

WHAT IS RADICAL PHILOSOPHY?

BEGINNING FROM COMMITMENT

Peter Binns

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The recent conference of radical philosophers in London attracted hundreds of dissident intellectuals. Yet it became apparent that there was no single clearly defined direction in which the philosophers wanted to move as a whole. Some saw the faults of the current academic orthodoxy in terms of its concern with the "wrong" ideas instead of the "right" ones, and suggested instead that perhaps we should be teaching Marxism (for instance) instead of the language of morals. Others stressed the form rather than the content of philosophical education, and argued that merely replacing one syllabus by another would still leave unchanged the authority structure of the university and its role in the self-reproduction process of bourgeois society. These people suggested instead the need for action to change the structure of the institutions of tertiary education.

Both these views are half-truths. For while it is obvious that no philosopher can be progressive (let alone revolutionary) if he confines his activities to the analysis of just those concepts which constitute "normal" social intercourse in bourgeois society; it does not follow that grounding one's thoughts in a more genuine social reality, and using the more significant concepts of "class", "exploitation" and "alienation", necessary though it is, can ever be sufficient in itself, either. Unpalatable though it may be for professional philosophers, using the "right" concepts does not guarantee progressiveness. Unless these concepts form the weapons of a politically progressive movement, they can also be used against the forces of progress. For instance Hundman of the Social Democratic Federation in 1914 had a clearer grasp of these concepts than most others, but it did not stop him supporting British imperialism in 1914 against Lenin's working-class internationalism.

The social significance of any set of concepts, therefore, does not depend solely on their content, but rather upon the role they play in society. In 1914 the crucial question was the war. Reactionaries supported it while progressives and revolutionaries opposed it. No amount of couching support for it in "Marxist" terms in the manner of Hyndman could make this support progressive. Today the issues have changed but the principle remains the same. Nobody who is not politically involved in the fight against British imperialism in Ireland, against the attack on tenants in the Fair Rents Bill, and against the direct assault on the working class through productivity deals, unemployment and the Industrial Relations Act, can pretend to be radical or progressive in any sense, whatsoever. A philosopher, like any other thinker, can thus only be radical in virtue of things extrinsic to philosophy itself.

As Gramsci realized, the crucial task for intellectuals in general and philosophers in particular who want to give expression to their desires for social change, is first of all to give up the notion that the

validity of philosophical ideas can be settled within the realm of these ideas alone. We must begin with "criticism of the philosophy of the intellectuals". Instead our positive philosophical work must be "to make coherent the principles and problems raised by the masses in their practical activity... "By doing so we shall have taken thought outside the confines of thought itself and into the realm of action. Here is where thought which is genuinely progressive can begin. Our purpose in doing so is to "construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups".

That is why radical philosophers must take as their starting point the current problems facing the working class. Gramsci correctly saw the only organ through which this could be achieved as the revolutionary party. It is the place where the experience of the class is generalized. It is the "crucible where the unification of theory and practice understood as a real historical process, takes place".

Here then we can see the seeds of a view which neither trivializes the importance of ideas, nor allows the criteria for their acceptability to be restricted to something as narrow as their internal logics. It prevents us being first of all philosophers and only then radicals, but instead requires our commitment to political change, and to the destruction of philosophy as the property of professional philosophers, before we begin to practice it.

BEGINNING FROM WHERE YOU ARE

Tony Skillen

In his discussion of "radical philosophy", Peter Binns counterposes the development of "correct ideas" in a political vacuum to the development of ideas subsequent and subservient to the pursuit of a correct political line. Offering himself these alternatives he understandably takes the second, but it may be wondered whether he poses the choice facing radical philosophers in adequate terms.

Peter Binns speaks of "commitment to political change" as the starting point of radical philosophy. But what is this commitment to change supposed to be based on? Boredom? He speaks of Hyndman's "clear grasp" of Marxist concepts as failing to stop his pro-war position in 1914. But were his "ideas" about the war neutral, and were they not mistaken? Is his position *vis a vis* Lenin and the pacifists simply to be understood in terms of conflicting "commitments"? Peter Binns' account seems to reduce ideas to rationalizations of non-rational and unexplained "commitments", rationalizations to be evaluated, not in terms of truth (of what is objectively the case) but in terms of promotion of the "committed's" cause. (In which case the question of truth would re-emerge, for we would have to ask whether it is the case that such and such views (e.g. Gramsci's) really and truly do promote the cause, whether such and such lines of thought do relate "organically" to the revolutionary movement).

By speaking of "the (which?) revolutionary party" as "the crucible" of theory and practice, Peter Binns presents as *a priori* solved problems that many of those involved in the Radical Philosophy group are trying to grapple with. One problem for example is that if, following Lenin, it is accepted that unity of practice requires unity of theory, there is a difficulty about the possibility of vigorous open and even heated philosophical and theoretical discussion given that this is to go on *within* the "democratic-centralist" party. And, in general, it is curious that such a thing as the Radical Philosophy Group should seem to meet with such a positive response if, already, The Party(ies) is the answer. Our arguments, our disagreements are public. Indeed this is essential to the "politics" of such a movement for it involves people in the activity of critical thought, an activity which involves more than the techniques and routines of criticism handed down in academic departments and more than the passive acceptance as unexamined "commonsense" of left intellectuals' ideas that Gramsci envisaged as the fate of the bulk of the workers, (thus the patronising hand-me-down Marxism that some left wing groups teach "the workers").

At its most modest then, the Radical Philosophy Group involves a *practice* of developing and exchanging ideas in an attempt to break from the oppressive load of bourgeois "commonsense" that so much academic philosophy puts on our minds. But immediately this kind of activity involves us whether we are "teachers or students" or whether we are outside the colleges in conflict with the existing *practice* of the "institutions of learning". We see ourselves as subverting these structures and as undermining the security of hitherto untroubled (and by no means politically neutral) ideology. Thus at the same time as we break through our own mystifications, our own academicism, our own individualistic careerism, we are also breaking through the cultural freezing compartments that are our universities, with their prepackaging examinations and prepackaged "courses". Ideas, then, already have a "practical life" in the academies, and many of us have no intention of quietly working on "ideas" in the academy during the week and noisily working on "action" outside the factory at the weekend. (Workers, for one thing, can sniff comfortably academic lefties a mile off, and have a right to know what sort of struggle their prospective guides are involved in in their own work-place).

