Reports of the Week at University of Kent
25-27 June 1971

Plans for the formation of the Radical Philosophy Group originated at a small and informal discussion weekend which was held in June last year. We are here reprinting a report on that meeting which was circulated afterwards. It should be emphasized that this summary presents the discussions in a very abridged form, thus the views which were expressed and the conclusions which were formed are here abstracted from much of their supporting arguments. Nevertheless we think that the report may be of interest as indicating the kinds of issue that were discussed.

Institutional Determinants

Friday evening’s discussion centred on a paper by Tony Sillitoe in which he examined the non-theoretical determinants of modern English (and especially Oxford) philosophy. His thesis was that the poverty was not a function of a false theory (Empiricism, for example). Rather, there was no powerful or rigorous theoretical tradition at all in England. Hence philosophical activity was dominated by its institutional and social setting. He referred to an article by R.M.Hare (“A School for Philosophers” Ratio V 3), and argued that Hare unwittingly reveals the way in which the use of the “professional philosopher” and his whole idea of philosophy is based on his activity as a preparer of future bureaucrats for the examination school. Although these factors obviously operate in other subjects, they affect philosophy to a special degree, since it has become almost entirely an academic teaching discipline for specialists. Thus he sought to explain not only the manifest content of English philosophy but also its piece-meal parcelled-up character, its formalistic stress on “moves” and “techniques” of linguistic analysis, and its isolation from reality and living thought — forcing it to feed on itself.

Tony quoted an article by Mark Pattison in Mind, 1876, showing how, from the very beginning of the modern academic period, philosophy at Oxford was constricted by the demand that teachers spend most of their time teaching for examinations.

In the discussion Tony’s suggestion that any opposition movement in philosophy would have to combat these distorting influences was generally accepted. But there was disagreement about the importance of institutional forces, especially examinations. It emerged that it was important to distinguish the historical importance of examinations in shaping academic philosophy’s development in England from their present importance in maintaining the status quo in philosophy.

Contemporary British Philosophy as Theory

Saturday’s discussion was mainly an attempt to situate contemporary British philosophy theoretically. The discussion was initiated by a paper on epistemology which Sean Sayers read, and by some further comments from Richard Norman. The main points to emerge were:

1. Sean argued that contemporary epistemology is still basically empiricist. He examined the relationship between it and classical empiricism, using the latter term to mean not just the idea that knowledge is based on experience, but also a particular interpretation of ‘experience’ within a particular tradition. He traced the progressive impoverishment of the concept of experience, from Bacon to the colour-patches of sense-datum theorists. Linguistic epistemology is a new phase of empiricism. Though less explicitly so, it remains empiricist.

2. Richard argued that it was misleading to attack contemporary philosophy for being ‘linguistic’. The distinction between ‘questions about language’ and ‘questions about the world’ is itself a false dichotomy, and therefore one cannot effectively characterise contemporary philosophy by saying that it is concerned with language. Moreover, philosophical arguments may legitimately appeal to ‘what we say’; and in particular cases the philosophical nature of a question may often be brought out by saying that it is ‘conceptual’ or ‘second-order’. What is really characteristic of contemporary philosophy, and leads to charges of ‘quibbling about words’, is its phenomenal nature. This is itself intrinsically connected with the empiricist view of knowledge and experience. Richard thus agreed with Sean that the important thing to concentrate on is the empiricist basis of contemporary philosophy, and he suggested that possible lines of approach might be:

a) to challenge the dichotomy of ‘Epistemology’ and ‘Ethics’ as the two separate bases of university philosophy courses; the division between the two perpetuates and is perpetuated by the fact/value dichotomy and the empiricist view of experience; and

b) to attack the prevailing conception of the history of philosophy; the Kant revival should be seen as a way into Hegel and Marx — but these, as also the philosophers in the phenomenological tradition, should not just be studied as alternative interests but should be used to combat the assumptions of empiricist philosophy;

c) to develop positively the anti-empiricist elements in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.

