

John Niemeyer Findlay (1903-1987)

Sanford L. Drob

John Niemeyer Findlay (1903-1987) was one of the twentieth century's most unique philosophers. At a time when positivism, scientific materialism, linguistic analysis, and ordinary language philosophy were the academic staple in Britain and America, Findlay championed phenomenology, revived Hegelianism, and wrote works that were inspired by Plotinus, Buddhism, and Absolute Idealism. In the course of a long career that brought him to universities in South Africa and New Zealand, to Kings College in London, Yale, the University of Texas at Austin, and Boston University, Findlay made major contributions to the study of Meinong, Husserl (he translated both volumes of the *Logical Investigations* into English), Hegel, Plato, Wittgenstein and Kant. His 1958 work, *Hegel: A Examination*, was instrumental in reviving the interest in Hegel in the English-speaking world. His highly original rational-mystical philosophy is detailed in four of his books, *The Discipline of the Cave*, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, *Values and Intentions* and *Ascent to the Absolute*. Findlay's command of the history of both western and eastern thought was legendary. John Silber once commented that "if all the philosophical libraries in the world were suddenly lost, Findlay could come closer to recapturing the history of philosophical and religious thought, both West and East, than any other person."¹

When I first met Findlay at Boston University in 1978 he was well into his 70s, a short, round, balding man with a South African accent and an unmanageable wisp of white hair at the top of his head. He dressed in oversized, boxy, faded grey and black suits that at the time appeared to be 20 or 30 years old. He would lecture (on Husserl, Hegel, Kant, Plato, Wittgenstein, and Axiology) in a room with six blackboards, writing out each of his words as he spoke them, frantically filling the boards. When he completed the sixth blackboard he would race back to the first, erase it and begin writing again, until he was completely out of breath and his suit, hands and face were covered with chalk dust. Although he would occasionally pause to answer questions or make, often brilliantly incisive, oral comments, he clearly believed in the primacy of the written language. His own prose, particularly in his later, "mystical" books, *The Discipline of the Cave* and the *Transcendence of the Cave*, was written in seemingly endless, baroque sentences (with numerous dependent clauses) which flew into the air and always seemed to land softly and in just the right place.

While in his earlier years Findlay had been a student and something of a follower of Wittgenstein in Cambridge, he later developed a terrible antipathy towards Wittgenstein and was particularly sarcastic regarding Wittgenstein's imitators and disciples. Findlay used to say that if one answered all of Wittgenstein's or Malcolm's rhetorical questions in precisely the opposite manner of the way they wanted you to answer them you would arrive at the true philosophy.

¹ R. S. Cohen, R.M. Martin and M. Westphal. Studies in the Philosophy of J.N. Findlay (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), p. ix.

Findlay was a moral vegetarian and often spoke of himself as a follower of the Buddha. Once at a conference I saw him turn red as he painfully voiced the view that while it was *natural* for tigers and other carnivores to kill and eat their prey it was *thoroughly lamentable* and in some axiological sense, wrong. He believed in what he termed "rational mysticism" and held that it was possible for the philosopher to use reason to "ascend to the absolute" and arrive at those "places" which traditional mystics intuit through non-rational means. Findlay was enormously generous with his time and intellect. He once lent me an unpublished paper he was writing on the nature of dialectic that was clearly an original typewritten draft covered with his own handwritten ink notes. When I went to return it and told him that I found it thoroughly enlightening he insisted that I *keep it*. After I left Boston University in 1981 I wrote him and phoned him occasionally and he was always so supportive of and enthusiastic about my work. I loved Findlay both as a human being and in the sense that one "loves" wisdom, and I feel thoroughly blessed when I realize that he is one of those souls who seem to live on in me, for example, whenever I put philosophical pen to paper or consider what I regard to be the highest ideals of my creative, moral and spiritual life. I know that I am not alone in this, as over the years I have been in touch with a number of his former students and colleagues who feel precisely as I do.

Findlay's philosophy has, unfortunately, not received anything near the attention it deserves. Douglas Lackey has written that in spite of his current obscurity, future generations may well regard Findlay as one of the great philosophers of the 20th century. This website is dedicated to publicizing Findlay's ideas and preserving his legacy.

I would be most interested in hearing from anyone with an interest in Findlay's philosophy, who has something to post by or about JN Findlay or who has personal reminiscences about this unique and wise man.

Sanford L. Drob