

NOTES

A REACTION TO RADICAL PHILOSOPHY

J.M.Hinton

No one, I believe, can yet say with any confidence to what extent the 'mere' attempt to uproot perennial forms of falsehood from our ways of thinking may itself change the world. If only for this reason, it is a mistake to reach the conclusion that contemporary British philosophy is "at a dead end", from the premiss which may or may not be true, that this philosophy has "largely abandoned" any more constructive kind of "attempt to understand the world". A great deal has been done, in detecting the subtler mechanisms of widespread false consciousness, by Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, Wisdom, Ryle, Austin and others. An indefinite amount remains to be done along the same lines - no fear of a dead end, there.

Nevertheless, a younger generation of international socialists, many of them associated with the New Left Review, has managed to convince some of us Old Leftists that the cultural-bolshevist attitude towards would-be-constructive philosophy, which those writers have tended to induce, has long ago become politically and hence philosophically reactionary in some of its aspects. (Not that it is too hard to see ways in which the rather culture-vulgar attitude of the 'sons' might become first philosophically and then politically reactionary, in its turn.) They have also convinced us that the first remedial steps lie in curricular changes suggested by the student protest movement, and which might have taken too much time to occur to us.

What I mainly have in mind is this. An international socialist, who is also a teacher of philosophy in the tradition which derives from Moore's and Russell's philosophically radical, anti-academic rebellion against English Right Hegelianism and from Ryle's philosophically radical, anti-academic rebellion against Phenomenology, and from Wittgenstein's philosophically radical, anti-academic philosophies, finds a disrelation between his political convictions and his way of making a living. Not only does his teaching not involve socialist advocacy, but also he may suspect that its social and political function is conservative in the main, even if it does undermine the prevailing vulgar-empiricist ideology to a certain limited extent. As already implied, I accept that the best way to escape from the trap is to broaden the syllabus. One will find enough to endorse in the area, Hegel-Marx-Anarchism-Existentialism, for a certain amount of political advocacy, philosophical rather than pragmatic, to emerge.

The problems of a period in which post-Moorean methods of scrutiny are applied to Marxism, and Marxism is applied to post-Moorean methods of scrutiny, promise to be interesting. It will also be interesting to see whether Radical Philosophy turns out to be one of the places in which these problems are fruitfully discussed. The ideal locus would be a group of international socialists who know about, and value a good deal in, both the Marxian and the post-Moorean traditions. In two-fold contrast, the Radical Philosophy Group appears to require no commitment to international socialism, and to be mainly a coalition of people who for various reasons are disposed to see little or no merit in the second of those traditions. But ideal conditions are not always attainable.

One problem which is sure to be encountered, and which looms among more parochial matters in Jonathan Ree's article in Radical Philosophy I, is that widely-used methods of critical scrutiny will be declared to be out of order by some of one's fellow-radicals if one tries to apply them to Hegel, or Marx, or Sartre. The methods I mean involve asking "Can we take that bit by bit?" and then, of some 'bit', "What reason is there to think so?". Here there is a distinction to be made between what would clearly be foolish, the attempt to condense some complex philosophical idea into a succinct statement, and what would not clearly be foolish, the attempt to extract from a complex philosophical idea some relatively simple statement to which among other things the proponent of the complex idea is committed. It was this, of course, which Moore and Russell tried to do at the turn of the century when they turned on the Hegelianism they had accepted. If we are told, not only that you can go wrong in using this method, but that the whole approach is wrong, so that there must be no looking for what Wittgenstein called 'the first, unnoticed steps' in an ambitious philosophical construction, then it seems that someone is trying to put the clock back. The

alternative usually offered is the indistinct one, of considering the philosophy in question as a whole. The most obvious things this boils down to are a sort of acceptance or rejection based on ideological affectivity, or a bemused state of mind in which one hardly knows whether one accepts the 'system' or only reckons to know how it goes. It would surely be sad if the son's conception of progress were to coincide quite so exactly with the grandfather's conception of what had to be left behind; thesis, antithesis, thesis.

HINTON'S REACTION: A REPLY

Sean Sayers and Tony Skillen

We take this opportunity to reply to Mr. Hinton's note, first because it contains a misconception about the aims of the Radical Philosophy movement which we are in a position to correct, and secondly because it well illustrates some of the major problems of working in academic philosophy departments, problems which we are trying to confront and overcome.

It is a misconception about Radical Philosophy to think that it stands for the total rejection of the British philosophical tradition. And it is certainly a misconception to believe that the Radical Philosophy Group is "mainly a coalition of people who for various reasons are disposed to see little or no merit in the [post-Moorean] tradition". (Cf. also Hinton's last paragraph). Radical Philosophy does not stand for the total rejection of the British tradition in philosophy. The Group has no corporate attitude to this or any other philosophical tradition; and although the Group's Statement [inside front cover] seems to have given rise to this misconception, the Statement in fact says: "the Group will not attempt to lay down a philosophical line".