3. There was some disagreement as to how far Wittgenstein could be used in this way. What was seen to be important was his recognition of the intrinsic connections between understanding and a) agency, b) social relations; on both points, there are affinities with Hegel and Marx. But there was disagreement as to whether Wittgenstein had really said anything very positive or useful about the nature of these connections.

4. Another point of disagreement which emerged in discussion was the nature of the relation between philosophy and particular sciences or bodies of knowledge. There was a general acceptance of Sean’s point that the scholasticism of contemporary philosophy consists in its cutting itself off from concrete areas of knowledge, and an agreement on the need to reject the dualistic view that “science investigates reality, philosophy investigates language/concepts”. But some of us were inclined to accept the first-order/second-order distinction, and to say that philosophy does not attempt to answer the same questions as are confronted within the specific disciplines; others argued that it was not a matter of first order as against second order, but one of degree of generality and depth of
question - so that it should be recognised that philosophical questions arise in all fields and that great scientists have been forced, through their work, to tackle philosophical questions.

5. The central theme that emerged from the discussion was a hostility to 'empiricism'. This did not go unquestioned. Tony was particularly unhappy with the idea of what he termed 'party line'. Chris Arthur asked whether we should be so ready to let the term 'empiricist' be appropriated by a particular philosophical tradition; was it not a term which, to signify the grounding of knowledge in experience, we should wish to retain? It was generally felt, however, that the term had become inseparable from the specific tradition in which it was used, and that an urgent task for an opposition movement in philosophy would be to re-examine the whole concept of 'experience', to rescue it from 'empiricist' distortions, and to re-present it as essentially practical and essentially social.

The Relevance of Marxism

A brief discussion of Marxism was introduced by Chris Arthur, who felt that the questions raised so far had tended to be mainly negative and that we ought to consider how far Marxism was capable of providing a positive perspective which we could aim to develop. He suggested that the following were the main questions demanding attention; unfortunately the discussion did not entirely get beyond an acceptance of the importance of the questions......

How should we interpret Marx's own attitude to philosophy? What is meant by his talk of abolishing philosophy through practice? What precisely did Marx himself contribute of importance to philosophy? How should we evaluate the main tendencies in Marxism since Marx? (Chris identified two basic traditions, the positivistic, and the neo-Hegelian, and suggested that though the former had made useful contributions to limited historical problems, the latter was likely to prove philosophically the more fruitful; he added that it would be valuable to compile annotated bibliographies of the most important Marxist writings since Marx.) In what areas has Marxism made progress, and in what areas does the really important work remain to be done? (Chris suggested that concrete sociological and historical analyses came into the first category, epistemology and ethics into the second. He himself was doing some work on Marxist ethics; he gave a brief review of the existing literature, none of which could be held to be satisfactory. Similarly with epistemology: there had been useful work on the sociology of knowledge but, as with bourgeois sociology of knowledge, there had been no satisfactory treatment of the status of the theory itself and the question how it could be anything other than just another ideology.

Practical and organisational matters were also discussed. Further meetings were held at the University of Kent at the beginning of September 1971, and at Birkbeck College London on 25 September, as a result of which it was decided to go ahead with the formation of a Group and the production of the present Journal.

Our first general meeting took place at the end of October with about 50 present from colleges all over London. We decided that, rather than have a formal paper/reply situation, which would encourage the usual hole-picking competition, we would have a loosely structured meeting to enable the co-operative articulation of diverse ideas and attitudes. We hoped this would be a model for the way of working we would be trying to develop in the study and discussion groups.

Sean Sayers led the discussion with some brief remarks about the contemporary situation in Philosophy. As it turned out the discussion was diffuse, inevitably perhaps given the widely ranging differences over the state of English philosophy and what was to be done about it. Some of the more hostile were most welcomed the Radical Philosophy Group. At the end of the meeting sixteen suggestions for study groups were put up.

The special problem of philosophy in London is that there are a large number of people and institutions spread all over the place. Contact is difficult. Hopefully the London groups will help break this isolation down.

