

## **What are learned societies for? A quoi servent les sociétés savantes? (A politically incorrect meditation)**

Ou peut-être vaudrait-il mieux dire à quoi sert l'Association canadienne de philosophie, car il existe plusieurs sortes différentes de sociétés savantes, and what puzzles me concerns a particular type of learned Societies. That is to say: national (or even provincial) societies defined by discipline. C'est-à-dire des sociétés savantes qui sont exactement comme notre propre association ou, par exemple, comme l'Association canadienne de science politique. But neither the Canadian Federation of Social Sciences and Humanities, nor the Canadian Society of Christian Philosophers, which are also "learned societies" at first sight at least, fall within the category of "learned societies" that I am talking about

When I started working on this speech my initial impression was that it would be an extremely short presidential address. (Short it will be, but not quite as short as I initially feared.) The answer to my question, one could argue, is contained dans les points énoncés dans notre nouvelle affiche qui forme la base de notre campagne de recrutement. The new poster states seven different reasons why an individual should join the CPA. Doesn't this contain the answer to my question, A quoi servent les sociétés savantes? Here is what our poster says:

Vous devriez adhérer à l'ACP  
parce que :

You should become a member of the CPA  
because:

· En tant que philosophe travaillant au Canada, vous devriez faire partie de votre association professionnelle ;

· As a philosopher working in Canada, you should be part of and should support your professional association;

· En tant qu'étudiant qui vise une carrière en philosophie, vous devriez rejoindre votre association nationale le plus tôt possible ;

· As a student who hopes and expects to work in the profession, you should join your national association as early in your career as possible;

· La crédibilité de l'ACP dans ses démarches auprès du CRSH et du gouvernement fédéral dépend de la taille de l'Association ;

· The Association's credibility, in such matters as lobbying SSHRC or the federal government, depends upon the extent of its membership;

· L'ACP est une des plus anciennes sociétés savantes canadiennes et nous devrions tous être fiers de son histoire et de ses réussites ;

· Seuls les membres en règle peuvent soumettre une communication au congrès annuel ;

· L'ACP est la seule association pancanadienne à représenter notre discipline;

· L'adhésion à l'ACP inclut aussi un abonnement à *Dialogue*, la revue de l'Association.

· The CPA is, in fact, one of the oldest learned societies In Canada, and one of whose history we should all be proud;

· Only members in good standing may submit papers for adjudication for the annual congress;

· The CPA is the only pan-Canadian group representing philosophy;

· As a CPA member, you receive a subscription to the Association's journal, *Dialogue*.

This poster tells us why any philosopher, considered as a rational agent, should join the CPA, pourquoi il est rationel et à mon avantage en tant qu'individu, philosophe ou étudiant en philosophie, de devenir membre de l'Association canadienne de philosophie. But the question is rather: why should any of these seven good reasons motivate me? What is the basis of their normative or motivational force? En tant qu'étudiant, pourquoi est-ce que je devrais adhérer à notre association nationale le plus tôt possible? Why should I join my professional association? Why do we need a pan-Canadian group representing philosophy et pourquoi est-ce que je devrais en être membre? One of the points tells a prospective member that if he or she wants to participate in the Association's activities he or she cannot free ride. Fine, but why would one want or should want to participate? What is a learned society like ours for?

We take it for granted that there is a good answer to this question, but what is it? We take it for granted that the CPA is for something and that, as a consequence, individual agents have many good reasons for joining it. Dès lors, dans une campagne publicitaire il suffit de rappeler à nos collègues, membres potentiels et actuels de l'association, cette information pertinente: qu'il y a d'excellentes raisons pour adhérer à l'ACP. As a publicity campaign this is an excellent strategy, but as philosopher we can and should ask some further questions. En effet, quelles sont ces raisons au juste? Let me tell you why I think there is an issue here and what I think it is. Let me tell why I think that if pressed we may find it difficult to answer those further questions in a convincing way.

L'Association canadienne de philosophie est une association savante d'un type bizarre et étrange. C'est ce qu'on peut voir aisément en se demandant ce qu'elle est vraiment, quel genre d'association est-ce?

