

News, Comment and Letters

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY: R.I.P.

The latest (1984-85) series of lectures sponsored by the Royal Institute of Philosophy was on 'American Philosophy'. Given the history of this prestigious series (now in its nineteenth year), this was an unusual choice. The Institute has never been radical in its deployment of this interesting piece of intellectual patronage, but in choosing (for the first time) a national tradition in philosophy and this one in particular they ran the risk of reinforcing rather than critically exposing a stereotypical and sadly deficient view of the history of philosophy.

A well-planned street poll of Western humanists would give you almost without error the outlines of the RIP programme. In order of chronological coverage, although not delivery, the 15 lectures offered the following: an introduction to the thought of Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), pre-revolutionary America's most powerful and original philosopher - who took on board Newton's cosmology, Locke's psychology, and the moral-sense theories of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, and turned them into an amazing defence of puritan (Congregationalist) fundamentals; a detour through the liberal constitutionalism of the Founding Fathers (Franklin, Jefferson and Madison), as well as a related retrospective survey of American legal philosophy; two lectures on the apparently outstanding figures of mid-nineteenth century America's cultural 'renaissance' (as it was termed by F. O. Matthiesson, without ever being entirely clear about what was being re-born) - Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-62); four separate lectures on key figures in the so-called 'Golden Age' of 'American' (more exactly 'Harvard') philosophy between the 1870s and the first World War - Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), Josiah Royce (1855-1916) and George Santayana (1863-1952); expositions of John Dewey (1859-1952), twentieth-century America's most recognisable public philosopher, - his close colleague at Chicago, George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), - and Clarence Irving Lewis (1883-1964), the epitome of twentieth-century institutional 'professionalism' in philosophy; and finally two minor but nonetheless rewarding figures selected by the Chairman and organiser of the series - Morris Raphael Cohen (1880-1947), naturalist logician and source of inspiration to an important generation (almost exclusively immigrants) who went through City College of New York between 1912 and 1938, and Arthur Edward Murphy (1901-62), author of a briefly influential doctrine called 'objective relativism'.

The canonical selectivity, the dangers of whiggish celebration, the omission of key figures who would be recognisable today as American philosophers (Saul Kripke, Donald Davidson, John Searle, Willard von Orme Quine), were all defects pricked but not punctured from the centre by Bruce Kuklick, author of the most rounded overall account of Harvard's Golden Age, *The Rise of American Philosophy*. Kuklick in particular poured scorn on 'American philosophy' as a cautionary tale; the progressive discovery of twentieth-century naturalism and experimentalism, summed up in the every-day image of 'pragmatism', where the

actions of self-interested politicians are justified by reference to the ghost of Benjamin Franklin. In exposing the hidden curriculum associated with this traditional canon, Kuklick suggested that asking questions about American philosophy from such a base is 'at best not very interesting and at worst silly'. The constructive part of his lecture offered an alternative, less heralded, canonical tradition through Congregationalist and Presbyterian theology, that provides in his view a more secure thread from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey (this is shortly to be published in book form as *Churchmen and Philosophers*).

The search for a spirit of American philosophy, implied in the RIP enterprise, is in fact an ideal type of the general investigation of American exceptionalism. The quest for American distinctiveness or exceptionalism is, in turn, a heuristic device for academic inquiry which shades uneasily into cultural propaganda. Put crudely, this is what the 'American Studies' programme is all about. American philosophy, like American Art, Literature and even Science, are all seen as aspects of American national character.

In American American Studies, unlike the subject in Great Britain (which generally depends upon a rather loose historico-literary synthesis), 'American philosophy' plays quite a central role; certainly a more central role than that which you would find played by philosophy in most undergraduate European Studies courses in Europe or the United States. Various reasons are suggested for this. Positively it is claimed that it reflects an enduring aspect of American culture: the distinctive interpenetration of popular and professional ideas shown, for example, in the prominent role afforded theologians, philosophers, literary heroes like Emerson, and other intellectuals. Apologists as well as cynics also point to the didactic value of the history of American philosophy as a moral lesson: the puritan conquest of the wilderness; the liberal ideals of the revolution and constitution; and the twentieth-century triumph of secular science. Cynics alone point to the accessibility (a euphemism for 'easiness') of the main texts, and the resulting circularity of a curriculum based on simple progressive ideas which excludes texts either contradicting those ideas or proving more difficult for undergraduates. (The chief victim of this process is Peirce whose presentation to undergraduates is usually confined to four early essays from the *Popular Science Monthly*).

A longer paper could be written on the 'essences' of American philosophising found by cultural critics. Most however settle on arguments of one of two types: the argument from thematic continuity or the argument from unresolved tension.

