

News

British Society for the History of Philosophy

Every few years since the war, a British Society for the History of something-or-other has been set up. This will form an interesting study for the future historian of academe, as revealing in its way as the flurry of scientific, philosophical and literary societies in early nineteenth-century Britain. It is now the turn of the History of Philosophy. The inaugural meeting of the British Society for this was held on April 12-13 1985 at Westwood Hall, University of Leeds, where the magnolia about to bloom outside the front door symbolised the hopeful anticipation within.

If expectations ran high, that was owing to the initial proclamation of the Society's specific aims, which included

- co-operation with historians of science, politics, theology, law, literature and other kindred studies, and with historians of philosophy from overseas, on matters of common interest

- the reappraisal of all aspects of the 'received tradition', exploring new approaches to the subject and new or neglected aspects of it

- the raising of historiographical questions, including questions about the history of the teaching of philosophy and about the teaching of its history

- the study of the relation of philosophy to its past, exploring the insights to be derived from both analytic and historical approaches, and raising the awareness of continuing developments in the history of philosophy among philosophers themselves and other students of the humanities.

Given that it is always easier to draw up a manifesto than to put it into practice, it is perhaps unsurprising that not all these admirable aims could receive equal attention during the inaugural meeting. Rather, the organising committee chose a selection of papers to be read which revealed implicitly certain differing approaches to the history of philosophy, without laying great stress either on what these approaches might be, or in what spirit of critical reflectiveness they were held. But it was possible to infer that one current approach is very much of the 'history of ideas' tradition, wherein philosophical ideas are somewhat detached from their historical context, and the relation to other philosophical ideas is the important thing.

Another approach seems to be to discuss current philosophical debates which might have some bearing (unspecified) on the enterprise of the history of philosophy. It is, of course, most valuable for members of the Society to tackle questions about what the subject of the Society is, how it should be done and what difficulties attend the enterprise.

But it is less clear that the best way of doing this, in the context of an inaugural meeting, was through a so-called 'Symposium' (i.e. two lengthy papers instead of one) on Translation. This did highlight, though, the extent to which the relationship between philosophy and history of philosophy is likely to continue to be a fertile source of creative tension at the heart of the Society's activities.

(In the early years of the History of Education Society, Asa Briggs gave a talk on 'The Study of the History of Education' (v. History of Education, Vol. 1 (1972), pp. 5-22), in which he outlined various historical approaches particularly relevant to the Society's concerns. Perhaps a congenial way of introducing historiographical reflection to the activities of the BSHP would be to invite a historian to address a meeting sometime soon?)

The only paper which appeared to be even aware that this was the inaugural meeting of a society (and the only one to address explicitly one of the Society's specific aims) was Jonathan Rée's, on the history of philosophy teaching and popular perceptions of philosophy. Perhaps, indeed, it was the only paper written or tailored for the occasion; for one must recognise the perennial tension at such conferences between the requirements of topic or subject-matter, and the needs of individuals to seek outlet and audience for their work.

Once one is reminded that philosophy has a history, and historic traditions of teaching and promulgation, a related question springs to mind that the Society could usefully discuss one of these days. What are the historic roots of the tradition whereby people should read out, for long stretches of time, prepared texts which are patently designed as written prose? Conference-attenders on almost anything will be familiar with this tradition, of course, but if the BSHP is to reappraise 'received tradition' this would be a good place to start. This tradition has further corollaries. Not a single speaker at this conference, for instance, proved capable of writing a text that could be read within the time allotted. (In Jonathan Rée's case, a fluent and lucid delivery was interspersed with instant timing judgements which left the impression somewhat of Achilles and the Kangaroo.) It is not clear whose interests are served by this written prose tradition: papers which are accessible and stimulating when read by someone, privately and at their own pace, become incomprehensible and stupefying when read to them, if the author has made no attempt to compose spoken rather than written prose. Almost all speakers (i.e. readers) proved much better able to explain clearly what they were trying to say, once they had liberated themselves from their texts, in discussion. Perhaps the BSHP will give some consideration to the advantages of moving towards pre-circulation of papers, which affords much greater opportunities for discussion and understanding.

