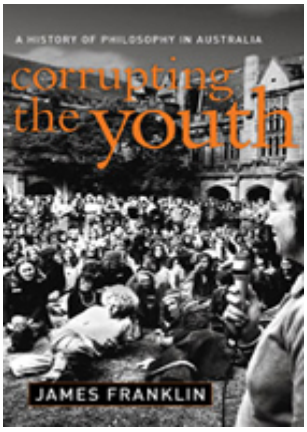
Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia by James Franklin.
Sydney: Macleay Press, 2003, pp. 465, A$59.95, ISBN: 1 876492 08 2.



The weaknesses of a book are often the counterparts of the style and approach underlying its strength, and the questions it sensibly, unintentionally or problematically precludes in establishing its scope. Franklin recounts a history of academic philosophy in Australia since the Scottish philosopher John Anderson commenced his Professorship at the University of Sydney in 1927. He justifies the focus on Anderson by arguing that the latter's arrival marked a break which set Australian philosophy on a course towards realism, materialism, atheism and a relentlessly critical outlook. The focus has the effect of privileging philosophy practiced in Sydney, while distinguishing the study from two earlier major works. The first of these is John Passmore's *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1957) a survey of the main writers in philosophy from 1850-1950, in which Anderson and his school are mentioned in a footnote. The second is Selwyn Grave's *History of Philosophy in Australia* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), which concentrates on the analytic tradition in universities up to 1983. In addition, Franklin's polemic style, and his approach to what he labels post-modernity and Idealism, draws much from David Stove, whose works are quoted in the text with a reverential glee.

Franklin is a mathematician, a historian of ideas, and a Catholic, who studied at the University of Sydney 1971-5, where he was strongly influenced by David Armstrong and David Stove. He deliberately and judiciously limits his enquiry to what he calls 'abstract' philosophy – logic, science, epistemology and ethics – as distinct from political and social philosophy. A significant and especially valuable portion of his study analyses the philosophy underpinning or implicit within the cultural history and landscape of Australian discourse and institutions, such as lifesaving, sport, scouting, freemasonry, science, psychiatry and the creed of empire. This comprehensive and detailed study of what is philosophically implicit within Australian cultural values is novel and largely original.

Franklin's taste for the sensational and newsworthy in the activities of academic philosophers makes for lively reading. Most notable are the chapters on the Knopfelmacher affair and subsequent Sydney 'disturbances', the Sydney Push and the way ASIO monitored its members, the case of Sydney Sparkes Orr's seduction of a student, and the analysis of Anderson's alleged nepotism and authoritarianism. The approach takes philosophy from the chalkboard to the event, from the abstract to scenes of struggle, scandal and folly, giving credence to the Hegelian notion that in their formation or implications, ideas are drawn out in blood. Franklin's insistence on the *implications* of ethical standpoints is an important motivation for the study as a whole, exemplified in the chapter on Peter Singer's preference for utilitarianism and its advocacy of active euthanasia.

The voluminous footnotes and quotes, accompanied by a useful guide to further reading, make Franklin's work a comprehensive and up-to-date study. The information is, however, belied at times by surveys which, in their breadth and occasionally partial or

partisan standpoint, present philosophical views framed by polemical opinion. Although it is commendable to open the book's window widely to sources, it is imperative not to skip over the arguments which sustain the theory under analysis, or to indulge in undue generalisation.

In short, Franklin's account is a *normative* one. The book's introduction distinguishes between 'admirable thinkers' and 'fast-talking charlatans' with their 'gullible disciples.' (p. 2). The ensuing chapters make clear that the former category is populated by those whose proclivities are, like Franklin's, inclined to metaphysical and moral realism, and the latter category's adherents are enchanted by the spectre of Idealism in various guises. Franklin's assessment of Idealism, including an excellent account of its influence on the ideology of empire and thinkers such as Vere Gordon Childe, ranges widely. His definition of Idealism as 'the doctrine that all is ideas: there is no truly physical world out there at all' is, however, too simplistic and too narrow to apply to the main targets of his derision, postmodernism and feminism. A major interpreter in Australia of the Sokal affair, he shows an unfortunate but common tendency to categorise a broad range of thinkers under the term 'postmodernist', with the connotations of nihilism, relativism and politicised opportunism. The spectre is too fuzzy, or histrionic, a pantomime ghost.