Each type captures works from a variety of perspectives. Thematic continuity can, for example, be found frequently expressed by philosophers. One of the most popular such work is John E. Smith's *Spirit of American Philosophy*, with its discovery of three 'dominant or focal beliefs': that 'thinking is an activity in response to a concrete situation', 'that ideas make a difference in the conduct of people who hold them', and that 'the earth can be civilized by the applications of knowledge'. What these three beliefs do for Smith is to stitch American philosophy together from its 'classic' background (Edwards), through the 'golden period'

(James, Royce and Peirce) to modern, optimistic, Deweyite instrumentalism. There are also grand cultural syntheses in this genre such as Louis Hartz' The Liberal Tradition in America and, now even more dusty, Ralph Gabriel's The Course of American Democratic Thought. Gabriel set out, in 1940, 'a pattern of ideals providing standards with which the accomplishments of realistic democracy may be judged ... a philosophy of the mean'. Then there are the products of the hard-nosed textual critics of contemporary American civilisation departments such as Sacvan Bercovitch's Puritan Origins of the American Self, with its discovery of the enduring visionary and symbolic myth of the representative American self. From a great height what is interesting is how easily all of these ideas dissolve into the two simple notions of American mission or destiny and American practical will.

Analogous works can be found for all of these under the heading of unresolved tension. Smith's analogue is Morton White's Science and Sentiment in America: Philosophical Thought from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey, which, with its companion volume of documents, has probably proved the most successful of the undergraduate textbooks. White posits an oscillation between the inspiration of the heart and the rationality of scientific evidence (similar to that described by William James as 'tender-minded' and 'tough-minded') beginning with the opposition of Edwards and Locke on the senses and eventually dissolved, again in Deweyite naturalism. Parallel themes inform influential works of historical synthesis such as Michael Kammen's prize-winning People of Paradox, and his revealingly titled anthology The Contrapuntal Civilization which collects together essays viewing '... the American experience in terms of its paradoxes, its contradictory tendencies, its dualisms and its polarities'. This approach is echoed in a most of modern titles such as Peter Conn's recent book on 'ideology and imagination' in America between 1898 and 1917 (a sort of transatlantic version of George Dangerfield's Strange Death of Liberal England called The Divided Mind (1983). Occasionally the manichean view shades into policy prescription. The late Richard Hofstadter's famous Anti-Intellectualism in American Life was really a plea for America's best self to rescue her from a worst self, and in particular to make use of the author and similarly-qualified contemporaries. 'Once the intellectual was ridiculed because he was not needed; now he is fiercely resented because he is needed too much.' These words were written in the warm glow of John Kennedy's 'New Frontier', but also in painful recollection of McCarthyism.

Kuklick's criticism of this enterprise - the search for essences - is not new. He is still respectfully regarded within the American Studies movement for a trenchant criticism of 'Myth and Symbol in American Studies' published in the American Quarterly (of which he is now editor) in 1972. Assaulting such central figures as Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx, Kuklick objected strongly to the 'platonic strain' in their intellectual history:

If myth-symbol generalizations have any substance, they must be subject to falsification by the conclusion of 'lower-level' historical research. If we do not know how to establish links between the two levels, the humanists will not have achieved viable explanations of any behaviour; what we would have instead is a series of ruminations with little empirical content, and not history.

During the past decade, which could also be said to have enjoyed the 'professionalisation' of the history of ideas (at least in American university departments), this critique has broadened and gained adherents in wider fields of intellectual history.

Contemporary American intellectual historians, of the type who banded together to produce the excellent volume edited by John Higham and Paul Conkin, New Directions in American Intellectual History, can be sharply distinguished from their predecessors in a number of ways. Collectively

what separates historians like Kuklick, David Hollinger, Mary Furner, Dorothy Ross, Thomas Haskell and David Noble from White, Merle Curti, Rush Welter, Gabriel or Hartz is a greater focus on institutional factors (such as the professionalisation of disciplines), the discovery of alternatives to the traditional canon (like Kuklick's churchmen), precise identification of communities of discourse (the feminist perspective is important here with, for example, the work on nineteenth-century women's support systems by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg), and careful theses about the interpenetration of professional ideas and public policy (of which easily the most influential was first published as an undergraduate textbook in 1967: Robert Wiebe's The Search for Order).

