

Philosophy Plays: A Neo-Socratic Way of Performing Public Philosophy

Edward Spence

This paper provides an explanatory rationale within a theoretical framework for the Philosophy Plays project. The object of the Philosophy Plays is to introduce philosophy, and especially Western Philosophy, to the general public through philosophical presentations by professional philosophers incorporating drama. They have created a public domain for philosophy where relevant issues and topics of public interest and importance, such as love, immortality, happiness, friendship, religion, knowledge, trust, pets, morality and corruption, can be presented by professional philosophers and discussed in an open forum with members of the general public. The Philosophy Plays, like Platonic dialogues, seek to engage their audiences both intellectually (primarily through the philosophical talk) and emotionally (primarily through the drama). So like Plato's dialogues, from which they draw their inspiration, the Philosophy Plays which combine dialectic (the philosophical talk) with rhetoric (the drama) seek to engage their public audiences in a realistic and shared lived experience thus rendering philosophy a practical and meaningful activity for all participants. *Thus all our dignity consists in thought. It is on thought that we must depend for our recovery, not on space and time, which we can never fill. Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality* (Pascal, 1966:s.200; p. 95).

Spence, Edward 2005. Philosophy Plays: A Neo-Socratic Way of Performing Public Philosophy. In E. Close, M. Tsianikas and G. Frazis (eds.) "Greek Research in Australia: Proceedings of the Biennial International Conference of Greek Studies, Flinders University April 2003", Flinders University Department of Languages - Modern Greek: Adelaide, 65-80.

Historical background

I first conceived of and founded the Philosophy Plays project in 1997 for the primary aim of taking philosophy out of the intellectually constraining spaces of university classrooms and professional conferences and into the liberating spaces of the public agora as Socrates did 2,500 years ago. It was a way of, once again, rendering philosophy relevant and resonant to the shared and common concerns and interests of the citizenry of the modern polis.

There have been seven annual series over the last seven years, each series comprising six to thirteen fortnightly sessions most of which are repeated two or three times according to popular demand. Each series is organised around a generic theme. To date the themes have been as follows: "Love, the Good, Knowledge and Friendship" in 1997, six sessions on mainly Greek philosophy; "Visions of Immortality, God, Body and Soul" in 1998, ten sessions on the exploration of the connections and continuity between Greek and Modern philosophy; "Philosophy East and West" and "Zen and Zeno" in 1999, thirteen sessions on the exploration of the connections between Eastern and Western philosophy; "Olympics of the Mind" in 2000, nine sessions on the celebration of philosophical thought during the Sydney Olympics; and "Philosophy as the Art of Living" in 2001 and 2002, nine sessions on the exploration of how philosophy conceived as practical wisdom can guide us in living better and happier lives; and "Thought for Food" in 2003, on various aspects of moral philosophy and applied ethics from Plato to the present.

The Philosophy Plays are performed fortnightly at a Greek restaurant, *Steki*, in the inner-west suburb of Newtown in Sydney. The philosophers are from various universities from around Australia and also include visiting philosophers from the USA.

I have also presented and performed philosophy plays at various national and international arts and cultural festivals in Australia, including the 1999 Greek Festival of Sydney (*Socrates in Love*), the 2000 Sydney Fringe Festival (*The Philosophy of Happiness*), the 2002 Adelaide

Fringe Festival in South Australia (*The Philosophy of Happiness*), the 2003 Greek Festival of Sydney (*Plato, Power and the Ring of Corruption*) and for the 2004 Adelaide Fringe Festival and Greek Festival of Sydney (the *Philosophy of Love* based on Plato's *Symposium*). The *Philosophy of Love* presentations for the two Festivals were accompanied by performances of an original play *The Philosophy of Love: Love in the Age of Terror* which I wrote specifically for those two events. For the 2004 Greek Festival of Sydney, the venue for the philosophy presentation and performance of the play was the Sydney Opera House. This, I believe, is an indication of the versatility of the Philosophy Plays which have been performed in restaurants, tavernas, theatre spaces, vineyards (for the Adelaide Fringe Festival the venue for the presentations was Coriole Vineyards in McLaren Vale), pubs, and the Sydney Opera House.

