

Notes for Monday 4th October guided discussion:

"Is philosophy dangerous?" Aristotle said that *"it is owing to wonder that men both now begin, and for the first time began, to philosophize"*. Wonder is a positive emotion, involving curiosity, surprise and joy, and it is an emotion that genuinely arises when philosophizing. But note the qualification, *"begins"* in wonder. Where might it lead, however? Socrates met his end at the hands of the Athenians under charges of *"refusing to recognize the gods recognised by the state"* and for *"corrupting the youth"*. And Kant, 2,000 years after Socrates, warned that metaphysics is *"a dark ocean without coasts and without lighthouses"*. Albert Camus wrote *"beginning to think is beginning to be undermined"*.

A famous slogan in modern physics is "shut up and calculate" – stop philosophizing, and rejoice in the undoubtedly remarkable and elegant powers of today's science. It could be generalised to "stop philosophizing because it is treacherous, and get on with living one's life more or less in accordance with the prescriptions of one's culture, for there lies all chance of happiness and fulfilment". It is entirely natural, because comforting and reassuring, to repose in the "official" ideas one was first taught, whether the ideas of, say, physics, or the ideas of one's surroundings general culture, and be done with it. But serious students of philosophy will encounter potentially disturbing questions – one might begin to detect what look like "noble lies" (and not so noble ones too) and "pious fictions", and so feel an undermining of one's own sense of being anchored in certainties, not to mention the possibilities of an undermining of society at large.

Kieran Quill