But academies do not affect only those who have their permanent jobs in them or those who pass through them. They contribute to the total culture in which they exist. And certainly, as Peter Binns so rightly implies, a radicalism simply of the academy does not amount to much. In this context it must be stressed that capitalist oppression relies on the maintenance in the heads of the people of a political culture, of systems of habits and beliefs. ("The rule of law", "free speech", "violence", "the common good", "politicians", "experts" etc etc). Clearly, if the independent Radical Philosophy Group is to play some role in breaking through such mystification-at-large, it has to organise itself in such a way that it includes and is communicating to workers, women, children, people involved in struggle against the forces that oppress them. And while I myself would question the force of proprietary communiqués distributed by one or other of the left political parties, it is clear that this aspect of organisation is ahead of us.

Peter Binns' statement "the social significance of any set of concepts depends on the role they play in society" is unlikely to be denied. But like any tautology it tells us little, especially about the complex ways in which ideas, whether our own or the status quo's, are socially located, and therefore little about the different levels of practice in a movement of radical philosophy.

MARXIST COURSE

Mary Warnock

All professional philosophers, probably since the days of the pre-socratics, have been accustomed to abuse and misunderstanding. They have variously been accused of undermining the state, corrupting the youth, destroying true religion, killing poetry, and probably other things as well. It is therefore not surprising that they still come in for attack. But, at the present time, the attack seems to be taking a rather new form; it is conducted with more than usual dislike and scorn and it is, in a way, more highly organised than usual.

The new radical philosophy group is an attempt to set up a rival philosophical school to replace all academic philosophy whatsoever; to replace the present unsatisfactory set of teachers of philosophy in universities and other places of learning with a new and more acceptable lot. The difference between the present type of discontent and previous discontents is easy to account for: it is precisely the difference made by marxism. On the whole, marxism made a very slow start in British universities. The detached, cool empirical goings-on of British philosophers may have had a good deal to do with this.

Certainly, when Sartre wrote in 1960 that marxism was the "inescapable philosophy of our time", readers in England were inclined to say, with an air of superiority, that they at least had escaped it. The supposition that no philosophy could hereafter be written except as a commentary upon, or an expansion of, marxist philosophy seemed an absurd exaggeration. Rightly. But the fact remains that the present attack on philosophy as taught in our university departments, starts from this very thought. Possibly the most-quoted words of Marx are those in which he says that whereas previous philosophers had been content to analyse the world, the real point of philosophy was to change it. From this the whole notion of philosophy as an essentially *practical* subject could be seen to arise.

The present critics of traditional philosophy, the radicals, wish above all to ensure that philosophy shall have practical effects. Though, of course, they speak with many voices, and at their recent conference in London did not come up with any agreed programme, the most nearly agreed proposition which they uttered was that philosophy must start from the working classes. Translated into something a little more concrete, this seems to mean that there is no part of philosophy that is non-political. The point of the philosopher's work is to change the world - and to change it he must change the consciousness of the working classes. Either this entails that all the traditional objects which have been the concern of philosophers ought to be dropped, under the new scheme, or it entails that the traditional objects of concern are *in fact* political, though no one hitherto had thought so.

There seems to me to be a real, but not unfamiliar, difficulty here. It is the kind of conflict which inevitably arises when two people have completely and absolutely different aims, though they are brought together by the fact that, in name, they are doing the same thing. One can think of any number of examples. If one person thinks that education is a matter of acquiring practice in making free choices, and another thinks of it as the teaching to children of certain prescribed skills and facts about the world, the fact that they are both apparently concerned with education will not prevent irreconcilable conflict. Thus, in the case of philosophy, the common name does more harm than

good. Of course, there are many philosophers, marxist and non-marxist, who simply go on pursuing their subject because they find it interesting, and do not stop very often to raise any question about their aims. On the other hand, one is quite often asked, especially by people who may be thinking of embarking on the study of philosophy, what it actually is, and what is the point of it.

The traditionalist may well say, in answer to such questions, that philosophy is concerned with problems which are very general; not specific ones which may be answered by physicists or historians or geographers or chemists, but questions which may lie behind all these studies, such as on the nature of knowledge itself, or of causation in general.

All such questions as these have been raised by philosophers since Plato and, for the traditionalists, this is in a way a part of their answer. Certainly, part of what they will expect to occur in a university department of philosophy is an examination of the philosophers of the past. As to the point of the thing, apart from its intrinsic interest, which may be thought to be great, there is the further important point of philosophy being, above all, a rational undertaking, which must proceed by argument. A great part of the study of philosophy, the traditionalist will say, is the study of arguments, and this is something which is of value in itself. To be able to distinguish, not merely between a good argument and a bad one, but between what is an argument of any kind and what is mere statement or rhetoric, is neither an easy skill nor is it trivial. Now if the traditional philosophy course at university were explained in something like these terms, it is easy to see that what may conveniently be called the marxist course, the radical philosopher's philosophy, differs from it at every point.

The most obvious point of difference is the lack of any specifically political interest in the traditionalists' statement of aims. The point is to understand, not to intervene in the world. The purpose of the course is not to get anybody to do anything or to behave in a particular way. It is specifically to enable them to judge for themselves whether there are good reasons for action or not; whether or not there are good reasons for belief, not in a particular area of action or belief, but in any area whatever.

The point of conflict, then, is precisely this. Is philosophy essentially political or is it not? Is it really aimed at political change, or is it not aimed at any kind of change, but at an enlargement of the understanding? The conflict, let it be clear, is not one between the left and the right, in the sense in which there may be left-wing politicians and right-wing politicians who would nevertheless agree about the kind of problems they had to solve. It is between two sets of people who differ totally about the nature of the activity they profess to pursue, though each side claims the name of philosophy for what they do.

It is this claim which has generated the extreme resentment on each side. Traditional philosophers tend to raise the question of why they should be castigated for failing to do something which they never had any intention or desire to do anyway. They think of themselves as following in the steps of Plato, Aristotle, Hume and Kant who certainly interested themselves in political questions among others, but in a speculative way and with the help of arguments, not strikes.

