

# DISCUSSION OF ON 'ON PRACTICE'

Richard Norman

Rip Bulkeley's criticisms of Mao's 'On Practice' (Radical Philosophy 18) raise again issues which were discussed by Peter Binns and Andrew Collier in RP4 and 5 (and indeed, as far as I can make out, his position seems to be very close to that put forward by Binns). It is good to see the discussion continued, for the relation between knowledge and practice is perhaps the central problem of Marxist epistemology. But it is a pity that Bulkeley did not take direct account of the Binns/Collier exchange, for Collier has set out very convincingly the difficulties which arise for a position of the kind Bulkeley advocates, and I would have liked to see how Bulkeley aims to get round these difficulties. For the same reason, I wish that Bulkeley had set out more explicitly his own positive account, rather than letting it emerge from his predominantly negative discussion of Mao (though I must say I sympathise with his remark that 'it is impossible to write about everything at once'). I am sympathetic to Bulkeley's approach; I am inclined to agree with him that Mao's account is largely a 're-statement of empiricist ideas in Marxist terminology', and that knowledge and practice need to be seen as more closely linked than they are for Mao. But at the same time I am impressed by Collier's claim that the unity of knowledge and practice, if pressed too far, lapses into irrationalism. I'd like to indicate the difficulties as I see them, relating them to Bulkeley's article. (I should add that in doing so, I am also engaging in self-criticism, for an article of mine in RP1 exhibits the same tendencies to irrationalism - as was pointed out by Tony Skillen in his comments on it).

According to Mao, knowledge 'depends on', 'arises from', and 'can in no way be separated from' practice. According to Bulkeley, such formulae are evasions; the fact is that knowledge is practice. Bulkeley then tries to show that Mao's epistemology, in which practice is simply the source of objective experiential data, is inextricably linked with an elitist politics. Conversely, an epistemology which identifies knowledge with practice is the only theory adequate to a politics forged by the proletariat itself rather than by its self-appointed leaders.

An essential part of Bulkeley's argument is the idea that experience, located as it is within a specific practice, cannot be communicated or shared. In Mao's view, he says, '... "developed technology" means that, in principle at least, any person can have indirect access to the experiences of any other, no matter how estranged may be their respective living practices.' Bulkeley then comments that Mao is 'blinker'd with the empiricist notion of experience as a neutral, universally available, exchangeable and objective raw material for science' (p7). Bulkeley's claim would be, I think, that those who are engaged in different practices thereby view the world from different perspectives, and their 'knowledge' is the articulation of their particular viewpoint. Only those who are directly engaged in a specific practice can properly be said

to have experience of it and of the world which it reveals, and they alone are in a position to assess that practice and the factual assumptions it involves. This is why Bulkeley thinks that his theory justifies a proletarian politics made by the proletariat itself. To me it seems, however, that this theory of the incommunicability of experience leads to irrationalism; and secondly it is this theory, rather than Mao's, that leads to elitism.

## Incommunicability and Irrationalism

First the question of irrationalism. Consider Mao's example of the visitors to Yen-an who have come on a tour of observation. Bulkeley's comment on the example is:

'Notice first of all that the practice of such an "observation group" is a very special kind of practice, and one which fits well into Mao's empiricist account of knowledge. Given that they are outsiders, the observers do not directly engage in the formulation of that line; still less do they take any part in the work of production; training and combat, which are the central practices of the line, and to which the entertainment of sympathetic guests is decidedly peripheral.' (p5)

Now Mao's intention with this example was to show that the visitors, as a result of their experience of the work and activities going on at Yen-an, can come to recognise the correctness of the Party's policy. Bulkeley seems to deny this. He implies that the correctness of the policy can be judged only by the Party members who are actually engaged in the work of putting it into practice, and he suggests that Mao ignored this because the policy had in fact been worked out not by the members but solely by the leaders. So what would Bulkeley say to the observation group? He would have to say something like this, I think: that only if they join the Party, commit themselves to the struggle and participate in the work, can they come to recognise the correctness of the policy. He seems to leave no room for the possibility of fruitful thought and argument prior to such a commitment; no room, therefore, for the commitment itself to be based on relevant experience and rational beliefs. To me this is reminiscent of nothing so much as the irrationalist 'leap of faith'. It is the attitude of the Christian fideist who, unable to produce any rational grounds for religious belief, says 'Commit yourself to Christ, live in faith, and then your doubts will disappear.' In much the same way Bulkeley seems to identify revolutionary socialism exclusively with the viewpoint of the proletariat and to infer that only one who is already engaged in the practice of the proletariat (both productive practice and political practice) can see the validity of that viewpoint. This seems to leave no room for any rational process of becoming a socialist, no room for engaging in socialist politics because one has come to be convinced of the socialist interpretation of contemporary society. The understanding must always follow from the commitment, and never vice versa.

