

Why do “cults” develop around some philosophers?

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. Some philosophers seem to have cults, or cult-like formations, around them. Why? Is it because they are better than philosophers around which cults do not develop? I introduce the hypothesis that not being too demanding on others is important.

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Of he who never goes down a pipe

Skips a few levels: do you know that type?

Why do cults develop around some philosophers and not others? In this brief paper, I wish to introduce two hypotheses.

Now before any hypothesis, I imagine someone’s saying, “Do cults really develop around philosophers? When I think of a cult, I think of compulsory robes, rituals, smoky rooms but not that kind of smoke.” Maybe they do not fit some of our preconceptions of a cult, but there is something cult-like about these groups of followers around a philosopher, and maybe that happens even in the natural sciences and engineering and mathematics. Probably I need a definition and then some of these groups will count, or count as borderline cases. I shall not try to offer one here. I shall just speak to those who share my intuition.

Here is *the betterness hypothesis*: they are just better. If you are good enough, a cult will form around you. (It’s almost something physical. Some astronomical bodies “trap” things, no “capture” things – or something like that without intentions, given modern science – in their gravitational field.) But did a cult develop around Leibniz? If this example fails, the

story of a genius ignored in their lifetime is legendary! Unless the many instances of that story are all false, being really good in philosophy or some other field of the mind does not guarantee this formation in one's lifetime, and therefore does not guarantee it by some process analogous to gravitational pull.

Here is another hypothesis, which we can call *the less-demanding hypothesis*. Some philosophers are just too demanding, so cults do not form around them, even if they are better than some who are the object of cults. If you could somehow keep what was good and take away the demandingness, the cult would form! (A necessary condition is less demandingness.)

To illustrate the point but in the other direction of possibility, I hope: Wittgenstein has these wonderful examples and analogies in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Many years ago, in my final year as an undergraduate, I was told one by my philosophy tutor. A picture of a man walking up a hill could also be a picture of a man walking slowly backwards down a hill! Now imagine that when one of Wittgenstein's followers gave their own example, his response was a harsh "I would not give that example. It's not going to captivate undergraduates for generations, is it? You need to be better than this to be in my club." Elizabeth Anscombe, Rush Rhees, Norman Malcolm, etc. – they are probably all keeping away from this person. Despite his image of being an uncompromising genius, he must have had some management skills which prevented him from pushing the group around him too far. (Apologies if all this is known already in management studies.)

Reference

Wittgenstein, L. 1968 (third ed., translated by G.E.M. Anscombe). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.