From the *Philosophy of Freedom*, performed for the 2005 Greek Festival of Sydney at the Museum of Sydney. Blair Milan and Amy Firth performing their respective characters of Theo and Sofia in the play *The Oracle of Light*, written, produced and directed by Edward Spence.

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The objective and structure of the Philosophy Plays

The primary object of the Philosophy Plays is to introduce philosophy to the general public and local communities through philosophical presentations by professional philosophers incorporating drama. To this end the Philosophy Plays aim at making philosophy, and especially Western philosophy, more accessible to the general public. As a large number of people do not have the time or the resources to study philosophy at universities and other tertiary institutions, the Philosophy Plays provide a means of rendering philosophy accessible to people who would otherwise not have access to it.

The Philosophy Plays are usually performed at a restaurant in the form and style of a Platonic symposium. They comprise four interrelated components:

1. A 20-minute talk by a professional philosopher;
2. A play performed by actors that dramatically illustrates some of the ideas in the philosophical talk;
3. Audience participation through discussion of the presentation and performance;
4. A banquet of food and wine served to the audience and the participants.

The drama component in the Philosophy Plays is either adapted from existing plays or philosophical dialogues or created and written specifically by the philosopher presenters themselves.

The Philosophy Plays, like Platonic dialogues, seek to engage their audiences both dialectically (primarily through the philosophical talk) and emotionally (primarily through the drama). The restaurant setting provides a popular and relaxed forum where people from different backgrounds and different levels of philosophical sophistication can come together to discuss various philosophical issues. This is the setting familiar in Plato's *Symposium* and it is the setting that inspired

the structure of the philosophy play presentations. The banquet and the wine are grist to the mill of philosophical discussion. They create a convivial atmosphere where the audience and the performers come together in friendship, as in Plato's *Symposium*, to engage actively in a liberating and lively philosophical exchange. Interestingly, the word "restaurant" is derived from the word "restore". One could say that doing philosophy in a restaurant restores both the mind and the body through providing food for thought. In combination, the philosophy presentation, the banquet of food and wine as well as the dramatic performance can, when presented and performed successfully, engage the public audience both intellectually and emotionally.

The Philosophy Plays always aim to be at once entertaining and informative but most importantly, transformative. For it is only through a personal and authentic transformation that philosophy as the examined life can be conceived as practical wisdom and become a way of life, a "βίου τέχνη" or the art of life, that leads to a flourishing and fulfilling life.

The philosophical rationale for the Philosophy Plays

According to the quotation from Pascal above, "all our dignity consists in thought. It is on thought that we must depend for our recovery, not on space and time, which we can never fill. Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality."

Pascal also said that "the heart has its own reasons". I extend the metaphor by adding that reason has its own passion. The Philosophy Plays is an attempt to bring together reason and passion, the cognitive and the affective, the intellect and the emotions, through the combined mediums of philosophy and drama.

Philosophy for the public

In the preface of her book *Poetic Justice*, Martha Nussbaum, referring to Walt Whitman, tells us that "Walt Whitman wrote that the literary

artist is a much needed participant. The poet is ‘the arbiter of the diverse [...] the equalizer of his age and land.’ His capacious imagination ‘sees eternity in men and women’ and ‘does not see men and women as dreams or dots.’ Whitman’s call for public poetry is, I believe, as pertinent to our time as it was to his [...] Very often in to-day’s political life we lack the capacity to see one another as fully human, as more than ‘dreams and dots.’”

Nussbaum goes on to say that the purpose of her book “is to describe the ingredient of public discourse that Whitman found missing from his America and to show some roles it still might play in our own. It grows out of the conviction, which I share with Whitman, that the storytelling and literary imagining are not opposed to rational argument, but can provide essential ingredients in a rational argument” (Nussbaum, 1995: xiv). In what follows, I will explain and demonstrate how “storytelling and literary imagining”, through the medium of philosophy plays, “can provide essential ingredients in a rational argument.”