The radical philosophers, on the other hand, say that the traditionalists who have a stranglehold on the universities are simply occupying themselves with trivialities and refusing to do what they ought to do. They just state that there is one "correct" procedure for philosophers, and this is the procedure which will lead to a revolution of values. They, on their side, resent the fact that there are so many people called

philosophers who are doing nothing at all according to this correct procedure. There is, as far as I can see, no way to end this mutual resentment. In practice it is tiresome, because it leads to a great many frustrations. There are students who desperately hope for something from their philosophy course which they will not and cannot get; and there are teachers of philosophy who fail to make any contact with at least a proportion of their students - all because they are not really concerned with the same subject at all.

It is hard to know what to suggest. The rational solution might seem to be to invent a different name for one or other of these two philosophies. But it is doubtful whether either party to the dispute would be willing to give up the old and honourable title. And in any case it would be years before the ambiguities in the expression "philosophy" were finally cleared up. For my own part, I must confess to a reluctance to allow the word to be preempted for so irrational or so politically involved an activity as that proposed by the radicals. It is not that I wish philosophy necessarily to be uncommitted. But commitment should come, if at all, by way of arguments. And it has always been the pride of philosophy to try to follow the argument, as Plato said, wherever it leads. To have it laid down in advance, in the book of rules, that there is one and only one correct way to go, seems to me to be contrary to what ought to be the free and sceptical spirit of the subject.

"If philosophers are scandalized by the death sentence meted out to Socrates, this is due not so much to the indignation provoked by the execution of the Just One, as to professional anger over the fact that those who acted as judges were not specialists in conceptual logic or reflexive analysis, but merely living human beings who, for better or for worse, were moved to pass judgement on the philosophy of Socrates because of the actual effect his ideas were having."

(Paul Nizan, *The Watchdogs*)

TWO REPLIES

1 Roy Edgley

Mrs Warnock's attack on radical philosophy does her target a service: it exemplifies the very vices the radicals attribute to their opponents. I won't say that the vices are those of blinding prejudice and complacent obtuseness, since she would regard that as 'rhetoric'. I'll do what she admires and argue the case, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions, rhetorical or otherwise.

Her criticism rests on an array of distinctions characteristic of much twentieth century English-speaking academic philosophy, the very distinctions radical philosophy rejects. She contrasts radical with 'traditionalist' philosophy, and this contrast is aligned with the following: whereas traditionalist philosophy aims at understanding and proceeds by argument, radical philosophy, being Marxist, seeks change, specifically by action, and more specifically still it seeks political change by political action. How do these distinctions provide grounds for objecting to radical philosophy? Mrs Warnock sees that to object that therefore radical philosophy isn't really philosophy would be simply to make a verbal point about the word 'philosophy', and her substantive objection is that these distinctions show that radical philosophy, by contrast with traditional philosophy, is irrational. These two objections might be brought together if it could be shown both that radical philosophers use arguments of the same logical kind as traditionalists and that such arguments logically can't have the substantive practical and political conclusions the

radicals require. Though she nowhere makes it explicit, perhaps a view of this sort was in Mrs Warnock's mind: certainly anyone familiar with contemporary academic philosophy in England will recognise it as strongly connected with the distinctions she does use.

Before looking at these distinctions, let me first clear away the muddle, reminiscent of so much newspaper argument, in her peroration against radical philosophy's Marxism. 'I must confess,' she says, 'to a reluctance to allow the word ['philosophy'] to be preempted for so irrational or so politically involved an activity as that proposed by the radicals. It is not that I wish philosophy necessarily to be uncommitted, but commitment should come, if at all, by way of arguments. And it has always been the pride of philosophy to try to follow the argument, as Plato said, wherever it leads. To have it laid down in advance, in the book of rules, that there is one and only one correct way to go, seems to be to be contrary to what ought to be the free and sceptical spirit of the subject'.

This assumes that characterising one's philosophical position in terms of a set of ideas already expounded, as e.g. Platonist, or Aristotelian, or Cartesian, or Humean, or Kantian, or Wittgensteinian, or perhaps as empiricist or analytical-linguistic, implies two things: first that that position contains nothing new and does not modify the ideas from which it derives; and second that one's commitment to that position is irrational and has not 'come ... by way of arguments'. Is she really suggesting that because Chomsky, for instance, can describe his linguistics as rationalist and Cartesian he says nothing new and has not argued or is not capable of arguing for his views? And doesn't 'the sceptical spirit' follow a line that has been 'laid down in advance', especially if this is the spirit of 'traditionalist' sheep rather than 'radical' goats?

The most general of Mrs Warnock's contrasts is presented as follows: 'Is it [philosophy] really aimed at political change, or is it not aimed at any kind of change, but at an enlargement of the understanding?' I'll ignore the question whether such 'traditionalists' (or were they radicals in their time?) as Socrates and Plato, for instance, didn't seek, by their philosophy, to change the world, or perhaps to prevent change, and in any case to have some effect, hopefully for the better, on the course of events, political or otherwise. That aside, could anything but a deeply-rooted prejudice against certain sorts of change obscure from Mrs Warnock the fact that an enlargement of the understanding is a kind of change, and one that Marxism, like most philosophies, traditional or otherwise, regards as crucial?

More specifically, as Marxists, radical philosophers, according to Mrs Warnock, see philosophy 'as an essentially practical subject and 'wish above all to ensure that philosophy shall have practical effects': they seek to get people to do things. In traditionalist philosophy, on the other hand, 'The point is to understand, not to intervene in the world. The purpose of the course is not to get anybody to do anything or behave in a particular way. It is specifically to enable them to judge for themselves...'. Certainly the aim of philosophy ought to be to get people to think for themselves, this qualification 'for themselves' presumably meaning 'with some degree of rationality, i.e. clearly and with awareness of the pressures, including social and political pressures, tending to produce bias and prejudice'. But thinking is of course an activity, a kind of doing, and in order to think clearly and rationally we may need to do many things, such as study, read, write, argue, and so on. Is there any *a priori* limit on this list of activities that might be necessary? Might it not, for instance, include such things as going to see for oneself what life is like among factory workers? Or aren't the 'detached, cool empirical goings-on of British philosophers' quite

empirical enough for that? But the question, I take it, is also whether understanding and thinking for oneself, when achieved, or at least clarified and made more rational, won't have implications for and effects on behaviour.

