

The Reverend Dr David Efird. An academic tribute.

It will surprise many people in the congregation today to hear that David was a nihilist. It will surprise yet others to hear that David was a Heideggerian.

I will return to the topic of David's philosophical views in a while, but it is important to start where David would want us to start when considering his academic career: with his teaching.

Looking back over various documents I wrote about David when I was his Head of Department - letters of reference, performance reviews, promotion reports - his talents as a teacher come to the fore again and again.

David was a famously good teacher and mentor and one of the first ever recipients of a Vice-Chancellor's Teaching Award at York - an award that could have been designed with him in mind.

From undergraduates struggling with logic, to colleagues in other Departments engaging in reflective practice on their own teaching, or the countless young people in Vanbrugh and James Colleges who were negotiating the transition to adulthood and independence away from home, all who came into contact with him went away enriched and achieving their best.

It seems to me with hindsight that there was a common theme to his teaching and mentoring: he did not focus on knowledge or skills or learning outcomes, but on slowly building resilient self-confidence.

David knew one big thing about people and put it into practice everywhere: the pupil - be they student, mentee or, I suspect, parishioner - who has *earned* their self-confidence will be able to quickly and effectively learn what they need to learn.

Another thing I notice from those documents is how I instinctively and repeatedly described David as a 'friend and colleague' or 'friend and collaborator'. I am certain that this is a universal response in everyone who worked with David: one didn't merely like and respect him, one always felt he was a true friend.

This abiding commitment to priority of human relationships, and engaging with people around him, extended to his research as well. Looking over his publications list it is striking that in fifteen years of productive research, he only ever published five single-authored pieces and had 10 different co-authors.

This thoroughly collaborative approach did not arise from the nature of the research, as it might do in the sciences, but from the nature of the man. For David, thinking, talking, writing, commenting, and revising were continuous and unified. He did not retire to a solitary island to have great insights but continually engaged with everyone and anyone around him in all parts of the research process. He once told me that he actively disliked those times, such as during his PhD, when he had been working in the traditional 'lone scholar' model of the humanities.

But this social approach to philosophical research did not prevent David having a clear and distinctive philosophical position of his own. So let's come back to Heidegger and nihilism.

David was, chronologically and intellectually, first of all a metaphysician. And he often approvingly quoted Heidegger's remark that the fundamental question of metaphysics is 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'

Now that question only makes sense, can only get an interesting answer, if there could have been nothing. Today it is probably easiest to explain this in terms of the opening sentence of the Bible:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.

Either God had to do that or he chose to. If he had to, then there had to be something and we haven't explained why there is something rather than nothing. At best we have explained why there is *this* something rather than *that* something. But if God chose to create, then he could have chosen not to - there could have been nothing.

More than a third of David's published work defends the view that there could have been nothing, a view he liked to call metaphysical nihilism.

[I may be somewhat to blame for this, since his PhD thesis defended the contrary claim that 'that every individual must have existed; or, in other words, that every individual is a necessary existent'. However, a conversation 17 years ago in the tiny printroom-cum-kitchen the Philosophy Department used to have in Derwent College lead to a decade long collaboration on the possibility of nothing.]

David also had an interest in Social Epistemology - the formation of beliefs in and by groups of people - and, in a way that we now know was typical of him, this was first announced to the world when he offered to teach an undergraduate module on the topic.

Simultaneously he was becoming interested in an emerging subdiscipline - yet to settle on a name - which was returning to a medieval tradition of enquiring about the metaphysical foundations required by the truth of Christian doctrine. In the early 18th century, Christian philosophers had by and large come to accept that the mysteries of religion - the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection - may not be against reason but were certainly beyond reason. The emerging discipline David was leading, now perhaps best known as Analytic Theology though David initially preferred Philosophical Theology, challenges this and tries to find rationally acceptable philosophical theories which make those mysteries possible.

I will end with the title of David's most recent publication,

The Resurrection of the Minority Body: Physical Disability in the Life of Heaven

David's medieval forebears had struggled with the consequences of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, given that by the time of death, few of us will have the body we would like to keep for eternity. David took this debate to a different level: while Aquinas believed that God would reward us with a return to some standard of physical perfection, David was more concerned with inclusivity. Not only does physical disability provide a challenge for the idea of physical 'perfection' as a just reward, but also many physical and neural differences and diversities can be tied closely to people's sense of identity and self-worth. David argued persuasively that God would respect this and heaven could be fulfilling for those who were resurrected with physical disability.

It was a brave topic to tackle and nicely sums up David's life: religion, philosophical rigour and loving concern for his fellow humans.

TWCS
14th February 2020