But first I want to briefly explore Nussbaum’s claim in *Poetic Justice* that “academic philosophy in the United States has had relatively few links with practical choice and public life” (Nussbaum, 1995:xiv). Nussbaum is perhaps right about the *degree* of contact if not the scope and her comment could apply not only to academic philosophy in the United States but equally to academic philosophy in the Western analytic tradition generally.

Leaving aside the degree with which it does, there are several ways in which academic philosophy makes contact with public life. There is to begin with the contact with the *education domain* through the traditional educational model of philosophy found in universities and other tertiary institutions. Though indirect, this is the primary contact of academic philosophy with public life. Aligned to this but not directly related, is the teaching and practice of applied and professional ethics that targets particular groups of professionals such as the police, the media, medicine and health care, engineering, social work, the public sector, business, and other professional groups in the *professional domain*. This *professional* model of philosophy has by far

a more direct contact with the public than the traditional educational model and one that has had expanding growth in the last few years. Philosophy also makes contact with the *political domain* that targets government both locally and globally on issues of human rights and other issues of political governance.

However extensive the degree of this contact of philosophy with public life is, in scope if not in degree, the *cultural domain* is an area of public life that philosophy has had very little contact with. This is the domain where most people spend their daily lives. Going to the cinema, to the theatre, to concerts, eating out at restaurants, visiting friends or family, lounging around cafes, socialising in bars, going to church, playing sport or hanging out in gyms. This is primarily the domain of the affections and the sentiments. If there is anywhere where reason is the slave of the passions, it is, if Hume is right, in the cultural domain. If philosophy is going to make contact with public life in the cultural domain, then its approach has to be one that can appeal to the affections and the sentiments of the public. A public moreover who by and large is not acquainted or familiar with philosophy, and especially Western philosophy. In order to engage with public life within the *cultural domain*, philosophy has to employ rhetorical devices that can appeal to popular culture.

The Philosophy Plays employ two main rhetorical devices that have popular cultural appeal. First, the restaurant setting provides through a banquet of food and wine a convivial atmosphere where people can eat, drink and relax among friends. This is the setting familiar in Plato's *Symposium* (Plato, 1997) and it is the setting that inspired the structure of the philosophy play presentations. Secondly, the drama that accompanies each philosophy presentation provides as a form of entertainment as well as through its emotional content, a means of engaging the audience and motivating their attention and participation. In combination, the philosophy presentation, the banquet of food and wine as well as the dramatic performance can, when presented and performed successfully, engage the public audience both intellectually and emotionally.

In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum tells us that her “central subject is the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstances, be oneself or of one’s loved ones.” Talking of the reading of literature as a way of animating public thinking and public debate, she goes on to say that “the reader’s emotions and imagination are highly active as a result, and it is the nature of this activity, and its relevance for public thinking, that interests me” (Nussbaum, 1995:5). In the case of the Philosophy Plays it is the audience’s emotions and thoughts that are of relevance to public thinking. And the discussion that follows the Philosophy Plays is crucial in providing the public audience with a dialectical evaluative assessment.

Citing Adam Smith, Nussbaum refers to this kind of evaluative assessment as one carried out by a “judicious spectator”. According to Nussbaum, Smith’s judicious spectator “offers an artificial construction [...] {that} supplies a filtering device for emotion of just the sort that Smith thought necessary for emotions to play the valuable role they ought to play in public life.” For Nussbaum thinks, and I agree, that “the spectator’s responses are not just willed attitudes of concern, they are really emotions; and Smith plainly believes that the cultivation of appropriate emotions is important for the life of the citizen” (Nussbaum, 1995:72–74). One of the central concerns of the Philosophy Plays is the cultivation of appropriate public emotions through the dialectical structure provided by them. This is achieved through the balance between the dialectical framework of the philosophical presentation and the rhetorical structure of the drama, which are then subjected to an evaluative assessment by the judicious spectators in the public audience.

