

Editorial: Hard men

The subject of progress (or not) in philosophy has recently come somewhat to the fore. The Royal Institute annual lecture for 2013–4, delivered by David Chalmers, was entitled ‘Why Isn’t There More Progress in Philosophy?’, while *Philosophy’s* annual prize essay for 2014 is on the topic ‘What is Philosophy? How is it Possible? What Can it Expect to Achieve?’. We do not want to steal Professor Chalmers’ thunder, nor nudge entrants to the essay competition in particular directions, but there is an aspect of the practice of philosophy which is certainly there, but which is not often referred to explicitly.

With characteristic pungency and a hint of misogyny, it was picked out by the late David Stove back in 1985. In an effort to explain why what he calls our academic ‘colleagues’ from other disciplines both despise us (for what they see as the triviality and irrelevance of much of what we do), and yet, at the same time fear us, he wrote:

‘In an argument of any kind, philosophers are hard men (some of whom are women), and most people do not care to tangle with us more than once or twice.’

The relentless pursuit of argument, together with logical rigour and clarity of definition, is nothing new. It contributed in no small measure to the condemnation of Socrates. In 2014 we might fancy ourselves to be more collegial and more friendly than some of our combative predecessors, but imagine what a non-philosophical friend or acquaintance might feel to be on the end of even the most gentle philosophical investigation into his or her own field of expertise. Maybe to him or her the hardness in argument might seem an alibi, too easily won, for ignorance of the matter in hand, or insensitivity to the real issues.

Stove was obviously rather pleased with the notion of being a hard man, one from whom, post a tangle or two, ‘colleagues’ might instinctively shrink. We take no stand on the matter, but simply offer his observation as a mirror in which to look.