



NEW YOUNG THINKERS

INTERVIEW BY CLAIRE VAN DEN BERG



Philosophy is fashion, the interest of people under the forty in philosophy is rising. Read more about this movement in this interview with Laurens Knoop, founder of the Dutch 'Brandstof' that provides philosophy for younger people...

To start from the get-go, when did you launch "Brandstof" and more importantly, why?

About 3,5 years ago I discovered Alain de Botton's School of Life in London – a school "devoted to developing emotional intelligence through culture" – and felt inspired by the concept. Accordingly so, I decided to start a similar idea in my hometown Amsterdam. Since then, we've organised a whole array of seminars centred on practical philosophy, some of which are regularly televised. And last year, we organised a festival called LIFE, where we mixed up 'our' philosophers and great thinkers with the masterminds of The School of Life.

Philosophy has traditionally been the domain of people say, over forty years old. Today however, there is a resurged interest discernible amongst younger generations. You also predominantly cater to this age group. What do you think explains this revitalization?

Well, first philosophy is beautiful. When we first started, it was indeed our goal to attract those that up to then, we're not so familiar with philosophy, which

happened to be mostly people being between 20-40 years old, to show them how beautiful and practical philosophy can be.

Why do you think philosophy and ethics has become so important for younger people?

That's hard to say really. Yet, there are some facts. Fact is that philosophy in the Netherlands has become much more popular over the past 10 years. In fact, the New York Times recently published an article on Holland's infatuation with practical philosophy.

I believe this stems from the relatively great level of freedom that young generations have today. In contrast with their parents, they didn't have to break loose from the church or other authorities. As such, youngsters are much more left on their own, you could say. Some people state that is a tremendous luxury, but I would beg to differ: It can be enormously difficult making big life decisions independently, without any guidance. It can make people feel a bit lost, really. And that's where philosophy comes in. It gives you a certain/clearer perspective on things.

You just launched a new media branch The New Thinking. Could you tell a bit more about that?

It is a conjunction with the Human club, yet it is mostly an extension or enrichment of what we already do

with 'Brandstof': providing people with insights from great thinkers on practical life issues, such as how to get happy. Some of these ancient thinkers literally spent their whole lives trying to find an answer to one or two (pivotal) questions. This reservoir of "insights" is humongous. Why not use it? Interestingly, their insights are often highly relevant in today's times. For example Aristotle, famous for 'becoming what you are' has quite some interesting things to say about how to find the job you love. We hope it will stir a movement of like-minded people and organizations, so that we can collectively re-appreciate these –mostly centuries- old philosophical insights.

Akin to this, do you believe that people have an increasing need or desire for ethical guidelines (on how to live)?

I wouldn't necessarily say so. Young and urbanized people are generally highly flexible, goal oriented and well educated. That said, I do see a thirst for knowledge on life issues and how to tackle it all. And that doesn't need to be easy or super accessible. People like to be challenged.

Do you think we also want to behave more correctly? Particularly since people see so much misconduct in their governments and in the financial sector, has ethics as such become more important in society?

I think that young people start to realize that older people and the institutions they created, don't know it either. In fact, many of these organizations, from the energy sector; to the financial sector; to intelligence agencies, all of them failed one way or the other. Joris Luyendijk, who followed bankers in London for The Guardian, once told me: "No one knows what has happened in the bank sector. It is all total chaos." Well that basically my point.

In line with this, people start to realize they are pretty much on their own, you can't rely on these institutions.

It is no coincidence that TedX and online universities are so popular worldwide, they fill in the gap.

To what degree do you think there is a shift in ethics and morality today? Do we view ethical behaviour today different than say, a decade ago?

It is always disputable how big the shift is, or what caused it, but yes, there are some significant changes. Like I said, people are much more aware of the chaos and they don't trust the government and what companies (third parties) claim anymore. One effect of this is that people realize that they are responsible and need to act accordingly. So yes, you could state that morality and getting directions in this is valued in much higher regards than before. And there is a definite correlation between this lack of trust in businesses, governments and other 'authorities and the need for direction. It's a trend that is also discernible in the food sector; as more and more people buy organic food or start to grow their own veggies. But note: only among a specific, higher educated group.

Did our ethical parameter changed and thus the way we ought to behave in society? Has our moral compass evolved over time?

That's a good and very difficult question at the same time. It's certain that we as mankind have developed like hell and I mean that rather cynical. We live in a risky world and in a way, we are moving, evolving too fast, much faster than we can really keep up with. Technology... It's hard to keep track of it all. So we need to redefine our times and our basic morality. Initiatives like these are omnipresent and spreading like wildfire.

How do you foresee our ethical behaviour/ ethics evolving in the near future? And what role can you fulfill in this with 'Brandstof' and The New Thinking?



In the end I'm positive, because this is what a crisis is all about. Paradoxical as it may sound, we need disorder and disruption in order to grow and move further. The system as we know it has failed and needs to be replaced by a new one. I wouldn't even say we're in an economic crisis now; it's a morality crisis. At the same time the world population is growing like crazy, with an extra billion people every decade. That does worry me.

It is very much simplified, but I would say that you have people that take value in this world and people that add value. In that sense I'm not that positive. But we need to mobilize as many people as possible to add value.

What philosopher greatly inspires you and why?

I haven't read all of his primary works, but I'm a big fan of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Foucault. Note: I'm not a philosopher myself.

Heidegger: because it's a bit mystic, esoteric, he talks about Dasein, our position in the world as a human being. His work was so fundamental, and it has certainly changed my perspective on how I look at the world, myself and others.

Wit: a logic, linguistic philosopher. All the problems in the world derive from language misunderstandings.

There are different 'games' of language we use.

Foucault: early work is about how the government tries to mould or develop us. E.g. autism. We are pushed into this normalisation. It is still very relevant.

Now we are also trying to make ourselves free (think Prism and so). Late work is about the art of living. How? Look to old Roman and Greek philosopher:

What role do you think 'Brandstof/The new Thinkers can play in all of this/ with today's changing/shift in ethics?

I would prefer to keep it simple. As for 'Brandstof'/ TNT, we are non-dogmatic, we don't try to stir people into a certain direction, we just try to enrich their lives and help them make their own choices. And when you try to understand things, it will improve the quality of your life. So, more you think, the better it gets. That's not always comfortable, but in the end it is a good thing. Or else everything would seem useless/senseless. We want to get young people thinking in a clear, transparent, accessible, fresh, bright way, so they can make their own choices.

How do you link ethics & morality to today's zeitgeist? Are we becoming less moral or is our moral standard increasing due to all the current worldwide "misconduct"?

That's difficult to tell. There are a lot of forces at play. The big question is: how will all these forces interplay with one another? I genuinely hope our morality will increase. That we will become more responsible with regards to our world, that greed isn't good (Ayn Rand). There are still a lot of people who are not aware, that are still obsessed with material stuff.

Yet always beware: everything should be re-evaluated in the historical context of that time. That's the way we look at all the philosophers and their ideas. ●