I write in and about an embarrassment: how should I, a philosophy teacher, respond to people who are also committed to philosophy, but cut off from official philosophical institutions? It was partly to focus my attention on this problem that I revisited a much-respected acquaintance a few days ago. He is Jock Shanley, a former upholsterer and trade union leader, now eighty-three years old and retired to a suburb near where I work in north London, where he reads, watches TV, and leafs through Marxism Today, wondering facetiously whether he is the only Marxist left in Britain.

Shanley is happy to be described as a "proletarian philosopher". His acquaintance with philosophy began when, as an apprentice in Aberdeen in the early 1920s, he attended University Extra-Mural classes in economics. Of the theories surveyed in the course, the only one which made sense to him was Marxism, and he pored the tutor with questions about it. The tutor first reacted by accusing Shanley of being a "plant" from the National Council of Labour Colleges, a Marxist organisation for independent working-class education, of which Shanley had not in fact heard at that time. But eventually the tutor was sufficiently pleased with Shanley to arrange for him to be offered a scholarship to Aberdeen University, on the understanding that he would spend two years working for the Liberal Party once he had got his degree. Shanley rejected that offer and, with a grant from the Amalgamated Union of Upholsterers, spent two years (1924-26) as a full-time student at the Central Labour College, the residential counterpart of the NCLC, in Earls Court, London. It was there that he learned the materialist and dialectical outlook by which he still organises his life and thought.

As he talked to me about his analysis of current politics - Reagan's raids on Libya, the British Communists' amnesia about the working class - he constantly referred to its philosophical foundations, playing back sections from an indexed tape-recording of key philosophical quotations from Marx and Engels, and paying homage to Tommy Jackson as "the Proletarian philosopher of the 1920s and 1930s, whose wit I cannot match". Shanley does not "believe in" philosophy, however; he regards himself as an "anti-philosophical philosopher". But his anti-philosophy, he is convinced, is indispensable for enlightened and effective social and political action [1].

My own opinions, for what they are worth, do not disagree with Shanley's. The embarrassment is that they don't correspond to them either. If I have more patience with the intricacies of technical philosophy, this may merely reflect the luxurious ideology of a professional; so too may my belief that philosophy can validly and valuable lead to utter uncertainty, rather than to firm conviction. But it would be facile to discard the problem by trying to separate popular from academic philosophy, and praising the former for its vital engagement with reality, whilst scorning the decadent aestheticism of the latter. For, on the one hand, popular philosophies will turn out to be modelled mainly on academic ones; and on the other, academic philosophies characteristically involve an image, a "wild idea" as Hegel put it, of something called "the people"[2]. The idea of an autonomous "popular philosophy", therefore, may be no more than a wishful projection of the academic imagination.

1. Vindictive artisans

It seems obvious that philosophy has traditionally been anti-democratic. In the Republic, Socrates conjures up a lurid vision of what would happen if ordinary craftspeople were permitted to "take a leap out of their trades into philosophy". Such artisan-philosophers might be "the cleverest hands at their own miserable crafts"; but if they dabbled in philosophy they would be no better than the "bald little tinker" who comes into money and "takes a bath and puts on a new coat", grotesquely fancying that he might be able "to marry his master's daughter". For the dignity of philosophy, according to Socrates, has an attraction even for those who are unable to understand it - "whose natures are imperfect and whose souls are cramped and maimed by their meannesses, as their bodies are by their trades and crafts." [3]

But Socrates's attitude is not unambiguous: if he associated sophistry with "the public", he also went out of his way to demonstrate, in the Meno, the innate wisdom of a slave. And Christian high culture has often elaborated this sort of story into resonant fables about enfeebled learning being revived on its death-bed by self-taught peasants, or pure fools, or street-wise kids, astonishing their sophisticated seniors by their information or their uncluttered insight. The original is presumably Luke's story of the twelve-year-old Jesus running away from his artisan-parents, to be found three days later "in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions" so that "all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers" [4]. Such intellectual David-and-Goliath stories must have helped thousands of outsiders to conceive and even to fulfill an ambition of entering into an intellectual elite - like Dirk Rembrants, the Dutch cobbler and amateur.
astronomer who, after much discouragement, won acceptance as part of Descartes's circle [5]; or Anton-Wilhelm Amo, the Ashanti slave who made a career for himself in eighteenth-century German academic philosophy [6].

