



## 街头苏格拉底:记当代不爱著述的哲学家Sidney Morgenbesser

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### *The New York Time* December 26, 2004 Sidewalk Socrates

By JAMES RYERSON

To Bertrand Russell, he was one of the cleverest young men in the United States. To Noam Chomsky, he was one of the most profound minds of the modern era. But to anyone who visits a library to gauge his influence, Sidney Morgenbesser, who taught philosophy at Columbia University from 1955 to 1999, is practically a nonentity: the author of a small stack of seldom-cited papers, the editor of a few anthologies. Not since Socrates has a philosopher gained such a reputation for greatness while publishing so little of note. Certainly no one else shaped so many seminal thinkers while leaving behind almost nothing in the way of major doctrines or ideas. "Moses published one book," Morgenbesser pleaded in his own defense. "What did he do after that?"

There are people who have a passion for discourse, who are addicted to debate, who live in a world of constant conversation, and Morgenbesser was among the purest examples of the type. A product of the bustling street culture of New York's Lower East Side, he was dazzling on his feet -- skeptical, funny, a sort of sidewalk sage. At Columbia, he transported that atmosphere to the stretch of Broadway from 110th to 116th, where he would corner colleagues, buttonhole friends and engage in all manner of kibitzing and argument. For his peers, running into Morgenbesser meant subjecting their latest theories to his penetrating and often ruthlessly clever analysis. ("Let me see if I understand your thesis," he once said to the psychologist B. F. Skinner. "You think we shouldn't anthropomorphize people?")

Morgenbesser was one of the rare philosophers who lived a genuinely philosophical life, which is to say that he didn't try to advance a fixed body of arguments as much as he stood for a stubborn ideal of knowledge. Armed with logic and distinctions and conceptual clarity, he tirelessly patrolled the borders of truth. Large, sweeping theories made him suspicious. ("To explain why a man slipped on a banana peel," he argued, "we do not need a general

theory of slipping.") In place of grand systems, he cultivated a set of attitudes, ways of thinking about ideas -- a sense of what it is to really, truly think. Not for nothing did Robert Nozick, the late Harvard philosopher, claim that as a student at Columbia he "majored in Sidney Morgenbesser."

In the academic world, custom dictates that you may be considered a legend if there is more than one well-known anecdote about you. Morgenbesser, with his Borscht Belt humor and preternaturally agile mind, was the subject of dozens. In the absence of a written record of his wisdom, this was how people related to him: by knowing the stories and wanting to know more. The most widely circulated tale -- in many renditions it is even presented as a joke, not the true story that it is -- was his encounter with the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin. During a talk on the philosophy of language at Columbia in the 50's, Austin noted that while a double negative amounts to a positive, never does a double positive amount to a negative. From the audience, a familiar nasal voice muttered a dismissive, "Yeah, yeah."

The episode was classic Morgenbesser: the levity, the lightning quickness, the impatience with formality in both thought and manners, the gift for the knockout punch.

There is a danger, of course, in being too clever, and no one knew this better than Morgenbesser. He was exceptional at taking ideas apart, but not at building them up. No argument ever satisfied him, least of all his own, and his exacting standards made it hard for him to publish a fitting monument to his life's work. At one point, he told friends that he had finally written a book, a manuscript on the philosophy of the social sciences, but that he lost it in a fire. Some wondered whether to believe him. His was an inhibiting kind of genius, not a liberating one. Before becoming a philosopher, he was ordained as a rabbi, and you could see in his style of argumentation a hypertrophied form of his Talmudic training -- the endless distinctions, always looking to dissect further. When faced with his relentless refinements, friends and colleagues could always throw up their hands and walk away. Morgenbesser, a captive of his own talents, did not have that option.

It may have looked to some like a game and to others like an affliction; in the end, though, his constant questioning was an expression of something deeper: the conviction that any product of the human imagination will almost inevitably fall short of what the world is really like. Morgenbesser was not a brute skeptic, but as a former believer who had lost and never recovered his faith, he understood that the truth was hard; hard to come by, and sometimes hard -- even painful -- to take. "Why is God making me suffer so much?" he asked in the final weeks of his life, as he struggled with complications from Lou Gehrig's disease. "Just because I don't believe in him?"

James Ryerson is an editor at the magazine.

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