I don't know whether Bulkeley would accept these implications. I hope not. But I don't see how he can avoid them, given his assertion of an identity of knowledge and practice - a non-dialectical identity which simply collapses knowledge into practice.

I have pointed to Bulkeley's stress on the incommunicability of experience. He seems to assume, nevertheless, that practice and experience can be shared within a class. But once we have set out in the direction in which Bulkeley points us, it is surely arbitrary to stop at this point. Why pick out, as the practice which constitutes knowledge, simply and solely that practice which is common to a whole class? Different sections of the proletariat will differ in their practice. The practice of the industrial proletariat, for example, differs significantly from that of service workers, or that of proletarianised agricultural workers. A particularly clear case is available if Bulkeley wants to emphasise, as he does, the proletarianisation of intellectuals (p3). I am hesitant about such an interpretation anyway, but even if it is true that in some respects intellectuals are coming to be absorbed into the proletariat, there remain fundamental differences between the practice of the traditional proletariat and that of intellectuals (and as I'll indicate later, I do agree that these differences affect the likely attitudes and beliefs of the different groups). So not only classes, but also sections of classes, differ in their practice. And it is equally true that no two individuals will be engaged in exactly the same practice. Thus, once we assert the incommunicability of experience, there is no non-arbitrary stopping-point short of a completely subjectivist relativism. We end up with a picture of solipsistic individuals, each trapped within her or his own practice, incapable of sharing the experience of anyone else, incapable therefore of arguing with or rationally convincing anyone else. A theory which has these implications is not just to be criticised as irrationalist; it is, quite blatantly, false.

### Objectivism and Elitism

I turn now to the question of elitism. Bulkeley suggests that an objectivist theory of knowledge, a theory which sees practice as making available objective observational data, goes hand in hand with an authoritarian and elitist political practice. Referring to Mao's account of how practice makes available observational data, and conceptual thought works on and interprets these, he comments:

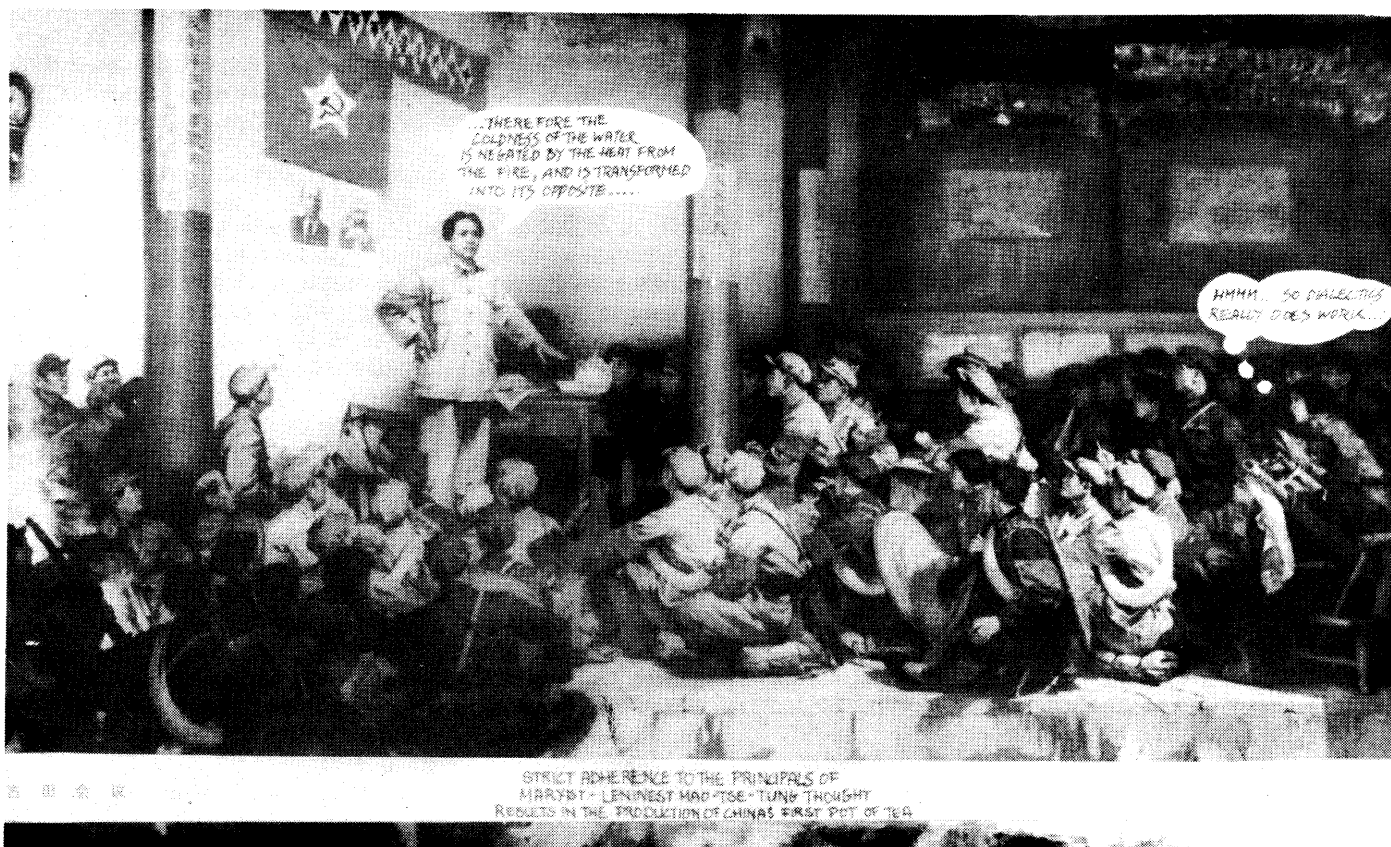
'Since anybody can do this, anybody who doesn't has either been too lazy to gather in the necessary data, or else must be wilfully refusing to "see" their meaning in the approved manner. The remedy in either case must be to coerce her will...' (p8)

But why 'must'? Part of the trouble here is that Bulkeley is looking for too simple a connection between theories of knowledge and political stances. I don't deny that there are such connections, and I welcome Bulkeley's attempt to examine them. But I don't think that we can find any simple one-to-one correspondences. Thus I agree that an objectivist theory of knowledge can lend itself to the rationalisation of coercion in the way Bulkeley indicates. But I also think that only an objectivist theory of knowledge can provide the appropriate basis for an open and democratic politics. Argument and discussion and open debate can be fruitful, or indeed possible, only on the assumption that experience can be shared and communicated, and that it can

provide objective data available to all. Conversely, it is Bulkeley's equation of knowledge and practice that most readily lends itself to coercion and elitism. He ascribes to Mao a 'view of knowledge as a privileged subjectivity' (p6). But the phrase 'privileged subjectivity' is much more applicable to the role of practice in Bulkeley's theory, generating an incommunicable experience and a 'knowledge' which is confined to the agents of that practice. Again, he speaks of Mao's 'Opportunism' (p9), but what could be more opportunist than a theory which eliminates the possibility of basing practice on any prior knowledge, so that practice can only be self-authenticating? If we are looking for connections between epistemology and elitism, it is worth noting that the political theory which most strikingly equates knowledge and practice is Fascism, as illustrated in the following passage from Gentile's essay 'The Philosophic Basis of Fascism':

'Fascism returns to the most rigorous meaning of Mazzini's "Thought and Action", whereby the two terms are so perfectly coincident that no thought has value which is not already expressed in action. The real "views" of the Duce are those which he formulates and executes at one and the same time. Is Fascism therefore "anti-intellectual", as has so often been charged? It is eminently anti-intellectual... if by intellectualism we mean the divorce of thought from action, of knowledge from life, of brain from heart, of theory from practice.'