But there will always be a mean-minded suspicion that people moved by such ambitions are just social climbers - traitors to their class, not champions of it. After all, stories which celebrate and romanticise the wisdom of outsiders or the oppressed are standard elements of elite cultures, rather than straightforward alternatives to them. They are versions, in fact, of pastoral - that is to say, of idealised stories which, as William Empson put it, are "about" the people, but not "by" or "for" them [7]. Anyone who might be thought to "represent" the people in such a scenario will naturally be suspected of betraying them.

But during "the scientific revolution", things began to change. It became possible to give a militant and vindictive interpretation to the role of the artisan-philosopher and to make it more proletarian than pastoral. Francis Bacon attempted to rewrite the history of philosophy by praising the down-to-earth artisanal practicality of the pre-Socratic philosophers at the expense not only of the Sophists but also of Plato and Aristotle with all their "professorial pomp" [8]. A possible model for the heroic Baconian "workman" was Bernard Palissy, a sixteenth-century Parisian potter whose quest for a perfect white glaze led him to write and lecture in Paris about his technical discoveries, in gleeful rivalry with the official philosophers. Palissy introduced himself to his readers as follows:

How can a man understand and discuss the workings of nature if he has not read the Latin books of the Philosophers? So it might be asked of me, for I prove by experiments that the theories of many philosophers are fallacious.... You will learn more about natural philosophy from the instances contained in this book than you could learn in fifty years reading the theories of the ancient philosophers [9].

In many ways, it is the same voice, more than two centuries later, which heralds a brave new world of working-class socialist revolution. In the Jura in 1807, Charles Fourier attempted to rewrite the history of philosophy by praising the down-to-earth artisanal.

There are some striking ambivalences, if not paradoxes, about the role which Fourier designs for himself here: the proletarian who is uncontaminated by official philosophy, and determined both to excel in it and to overthrow it. The character was to have hundreds, if not thousands, of real-life embodiments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America. The most notable, probably, is Joseph Dietzgen (1828-88), the Rhineland tanner and Social-Democrat whose name became a byword for "proletarian philosophy" from St Petersburg to Chicago and New York, Glasgow, Liverpool, South Wales, the Netherlands and on to Petrograd again [11]. There were also fictional versions, such as Earnest Everhard, the ex insulted "proletarian philosopher" hero of Jack London's The Iron Heel (1908). The proletarian philosophers are robustly evolutionist, materialist, and socialist; what is hard to make out is why they saw their revolutionary project as requiring them to pay any attention at all to philosophy. Why didn't they just ignore it, as one of the most insignificant of all the elements of the old immoral world?

2. Philosophy and hero-worship

The history of philosophy is not just a matter of doctrines, positions, and arguments. It also involves the aspirations, the passions, and the disappointments of those who set their heart on being a philosopher, even though they may have only a remote idea of what such an existence might mean. Philosophy's past, in other words, belongs to the history of intellectuals (academic or not) as much as to intellectual history. And the history of intellectuals is not a wholly positive discipline; its subject matter includes idealised fantasy-figures which individuals may fall in love with, or hate, and aspire to embody in themselves or impress upon others; it deals with "subjective careers" as much as with objective ones; the history of intellectuals, in short, is a matter of heroes and hero-worship.