The audience participation through discussion helps provide a dialectical evaluative assessment of the topic presented and performed in the philosophy play. Following Wayne Booth, Nussbaum refers to this discursive process as “coduction” since as she says it is “a nondeductive, comparative type of practical reasoning that is carried on in cooperation with others. In the process of coduction, our intuitions about a

literary work will be refined by the criticisms of ethical theory and of friendly advice, and this may greatly alter the emotional experience that we are able to have as readers [...]” (Nussbaum, 1995:76).

Philosophy as therapy

What inspires and informs the Philosophy Plays? The central inspiration of the Philosophy Plays is the Hellenistic belief that philosophy must be practical. Not just ethics, but all aspects of philosophy, including, logic, metaphysics, and epistemology. Epicurus tells us that “empty is the philosopher’s argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sickness of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul” (Nussbaum, 1994:13). The Greek Stoic Crysippus also describes the philosophical art in therapeutic terms. He says, for example, that “it is not true that there exists an art called medicine, concerned with the diseased body, but no corresponding art concerned with the diseased soul. Nor is it true that the latter is inferior to the former, in its theoretical grasp and therapeutic treatment of individual cases” (Nussbaum, 1994: 13). Cicero speaking on behalf of the Stoics expresses the same view. He contends that “there is a medical art for the soul. It is philosophy, whose aid need not be sought, as in bodily diseases, from outside ourselves. We must endeavour with all our resources and all our strength to become capable of doctoring ourselves” (Nussbaum, 1994:14). All the Hellenistic Schools accepted Sextus Empiricus’ view that “philosophy is an activity that secures the flourishing life by arguments and reasonings” (Nussbaum, 1994:15).

In her book *The Therapy of Desire* (1994), Martha Nussbaum takes up and expands on the Hellenistic arguments that support the claim that philosophy is therapy for the soul. Referring to the Hellenistic philosophers, she argues that the Hellenistic philosophers “saw the philosopher as a compassionate physician whose arts could heal many pervasive types of human suffering. They practiced philosophy not as

a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery” (Nussbaum:1994:3).

According to Nussbaum, these philosophers’ focus was “the state of desire and thought in the pupil which made them seek a newly complex understanding of human psychology, and led them to adopt complex strategies — interactive, rhetorical, literary — designed to enable them to grapple effectively with what they had understood [...]. In these ways Hellenistic ethics is unlike the more detached and academic moral philosophy that has sometimes been practiced in the Western tradition” (Nussbaum, 1994:4). As Nussbaum reminds us, for the Hellenistic philosophers, philosophy was a “βίου τέχνη” or art of life (Nussbaum, 1994:5). By doing philosophy one learned how to live a good, ethical, and most importantly, happy life.

Philosophy as public knowledge and rationality

The only legitimate authority is the authority of reason that is engendered through interactive dialogue that engages both the mind and the emotions. Philosophy as presented in the Philosophy Plays is primarily a dialogue in which all contributors, philosophers, actors and the public audience, play an equal part in their shared cognition and emotions and evaluative assessment of those shared cognitions and emotions through the discussion that follows each philosophy play. This is a process in which the subjective experience of each participant becomes objectified through interactive dialogue with others and objectivity becomes authentically subjective through the discovery of shared truths and values by each individual person. It is through this process that transformation takes place, a transformation that potentially leads to enlightenment and liberation from the shackles of subjective biases and ignorance and the arrogance of an externally imposed unauthenticated and often unsubstantiated “objective knowledge” disseminated by the media in all its different guises.