Premièrement: It is not a real professional association. It does not have any rule that it can impose upon its members. Elle ne définit ni critères, ni règlements. It is not the organ through which our profession polices and defines itself. It does not determine who is legitimately a philosopher and who is not. Elle n'exerce aucun contrôle sur notre profession qui de toute façon n'est même pas celle de philosophe. We are university professors, perhaps unemployed or retired, or students, or postdocs, or researchers, but socially and culturally "philosopher" is not a profession. Unlike lawyers, doctors and psychologists, but just like biologists, historians and literary critics our identity as professionals is independent from our definition as specialists of a particular discipline. The Canadian Philosophical Association has no control over its members as professionals nor does it have any control over them as individuals. Il est vrai que nous pouvons recommander et que parfois nous recommandons aux départements de philosophie certaines pratiques qui nous semblent souhaitables ou bénéfiques ou justes. But we make the recommendations to departments that can ignore them if they wish and that sometimes believe that we should "mind our own business". En dépit de ce que nous, l'Association canadienne de philosophie, pouvons croire ou dire, philosophy departments throughout the country tend to believe, or perhaps know, that "best hiring practices", the proper ratio of males to females in a department and an adequate representation of visible minorities within philosophy departments are things that are defined by university administrations and imposed by them upon departments. Very well then, but then what is our own business, in other words the one "that we should be minding"? Quelles sont donc au juste "nos affaires" dont nous ferions mieux de nous occuper? We are a learned society, une association savante. Mais encore?

To tell the truth, I am not quite sure that our Association really is a learned society after all, or if it is, it is a very special type of learned society. Nous sommes une société de gens savants peut-être, mais une société savante?... Il me semble qu'une société savante a pour but l'avancement du savoir, the advancement of learning. Mais nous ne donnons ni bourses, ni subventions. We have no laboratory, nor do we conduct research. Il est vrai que nous avons une excellente revue et que nous organisons un colloque annuel de haute tenue. These two activities help to disseminate the research of Canadian philosophers nationally and internationally and they allow us to communicate with each other. Il faut rendre à César ce qui est à César. Our Association does encourage research and plays a role in making findings known. Mais la question est plutôt de savoir en quoi *Dialogue* et notre congrès annuel sont spéciaux? What is it that our journal *Dialogue* and our annual congress add to

research in philosophy that could not be provided just as well by any other good bilingual journal or any other large scale annual conference? What would be different if the journal was independent ou si la Fédération organisait directement la rencontre annuelle des philosophes comme une sous-section de son propre congrès?

The last suggestion is not purely academic. A few years ago, the Société de philosophie du Québec decided to hold its annual meeting outside of the ACFAS, the French-Canadian learned. The ACFAS nonetheless continued to have a philosophy section at its meeting, and the Société de philosophie du Québec was simply absent. Philosophers and students kept on going to the ACFAS just as before, as if nothing had happened. The numbers didn't change. After two years, fear of redundancy drove the Société de philosophie du Québec to return to the fold of l'Association canadienne-française pour l'avancement de la science. Cet exemple montre, si besoin était, que le lien entre notre Association, notre revue et notre colloque est purement contingent, historique et accidentel. Ces deux institutions, *Dialogue* et le congrès annuel, ne pourraient-elles pas exister sans l'Association? Certainement.

But the fact is the journal is ours, and that the congress is organised by us. It could be otherwise, but it is not. Very well then, but who are we apart from being simply those who organise the congress and publish *Dialogue*? Do not fear, I am not looking for the essence of the Canadian Philosophical Association. Je ne crois pas qu'il y en ait. But precisely because there is none, the question "A quoi servent les sociétés savantes?" seems to me particularly urgent.

If these are our functions, and if they could be fulfilled just as well by different institutions, what is our learned society for?

Learned societies of old, in the 17th, 18th and even 19th centuries, were the place where research was done. They were also one the main vehicles through which results were exchanged between specialists and shared with the wider public. Elles étaient un des moteurs du progrès de la connaissance. Quiconque a travaillé sur Darwin, Condorcet, Lavoisier où même Rousseau sait quel rôle fondamental les sociétés savantes ont joué historiquement dans le développement de la connaissance. Mais les choses ont radicalement changé. When future historians turn their attention to some of the fundamental contributions to philosophy made by some members of this Association in the last quarter of the last century, how much place will our Association occupy in their narratives? Combien de nos membres pourraient dire que sans l'Association canadienne de philosophie jamais ils n'auraient obtenus les résultats pour lesquels ils sont connus?

Il me semble qu'aujourd'hui les "sociétés savantes" qui participent le plus au développement du savoir sont soit des associations interdisciplinaires spécialisées sur des sujets particuliers, like the International Association for the Study of Emotion, or formal or informal discussion groups. Such informal research groups are I think today's learned societies in a strict sense: they produce new knowledge. But we don't. We are a society of learned persons, but if the objective of our association is not to produce new knowledge, what is it? En quel sens sommes nous une société savante?