A main source of information for any history of intellectuals is provided by the regulations of academic institutions. These certainly help to explain the quite special prestige which has often been associated with the idea of "philosophy". In the universities of late medieval Europe, the term "philosophy" referred paradigmatically to three texts of Aristotle - the Physics, the Ethics (Nicomachean), and the Metaphysics. Under the title of "the three philosophies" these had been added to the older "seven liberal arts" to complete the provision of the Arts Faculties. This ideal curriculum had an essentially temporal sense; philosophy was to be studied after the seven arts, and it was upon an examination in philosophy that graduation to the rank of Master in the Arts Faculty would depend. Only after that could you become a
student in one of the small "professional" faculties - traditionally, law, theology or medicine. Thus philosophy was the name of a stage, rather than a subject; it was the culmination, normally the last year or two, of a liberal or pre-professional education. There was the same ladder for teachers too: they would begin by lecturing on junior subjects, the philosophy class being reserved for the senior and best paid masters. Thus the figure of "the philosopher" was institutionalised as a kind of supreme symbol of liberal culture, a Cynosure for the ambitions of all those wishing to improve their mind for its own sake.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, increasingly sharp distinctions were made between "secondary" and university education - distinctions which involved both epistemological discriminations between levels of knowledge, and moral ones between levels of "maturity". The philosophy-class found itself torn in both directions. In Germany and especially in France it became mainly secondary; in Scotland and America mainly university; and other countries developed intermediate arrangements. Philosophy's position at the divide between secondary and university education seems to have enhanced its popular image as the crown of liberal culture. At the same time, it encouraged directly political hopes to be attached to it - from the conscientious concern with the propagation of civic virtue in Scottish and American philosophy classes, through the famously progressive rhetoric of the French philosophers, and the quasi-military organisation of French philosophy teaching in the nineteenth century, to the radical teenage dreams of Hegel, Holderlin and Schelling, looking forward to the "revolution that will be made by philosophy". The idea of philosophy was associated in many people's minds not only with intellectual majesty, but with political power as well.

3. The people of the philosophers

The values and procedures actually promoted by the philosophy masters in their classrooms, however, did not entirely correspond to their splendid and dignified public image. The purpose of the classical philosophy-class, as defined by its traditional place in the curriculum, was to reflect on the earlier years of the students' education, to form a unified view of them, and to draw out their implications for the conduct of life. There would also be classroom discussions based on textbooks and the master's lectures, and a background of reference to a philosophical canon, which was established in its present form in the seventeenth century: a set of classics organised into a three-part history of ancient (Pagan); medieval (pre-Renaissance Christian); and modern (eclectic).

These factors placed a very significant constraint on the kind of education given in the philosophy-class, beneath and beyond the differences of explicit doctrine amongst leading authors which are the stock-in-trade of orthodox "histories of philosophy". For the philosophical canon has a structure which sets it apart from those of other academic subjects. The difference is that the philosophy-class is willing to treat its classics as erroneous as well as indispensable; indeed it can be their exemplary failure to live up to philosophical ideals which makes them canonical. Hence a main task of the philosophy master would be to use the classics not as examples to be emulated but as warnings about the terrible worm of abstraction or "metaphysics" which always threatened to attack sound thinking and reduce it to the inanity of a philosophical system [12].

The peculiarly negative character of the philosophical canon has given the philosophy-class an attractive tinge of diffidence, and a tendency towards anti-academic populism. The philosophy-class has had the vocation of undermining academic pretentiousness and intellectual vainglory, and has hence been capable of seeing itself as the people's fifth column in the academy, the professoriate's enemy within. So Malebranche's Search after Truth (1675-78) is actually a guidebook to scholarly error, and even includes a grudging commendation of the minds of women and children, whose exclusion from academic institutions was supposed to keep them free of metephysical debility [13]. The same theme was taken up, at least in prefaces and aside, by many of the celebrated philosophical writers of the eighteenth century. In 1710, for example, Berkeley presented his own Principles as offering the educated the opportunity to rejoin "the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high-road of plain, common sense" [14]. In the Treatise, thirty years later, Hume explained how it was philosophy's task to expose the "fictions" of "false philosophy" and lead its errant students, humber and wiser, back to common sense; for, as he put it, "the true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge" [15]. The same theme was enthusiastically promoted by the self-styled "Common Sense Philosophy" of Reid and Stewart, which soon spread not only to America but to France as well [16]. And Kant's case for the public usefulness of philosophy professors was that they would show up the "arrogant pretensions" through which scholars impose their "endless controversies" on "the great mass of humanity" [17].

It is not surprising, therefore, that the philosophy-masters who have been most revered and adored within the philosophical world have been celebrated for their hesitant sincerity and their tongue-tied self-doubt, rather than for their positive doctrines. Even Hegel was famed for his perplexed stammering when he lectured. And Jules Lachetier, who dominated the highly centralised national corps of philosophy masters in France at the end of the nineteenth century, was noted not for his magnificence but for his sweet simplicity. Emile Boutroux recollected his teaching as follows: He would size up the difficulties. He would stop to think and cast around. He hesitated, started up again, and then stopped. One day he said: "I think the best thing for you to do, will be to forget everything I have ever told you." [18] Such stories of heroically diffident philosophy-masters suggest that the profession has been marked by a horror of intellectual assertiveness: their patron saint would not be Aquinas, but rather Socrates; not Pangloss, but Candide. Their hero would not be the robed professor, but the good plain artisan and man of the people, and their politics would be not elitist but pastorally democratic.

