Philosophy and basic assumptions
Paul O’Grady

When we act, make decisions, identify and evaluate facts, we operate with a host of assumptions and modes of thinking that may or may not be correct – even when doing ‘objective’ science. The task of philosophy is to make these implicit structures of thought explicit and to test them for truth and rationality. However, because these assumptions are so basic and fundamental there is much disagreement and debate about them.

The part of philosophy that examines the nature, scope and methods of knowledge is epistemology. Within that field I have a long-standing interest in making sense of intellectual diversity: how it is that people may reasonably take very different assessments and stances on the nature of reality? My research has focused on relativism, religious belief, and latterly the notion of wisdom.

Relativism and philosophy of religion
Relativism has been seen by many as emancipatory: escaping the tyranny of a one-eyed vision and a monolithic conception of the world. It has also been viewed with suspicion as the possible justification of ‘alternative facts’. A significant part of my work has been to explore ways in which intellectual diversity and plurality can co-exist with rigorous critical methods – is it possible to foster plurality without descending into chaos and fake news? I brought together my first thoughts on this important theme in my monograph, Relativism (Routledge 2002).

One of the diverse ways of engaging with reality is religion. Philosophy of religion explores the meaning, diversity and rationality of religious beliefs. It is a field inhabited by atheists, agnostics, theists, polytheists and those who reject all such designations. My work in this field has been to critically examine the arguments of Thomas Aquinas, a major figure in the evolution of Christian thought and western culture, using the techniques of analytic philosophy. I wrote Aquinas’s Philosophy of Religion (Palgrave 2014) as an exploration of these issues.

The nature of wisdom: virtue epistemology
My current work draws on both these strands (relativism and Aquinas) and is an investigation of the notion of wisdom. This is the species of knowledge associated with living well and it is basic to the very nature of philosophy (which has been traditionally defined as ‘love of wisdom’). It was a central topic in ancient and medieval thought – with Aquinas producing one of the most developed accounts of the nature of wisdom in the western tradition - but it dramatically disappeared in 20th century thought. I’m interested in understanding why it disappeared and in engaging with the small but growing number of contemporary philosophers who are seeking to rehabilitate it.

A very recent movement – Virtue Epistemology – has brought discussions of wisdom into dialogue with mainstream epistemological issues. The main innovation of virtue epistemology is that it focuses primarily on the person holding a belief rather than on the abstract belief itself. Good properties of the person (e.g. reliability, thoroughness, courage) transfer to the belief and give it positive status. The topic of wisdom has been rehabilitated in this framework. It is therefore of interest to researchers in positive psychology, religious studies and education, and indeed to anyone who wishes to reflect on his or her own life uncovering their own assumptions and guiding principles.

When these guiding principles contribute to living well, they count as wisdom. I am currently working on clarifying the nature of that desirable goal through writing a book on the topic.

Paul O’Grady received his BA and MA from UCD and his PhD from Trinity before going to a lectureship at St Catherine’s College Oxford. He joined the Department of Philosophy as a lecturer in 1997, where he is now Head of Department and Professor. He was elected to fellowship in 2003. He won prizes from the American Philosophical Association and the Bertrand Russell Society and has published Relativism (Routledge 2002), Philosophical Theology (Priory 2008), Aquinas’s Philosophy of Religion (Palgrave 2014) and over 40 papers in theory of knowledge and philosophy of religion.

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