Interesting times lie ahead for the Society, then. Whether it will become the forum for widespread lively dis-

volvement in the subject, or another outlet for philosophical reflection about philosophical ideas, lies in the hands of the committee and the members. To judge by the inaugural meeting, could go either way.

John Fauvel

Membership details of the British Society for the History of Philosophy may be obtained from:
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Philosophers for Peace

News has reached us of two recently formed peace groups specifically concerned with the philosophical issues at stake in the peace movement; Philosophers for Peace and International Philosophers for the Prevention of Nuclear Omnicide (IPPNO). For the information of RP readers, we reproduce below extracts from their publicity material and contact addresses.

'Philosophers for Peace is ... a decentralised global communication network to help facilitate the effective sharing of ideas, perspectives and research among all those people interested in exploring the philosophical issues involved in the whole question of peace in the widest sense.

The idea is to compile an informal network register to be circulated to all participants (the first of which is in the initial stages of compilation) listing all those wishing to take part in the network and giving some idea of their activities and areas of research. This will enable participants to contact one another via the mail etc. (and wherever possible in person) and to explore areas of mutual concern. It is thus hoped to facilitate the fruitful exchange of ideas concerning the philosophy of peace between people all over the world, including areas which do not normally intercommunicate very effectively.

The network register, which will be updated regularly, is also planned to function as an information exchange whereby participants can give brief details of the continuing activities and research, as well as sharing news of any detailed communications which may be taking place among them. This will enable all participants to keep in touch with one another in general and to know which contacts to explore in greater depths. It is also hoped to share reading lists etc. via the register.

The aim is to have no formal membership or organisational structure per se, but rather to build up an organic network based on open sharing and communication. It is hoped that meetings, discussion groups, workshops, conferences and who knows what else will emerge naturally and spontaneously through the personal initiative of participants.'

For further information contact:
Philosophers for Peace
c/o Thomas C. Daffern, 108 Ledbury Road,
London W11 2AH telephone 01-229 0174

At the 1983 World Congress of Philosophy a new group, International Philosophers for the Prevention of Nuclear Omnicide (IPPNO) was formed, open equally to all countries. Its first International Conference will be held in the United States in 1986 under the Presidency of Professor John Somerville, with an International Organizing Committee representing all major countries and all philosophical viewpoints.

Its primary purpose is dialogue for mutual understanding and peace among countries with differing ideologies and social systems. Five conference days are planned for Plenary Sessions, Symposia and Workshops. All proceedings will be open to the educational community.

Papers of not more than 20 minutes reading time are solicited from scholars in any discipline related to the prevention of nuclear conflict.

For further details and draft prospectus of the Conference write to
Professor John Somerville
1426 Merritt Drive, El Cajon, California 92020
(619) 447-1641

The Question of Postmodernity

There has been much talk (and not a little writing) of late, among both philosophers and cultural critics, of 'postmodernity', the 'postmodern' age, and other related terms of epochal cultural diagnosis. The term 'postmodern' was originally popularised by the American architectural critic, Charles Jencks, back in 1968 in his book The Language of Postmodernist Architecture where it was used to characterise a particular architectural aesthetic. More recently, however, it has rapidly become part of the common currency of intellectual exchange in a much more generalised sense. In this sense, it is used not simply as an aesthetic category, even a general one, but as a designation for a whole new cultural epoch, manifestations of which, it is argued, may be found not merely in the arts, but in science, technology, and most fundamentally, in the very idea of knowledge as well.

The process of generalisation of the idea has been closely tied up with, although not exclusive to, the development of post-structuralism as a philosophical movement in France. It has received its most extended elaboration to date in Jean-Francois Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979), an English translation of which has recently been published by Manchester University Press, in their History and Theory of Literature Series, Vol. 10, 1984. One of its most vigorous critics has been Jürgen Habermas, the Frankfurt critical theorist. In a number of recent papers and interviews Habermas has been concerned to re-emphasise the dialectical character of the original Frankfurt critique of Enlightenment, and to oppose himself directly to current developments in French and American cultural theory.