Franklin's account centres on *corruption*, the *ideal* of philosophy, and the identity of *Australian* philosophy. The theme of corruption refers in the book principally to two events. The first (to which it refers in passing) is the trial of Socrates. Franklin believes that it was 'absolutely true' (p. 34) that Socrates *sexually* corrupted the youth. As Tamas Pataki has pointed out, the evidence given for this assertion is a complete misreading of Plato's *Symposium*. The second refers to the controversy in Sydney between major Christian leaders and figures in the University of Sydney Philosophy Department, commencing with the publication of Dr V. J. Kinsella's *Empiricism and Freedom* (Killara: Author, 1958). According to Franklin, philosophy matters because: '[f]undamentals are dangerous, in that changes in them have consequences that reach far into the depths of thought and conduct, and far into the future' (p. 4).

If there is admirable and sham philosophy, the admirable might address Franklin's disappointment that 'philosophy has not put forward a range of positive answers as to what the meaning of life might be.' Philosophy as edifying – creating positive answers to the meaning of life – would overcome philosophy which is corrupted and corrupting. This, however, presumes that the vital *risk* of philosophy – that the youth become corrupt – is both negated and effaced. It suggests that the youth of philosophy – the figure or ideal of love and the transmission of knowledge – should serve philosophy by edification and not critical transformation. Can *risk* – the condition of critical enquiry – be rescued, as if the methods of philosophy were assured, reconciled, given in advance?

In examining the influences and implication of ideas in the Australian context, Franklin's book goes further than broadening and updating Selwyn Grave's earlier work. It is an indispensable study, making apparent and addressing crucial and current tensions within philosophy in Australia and abroad, which concern the identity and influence of 'philosophy'. Given the effect in Australia of the Dawkins reforms and Brendan Nelson's recently implemented policy programme, I think Franklin's study would have benefited from an analysis of the broad market conditions in which philosophy is taught as a viable discipline, and in which research is conducted and sustained. To the extent it conforms to

the current market conditions and their prevailing need to attract graduates with the promise of providing transferable skills and employability, surely philosophy risks negating its *raison d'être* of critical enquiry.

Like history, art, or literature, philosophy in Australia has accompanied *external* trends. Although he does not raise the topic specifically, I think that the question Franklin skirts, in chapters on Aboriginal spirituality, the teaching of history and recent ecology, is whether 'Australian experience' calls into question the 'universalist' paradigm of philosophical knowledge – philosophy as the origin and promise of science – in a meaningful way. If we understand by philosophy a specific or distinct concern for what is *universal* to knowledge, truth, experience or meaning, in terms of conditions, principles and applicability, the question of a *properly* and *inaugurated* Australian philosophy would be redundant, unless it could be shown that philosophers in or from Australia have made *contributions* to the universal or world philosophy that reflect or have emerged from what is essentially 'Australian.' If the 'Australian experience' calls into question the tradition or horizon of philosophy, the 'universalist' paradigm, Australian philosophers might escape the characterisation of being, to paraphrase Bertrand Russell on his visit in 1950, 'cordial but uninteresting.'

If Australian philosophy were ever to be identified or inaugurated, it would remain fundamentally indebted to the possibility of settlement and clearance and land underlying structure and edifice. It is the paramount value of Franklin's work to bring philosophy in twenty-first century Australia to the question of what has always been uppermost in philosophy and beyond its reach, namely, what is non-identical within it, what sustains it, and what places it at risk.

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