

“Talking Philosophy: a Carmelite Perspective”

Reading & Discussion Zoom Group

Open to All

My name is Jane Horton. During 2019, I decided to read some of Edith Stein’s writings, and had not got very far, when I realised it was going to be a challenge! I did a Politics and Philosophy degree many moons ago, and vaguely recalled some of Edith’s ideas, but all had faded into a general mire, and I was distinctly rusty at grappling with complex (and logical!) thought.

Heather Ward, the formation Director of our Carmelite Group, explained how Philosophy is actually a perfectly natural part of human experience, but one that we often feel is too difficult – sometimes simply because of the way writers (dare I say Edith?!) formulate ideas. In Heather’s words:

“In the French play, ‘The Bourgeois Gentleman’, a newly rich man wants to learn to be upper class: a gentleman. His freshly appointed tutor, hearing him speak, praises his use of prose, and he responds delightedly, ‘To think I’ve been speaking prose all my life and didn’t know it!’ .

I love this story because it shows how often we don’t give names to what we do and how we can be influenced, for good or ill, by the names we do attach to what we do. It’s like this, I think, with philosophy. All of us, at some time or other, ask ourselves: ‘What’s real?’; ‘What’s true or truth?’; ‘How do I know it’s real, or true?’; ‘What’s right?’; ‘How do I know what’s right?’ . Children can sometimes ask, ‘What happens to the world when I’m asleep: is it still there?’ . These are all philosophical questions, but we don’t often identify them as such: we don’t realise ‘I’ve been doing philosophy all my life’ and get put off by the word ‘philosophy’, seeing it as something beyond us, or as nothing to do with actual life.

The answers given to these questions we ask, and many more, in their own day, helped to shape the way our Carmelite saints understood, and wrote about, their world and the human person. Our understanding of their teaching can be deepened and expanded when we come to appreciate how they heard and used the philosophy of their times. Such an appreciation may also help us to listen and respond to the philosophical ideas that can challenge or inform our communication of faith today.”

James Hunter joined our Nottingham Secular group in April, 2020, and has a lot of experience in teaching both Theology and Philosophy in schools, and as a Deacon, so he and I exchanged a few emails. From this (and the Covid communication revolution) came the idea of a Zoom group for Carmelites who would like to ‘discover, grapple with, and ultimately conquer’ (his words) some of the more philosophical Carmelite writers.

Here's an introduction by James:

"I took my Final Promises, as a Secular Carmelite, on 28th June, 2008, with the 'St Edith Stein' Community in Derby.

During the course of my Diaconal ministry, I have been promoting the practice of Contemplative Prayer to adults, from all kinds of backgrounds and beliefs, and been active in the Secular Discalced Carmelite Order. Whilst investigating St John of the Cross and St Edith Stein, amongst other writers, it seemed that their 'philosophical background' was an important part of understanding their ideas: for example, the 'scholastic Thomism' of St John of the Cross and St Edith Stein.

Similarly, when exploring the 'Cloud of Unknowing', the 'apophatic', or 'via negativa' (ie 'praying without mental images') thinking of the 'Cloud' author is clearly influenced by Denys the Areopagite, who also influences St John of the Cross and St Edith Stein.

Again, the 'faculty psychology' (ie 'memory, understanding, will') language of St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila and St Edith Stein is influenced by the teaching of St Augustine, who, in turn, is much influenced by Plotinus, Philo, and Plato.

All this made me wonder if it is time for us to offer a chance for Secular Carmelites, and anyone else who may be interested, to investigate the 'history of ideas', and the thinking and philosophical input which informs much of Carmelite 'mystical theology'? This would be in a friendly, intimate, non-threatening group, assuming no previous knowledge, and also open to non-Carmelites, non-Catholics, Christians of any denomination, contemplative tradition, or, indeed, anyone, of any faith, or none.

Hence, 'Talking Philosophy: a Carmelite Perspective – Reading & Discussion Zoom Group – Open to All', which we are suggesting, as a way forward."

After wider consultation, with Fr Yamai Bature OCD, at Boars Hill, Oxford, we have decided to start with "History of Philosophy" materials, to lay a broad, general, foundation, together, before moving on to Stein, etc. Please see attached "Talking Philosophy: Reading List & Further Information", for details.

We do hope you will join us!