If there are such practical implications, accepting Plato's recommendation to follow the argument wherever it leads will involve acting accordingly. Mrs Warnock seems to reject this very possibility, and without a shred of argument. Philosophers, radical or not, may suspect that she agrees with that well-worn doctrine, 'laid down in advance', that the nature of philosophy is such that it logically cannot have any substantive implications, and more specifically that moral philosophy must be neutral with respect to moral and practical issues. On this matter Mrs Warnock tars Bentham and Mill, to say nothing of Professor Hare (see his inaugural lecture), with the same broad and indiscriminating brush as radical philosophers. But does she mean what she seems to say? In her last paragraph she admits that 'It is not that I wish philosophy necessarily to be uncommitted'. As far as I can see, this can be squared with her anti-activist view of philosophy only by supposing that she regards philosophy not as uncommitted to action but as committed to inaction. If so, she'd better stop pretending that all or even most traditional philosophers, to say nothing of reason itself, are on her side.

More specifically still, Mrs Warnock objects to radical philosophy's commitment to change and action of a political kind. But if philosophy can be committed and have a practical relevance, why not politically committed and with a practical political relevance? Empirical knowledge may be necessary for rational political commitment, but that should not deter anyone engaged in 'the detached, cool empirical goings-on of British philosophers'. Or did Mrs Warnock mean 'empiricist'? Modern empiricist philosophy is of course extremely *a priori* and unempirical, and its detachment - from empirical as well as practical matters - is for radicals one of its chief vices.

Radical philosophy doesn't object to argument or reject reason, properly understood. It does object to the tendency, exemplified by Mrs Warnock's article, to suppose that argument and reason somehow exclude action, political or not. '... there is the further important point', she says, 'of philosophy being, above all, a rational undertaking, which must proceed by argument'. This idea that 'a rational undertaking ... must proceed by argument' conflicts with radical philosophy only if it's thought, as Mrs Warnock seems to think, that this means 'by argument alone'. Is she identifying argument with reason, or assuming that it's only in argument that reason can be exercised? '... Plato, Aristotle, Hume, and Kant ...' she says, 'certainly interested themselves in political questions among others, but in a speculative way and with the help of arguments, not strikes'. But couldn't there be arguments for strikes? And if they were rational arguments, wouldn't the action of striking be rational? Arguing is itself an activity, and the question whether it's reasonable to argue with someone doesn't depend solely on the logical validity of one's arguments, which is presumably what Mrs Warnock has in mind when she talks about the ability to distinguish 'good and bad arguments'.

The question is a practical one, and the answer to it will depend on the circumstances: it will be no good arguing, for instance, if arguing is ineffective in those circumstances. Whether or not the radicals hold that 'there is no part of philosophy that is non-political', contemporary academic philosophy in England is too little concerned with the social and political conditions of rationality, especially with such conditions as may frustrate and inhibit the exercise and growth of rationality and knowledge. Mrs Warnock's touching faith in argument alone, regardless of (or 'detached' from) the circumstances, is typical of the

irresponsibility of intellectuals in both philosophy and politics. It represents an ideology of reason articulated by 'traditional' philosophy, an ideology that has a conservative political function, and which has not surprisingly helped to bring reason itself into discredit.

2 John Mepham

The great value of Mrs Warnock's article is that it exposes so clearly just what we are up against: ignorance and arrogance. She understands neither Radical Philosophy nor marxism. The Radical Philosophy group does not "attempt to set up a rival philosophical school to replace all academic philosophy whatsoever". Mrs Warnock offers no evidence that this might be true of the group. Perhaps the easiest way she might have discovered that it is not so is by having actually bothered to read either of the first two issues of *Radical Philosophy*. In both there is printed the following statement of purpose. "Our aim is to encourage and to develop positive alternatives.. For this there are other traditions which may inform our work (e.g. phenomenology, existentialism, Hegelian thought and Marxism). However, the Group will not attempt to lay down a philosophical line. Our main aim is to free ourselves from the restricting institutions and orthodoxies of the academic world, and thereby to encourage important philosophical work to develop: Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom!" It is precisely the *exclusiveness* of contemporary English philosophy, especially that practised in Oxford since the war, that is the aim of our discontent. This exclusiveness is illustrated by the extraordinary arrogance with which Mrs Warnock, quite without any argument, implicitly repeatedly identifies philosophy as it is practised and taught in English universities with "traditional philosophy", with that philosophy which follows in the steps of Plato, Aristotle, Hume and Kant. My opinion is that "Oxford philosophy" is to be condemned precisely because it is *not* the "free and sceptical" inquiry to which these philosophers were committed, because it does not take seriously questions which all of these philosophers took to be important philosophical questions (for example, *but not only*, questions in political and social philosophy), and because it has refused, to generations of students, access to these questions in the work of the great modern European philosophers.

It is not only the more or less complete absence of significant research in social and political philosophy that exposes this local tradition as out of touch with the tradition of philosophy as practised from Plato to Hegel. It is also its rather laughable refusal to recot ise the existence of the works of, for example, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty. In seven years as a student in Oxford I only once ever heard a tutor *mention* (let alone discuss) any of these philosophers. The one exception was the brave Mrs Warnock herself. Her rather idiosyncratic lectures on Sartre were the one hint a student might have got that any philosophy (apart from that of Wittgenstein) had been written since 1800 in any language other than English. In my view philosophy as practised in Oxford, far from being identifiable with "traditional philosophy", is actually a rather narrow and provincial version of it which, by virtue of its hegemony in English universities has managed to pose for far too long as its unique modern embodiment.

As for Marxism: Radical Philosophy is not a marxist group, though some of its members are marxists. This may or may not be a pity. But it is anyway a fact, and one that Mrs Warnock could easily have ascertained. It is not the case that marxist philosophers interest themselves in political questions by way of strikes and not argument. If Mrs Warnock had done some reading she would not have made any of these silly mistakes. Unfortunately it is quite normal that

philosophers in Oxford combine the programme of ignoring Marx (and Husserl and Freud etc etc) with that of remaining ignorant about them. Mrs Warnock manages to misquote the 11th Thesis on Feuerback (the "most-quoted words of Marx") in such a way as to actually produce the opposite of Marx's meaning (since his point in the Theses, in relation to philosophy, is that it cannot change the world). Had she bothered to read *Radical Philosophy* No.2 she would have found, boxed and conspicuous on the first page, the following passage from a letter of Marx to Ruge.