Nor has professional philosophy escaped the influence of these pressures to retreat from the fundamentally uncritical high ground from which something called 'American philosophy' can be viewed. Murray Murphey (like Kuklick at the University of Pennsylvania, although in a different department) is joint author of a two-volume History of Philosophy in America (a careful title), published in 1977 and explicitly designed to supersede Herbert Schneider's History of American Philosophy (first published in 1946). Murphey concludes the work with a tentative endorsement of at least the aims of the search for 'American Philosophy':

(further work) should look for - and we may hazard the suspicion that it will find - some features of the human spirit that are distinctively emphasized on the American scene and which may still be maintaining a pattern that is consistent with the American cultural traditions.

I suspect that the tentative tone betrays some serious misgivings. In an article in the Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society in 1979 Murphey sets out a prospectus for an approach to the problem significantly undercutting his substantial work. Traditional history of philosophy is defined as presentist and evaluative. That is, it continues a dialogue within the discipline as we understand it today. An 'historicist' alternative attempts 'to interpret historical phenomena in terms of the historical cultural context in which they were produced and of which they were a part'. This may sound simplistic and old hat to the historian of ideas, but as a principle it is profoundly destructive to the identification of anything as redolent of a 'usable past' as the Royal Institute's search for the spirit of American philosophy.

David Watson

CROSSING THE CHANNEL

Are relations between French and English intellectuals improving, or at any rate changing in significant ways? The question is of obvious importance and fascination, and the more immediate ways of trying to answer it (by scanning Rorty's author index or noting mention of speech acts in Lyotard) liable to be deceptive.

Two conferences have recently taken place with this subject as their avowed theme. The expectation that a conference should actually effect a rapprochement, or establish the existence of an intraversable distance, makes in present circumstances too high a demand. Nevertheless, the event of physical and institutional confrontation can not fail to be revealing, and each of the conferences has - in very different ways - provided some sort of index of the state of play.

In December the Institute of Contemporary Arts organised an ambitious weekend conference in London, under the description, 'Crossing the Channel'. Several disciplines, including philosophy, were each allocated a cluster of famous names and about two hours in which to make their differences seen, felt and, if possible, reapprehended. As the title suggests, an element of challenge was acknowledged

from the outset. The French speakers, with one glaring exception, had visibly succeeded in making the physical crossing, but what was to be done on their arrival often seemed far from clear, both to them and to the audience: it was implicit that the occasion demanded more than self-description, but that more seemed hard to get. If the French rarely made a crossing in any less literal sense due to lack of orientation, the English speakers failed to do so without that excuse.

The session devoted to Anglo-French philosophy showed this more strikingly than any of the others. It was originally and tantalisingly billed as a juxtaposition of A.J. Ayer and Derrida, but the latter never appeared, and was replaced by the philosopher Deschamps, who writes in *Le Figaro*.

Their session, even allowing for difficulties of translation and for shortage of time, amounted to nothing describable as a discussion or exchange, but provided for, on the English side, something more like a caricature of national intellectual temperament. Ayer opened with a ten-minute recapitulation of the achievements of analytic philosophy since its inauguration with *Principia Mathematica*, which he delivered with charm and urbanity. He then relaxed further into a sense of his tradition's achievement by barely attending to his French respondent. Deschamps, rather than attempting an analogous counter-tale of progress by trial-and-error, took pains to emphasise the difficulty of defining a current French orthodoxy, and, with an eye to the future and more assiduous attention to the purpose of the occasion, tried to explain that constructing concepts might best characterise his contemporaries' endeavours.

The question and answer session that followed ended when Ayer, with frightening predictability, made a Johnsonian stone-kicking gesture and uttered a sentence in a natural language expressing the (true) proposition that there was before him on the table a tumbler of water.

The audience were therefore certainly made aware of some sort of contrast. But a contrast of what, exactly? Given his written declaration that Continental philosophy originates in psychopathology, Ayer ought clearly not to have been invited. From a reflective point of view, the choice was excellent for what it revealed about how Anglo-French relations were being desired to be seen. At some thoroughly institutionalised level, these relations are, when under the aspect of 'public' perception, a saleable item, without there being anything more in the presented contrast than a contrast of 'styles', for want of a better term. Perhaps 'the current state of literary theory', a publisher's dream, is evidence enough of this. Somewhere down the line, the intellectual content and the desire to locate it have been eradicated, and in their place there is instead an image that effectively homogenises the two parties, blocks the appreciation of internal differences, and offers instead the gratification of a spectacle.

What was of value in the conference lay scattered, often unpredictably, in the other sessions; French novelists discussed their work in a relaxed and revealing way, and - intriguingly - avowed an indifference and an invulnerability to literary theory. The ICA should also be given credit for having created the occasion for a stimulating breadth of exposure; the weekend conference had been preceded by weekly seminars on Barthes, Foucault and Althusser.

