed in a workshop on philosophy in management consulting. This workshop was called: "Reflection in Action: Creating a reflective space in management consulting." The introductory part involved getting our reactions to a text with a little speech by a middle-manager to an employee. We were asked to comment on this and our comments were written up on a flip-chart. These comments were very critical; apparently these initial comments are almost always negative and there is a kind of avalanche effect as people echo the tone of the first comments.

We were then asked to imagine that the person we'd been criticising came in and saw our comments. This led people to reflect on what they'd said and acknowledge that their comments could be seen as hasty and unfair. Ruud Meij, one of the workshop leaders, explained the underlying approach and theories behind the exercises. They feel that their approach is not merely of relevance in management consulting: "We think that our approach in creating a reflective practice as philosophers engaged in management consulting is of importance for every philosopher." Given the way many of the philosophers in the group had had to rapidly revise their initial responses to the first exercise, Boers and Meij have a point.

Warren Shibles' talk "Philosophical Practice and Emotion" was a further example of reflective practice; it involved radical questioning of some of the basic assumptions underlying philosophy in practice. He pointed out that there was a focus on a very restricted range of philosophers, a great emphasis on Socrates, but very varied interpretations of what Socratic Dialogue was.

One talk was about the value of web sites, particularly for teaching philosophy to children. Richard Anthone (from Belgium) has worked on the Philosophy Hotel during the European Netd@ys with schools in four countries—and four languages—in 1997 and the Philosophy Hotel in 1998 with new technical events such as streaming video, audio and with simultaneous translation. The

next project is even more ambitious. According to Richard: "Explorians will start in September this year ... children have to explain to aliens what our world is about. In fact this means a gigantic study project conducted by children and all this via the Internet." It was good to see someone using the new technology in this imaginative way to get children thinking about some ancient questions.

An important aspect of the conference was the informal discussion that took place on Wadham's lawns, on the terrace of the college bar and in some of Oxford's fine pubs. At the last plenary session participants expressed a desire to keep in touch and continue the discussions. It was decided to set up the *Network of International Philosophy in Practice* (NIPP) and a mailing list.

(Some of) The organisers: Trevor Curnow & Elizabeth Aylward

Trevor Curnow:

On the basis of, 'If you can do it once you can do it again' (if only that were true of every area of life!), I have been asked to write a report for *Practical Philosophy* on the Oxford conference, just as I produced one on Bensberg last year. However, certain significant differences obtain. I went to Bensberg as something of a wide-eyed neophyte in philosophical counselling circles, and attended a substantial number of the sessions on offer. A year later, though not noticeably wiser, I attended Oxford as one of the conference organisers, and only managed to get to one parallel session apart from my own. This year's report is therefore significantly more anecdotal and more reliant on second-hand experiences.

To begin with the basics. Oxford proved an inspired choice of location, the weather exceeded anyone's expectations, and the staff of the college bar were of the highest calibre. A decision was made at an early stage of the conference planning that it would provide a forum not only for those interested in philosophical counselling, but also for those involved in the areas of philosophy for children and philosophy in business. As a result, there was a very varied programme on offer, and many took the opportunity of exploring areas of philosophical practice which were not normally their own.

Another decision which was taken at a very early stage was to provide as much time as possible within the programmed sessions for discussion or practical workshop activities. To this end, as many materials as possible, in as full a form as possible, were circulated in advance. Although this necessitated a considerable amount of work, the experiment generally proved to be popular. The result was that those who gave papers usually only needed to introduce them, and discussions could focus on the areas participants found to be of particular interest. In the case of workshops, participants had a good idea as to what was an offer and were better able to make informed choices. This was particularly helpful given that we had to operate with a split site. Even with plenary sessions, there was generally far more discussion and/or participation than is common at conferences.

As always, discussions bring out differences of opinion as well as agreements. Putting 150 philosophers into a limited space can hardly be expected to yield anything else. Two fundamental issues merged more than once. First, as ever, there were debates over the nature of philosophy itself, and the significance of the divisions within it. Secondly, and relatedly, there were conflicting views over what

it was that philosophy had to offer in the different areas under consideration. Many of the points of contention were crystallised by Eite Veening in his plenary contribution, with his characterisation of the Platonist and Aristotelian approaches to philosophy, and what they had to offer. Given the fact that this particular pair of terms is now well into its third millennium of usage, it will come as no surprise that no obvious consensus emerged.