This sketch of the intellectual consequences of the institutional situation of philosophy points to a definite paradox. The philosophy-class was bound to look very different from the outside than from the inside. Outsiders would think of it as majestically concentrating all the virtue of liberal culture within itself, or at least as pretending to do so, and would expect the philosophy masters to be eloquent, confident and superb. But viewed from within, the class would harbour an upside-down intellectual culture of self-deprecation, hesitancy, and pastoral democracy.

Youngsters moving up into the philosophy-class could be expected to experience some disappointments; but the situation of real outsiders - "proletarians" like Fourier in the Jura, or Dietzgen in the Rhineland, or Everhard in Jack London - was even more awkward. As working people with a longing for science, or poetry, or music, or art, they were desperate to get away from the "simplicity" and "purity" and "commonsense" in which, as a class, they were supposed to be submerged; they did not wish to glory in the dignity of labour, whatever bourgeois socialists or democratic philosophy masters might say [19]. And by focussing their desires on philosophy, they were embracing a particularly acute form of this contradiction. They might hope to take the subject by storm, as the pinnacle of the academic culture of an oppressive ruling class; they might hope to commandeer and transform it in the name of the dispossessed. But then, owing to the sceptical, pastoral and anti-academic tendencies already implicit in philosophy, they would find the philosophers either welcoming them and applauding them for their good sense, or criticising them for straying from the paths of the masses whom they claimed to represent. (I am referring to a predicament peculiar to philosophy, not repeating the old and unconvincing story about academic knowledge inevitably "incorporating" its beneficiaries into the ruling elite.) I shall now offer an illustration from the history of English philosophy.

Philosophy classes of the kind common in Scotland, Europe and America in the eighteenth century were not established in England till the second half of the nineteenth century - in Oxford in 1830, and in Cambridge in 1831 [20]. The first English professional philosophy journal, Mind, introduced itself in 1876 with the observation that philosophy in England was "distinguished from the philosophical thought of other countries by what may be called its unprofessional character". The editor, George Robertson, went on to explain that "except in Scotland ... few British thinkers have been public teachers with philosophy for the business of their lives." But when he reviewed the work of a philosopher fifty years later, he was able to observe that "the admired 'professors' are now there in no small number, south as well as north of the border, and in the sister island" [21].

From the beginning, English professional philosophers have exhibited that streak of hesitancy which is such an important (and amiable) part of traditional philosophical institutions. The first of them was T. H. Green (1836-82), who transformed the lives of dozens of influential students at Oxford by his strenuous social idealism. He was notoriously hard to understand when he lectured, but his "speculative impulse" was said to glow so intensely that "when it touched minds of the same temper, it struck fire." The "enthusiasm" of his students was, however, "not for any definite subject or idea"; but they all believed "in philosophy", and "the belief was not the less real because it was vague" [22].

Cambridge soon had several professional philosophers cast from the same mould. James Ward (1843-1923), the first Professor of Mental Philosophy and Logic at the University, was admired by his students (as G. E. Moore recalled) "because of his extreme sincerity and conscientiousness, but partly also because of his melancholy. He was a man who found things very difficult.... He talked; and, while he talked, he was obviously thinking hard about the subject he was talking of and searching for the best way of putting what he wanted to convey." F. W. Maitland recalled his teacher Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) as "a supremely great teacher.... I sometimes think that the one and only prejudice that Sidgwick had was a prejudice against his own results." And Moore said of his teacher McTaggart (1866-1925) that "what influenced me most was his constant insistence on clearness ... on asking the question 'What does this mean?'.... What immense pains he always took to get clear, even though he did not always succeed" [23].