The second conference, attended by few, and of a very different order of seriousness, took place early in January. 'Philosophie et Pratique' occurred at the Maison française in Oxford, organised by the Services Culturels of the French Embassy, and lasted three days. Nearly all the papers were dense and concentrated attempts to answer the question that formed the conference's sub-title: 'Is there anything essential in the nature of philosophical research that bears specifically on problems of politics, psychoanalysis and literature?'. Unlike the ICA's event, there was a sufficiently determinate theme, and provision for home ground on both sides and therefore a genuine chance for lines of convergence and demarcations of distance to be defined.

If the upshot can be summarised at all, a task repeatedly attempted throughout the conference itself, it can only be put by way of a series of negations: there is as yet no way of stating either a thematic or a methodological difference, nor complete agreement on the possibility or desirability of doing so. If this sounds like a failure, it should not be attributed to the conference itself; and it must further be qualified by the important fact that the perception of the other side as 'other' is not accompanied by reactive contempt or by any sense of having to belong to a denomination that need view the other as a threat.

The model of the Searle/Derrida exchange in *Glyph*, a common textual emblem of the Anglo-French non-connection, has, on the basis of this conference, no application to Anglo-French philosophical relations, however it may function with regard to literary theory. (Derrida, physically absent from the ICA, had no greater linguistic presence at Oxford, Deleuze if anyone being the most frequently cited French philosopher, and never in the manner of an authority.)

Does this signal apathy, or a refusal to acknowledge existing orthodoxies? Some traces of indifference could be detected among even those few analytic philosophers who had taken the trouble to attend; and the French, who opened the session with one of the most lucid characterisations of 'analytical philosophy' to date (by François Recanatì), expressed no enthusiastic conviction that there was much to be learnt from current writings in England or America. A less than sufficient knowledge of one another's texts emerged as an obvious and damaging hindrance to discussion (an astonishing instance of which took the form of an attribution to Sartre of a theory with not one, but two, substantial selves).

Despite the tentativeness with which the conference found it had to characterise itself, some salient and revealing areas of convergence and of disagreement emerged. Mary Tiles argued through theory of meaning to the necessity of granting a level of grasp of sense where metaphor could be located, and this dovetailed with a Deleuze-based exposition of the nature of figuration and concept-creation by Jean-Jacques Lecercle. A second point of contact was established between David Archard, arguing against the assimilation of Freud to some schools of contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, and Roustang, rejecting the intrusion of the Lacanian philosophical a priori into psycho-analytic theory.

Of those moments where incompatibility assumed a definite form, the most dramatic was initiated by Jonathan Glover, frustrated by the absence of common propositions to contest, who complained that etiquettes of politeness had been hampering discussion, and challenged Macherey on the question in the title of the conference. What then is the French commitment to practice, if it is not to take the form of applied ethics? (An example of which being that of surrogate-motherhood, Glover explained) Macherey replied that it was necessary for theory to think beyond its own distinctness from practice, and recognise the need for it to think analytically-defined problems back into the context of a political whole from which they had been ideologically excised, and of which philosophy was already a part.

The longest - and least useful paper in relation to the conference's ends - was given by Hacker, who deployed a series of Wittgensteinian arguments against various epistemological and scientific claims. Hacker's arguments revealed the analytic understanding to be fixated by epistemological interests, and to be entirely conservative in intent - thereby failing to arouse any interest in Wittgenstein that the French could share.

It is hard to see how future Anglo-French conferences could go much further, without delimiting their scope more sharply than was done at 'Philosophie et Pratique', so as to take single salient issues (such as figuration in philosophical language, or philosophy's relation to its own history). Aesthetics, which appeared in the sub-title of the Oxford conference but was not really discussed, has surely to be one area capable of yielding most room for dialogue.

But even given this and many other preconditions - of which the careful reading of one another's texts must be the most important - it may be that there is a limit soon reached where nothing more can be yielded, and nothing more defined; and it would be plausible to conjecture that those very reasons that made the ICA's event a pleasure and a commodity are not independent from those that set the boundaries to metaphilosophy. Of the attempt at metaphilosophy, it must be asked whether it is not misguided to attempt to produce a perspective from which both analytic and Continental philosophy can be reviewed, and what kind of will to adjudication might be disguised in it. Pluralism must also defend itself against the charge of failing to be dialectical.

However, 'Philosophie et Pratique' gave some small but heartening indication that the absence hitherto of metaphilosophical discussion between French and English would not necessarily be continued out of professional self-confinement, and if it is not, it can avoid taking certain forms that stultify it in the process of providing its appeal.