After some of the mind-numbing (i.e. incomprehensible), ear-numbing (i.e. for those of us relying on headphones for the interpreter's services), and buttock-numbing (i.e. too long) plenary sessions at Bensberg last year, one of the pleasures this year was the variety of plenary presentations on offer. For example, Ida Jongsmas and Dorine Baudoin showed that even after a long day and a decent dinner, you can still get an audience actively involved, and Eulalia Bosch sought to open our eyes to the density of meanings of visual images. In the sessions I attended, there was generally a level of liveliness on offer which I do not normally associate with the formal sessions of conferences.

Given that the ethos of a conference is as much established by what goes on outside the formal sessions as what goes on within them, it is pleasing to report that a general spirit of harmony prevailed, from the meditation-inspired tranquillity of the early morning to the alcohol-induced bonhomie of the very early morning. Thanks to Lia Keuchenius, Arthur Guinness et al.! One of the memories of the conference which will linger for a while is of a substantial number of delegates being despatched from outside the long-closed bar by an irate porter who had received complaints about the noise from students! And we really were discussing philosophical issues! Some headed into the city to carry on their debates at an alternative venue.

Having had some involvement with the organisation of the conference, I am aware of how much work was put into it by two people in particular, namely Karin Murris and Elizabeth Aylward, without whom it really would not have happened. Both for the planning of the whole enterprise and for their day to day management of the details of it, they wholly deserve the immense gratitude of all who attended.

To end on an anecdote, my own abiding memory of the conference is of trips to an Oxford bank with wads of bank-notes stuffed into pockets, as an unexpectedly large number of delegates settled their accounts in cash. After the third such trip I felt I had to explain to the cashier (it always seemed to be the same one) that just because I kept coming in with large wads of cash, that did not mean that I was dealing in drugs! Had she been of a logical bent, she could have pointed out that it also did not mean that I was not dealing in drugs. It may be a good thing that not everybody studies philosophy?"

Elizabeth Aylward

My impressions of the conference were many and various:

- the perfect weather;
- delight with my room at Wadham, wisteria-clad and in the Bursars' quad which meant easy access to everything;
- relief that all the books had arrived as promised;
- fear that we would not sell any and I would have to go crawling back to the suppliers;
- the almost overwhelming pressure of enrolment shared with Tim;
- exasperation at not knowing answers to some of the queries;
- relief that we had prepared a badge for every delegate;
- the early morning quiet on my trips down to Keble, only the sun up, another lone figure strolling round the quad, a furtive backpacker sneaking down one of the stair ways;
- admiration for Nigel's ability to speak clearly and informally at a moment's notice as he did at the Sheriff's reception;
- the mad dash with Karin back to Wadham immediately after the speeches, to try to deal with problems;
- trying each day to avoid the porters and Bursar who greeted me with "AH!" and a list of problems the moment they saw me;
- lugging the loads of books each day to the Okinaga corridor, hoping they would be lighter on the return journey;
- gratitude to Susan, Mary, David and Maria without whose help we should not have managed;
- after midnight checkings of numbers and money, the incredible din from the bar;
- appreciating Trevor's support and numerous trips to the Bank;
- frustration at not having time to stop and chat during coffee and lunch breaks;
- frustration again at only hearing bits of lectures;
- grateful for having the chance to meet our advertisers, especially the four ladies from Tangram, who were all fascinating to talk to;
- relief at the arrival of the photographer and at the way she did her job and the delight on the delegates faces when they saw the results next day;
- the blur of the AGM where we were all on auto pilot I think;
- chagrin at having, throughout the conference, wrongly directed delegates who asked for the New Seminar room;
- a lasting impression of a wonderful performance of Macbeth in a perfect setting;
- being unable to sleep on Tuesday and Wednesday nights in case I forgot something and then blotto on Thursday night after (faint) feelings of regret that it was all nearly over;
- grateful to have heard most of Dr. Stanley Chan's lecture and question session, which was personally helpful to me;
- sorry not to have the chance to talk to him further, horror at being so unfit that it was a major operation to climb into a space on the refractory benches;

- the taste of a long glass of ice cold lemonade handed to me after an extremely hot afternoon with our visiting reporter;
- the final International Forum, where there was an amazing enthusiasm and atmosphere even though everyone was exhausted;
- euphoria at the sight of the coach, an hour late, finally arriving at Gloucester Green for the homeward journey

Altogether although I regret some lost opportunities. It was overall a wonderful experience to be a part of such an atmosphere and undertaking, and I gained a great deal in terms of interest, contacts made and lessons learned.

Article originally published as:

Fleming, J., Boele, D., Traves, L., Welch, T., Curnow, T. & Aylward, E. (1999).
Conference Reflections. *Practical Philosophy*, 2.3 (November), pp.8–18.