Paraphrasing from Paulo Freire’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

(Freire, 1996:48), in order to achieve this kind of philosophical transformation it is necessary to trust in the ability of people to reason. According to Freire, “whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate dialogue, reflection, and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiques, monologues, and instructions” (Freire, 1996: 48). This reminds me of a poignant moment in Brecht’s play *Galileo* where Galileo, responding to his friend’s advice to be careful about expressing his dangerous cosmological views, replies that if he did not have trust in people’s ability to reason he could not get out of bed in the morning. It is perhaps this conception of public reason that Nussbaum refers to as “the multi-valued conception of public rationality” (Nussbaum, 1995:xv).

The unreflective intellectual authority that Galileo was opposing is akin in spirit to the intellectual arrogance opposed by Socrates. Socrates’ metaphor for true knowledge was midwifery. Socrates, who saw himself as a philosophical midwife helping others give birth to knowledge, believed that true knowledge cannot be imposed by experts from without, nor generated from within through unreflective dogmatic and self-serving thoughts but rather, generated internally both individually and collectively through participation in interactive reflective dialogue. Following Socrates’ metaphor we can say that philosophy takes place, or should take place, in a “public nursery”. This introduces the dual concepts of love and innocence, cognitive sentiments that I believe are essential to the pursuit of truth and wisdom.

As Paulo Freire correctly points out, “dialogue cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people” (Freire, 1996: 70). It is for that reason that I consider Plato’s dialogue on Love, the *Symposium*, to be central to his philosophy. If philosophy is the love of wisdom then wisdom cannot exist in the absence of love. The innocence comes through philosophy’s magical ability to transform us into curious children encountering the world for the first time. Without stretching Socrates’ metaphor too far, we not only give birth to knowledge through philosophy but are also born anew through philosophy. This is how death and birth come together in Plato. We die to the

world of arrogance and ignorance and are reborn into the world of truth and wisdom. This intricate connection between death and birth through the transformation of love is clearly evident in the thematic continuity between Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedo*, Plato's dialogues on Love and Death.

Philosophy as public performance

As mentioned earlier, a very important and significant aspect of the Philosophy Plays project is the performance of philosophy through drama in venues such as restaurants, vineyards, pubs, theatres, opera houses, and other venues accessible to public audiences. This is in keeping with the Socratic way of doing philosophy through interactive dialogue with the citizens of the polis in widely accessible public spaces: philosophy in the agora (market place) of ideas and feelings.

To demonstrate this practical and applied aspect of the Philosophy Plays project, a philosophy play, *Plato, Power and the Ring of Corruption*, was performed in a Greek restaurant in Adelaide as part of the conference dinner for the Fifth Biennial Greek Studies Conference 11–13 April 2003. The performance incorporated a philosophical talk by Edward Spence with a dramatic performance of an original play, *A Perfect Injustice*, by Edward Spence and Liam Nesbitt, and free audience participation through discussion in the form of a Platonic symposium including food and wine. The play was performed by Liam Nesbitt and Fay Akrivou, two actors from Sydney who have contributed regularly to the Philosophy Plays program at Steki Taverna over recent years.

The play *A Perfect Injustice* begins with an opening scene adapted from Plato's *Apology* in which Socrates defiantly addresses the Athenian court after being found guilty for corrupting the youth of Athens and is sentenced to death by hemlock. The next scene switches to a contemporary setting and the rest of the play explores contemporary issues in corruption generally and police corruption specifically through the Myth of Gyges in Plato's *Republic*. The two main characters, Constable Socrates and Constable Shepherd, represent, respectively, the

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just person who though perfectly just appears unjust and the unjust person who though completely corrupt and unjust appears perfectly just. This is the phenomenon that Glaukon in Plato's *Republic* describes as a "perfect injustice." The audience participation through open discussion that followed allowed members of the public to debate issues of contemporary corruption through the philosophical framework provided by Plato's Myth of Gyges in the *Republic* highlighting Plato's continuing relevance to and resonance with our own ethically challenging times. In particular the audience was asked to consider for themselves which of the two alternatives is better: to appear just when one is not, and not only not be punished but rewarded by society for one's injustice, or alternatively to appear unjust and punished or

An audience participation through discussion at a typical philosophy night presentation
for the *Philosophy of Happiness* performed for the 2003 Fringe Festival of Sydney
at *Steki Taverna* in Sydney.