Our role, it may be argued, is to represent our members, to defend them, to speak for them at various levels of government. It is true that we lobby government agencies like the SSHRC and associations of associations like the Federation of Social Sciences and Humanities, to obtain more funding, more scholarships, more research grants, more Canada Research Chairs for philosophy. Il semble de plus que personne d'autre, aucune association ne pourrait faire cela de la même manière, avec la même portée. As our new publicity poster says "The Association's credibility, in such matters as lobbying SSHRC and the federal government, depends upon the extent of its membership" et encore "L'ACP est la seule association pan-Canadienne à représenter notre discipline". Il semble clair que face à des politiques nationales, seule une association nationale peut constituer un interlocuteur national. Un interlocuteur qui nous représente tous. Is this what we are for then, lobbying? Is this our role, to be the national spokesperson for the philosophical profession? Je crois que la réponse est, jusqu'à un certain point, oui. Ce n'est pas là seule chose à laquelle serve les sociétés savantes comme la nôtre, but it certainly is part of the answer. Learned societies like ours are, among other things, lobby groups.

If this is the case, it also suggests what type of association or society we are. We are in a sense, a political association. But in what sense exactly? What kind of political association are we? Par rapport à la conception classique de Max Weber, étant donné que, comme il a été rappelé plus haut, nous ne possédons pas le pouvoir de contraindre nos membres à respecter nos règles, ce qui selon Weber est la caractéristique définitionnelle des associations politiques, il est clair que selon cette définition nous ne pouvons pas être une association politique au sens propre. It seems therefore that we can only be a political association in an extended or derived sense. Yet, I now want to argue that is also unlikely. It is not the goal or function of the Canadian Philosophical Association to deal with political issues, either in a strict or in a wider sense. Nous ne sommes ni un parti politique ni un groupe de pression au sens propre. The Association sometimes reacts to or protests against various policies and various administrative decisions that have detrimental consequences upon our membership, but it is not an academic think tank. Son rôle n'est pas d'élaborer et de promouvoir des solutions alternatives à la manière dont est gérée dans ce pays la "république du savoir." Nor

am I suggesting that we should become such a pro-active pressure group promoting a different academia.

But if we are not a political association in an extended sense, we are also not a political association in a derived sense. Nous ne sommes pas une créature du pouvoir politique, une courroie de transmission pour la mise en application de ses politiques. We are independent from the government. Of course, like any association we are subject to its laws and rules, but we were not created by a political entity to regulate a certain group or sector of the population, or to counteract the activity of some other organisation. The Canadian Philosophical Association is not a political association in that sense, either.

Il semble donc que nous ne sommes, au sens propre, ni une association professionnelle, ni une société savante, ni une association politique. Simultanément, il semble que nous sommes un peu des trois. Nous nous comportons parfois comme l'une, parfois comme l'autre, ou comme l'autre encore. We sometimes act as if we were a political association, or at least as a special interest group, for example, when we lobby the SSHRC or (try to) pressure various government agencies. D'autres de nos activités sont typiques des sociétés savantes, par exemple la publication de *Dialogue*, l'organisation du colloque annuel ou de conférences sur des sujets spéciaux comme les droits des premières nations. Finally, at other times we also act as if we were a professional association through the different rules and policies that we recommend to Canadian philosophy departments and to our individual members.

So is the answer simply that learned societies are for all these things? Yes and no. Je crois qu'il serait dangereux de dire que le rôle de notre association, de notre société savante c'est à la fois de remplir la fonction typique des sociétés savantes, de servir d'association professionnelle et de se comporter, parfois, comme une association politique. The reason why this answer is dangerous is because it can easily be argued that each of these functions would be better served and are in fact served by different institutions. L'avancement du savoir a lieu dans les laboratoires et les groupes de recherches et le rôle qu'y joue une association comme la nôtre est au mieux périphérique. Our profession is not that of philosopher but of university professor and we represent but a tiny fraction of that group. The rules to which we are subject as members of that group do not apply to us only and were not made by us. Our Association can preach and recommend as much as it wants, it does not have the power to rule our profession. Finally as a pressure group, nous sommes un nain parmi les nains.

But if we mean to say that the role of the CPA is, today, to do these three thing among the many other different roles it may be called upon to fulfil in the future, then I believe that the answer is correct. What are learned societies for? The answer, I think,

is representation. Ce que je veux dire par là, c'est que le rôle premier d'une association comme la nôtre est de nous représenter. Auprès de qui? Auprès de nous mêmes pour commencer, mais aussi auprès de l'ensemble de la communauté académique et auprès du gouvernement.