Following the meeting, several study groups have actually formed and have been successful in varying degrees. The historical materialism group has met three times, with about 25 people. The individualism group has met six times with numbers and composition varying a lot. Other going groups are one on education and one on Hegel. We expect other groups to be formed next term.

The formation of these groups raises a number of important and difficult questions of organisation. It is obviously no easy task for philosophers to liberate themselves from academicism and its attendant evils. One thing is clear: that there is going to be a fairly permanent tension in the groups between the concerns of people who are primarily "radicals" and people who are primarily "philosophers". Inevitably there will also be a degree of "tourism". But we do not see these tensions as unhealthy or as, at least at this stage, producing anything like an organisational crisis.

J.M.C. et al.

The Oxford Branch of the Radical Philosophy Group was formed in October. We have been feeling our way rather hesitantly this term: but we have found considerable sympathy and support. Next term we will be a proper university society, which means we will have a paying membership and money to spend on our activities. So far we have about thirty definite supporters, and many possible supporters seem to be hinting their time to see if the Radical Philosophy Group isn't a flash in the pan. Unlike other local groups, we have received no support or encouragement from the sixty or so teachers of philosophy in the university.

We have a twofold programme of activities: open meetings and small closed groups.

The small groups are meant to meet regularly to discuss philosophical questions or to work through difficult books. The aim is to give people the opportunity for free and open discussion in an uncompetitive atmosphere free from the narrow formalities of academic philosophy. We think the best way of achieving this is to keep numbers small (about eight) and membership constant: a member of a small group has to take his membership quite seriously, and non members are not normally admitted to small group meetings. Small groups have been set up on: The Mind; Concrete Moral Problems; and on Hegel. Next term there should be groups on Social Science, Morality and Society and Wittgenstein.

We also run open meetings where people give talks on philosophy, and where we co-ordinate other activities such as the small groups scheme. We had three meetings this term, and in spite of difficulties in advertising them, we attracted up to 80 people. Next term, we will have four open meetings, mostly with speakers from outside Oxford. We will be the only University philosophy society which invites speakers from outside Oxford, and I think we will have achieved something if we get Oxford philosophers to realise that Oxford isn't the centre of the philosophical world.

JVR
OXFORD

In the last few years, many Oxford philosophers, especially Strawson and Hare, have come to think that linguistics is the most important part of philosophy. A special post in linguistics was set up two years ago; and there are proposals to introduce an optional linguistics paper in a philosophy BA course (PPP) and in the philosophy graduate course (B.Phil).

The importance of developing linguistics in Oxford has been given as a reason for not expanding in other directions. For instance, it will soon be possible to take a joint BA course in modern languages and philosophy, but no courses will be offered in continental philosophy since Kant. When student representatives expressed concern over this at a meeting of a staff-graduate student consultative committee in November, the representatives of the philosophy staff said they hadn't the teaching personnel to offer such a course. Asked why they didn't try to do something about this some said it would endanger their plans for linguistics; others said there was nothing they could do about it in this ramshackle university; and someone else said that since there weren't yet any Oxford graduates in Modern Languages and Philosophy, they couldn't expect any decent applicants for posts in Modern Continental philosophy. (There was some embarrassment when a student pointed out that there were foreign universities and also about fifty British universities besides Oxford.) Finally, a motion was put which said, amongst other things, that in Oxford 'post Hegelian continental philosophy' didn't get as much attention as it ought to.

The representatives of the philosophy staff saw a bolt hole, and applied the famous Oxford argument from Oxford ignorance: according to the unconfirmed minutes of the meeting, 'Mr.Taylor pointed out that he, and perhaps others present, would have to abstain on this motion because knowing little about the philosophy in question, he did not know how much it ought to be studied.' The motion was passed, 6 votes for, 2 votes against, and 6 abstentions.