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shunned by society though one is, like Socrates, perfectly just. Plato's distinction between appearance and reality, as famously illustrated in his "Allegory of the Cave" in the *Republic*, is not only of epistemological significance but equally and perhaps more importantly, it is of ethical significance, a significance no less relevant and important today than it was in Socrates' time. It is as important to us today as it was in Plato's time to be able to distinguish the shadows from reality. This is not merely important for discovering true knowledge but it is equally important for discovering the Good and making it our own as Plato through the words of Diotima, the mysterious woman from Mantinea, counsels us in the *Symposium*, Plato's dialogue on Love.

Curtain call

I thought it appropriate to conclude this paper with a short extract from my talk on the "Philosophy of Happiness" that I presented at the 2002 Adelaide Fringe Festival and which was accompanied by a dramatic performance of an edited extract from Plato's *Symposium*. The performance of the *Symposium* was meant to illustrate the crucial importance of love for happiness, especially love for the Good. What follows is the final segment of my talk on how love is a necessary condition for happiness.

Happiness and love

In 1997, I presented the first philosophy play on the topic of love, based on Plato's *Symposium*, which incidentally furnished the Philosophy Plays format, a group of friends who come together to eat, drink wine and talk philosophy.

I recall beginning that talk with a statement by Marilyn Monroe from her film "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes". The statement was "when love goes wrong, nothing goes right". Tonight I want to briefly revisit that statement in connection with the topic of happiness. In doing so, I hope to show that happiness is intimately connected with love.

Specifically, I want to share with you the thought that when love goes wrong we can make ourselves unhappy and happy when it goes right. Knowing what to love and how to love in the right way and to the right degree is the secret to happiness.

You will recall how all the philosophers mentioned earlier regarded the possession of what is genuinely good as that which secures a person's happiness. The disagreement between the Aristotelians, the Epicureans, and the Stoics, centred around the question whether virtue alone was good. Only the Stoics maintained that. For their part the Aristotelians maintained that some of the preferred indifferents like health and wealth were also good, and the Epicureans claimed that only pleasure that leads to ataraxia (tranquillity, serenity, free from trouble and anxiety) was good. Possession of what is genuinely good as a foundation for happiness is therefore, a common denominator among all these philosophers. And along with Plato they too would accept that loving that which is genuinely good was appropriate and necessary for happiness.

Love is essential for happiness because love of the good is. Whether the good takes the form of another human being or the works of scientists or the artists, or the mystical transcendent Good of Plato, there can be no happiness without love. Love is essential for happiness because it is love of the Good that inspires and motivates us to be ethically good and by being ethically good, happy. Moreover, by being ignorant of what is ethically good we can harm others and by harming others harm ourselves and ultimately make ourselves unhappy. Knowledge of what is ethically good is therefore also essential for happiness.

Discussion time

And finally, one of many questions/comments from the floor during discussion time at one of the performances for the Adelaide Fringe Festival at Caos Café in March 2002; hopefully, the irony of presenting Stoic philosophy at Caos Café was not lost, given that one of the central claims of Stoicism is that the Universe is perfectly rational and orderly.

The question/comment came from the protagonist from “Moving Melvin”, the show that immediately followed on from the “Philosophy of Happiness”. Melvin, a big affable African American in his fifties was in his tightly stretched red lycra bodysuit ready for his act of singing, tap-dancing and telling stories of growing up in Texas.

In his deep southern voice Melvin asked “isn’t happiness a matter of choice?” And to my reply “insofar as the Stoic claim that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for happiness is true, and that the possession of virtue is entirely within one’s control then yes, happiness is a matter of choice — one can choose to be happy”. Moving Melvin flashed me a generous southern smile followed by a laconic “Yeaaa”.

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