To its philosophical proponents, the idea of the postmodern or of postmodernity seems to mark the achievement of a final (Heideggerian) break with all those modes of cultural experience grounded upon that false 'metaphysics of presence' and the related 'fallacy of constitutive subjectivity' which, according to Heidegger, has characterised the whole Western tradition since Plato (and possibly before). It registers an almost apocalyptically liberating event, albeit one which is liberating in an essentially different way from that in which the idea of emancipation has traditionally been construed - the idea of a revolutionary subject being, for the postmodernists, a paradigm of the fallacy of con-

stitutive subjectivity. Thus, for example, Lyotard, launching what amounts to something of a crusade on behalf of the postmodern and its philosophical representative the 'unpresentable' beseeches his readers: 'Let us wage war on totality; let us be witness to the unpresentable....'

Not surprisingly, especially given its Heideggerian origin, critics of the movement see it as a dangerously reactionary phenomenon, reproducing at the level of philosophical obscurantism a variant of the neo-conservatism of Daniel Bell and those other cultural critics of the political right who have espoused the cause of postmodernism in the arts. There are, of course, as in any confrontation of this kind, people trying to mediate between the two positions. Principally, those like the American Marxist, Frederick Jameson, who has attempted to rescue something of the culture called 'postmodern' from the interpretations of the philosophical postmodernists. But the basic philosophical antagonism remains. The ultimate coherence of Jameson's strategy of dialectical reappropriation, in fact (see, for example, his 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', New Left Review 146) would seem to depend upon some as yet unestablished philosophical synthesis.

It was in the context of these debates that the Institute of Contemporary Arts organised another of their weekend conferences in London at the Institute in May. The title was simply 'The Question of Postmodernity'. It was planned that the philosophical issues be considered on the first day with the more restrictedly cultural or specifically aesthetic ones being addressed the following day. As usual, the ICA managed to marshal an impressive body of participants for its rotating panel over the four sessions, all of which, held in the main auditorium, were sold out.

The main speaker for the first session was Lyotard. He spoke in French to the main topic of the conference, and was given a periodic translation by Geoff Bennington, co-translator of his book, who sat beside him and took his talk down verbatim. The rest of the panel, who each gave extended responses to his talk, included Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, a French Heideggerian, Terry Eagleton, Martin Jay, and Peter Dews. In the afternoon, Jay gave a paper on the primacy of the visual in modernism and its anticipated decline in the postmodern era. The same system of taking responses from the panel, with the speaker replying before letting in the audience, was adopted.

The spectacular character of the ICA conference routine has already been noted recently in RP (see 'Crossing the Channel', RP 40) and I shall not dwell upon it here. Except to mention that this was the most exhausting of spectacles. During the Lyotard session, for example, it was two and a half hours, without a break, before the chair (Alan Montefiore) turned to the audience for questions. This was dispiriting. Not least because of the number of ostensibly quite different conceptions and periodisations of 'the postmodern' that were at play in the discussion without being clarified or explicitly related to one another. Given the conference title, to which Lyotard addressed himself, this was also surprising, since it might be supposed that 'the question of postmodernity' is at least to begin with, and especially at this stage in the debate, a question of definition and conceptual clarification. Lyotard's talk, it is true, was structured around an exposition of three different senses of 'postmodern'. But no real attempt was made to relate these to each other or to analyse them.

Lyotard is actually as responsible as anyone for the confusion that currently prevails in the literature of the philosophical postmoderns on this just point, offering two quite different periodisations of the postmodern age within the first four pages of his book. The tension within the concept created by these different periodisations (which reflects a fundamental ambivalence of the postmodernists towards modernism, and how to understand that) underlay the whole day's discussion without ever really being directly confronted. Peter Dews, in his Habermasian defense of an enlarged conception of Enlightenment rationality, did however spell out the opposition's perspective on the matter.

But there was not so much a debate between the proponents and opponents of the idea of postmodernity, as a repeated statement of opposed positions on an issue the nature of which was itself far from clear.