"Since it is not for us to create a plan for the future that will hold for all time, all the more surely what we contemporaries have to do is the uncompromising critical evaluation of all that exists, uncompromising in the sense that our criticism fears neither its own results nor the conflict with the powers that be.... Therefore, we can express the aim of our periodical in one phrase: a self-understanding (critical philosophy) of the age concerning its struggles and wishes".

No doubt what Marx meant in saying this, and whether or not he was right on this or any other occasion, *ought* to be open to discussion. In Oxford it *de facto* is not open to discussion and those who are responsible for this fact are an active denial of all that philosophy stands for.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE IN PHILOSOPHY?

Guido Frongia

Every initiative is relative to a particular situation. And it is clear that both the existence of your group and its polemical position reflect a real situation of discontent in England which had already found some expression, though perhaps not in such a vocal and explicit way. But only when the motives of this cultural phenomenon are understood not simply in relation to its local and contingent dimensions, but within a wider historical perspective, will it be possible to assess their real force and clarify their meaning.

With this in mind, I feel that, whatever we think of that trend of philosophy usually referred to as "conceptual analysis", we must not overlook its importance. Many writers who are more or less accurately placed in this current of enquiries expressed in their work a need, which is in my view justified, for greater rigour and clarity in philosophy. They contributed to the perhaps permanent disappearance of the imprecise, presumptuous and quasi-theoretical forms of philosophical speculation which in late Victorian England were mostly expressions of the aristocratic, normally conservative, conception of culture produced by the dominant ideology.

In order to put the anlysis in a wider historical perspective one should ask, furthermore, whether the narrowness of issues and interests which Jonathan Rée, in the first issue of this journal, rightly I think, finds in the present practice of English (or perhaps more generally anglo saxon?) philosophy, reflects needs of an objective character. We must ask, for example, whether all this is in some way expressive of a radical change (compared with a century ago for example) in the contribution that a philosopher *can* make, or the function that he *can* have, in cultural debate.

Certainly Jonathan Rée's accusations against some aspects of modern philosophy are justifiable: that it adopts an uncritical and dependent attitude towards scientific disciplines, and that it accepts implicitly a technocratic and purely instrumental perspective

with respect to the achievements of science (cf. the similar critique by Habermas). Nevertheless this line of criticism might partly be understood as an anachronistic, even nostalgic, appeal for a "restoration" to philosophy of the functions and competence for which it is no longer equipped. No possibility seems to me less realistic today than that a philosopher, however powerful his intellect or broad his erudition, is capable of constructing with any credibility the kind of grand synthesis with which Hegel in the last century could still from his pontifical chair dazzle his astonished audience.

The various recent attempts at such a systematic account of "human thought" and "its faculties" (from Russell to Sartre, from Croce to Merleau-Ponty), however interesting, have been rather ephemeral; and the price of their speculative adventurism has often been a sacrifice of clarity for literary style. The works of these writers, as I see in my own daily experience, have been made a mere backdrop to fruitless disputes between "learned men" and experts in some piecemeal aspect of the history of culture. These debates are often characterised by an academicism at least as obtuse and aristocratic as the one which Jonathan Rée complains about among those responsible for the "intellectual isolationism" of British universities. This particular kind of academic professionalism, which seems to have almost completely disappeared from English philosophy departments, continues to flourish, especially in the areas of European culture which have been most tyrannized by the high priests of various forms of *Philosophie des Geistes*.

I do not wish to deny that these attempts at comprehensive synthesis have played an important part in modern western culture. Yet it seems worth emphasising that their major function has been a negative one: they have given us evidence of the objective limits that confront anyone today who wants to take the way of speculative deductive systems.

I am impelled to make these points also because I live and teach in a country where the philosopher still very often retains, in line with idealist tradition, the position which Croce gave him at the beginning of the century - the supreme prophet of truth. In many Italian academic circles, for all the unflinching distinctions and reservations, grand speculative statements are still taken very seriously. I should mention, for instance, the widespread practice of organising meetings (on television and elsewhere) about issues of a "scientific" nature where the place of honour is reserved for a philosopher who, after the various scientific experts have expressed their "technical and particular" points of view, is given the task of summing up the parts of the debate into a "higher synthesis". This capacity is a recognised attribute of the philosopher who takes his privileged position from not making particular investigations and having no specific area of competence. Since he is not subject to the law of division of labour, he is capable of facing problems with a more general perspective and of reaching knowledge of the "totality". Needless to say, the results achieved in this way are limited and, even in the best cases, do not go beyond the production of fascinating passing suggestions.

I am saying all of this in order to make clear first of all the directions which I think your journal's search for greater generality and significance in philosophical enquiry ought not to take. But then, more positively, the question remains: what to do in philosophy?

In my opinion you should not obscure the importance of certain results obtained from the experience of analytical philosophy in Britain: it has established rigorous methods of enquiry; it has achieved relevant results for example in the fields of the philosophy of logic, the theory of meaning, the analysis of moral, juridical and scientific language; it has tried to unravel, with an original perspective, the knots formed

by the intersection of different problems of classical western speculation (dualism between body and mind, the "problem" of other minds, the *a priori* and a *posteriori*, determinism and freedom of the will etc); finally it has made an attempt to find out how these problems are rooted in our conceptual schemes and in what way their solutions are reflected in our current forms of linguistic behaviour and modes of thought.

It is interesting to note the continual growth, in Italy, for example, in the number of philosophers who look with interest in the analytical direction and who regard analytical method as an important instrument, especially of a heuristic kind, to build a wider awareness of the nature of philosophical enquiry and to clarify and select what today appears redundant and superfluous.

I am not saying that this choice of direction and method is the only possible one; nor do I overlook its risks. It might reduce the analysis to a shapeless constellation of tiny problems, each one considered as autonomous and independent. Or it might even compromise the capacity to understand the very nature of the problems taken into consideration (a danger, however, faced especially by those with no genuine interest and philosophical perspective in the first place). Finally it may run the risk of losing all the historical dimension of the questions involved by overlooking the fact that not only do the answers given to them change over time, but also, and above all, that the "same" problems have a substantially different significance at different periods in the history of the culture, and therefore sometimes also in different countries at the same time. I do not deny that all these shortcomings have limited the development of modern philosophy in Britain. On the contrary, I believe that, especially in the last decades, there has been a real impoverishment of themes and interests; and this certainly has compromised the disposition to learn and to achieve valuable insights even from the work of many widely read and "respected" writers (the case of Wittgenstein to which Jonathan Rée refers in his article seems to me indicative). It is also true that there has been a general tendency to reduce forcibly the complexity and thematic breadth of these writers within a rather narrow and limiting range of arguments.