If you wish to enquire further, please contact us as follows:-

James Hunter OCDS (Deacon) Email: james.hunter200@btinternet.com

Jane Horton OCDS Email: janehorton@gmail.com

Heather Ward OCDS Email: heatherward67@yahoo.com

Cyprian Blamires OCDS (Central Region Representative) Email: cpblamires@aol.com

Fr Yamai Bature OCD (Boars Hill, Oxford) Email: fryamai@carmelite.org.uk

“Talking Philosophy”: Reading List & Further Information

The books listed below should **all** be available, either new and/or second-hand, from various booksellers, via Amazon UK.

If you are **new** to Philosophy, the following are recommended:-

1. “Sophie’s World” (20th Anniversary Edition) by Jostein Gaarder

(An easy read, from cover to cover, it “punches above its weight”, providing a surprisingly comprehensive and insightful “history of ideas”, with detailed index section at the back, for quick reference. This is an international best-seller, with over 40 million copies sold, and translated into 60 languages!)

2. “The Dead Philosophers’ Café” by Vittorio Hösle

(A great introductory, and exploratory, exercise in the art of philosophical dialogue)

3. “History of Western Philosophy” by Bertrand Russell

(Slightly “dated”, in parts, but remains a best-selling, accessible, and, sometimes, witty and amusing, reference work)

For the **actual** “Talking Philosophy: a Carmelite Perspective – Reading and Discussion Zoom Group”, we shall be starting with the following **two** books, together, “in parallel”, which complement and support one another:-

1. “A New History of Western Philosophy” by Anthony Kenny, in Four Parts,
pub 16th August 2021

(Particularly good for group reading and discussion, by a leading philosopher, providing “four volumes in one”, in combining four of his previous books in one volume, at a very competitive price! Takes us further into 20th/21st Century Philosophy than Bertrand Russell’s book – see “Recommended Reading”, item 3, above)

2. “Western Philosophy: An Anthology” by John Cottingham, 3rd Edition, pub
13th May 2021, by Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies

(This is the **best** anthology on the market, covering the widest range of selected readings, in one volume, of any other anthology currently available, by a leading Catholic philosopher, at a reasonable comparative price)

As we finish using selected portions of the books, above, similarly, we shall then go on with the **next two** books, together, “in parallel”, which likewise complement and support one another:-

1. “Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue” by Alasdair MacIntyre

(By a leading Catholic philosopher, who was actually “converted” through trying to explain the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas to sceptical students!)

2. “A Short History of German Philosophy” by Vittorio Hösle

(From the mediaeval “mystical philosophy” of Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa to the post WWII “schools” of German Philosophy, including, along the way, Edith Stein and her contemporaries, some of whom were particularly influenced by Meister Eckhart and the “Rhineland mystics”)

Again, as we finish using these, we shall go on, still further, with **another two** books, and so forth, etc, etc.

[NB Any E-book editions of the books we use should best be avoided, as these are proven, from experience, to be quite impractical for Group work and research purposes!]

It is estimated that the **four** items of reading and discussion materials, above, taken together, would last our “Talking Philosophy” Group anything from 18 to 24 months, before going on to **new** material. So this would be “good value”, and “cheaper” than comparable “online” courses, but with **no** essays or course deadlines, to meet! Also, members would “take ownership” of their reading and learning, in dialogue together, and build up a “home library” of Philosophy, to refer to again and again, in future. In the spirit of John Paul II’s encyclical, “Faith and Reason”, a similar structure for a “Talking **Theology**: a Carmelite Perspective - Reading and Discussion Zoom Group – Open to All” could also, subsequently, be rolled out. The “Talking Philosophy” Group will

meet **monthly**, and there will of course, be “breaks” for Christmas, Easter, and August, etc, with an optional annual week-end residential Conference, including one or two Guest Speakers, etc. This would afford an opportunity for members to gather together, “in the flesh”, to enjoy one another’s company, and to celebrate our shared interest! For “Talking Philosophy”, apart from the cost of books, for each member, there would be a modest subscription towards other costs, such as that for setting up a suitable “unlimited” Zoom facility, unless we could “borrow” a pre-existing system from somewhere : suggestions, here, would be welcome! **“Talking Philosophy”** will be **starting**, hopefully, in **February 2022**. **“Talking Theology”** would be starting, hopefully, the **following** year, in **February 2023**, with **both** these **two Groups** meeting, **monthly, in mutual support**, from then on. Our Zoom sessions will each be **monthly**, for **two hours**, so, if you would like to join us, we should also like to hear from you the preferred **day(s)** and **time(s)**, each month, when you would like to meet. Please correspond with us, using our email addresses, given on the **other**, attached, “Introductory” document.