One could not help feeling that it was both the centrality of Lyotard himself to the proceedings, and the centrality of his work to the way in which the whole issue of postmodernism has been generally received, that was the major stumbling block to the clarification of what is at stake in the debate over the concept of the postmodern. For just as throughout his recent book Lyotard continually contradicts himself in his efforts to pre-emptorily counter anticipated criticisms of his position, so throughout the weekend at the ICA, both the images he evoked in defence of his position and the presuppositions of his discourse continually subverted the points he was trying to make. Thus, for example, he spoke of postmodernism in architecture as a symptom and result of the 'tragedy' of architecture's loss of its ritual function of 'rendering homage', and as being comparable to the last dance on the Titanic. Yet it is precisely the function of the exposure of the 'fallacy' of constitutive subjectivity and of the essentially contradictory character of all legitimating discourses, to which he is committed, to undermine any such notion of tragedy. Similarly, his extremely loose analogical use of psychoanalytic categories such as 'working through' to describe the emergence of postmodernism out of modernism would seem to be grounded upon a concept of subjectivity to which he is explicitly opposed. Yet it is only by virtue of such systematic ambivalence that Lyotard's position seems to be able to exert any rhetorical force at all.

The second day's two sessions, on postmodernism in architecture and in the 'fine' and 'popular' arts, respectively, were more productive. Kenneth Frampton's paper on critical regionalism as a counter-strategy to postmodernism in architecture was, for me, the high point of the weekend. At least in the architectural debate, one felt, there is a clear conception of what the whole controversy is about. Both the very high level of generality at which it has so far been formulated, and the studiously evasive stance of its proponents towards its further clarification, suggest that philosophical postmodernism will remain, at least for the moment, a primarily aesthetic phenomenon.

Peter Osborne

Chomsky Smear Campaign

There is, it seems, a sustained attempt being made to discredit Noam Chomsky, the well-known American philosopher, linguist, political analyst and human rights activist, whose most recent book, The Fateful Triangle, sets out a powerful critique of US - Israeli foreign policy. According to an article by Alan Ward in the (US) Guardian (3.4.85) systematic attempts have recently been made to stop Chomsky from speaking at a number of American universities. While when he spoke at the University of Michigan last October, leaflets printed in the same unusual typeface as the talk's official publicity were handed out to the audience describing Chomsky as 'dishonest' and 'mad' and claiming, among other things, that he denies the existence of the holocaust.

The originator of this claim, reprinted in the leaflet from an editorial in the magazine The New Republic, appears to be the British linguist Geoffrey Sampson. Sampson has vilified Chomsky at length both in an article in the October 1984 issue of the right-wing magazine The New Criterion and, originally, in his entry on Chomsky in the

hardback edition of the book Twentieth Century Culture, edited by Alan Bullock. In both these pieces, along with the holocaust claim, Chomsky is accused of persistently trying to minimise the Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia. While in the former of the two pieces it is further claimed (incorrectly) that, in direct contradiction to his stated belief in the principle of free speech, Chomsky threatened to initiate libel action against the projected US paperback edition of Twentieth Century Culture.

The holocaust claim and the suggestion that Chomsky's attitude to free speech is hypocritical are connected. Both go back to the incident four years ago when Chomsky criticised the arrest and trial of the French teacher Robert Faurisson (who did deny the reality of the holocaust) for 'falsification of history', on the grounds of his belief in the general principle of academic freedom and the rights of free expression. The suggestion that this action implied an endorsement of Faurisson's views was made at the time, and explicitly repudiated by Chomsky, who has described the holocaust as 'the most fantastic outburst of collective insanity in human history'. Sampson's suggestion that Chomsky has attempted to restrict his right to free expression (by threatening libel) is clearly intended to reinforce the claim that Chomsky shares Faurisson's views. The reiteration of this claim at the present time, despite Chomsky's explicit rebuttal of it, in conjunction with the charge of hypocrisy, can only be interpreted as a deliberate misrepresentation of Chomsky's ideas designed to discredit him so as to direct attention away from his criticisms of US foreign policy.

