

Benjamin Gibbs
**ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY
 AND
 RADICAL PHILOSOPHY**

Most of what I am going to say will be cast in autobiographical terms. This seems the natural way to indicate my personal, perhaps idiosyncratic reaction to the Radical Philosophy movement.

When I began studying philosophy at university in the late 1950's I was, like many others, disappointed with the curriculum. Important questions seemed to be ignored or ridiculed, and the history of philosophy was reduced to intellectual shadow-boxing without any pretence of close study of texts. My initial attitude was like that of Collingwood to the "realists" of fifty years ago. He says in his *Autobiography* (p.51):

They were proud to have excogitated a philosophy so pure from the sordid taint of utility that they could lay their hands on their hearts and say it was no use at all; a philosophy so scientific that no one whose life was not a life of pure research could appreciate it, and so abstruse that only a whole-time student, and a very clever man at that, could understand it.

Later, however, I came to respect as well as to criticize the work of some leading modern philosophers, particularly Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin. The latter two influenced, without determining, the way I now work at and try to write philosophy. But they had nothing to teach me about morals and politics, and not much about metaphysics. Gradually I became disinclined to bother with the modern Anglo-American literature. The so-called "revolution in philosophy" seemed to be petering out in a clutter of textbooks. I gave up going to conferences. I did not read much philosophy apart from Plato and some medievalists. Luckily this specialization corresponded with my teaching duties.

Last November I was forced out of that unhealthy intellectual anchoritism by reading the leaflet sent out by the Radical Philosophy Group.¹ This studiously intemperate document stimulated and perturbed me, though I had heard of the group's existence and was sympathetic to what I had heard of its aims. After swapping letters and telephone conversations with Tony Skillen, Jerry Cohen and Jonathan Ree, I arranged a meeting at Sussex to discuss the issues. Fortunately, Jonathan was able to come from Oxford and give his paper "Professional Philosophers" (reprinted above) to a big heterogeneous audience. We had further discussions in the course of the weekend, and there have been more since. My thoughts here can be read as a response to Jonathan (with whom on the whole I agree) and the R.P.G. leaflet (about which my feelings are mixed).

Jonathan Ree's paper is an attack on academic institutions as well as orthodoxies. The main cause of the defects of contemporary British philosophy is, he suggests, "the regime of examinational tyranny". At least as important, though, is the institution of weekly one-hour tutorials with one or two undergraduates. This absurdly expensive institution is the basic medium of philosophical teaching at Oxford, Sussex (which in this respect has modelled itself on Oxford), and elsewhere. If an essay has to be read out and a topic "covered" in one hour, it is not surprising that people subjected to this process become nothing more than skilful debaters of clearly formulated theses. Even more deplorable is the effect on the tutors, who are obliged to devote the greater part of their working lives to this pettifoggery. Small wonder we write few books. As Collingwood says (p.28), "A man whose mind is always being stirred up by philosophical teaching can hardly be expected to achieve the calm, the inner silence, which is one condition of philosophical thinking." Of course the general public and nearly all students regard professional philosophers as paid servants whose sole function is to give instruction. There may be a real conflict of interest here, but I think that other, more economical modes of instruction would benefit everyone concerned.

Replacing these pedagogic institutions by others would not however be sufficient to rejuvenate British philosophy. One

reason for the present neglect of metaphysics, ethics and politics is the relatively exaggerated veneration accorded to logic and theory of meaning. Like Jonathan Ree, I have ungrudging admiration for modern achievements in this field; but it is a disaster that so many regard it as the primary field with which the philosopher should concern himself. It is not an adequate consolation to know that bad theories of meaning and muddled pieces of conceptual analysis may be refuted and replaced by better ones. The only effective way of ridding ourselves of our present inhibitions about taking other branches and modes of philosophy seriously is to give up the idea that a satisfactory theory of meaning must be established before anything else is attempted, and that very formal conceptual frameworks must be laid bare and vindicated before specific problems are dealt with. This is not to say we should abandon values like clarity and rigour of argument; though our concern for them might well become less neurotic and exclusive. The truth is that we must address ourselves both to the less and to the more general questions, if our philosophy is to avoid the desert of formalism without drowning in a sea of pap. The greatest philosophers of the past succeeded in fabricating the bones and the meat of their theories concomitantly.

Two things about the R.P.G. leaflet perturbed me. One was the implied suggestion (apparently not intended by the authors) that "linguistic and analytic" methods should be discarded and inspiration sought in Continental philosophy. Linguistic and analytic methods are not Anglo-Saxon aberrations, but methods as ancient and honourable as philosophy itself. People should certainly be encouraged to study Continental philosophy; but phenomenologists and Marxists have their own orthodoxies and scholasticisms. The French phenomenological journals, for example, are no less ossified and out of touch with real issues than *Mind*. We shall not find what we want ready-made in any philosophical shop, here or across the Channel. We had better look at the goods in a variety of shops and be careful about what we buy, or preferably make our own.

The other thing that bothered me was the passion and moral outrage that spiced the leaflet. Something like this may be required if a new intellectual movement is to gain momentum. As Ryle said in "Taking Sides in Philosophy", when zeal, combativeness and team-spirit are "canalized into the channels of a non-spurious philosophical dispute, the hostilities and militantisms may aerate the waters and even drive useful turbines" (*Collected Papers* vol.2, p.168). But it would be sad if cantankerous, embittered tones (such as one cannot help noticing in Collingwood's *Autobiography*) were to be characteristic of our philosophy. Further, many teachers and students grumble about the narrowness and academicism of modern philosophy while acknowledging such virtues as it has. These people naturally resent being told that everything they have studied is worthless, and that they must begin all over again if they are not to be convicted of charlatanism and hypocrisy. If this were true, which it isn't, there must be more diplomatic ways of putting it across.

But there is surely something new and exciting about the Radical Philosophy movement. For the first time, the critics of orthodox philosophy are not isolated individuals but an organized group. The group is, as Jerry Cohen said to me, only "a loose coalition of different tendencies and views which share a sense of alienation from the predominant modes of philosophical theory and practice in this country". But there is the chance that a few philosophers, their isolation removed and their confidence strengthened, may now be encouraged to do something really constructive. It is time for another revolution in British philosophy, and I think the Radical Philosophy movement will act as a powerful catalyst.