Nous sommes des individus qui partagent en commun d'enseigner, d'écrire, de faire de la recherche dans une même matière: la philosophie. But that subject matter is quite peculiar in that any given philosopher can have more in common with a classicist, a cognitive psychologist, or a political scientist, with a mathematician, a linguist or a medieval historian, than he or she has with many other philosophers. This particular structure of our discipline explains in part why an association like ours has such a hard time being a "real" learned society. Internally, our discipline is extremely diversified. As a consequence many of our intellectual exchanges involve other philosophers who share our particular interests, for example social contract theory or the philosophy of physics, and representatives of different disciplines, but they often leave out most other philosophers.

La même difficulté se retrouve au sein de notre rencontre annuelle. Le nombre croissant de mini-colloques, de table-rondes, d'ateliers qui ont lieu durant congrès annuel de l'association ne reflète pas seulement, ni surtout me semble-t-il, le désir de certains de faire l'économie d'un processus d'arbitrage contraignant. Il indique aussi le souci de plusieurs de se regrouper afin de partager leur intérêt particulier de recherche. Un souci légitime qui renvoie à la structure éclatée de notre discipline. Until now our annual meeting has been organised in such a way that takes it for granted that, notwithstanding the major differences that divide us intellectually and philosophically, we all have something to learn from and to share with other philosophers at large. Should our annual congress continue to be organised in this way or should it rather become a collection of independent specialised symposia, a series of parallel meetings of the different sub-groups that compose our profession? The question is open for discussion. Each year, the Chair of the Programme Committee resolves the problem in one way or another, and in every case the solution suggests an image of who we are and of how we see ourselves as philosophers. That is part of what I mean when I say that the fundamental role of an association like ours is representation.

Une association comme la nôtre est en fait le seul lieu où en tant que philosophes nous existons comme une communauté, comme une communauté de philosophes. On peut même ajouter que c'est l'association qui nous fait exister en tant que communauté. Elle ne reflète pas tant une communauté pré-existante qu'elle n'amène à l'existence en tant que communauté une collection d'individus indépendants. In that sense, the Canadian Philosophical Association is fundamentally, and in a sense different from those surveyed above, a political association. The community of

philosophers is not a communitarian community, a small tight-knit support group indispensable to one's identity, but a society of persons who are burdened with to some extent similar difficulties and wish to face them together. It is a free association of philosophers, a hybrid that is partially a learned society, partially a special interest group and acts at times as if it were a professional association. However it is essentially none of those things.

Ce caractère hybride constitue en fait notre force, je crois. Il est à l'image de ce que nous sommes. Nous ne formons pas une profession, mais nous en partageons pour partie les obligations. Nous sommes une discipline unique, mais qui regroupe des intérêts de recherche si divers et différents que nous avons notre place dans presque tous les domaines du monde du savoir. It is, I believe, because the institution that we are, the CPA, is to some extent ill defined that our association can transform itself and adapt to new circumstances. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it is because our association has succeeded in adapting to new circumstances that when we look back we can see that we have no essence, no specific role or function: we are a historical individual.

Our association has changed over the years. When it started out it was more like a typical learned society. Philosophy was also different then, and the several theoretical orientations that existed within our community reflected to a large extent the division of our country into French and English Canada. French philosophy was more continental in flavour and English philosophy was more analytical. Mais aujourd'hui ceci a changé du tout au tout. Today members of each linguistic community often write about the same analytic, continental or naturalised philosophy in two different languages and sometimes in the same language, English, our new *lingua franca*. Our philosophical environment is now radically different from what it was then. De plus il y a vingt-cinq ans les organismes subventionnaires jouaient un bien moindre rôle dans notre vie d'enseignants et de chercheurs. Le féminisme n'était pas encore une question philosophique importante et nous ne pensions pas que notre association se devait refléter dans sa structure et dans les recommandations qu'elle fait à ses membres nos préoccupations de philosophie politique. L'environnement social et culturel dans lequel nous vivions était profondément autre.

To say that we are a political association whose fundamental role is representation is to say that the Canadian Philosophical Association is what transforms us, a collection of independent agents, into a community of philosophers, this association is a historical entity and it has no determined rôle or function et c'est pour cette raison même qu'elle a su s'adapter à son environnement changeant et parfois le transformer. Merci. Thank you.

Paul Dumouchel