Chomsky, incidentally, as a policy of never engaging in libel suits on his own behalf. His 'censorship' of Sampson's views about him consisted of sending Bullock documentary evidence to the effect that Sampson's entry in Twentieth Century Culture was a fabrication. Bullock asked Sampson to revise it, and on his refusal, replaced it. The hardback edition, however, continues to circulate with Sampson's entry in it. Meanwhile, in response to Chomsky's making these facts public, in a letter to The New Republic, published in a shortened version two months after it was received, Sampson has suggested that Chomsky's defence of himself to Bullock was in any case the moral equivalent of a lawsuit!

Both Sampson's success in launching a campaign of character assassination against Chomsky (after having initially been a serious critic of Chomsky's work - for which, see the review of his Liberty and Language by Russell Keat in RP25), and the harassment to which Chomsky has been subjected on some US campuses as a result, are disturbing evidence of the political climate in Reagan's America. The fact that Sampson's allegations were accepted into the first edition of Bullock's book in the first place is surprising, at the least.

Tomin

Julius Tomin, the exile Czech philosopher part of whose reply to Martin Walker's Guardian articles on philosophy in Britain was published in RP 37, finally succeeded in obtaining a teaching position in Britain when he became a visiting lecturer in philosophy at Saint David's University College, Lampeter at the beginning of the year. Taking the opportunity offered by his position to reflect upon his experience of philosophy in Oxford, where he had lived for the previous five years, Tomin had the following to say, in the Lampeter Newsletter of April 1985:

In the West, to write anything worth publishing today presupposes an enormous study of secondary litera-

ture; it is like a cancerous tumour in the body of the human intellect; it blocks the experience of vigorous contemplation. ... at Oxford the dons are preoccupied with building an edifice of second rate and second hand material. ... the last five years have been the most instructive of my life. I have been with people of the highest niveau of their kind; but somehow even they have lost touch with the Greek writers. Thanks to the work of generations of scholars, we now have the definitive texts, yet paradoxically instead of freeing the words, scholarship has killed them and modern scholars are preoccupied with irrelevancies.

Hardly a revelation to RP readers, but it's interesting to hear it from Tomin, initially so predisposed to be sympathetic to intellectual culture at Oxford. His experience of Oxford, in fact, seems to have considerably strengthened his emphasis on the potential social function of philosophy, apparent in his piece in RP 37, by some kind of negative reinforcement. Speaking of his experience in Britain, he remarks that 'I pursue all my work in Britain in such a way as to become useful to my country after returning to it'. This is, of course, precisely what Tomin is denied by the Czech authorities. He is, however, currently renewing his campaign to return to Czechoslovakia. Anyone wishing to add their voice to the campaign is invited to write directly to the Minister of Internal Affairs in Prague, requesting his reinstatement as a Czech citizen.

Royal Institute Lectures

Two Boards, A.E.B, and J.M.B., now offer Philosophy A-levels. The Royal Institute of Philosophy has taken an interesting initiative in this. They have arranged their 1985/86 series of lectures on the texts prescribed by these Boards. The lecturers concerned are invited to make them accessible to those without previous acquaintance with philosophy. The lectures are given at 14 Gordon Square on Fridays at 5.45. The programme starts on 11 October with Plato's Republic and runs through chronologically (Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Marx, Mill, Nietzsche, Russell, Ayer) to Sartre on 28 February. Then the series concludes with a lecture on Hume by the organiser Godfrey Vesey. The lectures will be published by Cambridge University Press.

Some of the cartoons in this issue are once more from Cumhuriyet, Turkey's only remaining independent daily newspaper. The Turkish Ministry of Culture's bookburning activities (reported briefly in RP38) continue unabated. The entire stock of the Turkish publishing house 'Ege' (133,000 copies), 'acquitted' in a recent trial, somehow ended up pulped by the state paper company anyway. Meanwhile, the Islamic fundamentalist Minister of 'National' Education has banned the teaching of Darwin in Turkish schools, and ordered the rewriting of 1200 school textbooks from a 'national' perspective. 'National' philosophy in the universities to follow?