However, the emergence of the Radical Philosophy movement is most definitely occasioned by the extreme poverty of recent thought within this tradition, and the major motivation behind the Group is a strong dissatisfaction with the present state of philosophy in this country. And so, major questions which the Radical Philosophy Group is seeking to raise are: What are the reasons (causes) of this poverty? and What is to be done to overcome it?

It is essential to keep these questions clearly in mind. Hinton continually poses the problem in terms of the question: The British tradition: For or Against? This is a fruitless and mystifying question which leads him to lose sight of the inadequacies of recent British philosophy.

One of the most unsatisfactory features of recent British philosophy has been the extraordinary narrowness of its intellectual and practical horizons. The student movement and New Left Review have impressed this upon Mr Hinton too. However, the only "remedial steps" he suggests are "curricular changes". Indeed throughout Mr Hinton's note, "broadening the syllabus" is the only respect in which it is suggested that the ills of British philosophy might be remedied.

Unfortunately, all our experience as teachers and students tells us that such changes (although important and desirable reforms) will not in themselves produce the sort of radical changes we are working for. Without other essential changes, the effect of broadening the syllabus is all too likely to be the substitution of a new academic orthodoxy for an old one.

The academicism of recent British philosophy is a major source of our discontent. Hinton seems to be incapable of recognizing this academicism. He describes Moore, Russell, Wittgenstein and Ryle as radical anti-academic philosophers. It is difficult to see what he could have meant by this. Whatever else one might want to say about them, Moore and Ryle were academic professionals of the purest kind; and although Russell and Wittgenstein were not, their philosophy drew its problematic from the academy (e.g. absence of a humanistic or social motif from Wittgenstein's critique of mechanism and scientism; the narrowness of his philosophical preoccupations. Apparent divorce of Russell's academic philosophy from his social and political life -- a divorce which is portrayed as absolute and not discussed by his academic commentators).

The crippling effects of this academicism are well illustrated by Hinton's own words. Essential to the academic conception of "The Philosopher", which Hinton shares, is the idea that "The Philosopher" is aloof from political reality in his academic role as "Philosopher", even though he may also be an "international socialist". "The Philosopher" who has the fortune -- or misfortune as it would appear -- also to be an "international socialist" is even perceptive enough to "suspect" that his teaching is not merely not an expression of his socialism, but actually "conservative in the main" and in contradiction to it (3rd paragraph).

But how can an international socialist philosopher be content merely to remain "suspicious" that his life work might be conservative? Surely this is a matter which any self-respecting socialist or philosopher would investigate. This sort of "dis-relation" between political convictions and philosophical work is the very division which Radical Philosophy aims to make people conscious of and then to question and subvert. Hinton again sees curricular changes as the answer: he says, "the best way to escape from this trap is to broaden the syllabus". But this is remarkably complacent. Isn't there something much more fundamentally wrong with a philosophy like this, which fails to engage itself politically by confronting current ideology and mystification; and isn't there something much more fundamentally wrong with a form of politics which is uninformed by any philosophy and which fails to confront a great deal of contemporary British philosophy as ideological and mystifying?

The problems which Hinton's paper raises: (i) the nature of recent British philosophy and the reasons for its poverty; and (ii) the dilemma for the socialist academic -- these problems are very real and important ones; and we are not trying to suggest that we have quick and ready answers to them. However, it is clear to us that Hinton's note obscures these problems and reveals a complacency about their solutions which the Radical Philosophy movement is committed to disturbing.

SANITY, MADNESS AND THE PROBLEM OF IGNORANCE

(A Reply to Trevor Pateman)

Martin Skelton-Robinson

Trevor Pateman has offered us some reflections about one of the families Laing and Esterson studied and wrote up in 'Sanity Madness and the Family'. (Radical Philosophy. Jan.'72. I. 22-23). Whether he intends his remarks to be relevant just to this one case, or, more generally, he fails to mention. However, it scarcely matters as they apply in neither case.

In the one case study his article discusses Laing and Esterson have provided comparatively little information about those features of the girl's experience that have occasioned her diagnosis as 'schizophrenic' and which they are arguing are probably intelligible in terms of family inter-relationships. Apart from a set of conventional symptoms set out by the authors; 'She had auditory hallucinations and was depersonalised; showed signs of catatonia; exhibited affective impoverishment and autistic withdrawal. Occasionally she was held to be impulsive,' and their rather optimistic translation of these into experiential terms, we know very little of what Maya has suffered. What were the exact experiences the clinicians encountered; what did she hear when she was said to hallucinate, when and in what way was she depersonalized, etc., etc?

