

## Philosophy at the Gozo Campus

### Joe Friggieri

*Pro-Rector for Gozo*

Twenty years ago, two or three people came up with the idea of opening a branch of the University on the other side of Comino, and I was one of the pioneers responsible for its implementation. It started as a small-scale project that grew and gathered momentum as it progressed.

*Professor Joe Friggieri*



Twenty years is a fourth of a lifetime, if one is lucky, a bigger fraction for many. For me, at any rate, those twenty years have gone by pretty fast, almost in a flash, or so it seems. I don't think I'm the only one to feel that way. The first batch of students who started coming to my classes in Gozo twenty years ago and ended up with a degree in Philosophy and another subject must feel more or less the same.

It has been shown scientifically that time appears to pass more quickly as one grows older. Stephen Hawking suggests that the perception of time at any particular point of a person's life is a ratio between a unit of time and the time lived up to that point by the perceiving subject. An hour, in other words, appears much longer to a child or adolescent than to an adult, even though the measure of time is the same. From sundials and water clocks to incense sticks and candles, from the hourglass to atomic clocks, a whole range of devices has been invented to measure time. None of them, however, can reverse the arrow of time or stop its flow.

I've been to Gozo so many times since we first started that I really can't count the ferry crossings. For some reason I can't explain, they all seem to merge into one crossing, one view of Comino and the caves (I always sit on that side of the boat), one sight of Mġarr harbour, with the yachts to one side and the fishing boats further in, with Fort Chambray perched on top of the hill and the chapel rising out of the rocks.

"What then is time?" asked St Augustine in the 4th century. "If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to one who asks, I know not." Augustine was also one of the first philosophers to see clearly that time and memory are closely related. Memories give us a sense of the past, just as hopes, desires, plans and intentions anticipate the future.

My recent memories of Gozo are closely linked to my experience at the University Gozo Campus, both as co-ordinator of the Philosophy courses and as member of the Board of Studies,

representing Senate. I knew Gozo quite well before that, but I got to know it even better over the last twenty years, teaching three successive groups of mature students, some of whom pursued their studies up to M.A. and even Ph.D. levels. Although most of those memories are blurred, and some have faded away completely, I feel a deep sense of satisfaction at what we managed to achieve over the last twenty years. I might not remember the names of all the students I taught at the University Gozo Centre since it came into existence, but I can clearly remember their faces. Whenever we happen to meet, they always show their gratitude for having been given the opportunity to continue their studies after years of gainful employment and to enjoy the excitement and reap the benefits of a University education. They look back on their years at the Gozo Campus with a great deal of nostalgia, some saying that they were the best years of their adult life.

According to an old and well-established tradition, Gozo was the enchanted island of the beautiful goddess Calypso. In a recent number of *Philosophie* (August-September 2011), the French philosopher and former Minister of Education Luc Ferry claimed that in order to discover the true philosophical significance of Homer's *Odyssey* one needs to start from the encounter between Ulysses and the nymph. It is this episode, in Ferry's view, that throws light on the origins of philosophy in ancient Greece and manifests the beauty and depth of the subject in the best possible way. By rejecting Calypso's promise of immortality and eternal youth, Ulysses accepts human finitude, casts away the spell of the past and assumes responsibility for the present, as he pursues the journey that will reunite him with his true self, his loved ones and the world.

And isn't this what philosophy is about or tries to do? It helps us find meaning in the world and in the lives we live, it scrutinizes the basic assumptions of our society, it creates new ways of looking at things and urges us to re-examine what's important and what's worthwhile. In doing this, it can bring about important changes in an entire culture or tradition.



*Professor David Cooper, a regular visitor to the Gozo Campus, giving one of his lectures.*

The inclusion right from the start of Philosophy, History and Sociology as core subjects in the degree programmes offered by the Gozo Campus was a clear indication of the importance attributed to the humanities in the setting up of this new branch of the University. While in virtually every other country in the world the humanities are being marginalized or cut away in favour of subjects which are seen as producing higher economic returns, the continued presence of Philosophy and other humanistic subjects at the Gozo campus is something we should all be proud of. It is these subjects that foster critical thinking, generate new ideas and stimulate the imagination. What would a person, a nation and education itself be without such qualities?

The unmitigated success registered by the University Gozo Campus over the last twenty years should make all of us involved in the project look upon the future of the institution with renewed enthusiasm and a determination to make it flourish and achieve the same kind of results in an even wider range of subjects and in other fields of knowledge.