Now there is, in Bulkeley's discussion, an important political point with which I would agree. Certainly it is the case that people's beliefs are affected by their practice. I agree, for example, about the dangers inherent in a political movement dominated by a leadership which is cut off from the experience of the membership or of the class which it purports to represent. But the point here is not an epistemological one. It's not that knowledge is identical with, constituted by, the practice of the members or the workers. It's rather that the leadership will become too remote from the experience which is in principle available to it - will replace that experience, and the authentic revolutionary aims generated by it, with rationalisations perpetuating its own power and promoting its own interests. For similar reasons it is important for us supposedly socialist intellectuals to think seriously about the nature of our own practice, our own relations of production, our relation to working class experience etc. But again this is not because an authentically socialist experience is in principle confined to the working class, but because by isolating ourselves within the academy and devoting ourselves to respectable scholarship we deprive ourselves of the experience which we could draw upon, and are likely to distort our own socialism (which is what Radical Philosophy is supposed to be all about). It is along these same lines that I would understand also the relation between class and beliefs. Although the experience of the working class can in principle be communicated to other classes, we know that by and large it is not going to be (and that is why no socialist who has learned anything from Marxism is going to devote his/her efforts to the conversion of the bourgeoisie). But here too the point is not that other classes are in principle excluded from the practice which constitutes knowledge, but rather that their understanding of reality is distorted by a class viewpoint and class interests. This is precisely where the notion of 'ideology' becomes appropriate - for I take ideology



to be a form of consciousness which distorts reality. But it can be described as 'distortion' only in relation to an objective world which can in principle be known and understood.

Bulkeley may reject this view of ideology. He may regard bourgeois ideology, for example, not as a distortion of reality but simply as an authentic expression of the practice of a particular class. But that seems an unsatisfactory position. Take the example he mentions in his article - the ideology of 'national unity' and 'the national interest'. Given the facts of class antagonisms and class interests, isn't it simply false to assert the existence of a generalised 'national interest'? Not: false from the standpoint of the practice of a particular class and true in the context of some other practice; but, straightforwardly and objectively, false.

I want to mention briefly one other objection to Bulkeley's account. He claims that 'if experience is not itself a practice ... but simply a uniform raw material or "Nature", this must lead to an 'acute pessimism', since 'if we ourselves originate from the natural "given", it is a mystery how we can ever radically change it or ourselves' (p8). Here I don't need to offer any counter-argument, but can simply refer to the answer excellently stated by Collier, not only in RP5 but also in the article on 'Freedom as the Efficacy of Knowledge' in the same issue as Bulkeley's article. It is precisely insofar as we have an objectively correct knowledge of the natural 'given' that we can change it. Bulkeley says: 'Knowledge and practice ... for Mao ... are not united, because in the last analysis knowledge is not entirely active, since it depends on a "given"...' (p15). But if knowledge were

entirely active, there would be no reality for it to know. If there is no independently-existing world which our knowledge has to conform to, if that world is entirely the creation of our knowledge and nothing is 'given', then there can be no such thing as error and therefore no such thing as knowledge, no such thing as rational action and therefore no such thing as free action.

I may have been unfair to Bulkeley. As I have said, he does not give any extended presentation of his positive theory, and I may have attributed to him views which he would not accept. I must also admit that if his discussion was predominantly negative, mine has been relentlessly so. I can only add lamely that as far as a positive theory is concerned, I'm working on it. What is needed, I think, is a theory which, like Bulkeley's, treats practice not just as the source of knowledge but also as, in some sense, determining the nature of knowledge; but a theory which is, at the same time, an objectivist theory, treating beliefs as true or false according to whether or not they accurately reflect the nature of an independently-existing reality. The suggestion of Bulkeley's to which I am most sympathetic is the suggestion that we can work towards an adequate theory by developing in a materialist direction the insights of Kantian philosophy. (Cf. his remarks on p15. What I would take to be crucial in Kant is the idea that human agency is responsible for the creation not of specific truths, but of the categorial framework within which specific truths are articulated.) Certainly there is work to be done here, and I hope that Radical Philosophy will carry further contributions to it.