I do agree that it is most important in the future to give more attention in English philosophy departments to the study of works and writers who have for too long been kept out of syllabuses. Nevertheless, rather than Hegel and the later followers of idealistic speculation, I would mention here writers of German historicism - from Dilthey through Windelband and Simmel to Max Weber; also Lukács; perhaps some aspects of the existentialist problematic; among contemporary writers, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas; and to clarify the function of intellectuals in the struggle for a socialist society Gramsci and of course Marx. And it is crucial to rediscover the taste for a more "faithful" analysis of a historical character, with greater concern for the physiognomy of the writers considered and of the cultural nature of the epochs in which they lived.

From this wider perspective it may be easier to recognise the importance of "conceptual analysis". Its task is to reconstruct a "map" of the complex network of relations between different areas of our languages, and by these means to make explicit the almost always implicit, and often unconscious, pre-suppositions which are at the base of conceptual schemes in which and through which we organise our experience. This means, following the lines suggested by Wittgenstein (set out with particular clarity in *On Certainty*), to identify and describe the foundations of a metaphysical character on which different effective systems of knowledge are based, or were based in the past. I am referring here not only to those relatively more stable, if perhaps more complex and elusive logical and epistemological conventions which we tacitly accept in learning our language, but also to what, in a more homogeneously structured way lies

at the foundation of different scientific theories. This "descriptive" method, though applicable only to restricted fields of inquiry, could make available to the critical judgement of the reason, aspects of our conceptual equipment which are less accessible and usually less known.

I do not think that the philosopher, by means of his intellectual criticism or his visionary power only, has any chance of changing at will the *substantial* part of what in this investigation he has unearthed from underneath the actual manifestations of human thought. Perhaps we should definitively rule out any possibility for him to substitute *successfully* one form of metaphysics for another, or even, more restrictedly, to elaborate *possible* alternative metaphysical systems. To invent a new metaphysics would mean, in Wittgenstein's terms, to invent an entirely new *form of life*: a new culture. And the complexity of this task seems today to transcend the limited possibility even of the best equipped school of philosophy.

It is true that quite often in the past, the best contributions in speculative philosophy have brought to the surface important ferments which in some way had already been operative in the depths of the reality of the time. It is equally true, from our point of view of historical observers, that these works seem to have sometimes anticipated, or perhaps even accelerated, profound transformations in society. To quote only one name which I have found quite often in the first issue of *Radical Philosophy*, an analysis of the relations between the writings of Hegel and the first developments of romantic culture, could exemplify precisely this point, besides being of considerable theoretical interest. Such an analysis could make us aware, for example, of the fact that the somehow revolutionary power of these works presupposed a capacity (perhaps only an illusory one) of dominating and unifying in a universal synthesis of a speculative nature all the manifestations, past and present, of what at that time was usually called "the activities of the Spirit": from science to art, from religion to law.

Today it is precisely such a synthesis (or even its figment) which we are denied. This awareness determines that aspect of contemporary western culture which I would call, using once more a Hegelian term, its "*unglückliches Bewusstsein*" (unhappy consciousness). Such a statement appears all the more dramatic since today it seems no longer possible, as Hegel envisaged it in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, to transcend this state of consciousness in the sense of its "pacification" by means of philosophy. And this is true for various reasons: because of the progressive division and specialization of knowledge as we have witnessed it especially in our century; because of the great complexity and relative theoretical autonomy assumed by the various disciplines; and finally, and most of all, because meanwhile it has become generally accepted that what at that time was preferred as "universal" manifestation of the "life of the Spirit" was no more than a particular and contingent expression of human thought, privileged by an aristocratic and Eurocentric conception of culture. A greater critical awareness, favoured by many different factors, makes it easier for us today to *understand* and *accept* the fact that besides the Western tradition of thought there are other cultures which are at least as rightfully entitled to an autonomous existence. But with all this, the possibility of dominating, by means of an universal synthesis, even a transitory phase of human knowledge seems to become more and more remote.

From what I have said above, must one then deduce that the philosopher's role today is only that of a *passive* observer of the eventual change of those aspects of reality to whose individuation and description he himself has contributed? I personally believe that one must rule out even the possibility that he can determine in what sense this mutation *could* or *should* be oriented. An answer to this last problem is, ³² rather, provided from what results, quite unpredictably,

from the continuous change in that complex set of natural and social conditions which determine our ways of living; and it depends, in the first place, on which components of our societies succeed in moulding reality in accordance with their own will to change. But this is of course an answer *DE FACTO* which then becomes an object of analysis, and as such susceptible of description and interpretation

ON ALTERNATIVE PHILOSOPHIES

Colin Beardon

It is part of the manifesto of the Radical Philosophy Group "to encourage and to develop positive alternatives" to contemporary British Philosophy. In a certain sense this aim is admirable. The present content of most of what passes for philosophy is not only of "little relevance or interest" to the vast mass of people, it is decidedly working against their interests, and therefore some alternative is imperative. But the Group's distinctly liberal "refusal to lay down a line", combined with the frequent defences of specific figures and parts of the established philosophy, make me wonder what kind of alternatives you have in mind. Traditionally, philosophy has set very narrow limits on what it will consider as an alternative to itself, but if we are really going to be radical we must not be hoodwinked by our inheritance. For example, any conception of a real alternative being formed by combining all that is best in existing philosophies, would be both idealistic and naive, as it would fail to recognise the wider significance of the complaints made against philosophy.

Firstly, I find it odd that you should think that it is only contemporary British Philosophy that is trivial and boring and is at a dead end. If modern philosophy is trivial and boring, then so are the historical figures that undergraduates also have to read. And if anything is at a dead end I would have thought that it is the whole tradition that led up to the present impasse.

