

Living in the Grey

- Samantha Cooper

For me philosophy is a frustrating, intangible topic, where what you know, and how you know it, is continually questioned. So researching philosophy couldn't possibly have any creditable or quantified techniques; or could it?

In a somewhat ironic setting I met with Dr. Carleton B. Christensen in God's to discuss his research. Dr. Christensen is an esteemed researcher at the ANU specialising in Philosophy; currently he is working on a reconstructive interpretation of the path from Husserl to Heidegger. Traditionally philosophy is researched in the analytical tradition linking closely to the scientific tradition. Currently Dr Christensen's work is in the phenomenological tradition. In this, he analyses the cultural context of their philosophical writings and aims to reinterpret their works. He believes that cultural and historical contexts largely influence the writer's ideology. Understanding this is the key to unlocking their fundamental ideas. One of Dr Christensen's research strengths is his ability to understand the problems and issues that the writers are responding to. Thus Dr Christensen's work focuses on understanding the original interpretations then making new connections and parallels to our current society. This in turn, creates new knowledge of the present in light of what we know in the past.

The idea that scientific tradition would be applied to philosophy puzzled me initially, as the latter is primarily associated with the humanities. However, I noted that all subjects have very similar research traditions; some however are more valued in contemporary society. Through our conversation I wondered if relying on one set of research methods for all areas would narrow research creativity. Dr Christensen alluded that research in general is headed down a path of achieving foreseeable and quick results, however since his research method is extensive and time consuming some may regard it as redundant, as "people are just so time poor in this era".

I have noticed that society just wants to achieve one 'white line' solution that will solve the problem. A key part of research, particularly within the ANU, is being able to provide creative and dynamic new research. Further, to reinvent the previous research depicted in the 'Grey Area' by Dr Christensen. Living in the grey area is uncomfortable and you need to "accept that you are going to be confused most of the time. Accepting that things will be difficult is the most important aspect of research." Working within the grey area breeds creativity and helps us deal with not only "problems thrown up by the past but helps us transform current ideas." Dr Christensen thus suggests that we need languages, a depth of historical knowledge in your field, balanced with a breath in some other fields.

To enhance your research skills, respect for - and use of - current methods in research is important, and it further allows us to create knowledge. Enhancement also comes through understanding your own traditions in research, which may have its limitations, and exploring the grey area. Often research finds out new knowledge but to fully apply a solution we need to look outside of our own disciplines. For example 'climate change' needs a solution, though science alone cannot solve this issue. Dr Christensen pointed out part of the issue within climate change is it is inter-linked to the way we live our lives which is connected to the way we perceive our sense of self. In finding a solution we must broaden our focus from technological solutions to include philosophical explanations of what our sense of self is and how it is developed. This in turn, may allow us to find a solution.

This discussion has tempted me to jump into the grey area, a daunting possibility. Do you have the courage?