THE ASTROLOGICAL SCENE

During the 20th century there has been a resurgence of astrology in the West. Popularisation in the media is one factor here, but there are also now several thousand practising astrologers (full or part time) who distance themselves from 'pop' astrology. This 'serious' astrology still follows traditional principles with the addition of several recent techniques. Astrologers today often use astrology in the context of counselling, linking it with Jungian or humanistic psychotherapies. There has also been a great deal of empirical - usually empiricist - research following the work of the Gauquelins.

The existence of various types of astrological activity, coupled with the lack of a clear and agreed definition of the discipline compared to others, means that it can be put into a number of diverse categories convenient to various discourses: 'scientific phenomenon'; 'pseudo-science'; 'model of the psyche'; 'entertainment'; 'system of personality description'; 'stupefying ideology'; etc. In each case the discourse maintains its own mythical 'astrology', each with many unexamined assumptions. With the lack of clearly formulated alternatives from the world of astrologers, non-astrologers approaching the subject tend to pick upon only these mythical definitions. Thus the few writings by radical thinkers, while correct in their critiques of astrology's

ideological role in media discourse, paradoxically accept the discourse of scientism in rejecting all astrology as 'pseudo-science'.

A study or practice of astrology brings one to the classic issues of philosophy: free will, causation, time, mind, knowledge, human subjectivity ...; and these have been focal points in the debates between astrology and rival systems of thought. But astrology today lacks a comprehensive and developing theoretical side of its own which would help astrologers think out these issues, defend and define their practice, and lead to more productive interaction with other fields.

The Radical Astrology Group

Through our publications, meetings and lectures, we have tried to introduce recent developments in theory and philosophy, including those of structuralism, post-structuralism, semiotics, and feminism, to the rather insular world of astrologers, and provoke discussion on them. We do not hold any unified position but we share a belief that a critical approach and more awareness of these developments are needed.

Astrology itself, conceived in such theoretical terms, has much to say to those in other disciplines, particularly those studying philosophy or systems of thought in a social context. Even if one sets aside the question of validity, astrology is a field where diverse discourses come into play and can be comparatively observed, both now and at key points in its history, such as the late 17th century. Much of modern astrological practice would appear to offer a direct challenge to notions of empiricism, universal causation, and the distinctions subject/object, science/art.

Our first main project was writing our book: Discussion Papers: Astrology and Theory. This summarised the relevant theoretical developments such as semiotics and presented some new contexts for thinking about astrology. It also examined the implicit philosophies of the various astrological groups in Britain, and included an outline of astrological methods for the benefit of non-astrological readers.

We are now reworking the Discussion Papers with a view to republishing them as two books: one on theory/philosophy; the second on astrology, semiotics and interpretation. In addition we are publishing a book of interviews with astrologers which will have a wider appeal than the academic content of the others.

We hold regular meetings in London, plus occasional workshops, and are interested in hearing from anyone with ideas/feelings on the above topics. To obtain more details and be added to our mailing list, please write to Radical Astrology Group, 17 Granville Road, London SW18 5SB

A NOTE ON 'ORTHODOX LINGUISTICS'

BoL Borsley

In her contribution to the recent debate on sexist language, Deborah Cameron makes the quite reasonable point that the way speech is understood is dependent on context and hence that sexist interpretations are likely in a sexist culture. However, she embeds this point in a tirade against prevailing ideas about language, and, in particular, against mainstream linguistics, or 'orthodox linguistics', as she prefers to call it. It would be unfortunate if this were allowed to pass without comment. In this note, therefore, I will take up the main points that Cameron appears to be making and try to set the record straight <1>.

Cameron presents a string of assertions whose precise meaning is often far from clear. It seems, however, that her main claim is that linguists assume a conception of communication which leads them to a view of language

which precludes any dependence of meaning on context. She suggests that linguists assume that communication is a matter of 'telementation', the transfer of ideas from one mind to another, and that perfect communication is the norm. This conception of communication leads them to view language as a fixed code of form-meaning correspondences and this is incompatible with any dependence of meaning on context.

Do mainstream linguists in fact hold these views? It would, I think, be quite hard to show that they subscribe to the crucial conception of communication for the simple reason that they say very little about communication. If one looks at the recent writings of Noam Chomsky, who remains the dominant figure in mainstream linguistics, one finds that the only references to communication are where he takes issue with the idea that communication is the purpose of language and the key to an understanding of its structure <2>. It may well be that many linguists think that communication is in part a matter of the transfer of ideas from one mind to another. (It's hard to see what's wrong