

Foreword

The Philosopher and the City

There is a mystical belief that some places have a spiritual power. This power comes from some peculiar property of the place or from a holy man living or buried in the locality. Can we say the same about the presence of the philosopher in the city? Philo of Alexandria talked about this matter when he discussed the character of the philosopher or those who are trying to attain wisdom. He said of them ‘Their bodies remain on earth, but they give wing to their souls, so that rising into the ether, they may observe the powers which dwell there, as is fitting for those who truly become citizens of the world’. He continues ‘Such people consider the whole world as their city, and its citizens are the companions of wisdom’. But then he observed that ‘To be sure, there is only a small number of such people, they are like the embers of wisdom kept smouldering in our cities, so that virtue may not be altogether snuffed out and disappear from our race. But if only people everywhere felt the same way as this small minority [...] then our cities would be brimful of happiness’.

I am not sure that we can still equate philosophers with wisdom and virtue, but they certainly dedicate their lives to intellectual activity, learning, teaching and writing. They seem to gravitate around a distinguished figure or a group of people. A presence of a university is another helping factor in the formation of a powerful group. There are many examples of this, one being the birth and development of analytical philosophy in Oxford and Cambridge.

The German city of Jena is another interesting case. A recent book on that city, *Magnificent Rebels* by Andrea Wulf, is a detailed history of the constellation of philosophers, poets and artists in the city at the end of the 18th century. Talking about Alexander von Humboldt and Jena, Wulf says: ‘For it is here, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, that Humboldt joined a group of novelists, poets, literary critics, philosophers, essayists, editors, translators and playwrights who, intoxicated by the French Revolution, placed the self at the centre stage of their thinking. In Jena their ideas collided and coalesced, and the impact was seismic, spreading out across the German states and on into the world – and into our minds’.

It is interesting that references in most cases are made to the city rather than the individuals who gave it such a good reputation. So there might be something about the place, but in the last analysis the credit goes to individuals of genius and successful groups who transmit their intellectual power to the city and leave behind a reputation that inspires coming generations. I am not going to claim this for *The Wednesday* group, but I hope we have contributed, and are still contributing, in this direction.

The Editor