"The universities are old, and they have the faults of old age; that is to say, they are hardly able to correct themselves. Can one hope that the professors will give up what they believe themselves to know, in order to learn what they are ignorant about? Will they admit that their lessons teach nothing, or nothing useful? No: like schoolboys, they will carry on going to school to fulfil their task."

Condillac (1714-80)
Cours d'Etudes, Histoire Moderne

SUSSEX

The Philosophy Group at Sussex University are proposing to introduce "streaming" of graduate course-work, in an attempt to break away from established formulae in British universities. This conventional course, now called "Central Philosophical Issues", will remain available. There will be four new options based on the areas of expertise of the teachers. Each of these options includes four course units, two per term. The new courses are:

1. Metaphysics
   (a) Aristotle's Metaphysics
   (b) Problems and its Critics
   (c) A Metaphysical System
   (d) Nature of Metaphysical Thinking

2. Philosophy, Psychology and Linguistics
   (a) Introduction to Linguistics
   (b) Philosophy of Language
   (c) Philosophical Psychology
   (d) Cognition and Representation

3. Marxism
   (a) Marxist Social and Political Philosophy I
   (b) Option (e.g. Marxist theory of knowledge)
   (c) Marxist Social and Political Philosophy II
   (d) Philosophical Trends in the 20th century

4. Modern European Philosophy
   (a) Phenomenology and Existentialism I
   (b) Option (e.g. phenomenological aesthetics)
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(Joint unit with the Marxism course)

If the proposal is accepted these courses will be available Sussex in 1972-73.

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-New-

TRI 11NG COURSE IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

(In association with the Philadelphia Association)

R.D. Laving M.B., Ch.B., D.P.M.

The Course consists of:
1. Training analysis
2. Weekly seminars
3. Weekly supervision when patients are being treated.

The Seminars:
The seminars are addressed to the problems of the therapist in his development. The emphasis throughout is on helping the participants to understand and develop their own experience of therapy. The phenomenological method seems ideally suited for this, reflecting a philosophy of the world as lived not as observed.

The following themes are covered:
The basic theory and classical texts of phenomenology. The phenomenology of the life world, i.e. how persons experience themselves in space and time, their bodies, feelings, emotions, other people etc. Hermeneutics and the study of symbols, dreams, myths. Language, including rhetoric, poetics and wit. The dynamics of small groups e.g. families. Dialectic e.g. Socratic, Hegelian and Marxist. Meditation. The presentation of case histories and interviews.

Qualifications:
No formal qualifications in psychotherapy are awarded. The course aims to give psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists and others working in the field of psychotherapy a basic competence in phenomenology.

Fees:
Training analysis from £10.00 per week
Weekly seminars £ 1.00 per seminar
Weekly supervision from £ 5.50 per week

This England's Philosophers

"I am not always such a linguistic philosopher; but when I am faced with the psychologist, with his masses of empirical data, then I have to have something to fall back on."

(G.N.A. Vesey at Philosophy of Psychology Conference, Kent, 1971.)

"But does not the use of physical methods (for example, ECT) on patients by orthodox psychiatrists involve the infliction of 'violence' on a patient? And is this not morally unjustifiable? If we confine ourselves to talking the Queen's English, then it is just false to say that the physical methods of orthodox psychiatry involve the infliction of violence. But these existentialists do not confine themselves within the bounds of the Queen's English."

(B.A. Farrell on "The logic of Existential psychoanalysis")

If state authority is monopolized indeﬁnitely by a group with one set of values, the state will seem a poor umpire to men with different values. If they feel that their legitimate interests are consistently disregarded they will be morally dissatisfied. If they are powerful enough, they will try to change the constitution to secure more favourable uprisings. Revolutions are made and resisted in a spirit of righteous indignation. The state will remain at peace only if the government's policy is morally intelligible at least to the more powerful interests that it affects. We shall argue later that one of the virtues of liberal democracy is that it tends to produce governments which share the moral attitudes of at least the strongest groups within the community."

J.M. Heaton (Social Principles and The Democratic State)