In saying that the whole tradition in philosophy is trivial and at a dead end, one is not necessarily 'committing it all to the flames'. There are a number of good reasons why studying particular figures or ideas may be rewarding. It may be that one can get a sense of historical change by studying the development of a particular idea. It may be that the connection with other things one knows about a period makes a particular historical figure or period interesting. It may be that one is particularly interested in a specific problem and anything that anyone has to say on it is of significance. All this may be granted and the attack on establishment philosophy maintained. For there is an important distinction to be made between the significance of particular people or ideas for someone who is pursuing a special interest, and the significance of all these people and ideas when lumped together and presented in a particular way as a comprehensive course in philosophy.

To the Radical Philosopher who is also a professional philosopher (I am referring mainly to staff and postgraduates), his or her personal concern will generally be their specialist field of research. Naturally enough, they will be extremely reluctant to cut their ties with their past work, and will automatically tend to relate their ideas to those philosophers which they had to study when they were undergraduates. Also, of course, their teaching duties provide yet another link to the established tradition. To the Radical Philosopher who is an undergraduate, and is perplexed or disillusioned about what has been presented to him at University or wherever such considerations are largely irrelevant. Probably he or she will not be pursuing philosophy after graduation, so the Philosophy Department needs to be seen in its role as a producer of a particular type of graduate,

rather than, as it tends to be professionally, a collective for the production of ideas.

This role of Philosophy as a part of deliberate educational policy is, obviously, played down by the establishment, but also we find many liberals ready to deny its importance. Without a doubt reactionary forces do not want the social significance of different disciplines to be widely discussed and brought into question. But unfortunately there is a trendy image of an academic which, consciously or not, lends support to this reactionary desire. The not-uncommon view that research is what being an academic is really all about, whilst teaching is a necessary evil, can only be seen as a withdrawal from the fight. One frequent outcome is the stereotyped 'objective' and impersonal lecture where a specific topic is taken and all attitudes and counter-attitudes to it are explained. The result is that a student is trained to see 'all sides of the problem', thus almost guaranteeing that any solution he comes up with will not cause any great disturbance.

I think we could give more consideration to what three years of such training does to a young man or woman. One obvious result of it is the production of graduates with a certain 'state of mind', ideally suited (from an establishment point of view) for the civil service, management services and teaching professions. And make no mistake about it, it is the production of such graduates that is the economic reason why philosophy departments are tolerated at all in our Universities.

This realisation has a sobering effect on anyone who has a determination to see the present situation in our Philosophy Departments changed. Just as it is not rational arguments that bring down governments, neither is it rational arguments that persuade Faculty Boards. It took a sit-in in Bristol in 1968 in order to get even liberal reforms accepted, and many of the advances made then have since been eroded. It is the examination of the nature and strategy of the actual struggle that is the theoretical priority of any group dedicated to finding a real alternative. Philosophies do not grow in vaccuums, they arise in concrete situations where an orthodoxy is being challenged at a very deep level. They both reflect that struggle is a necessary part of it. We need to both recognise the larger struggle and to discover its manifestations in that most obscure of disciplines, Philosophy.

When we say that Philosophy is irrelevant or boring or trivial or at a dead end, many philosophers will not agree with us. Things are only relevant to some particular aim or position, and all we are really saying is that all this verbal thrust and counter-thrust is irrelevant to us, as individuals with our own interests and aspirations. If you were raised on the playing fields of Eton, or are merely looking for something interesting to do, you would have different interests and aspirations, and this type of philosophy would perhaps be just what you were looking for. What we would describe as "trivial", someone with such interests might describe as "paying attention to detail". And so I would not describe the traditional philosophy as universally trivial. It is absolutely essential to the upper classes as part of their domination of everyday ideology. It is irrelevant to me merely because I have no wish to support that domination.

It would be a hopeless task to set out to devise a philosophy that is not trivial, all we can do is to devise philosophies that reflect certain viewpoints. There are many possible view-points that differ from the orthodox one, but the important point is, how many reflect the viewpoint of a large enough body of people to make effective changes in the educational system even feasible? Only a Marxist philosophy sets out to do just that, and fundamentally it is for this reason that is treated with such hostility in our Philosophy Departments. In a University in Moscow, 1½

years of a 4-year philosophy course are devoted to western non-Marxist philosophy. In Britain you are lucky if you get 1½ hours of Marxist philosophy in an undergraduate course. Such dogmatism is indicative of the threat that Marxist philosophy poses to our irrelevant University courses and the system that supports them. The triviality of contemporary philosophy is a class-weapon, and to be opposed it requires a class-opposition.

No-one (of any importance) would recommend committing vast amounts of philosophy books to the flames. But if revolutions in Philosophy do not come from destroying the past, neither do they come from compiling a kind of 'Best of Philosophy'. They do come from the adoption of a fundamentally different viewpoint, so fundamentally different that the ensuing ideas are strictly not comparable with those produced from the orthodox viewpoint. This feature enables the British tradition to dismiss Marxism as "not philosophy". We must be careful neither to accept their analysis, nor adopt the opposite, either in the sense that the establishment philosophy is 'not philosophy', or in the sense that the two are readily comparable. Where traditional philosophy goes wrong, where it becomes trivial and uninteresting, is at a very fundamental level. Our initial job must be to expose and criticise at this level.

As an example of what I mean I would like to sketch some suggestions as to what these fundamental weaknesses might be. They are attitudes which seem to me to be often accepted by philosophers of all persuasions. Each operates as a defence mechanism against a possible attack on Philosophy's irrelevance and triviality.

Firstly there is the conservative idea that any new philosophy should bear a 'family resemblance' to previous philosophies, especially in the sort of problem it concerns itself with. But even more than just this, we often find that 'Philosophy' itself becomes informally defined in terms of this continuity, so that grosser irregularities can be dismissed as just 'not philosophy'.

Secondly we have the notion of autonomy, which states that it is philosophers who tell other people what they (the other people) are really doing. It can never be the other way about, with people from other disciplines putting the philosopher in his place. Philosophy itself cannot, according to this idea, be the object of another theory, it is strictly aloof from all theories. This myth ensures philosophy's isolation from other disciplines.

Thirdly comes the lack of purpose, which views any talk about the purpose of philosophy as involving some kind of logical mistake. In order to protect the philosopher from the charge of being a parasite, Philosophy's purpose is shrouded in subjectivism and mysticism. Anyone who doubts the usefulness of what he is doing is dismissed as a bad philosopher.