Only one of these features of her 'illness' is taken up in any detail in the ensuing narrative, her 'emotional impoverishment'. Her auditory hallucinations, for example, are dealt with in one or two sentences. 'The voices, she said, were her own thoughts anyway.' This neither clarifies, nor explains, what is at issue here. We still want to know, did she think her thoughts, or were they passive thoughts thrust on her from elsewhere? Were these thoughts silent or spoken aloud, and if aloud whose was the voice and where did it come from? Moreover, just what were these 'thoughts' about? They cannot be explained till we know what needs explaining. That THIS suggestion about her voices is most misleading in its implication that the psychiatrists had got it all wrong and there were no voices, is shown by the observation made later that 'her thoughts thought themselves audibly in her head.'

Her depersonalization is dealt with like-wise: 'Just as not she but the voices thought, so not she but her body acted.' which in its context tells us exactly nothing. Finally her catatonia is not mentioned at all.

The other features of her 'illness' that are dealt with besides the emotional impoverishment are her ideas of influence (One wonders how prominent these were as there is no mention of them in the list of clinical ascriptions which, we are told, were the results of 10 years observation), and her sense of lacking personal autonomy.

Her 'ideas of influence' are certainly the symptom in respect of which the best case is put up for social intelligibility. However even here the authors report, 'As she recalls when she was 15 she began to feel her father was causing these sexual thoughts', an observation which is not translated into family praxis. And they write up this feature of her illness: 'These open yet unavowed non-verbal exchanges between father and mother were in fact quite public and perfectly obvious. Much (my emphasis) of what could be taken to be paranoid about Maya arose because she mistrusted her own mistrust. Much, but not all.

This reservation is part of the same inconclusiveness Trevor Pateman cannot understand in the preface when Laing and Esterson say that they have not 'set out to test the hypothesis that the family is a pathogenic variable in schizophrenia.' They are also reserved in their conclusions about the Abbott family. They say of Maya's symptoms that 'They seem quite in keeping with the social reality in which she lived.' Only 'in keeping'. As I have indicated in some detail a great deal more would be required of this family history (and besides that in other histories, and control work, etc.) to prove that they were the result of this social reality.

I spell all this out because Trevor Pateman says he cannot understand Laing and Esterson's diffidence. This failure perhaps explains his own singular boldness. He takes up this one case, fails to mention most of the symptomatology which Laing and Esterson have already abbreviated precisely because they are doing nothing conclusive, but only illustrating the plausibility of an idea, and hypotheses just what are at the roots of this 'illness'. First we hear: 'The dominant feature of these arguments (between parents and daughter) is, in my reading, conflict over what is the fact of the matter. In this conflict, the feature of the 'schizophrenic' daughter, as evidenced in her statements, which I wish to single out is her inability to either state or, more radically, to know what is true and what is false in a given situation. I shall suggest as a possible explanation this could be because she has not learnt to tell true from false.' Even as a possible explanation some qualification would be in order since not being able to tell true from false at all is absolute mental defect or some such pristine ignorance.

However if Trevor Pateman had read the text a little more carefully he would have discovered that, 'Maya sometimes commented fairly lucidly on these mystifications.' Not a possibility, presumably, if she had failed to learn the 'verification criteria' required to make such comments.

This first suggestion Pateman elucidates with the magnificent contention that 'parents are our epistemological authorities, that is, authorities on questions like: what can we know? How can we know? How can we know that we know? When can we claim to know? and so on.' It is true that parents are not called our 'legitimate' epistemological authorities, but this is certainly implied. And so the theory of knowledge will have to study child rearing customs! More seriously the idea that the external world or at least its sensible phenomena, on one side, and the laws of logic, the objects of mathematics, and notions of space and time, grammar and certain universal functions of language, the meanings of some bodily gestures and poses, all on the other side, are one and all conveyed to us by our parents, rather than, shall I say, through them (for a social nexus is of course one sine qua non of knowledge) is not radical empiricism with all possibility of the empiricist, or observer himself, removed.

To conclude I will take up one valuable point Laing and Esterson put in their preface. 'Do these things go on in all sorts of families? Possibly.' If Pateman imagines there are no contentious or bitterly quarrelsome families without 'schizophrenic' children he must place the incidence of schizophrenia a little higher than the Registrar General's estimate of 0.85% of the population. With this point some real considerations about madness emerge. It is not the disputes, disagreements, flat contradictions which are more or less a feature of all children's upbringings, but what motives these disagreements serve. As Laing and Esterson are at pains to emphasise Mrs. Abbott did not want her daughter to grow up and be herself, that is to become an independent and self possessed person. If we assume that Maya's 'illness' is socially intelligible we may reflect as against Trevor Pateman that she learnt exactly what was communicated to her, with disastrous results.

WEEKEND WORKSHOP ON HEGEL

Arising out of the Hegel workshop at the recent R.P.G. Conference, plans are being made for a weekend of discussions and papers on Hegel, to be held in London on June 24th & 25th. It is hoped to have papers on Hegel and logic (with reference also to the British Hegelians) and on Hegel in relation to philosophical scepticism. Further information from Richard Norman, Darwin College, University of Kent, Canterbury.