Finally there is the myth of neutrality which views it as wrong to examine philosophical disputes in the light of non-philosophical ones. This myth claims more than just that Philosophy does not represent any sectional interest, it goes as far as to say that individual philosophies do not either. Both Philosophy and particular philosophies are an attempt at some Absolute Truth.

It is at the level of myths such as these that the attack needs to be mounted. For example, Wittgenstein, who undoubtedly has many virtues as a philosopher, is guilty of harbouring all these myths, some of them quite explicitly. Any radical criticism of his work must, I would have thought, concentrate on such weaknesses.

Turning now to what we ought to do in the Group, I feel that the division of interest must be raised again. The tendency is for professionals to want to achieve an element of academic freedom. But it has sometimes happened that this freedom, once gained, can be used against the interests of students. For example, where you have a system that allows lecturers a certain amount of freedom, students who make specific demands on course content can get the reply, "But nobody wants to do it. Surely you don't want to attack our academic freedom?". Academic freedom can be a two-edged sword from the student's point of view, for we do not just want our ideas tolerated, we want them put into effect.

From the student's point of view the tendency is to see their complaints against the department as part of a much larger struggle, taking place through their Union, against the whole University system and, ultimately, the social system. Unless the professionals can also make the same sort of connections (not so easy perhaps with the AUT), and are able to see their academic struggle as a part of other struggles, the success of any of which can only come through unity, I see no hope of a real alternative emerging. It is only by this commitment to unity that a practical alternative viewpoint can be adopted. Alternative philosophies do not blossom like flowers, they have a job to do and are forged in a situation of conflict.

I have heard Radical Philosophy described as a kind of 'Philosopher's Liberation', on a par with Women's and Gay Liberation. I think the analogy useful, for just as these liberation groups started out thinking that the world would be changed by being made aware of their reasonable demands, they quickly found out that the reality is something different. Those parts of the Liberation groups which are seriously concerned with changing certain oppressive features of society have rapidly become overtly political and have unified with wider political movements. I see no other alternative for Radical Philosophy. Either a few like-minded professionals will have found an outlet for their interests, and little else will happen, or the Group must become seriously committed to changing the present state of philosophy. In which case it must take the task seriously, for it will be no easy business.

"And finally, for heaven's sake, what business have our youth with the history of philosophy? Shall the confusion of opinions discourage them from having opinions of their own? Shall they be trained to join in the jubilation at our wonderful progress? Shall they even learn to hate and despise philosophy? One would almost think the latter was the case if one knew how students have to torture themselves for their philosophy exams in order to cram into their brains the craziest and sharpest ideas of the human mind together with the greatest and most difficult. The only criticism of a philosophy which is possible, and which also proves something - that of seeing if one can live by it - has never been taught at the universities: but always criticism of words by words. And now let one imagine a youthful and inexperienced mind, in which fifty verbal systems and fifty criticisms of the same are stored next to each other in confusion - what wilderness, what chaos, what mockery of the philosophical education! In fact, one is not educated for philosophy, as is admitted, but for a philosophy examination: the usual result being, as is well known, that the person taking the test - an all too severe test! - says to himself with a heavy sigh: "Thank God that I am no philosopher, but a Christian and a citizen of my state!"

Let one ask oneself: "What if this heavy sigh were what the State was aiming for, and the 'education for philosophy' only a drawing away from philosophy?" But if this is the case, there is only one thing to fear: that finally youth will realize for what end philosophy is being misused ... They become acquainted with the forbidden books, begin to criticize their teachers and finally notice the purpose of university philosophy and its examinations ..." (Nietzsche)

NOTES

MAYA AND I Trevor Pateman

Martin Skelton-Robinson (Sanity Madness and the Problem of Ignorance, *Radical Philosophy* 2, p.25) takes me to task and I'd like to reply. Four points then.

(i) My possible explanation requires modification, since Maya can sometimes comment fairly lucidly on what is being done to her. So instead of writing that she is unable "to know what is true and what is false in a given situation" I should write "in a given complex situation" and refer say, to the complex dyadic situations symbolised in *Self and Others* or *Interpersonal Perception*. But the qualification still leaves the *cognitive* orientation I am suggesting intact.

(ii) This orientation - which resembles 18th century theories of madness by the way (see Foucault - *Histoire de la Folie* - 10/18 edn - pp.182-200) - can account for much, if not all, of the symptomatology which Laing and Esterson and I neglect (perhaps justifiably - our colleagues on Red Hat would find *risible* the idea that clinical psychologists 'encounter' 'experiences' when they make a 'diagnosis' which *legitimizes* the original hospital admission. Remember also that the symptom is not a brute fact, but belongs within a complex and changing ideological field - (see Foucault - *Naissance de la Clinique*, 2nd edn, PUF, 1971). Leaving aside these asides, however: with respect to emotional impoverishment, I would argue that you can't respond emotionally when you can't conceptualise the situation to which you are responding. Alasdair MacIntyre has been making this point for years, in terms of the connexion of emotion and belief. Such an approach also allows us to say: people are apathetic not because politicians always lie, but in part because they can't tell *when* they are lying and *when* not. Another example: I suspect that many more people 'hear voices' than say they hear voices. The only difference could be that some people are not so good at distinguishing what I called in my Note veridical and delusive perceptions. When I hear voices I know enough about knowing *not* to ascribe them to someone else. This may, of course, cut me off from God.

(iii) In what is obviously meant as a magistral put down, Skelton-Robinson deduces from my argument "And so the theory of knowledge will have to study child-rearing customs!" *Tu quoque*: It always has - look at Locke or Wittgenstein. What I felt was *radical* about my Note was the implication that the study of child rearing customs could fruitfully be taken much more seriously by 'philosophers', from which study might emerge the idea and practice of a practice which would take 'philosophers' out of the Academy and into "real" social situations where they, like the psychiatrist, might intervene. By which I mean: one of the things they could do is to help people like Maya to some sort of cognitive sureness in themselves. Which brings me to my final point:

(iv) The Registrar General puts the incidence of schizophrenia at 0.85%. I put it at 20-30%. Maya might be me or one of my friends. When I have to respond to the discourse of a friend, or when I have to reflect on my own discourse -- that is when I need ideas like those of Laing and Esterson to aid me in my self-orientation and my orientation to another. For me, Maya is not an object of study, but a person to whom I have to relate, for her sake and for mine.