G. E. Moore is the paragon of the second generation of professional philosophers in England. Moore was a silent man. Quentin Bell discusses a discussion of "Moore's famous taciturnity: he was accused of silencing a generation. 'I didn't want to be silent,' he replied. 'I couldn't think of anything to say'" [24]. Roy Harrod said that Moore "was the mildest and simplest of men.... If the veneration which his young admirers accorded him matched that due to a god, he was not very near-sighted. "On the contrary, the intellectual virtues which drew such praise on Moore are precisely those which had always been fostered by the classic philosophy-class; the words of admiration which he evoked from his acquaintances are the same as those which had been used to describe ideal philosophy masters for two centuries and more: commonsense, simplicity, and, above all, silence. The continuity extends to political attitudes too. Moore did not give direct expression to political views, in spite of his connection with well known opinion-holders like Wolff, Keynes and Russell. But his philosophical ideals involved the traditional philosophical reverence for "the people". He gave expression to it, for instance, in a diary entry in 1893, when he was still a student. He is describing a meeting in Cambridge addressed by a member of the London County Council:

He was a genuine workman, like Tom Mann, but not fiery, or with a strong understanding and great power of speech. He was simple and gentle, as could be.... He was a steady Liberal and Progressive; and I could not help thinking much better than before of the London labourers, seeing that they chose him as their candidate [27].

It is striking that what Moore loved in this "genuine workman" was precisely those qualities for which Moore himself was to be loved: simplicity, gentleness and reticence of speech. Presumably, though, the Councilor would have been unhappy with the circle of identifications which Moore made: he would have expected a philosopher
to be more impressive than Moore, and would surely have been uneasy at the patronising pastoralism through which he gained credit for the people he represented purely through his reassuring lack of "a strong understanding and great power of speech".

5. The philosopher of the people: proletarian or pastoral?

My argument so far has been that, if you consider philosophy as an institution going back to the seventeenth century and beyond, rather than as a set of doctrines going back to Socrates, you will notice a constantly repeated (but seldom remembered) set of themes, images, and words, connecting the ideals of the philosophy class to the supposed virtues of "the people"; commonsense, simplicity, and silent reproach against excessive theory. This "pastorally democratic" attitude, as I have called it, prepares a perplexing reception for any members of the "people" who manage to force an entrance into the philosophical world.

But there is a distinction, as has already been noted, between the relatively docile pastoral figure of "the philosopher of the people", and the vindictive and militant "proletarian philosopher", such as an E. P. Thompson, Dietzgen, or Earnest Everhard. The embarrassment is that this distinction between proletarian and pastoral may not go very deep. If the proletarian philosopher refuses to play the part of sweet simplicity in the philosopher's pastoral romance, he will be consigned to a mock-heroic subplot, like the tinker in Plato who gives himself airs and hopes to marry his master's daughter. The basic lesson was pointed out a century ago by William Empson, when he examined the idea that "proletarian" literature differed from pastoral in that it was not only "about" the people, but "by" and "for" them too. The difficulty with "proletarian literature," he confessed, was that "when it comes off I find I am taking it as pastoral literature" [28]. The proletarian philosopher, I think, is always in danger of reverting to pastoral type. What begins as a subversion of pastoral, ends as another version of it.

Of course no philosophers - whether popular or proletarian or professional - are entirely confined by the plots I have described. Certainly Jock Shanley isn't. I am sure he will rebuke me for the ideas I have tried to set out here as he has rebuked me in the past, for what he sees as my typically academic evasions, all part of the "worldwide search for a Marx without dialectics and even a doubtful materialist". "What an excellent self-portrait you have written," he told me; "you have studied everything and understood nothing." But fortunately, he went on, the world is still being transformed - "in a real, as distinct from a philosophic, sense ... [by] practical men who believe that the 'positive outcome of philosophy' is science, though they have never heard of Dietzgen - or for that matter Marx."

I respectfully challenge you - write a positive explanation of your own philosophy and see where you get to. At least we Proletarian philosophers failed while trying. ... You may feel I am rude. Well, I come from a robust school. The University (Aberdeen) I failed to enter had a motto: "They say, what say they, let them say." That is my reply to my critics.

A few weeks later, Shanley wrote again:

As I write, I give my attention partially to a TV programme. Some people are tidying up Highgate Cemetery, cutting down the undergrowth, exposing the tombs of the Victorians, and making the cemetery a pleasant place for the intelligentsia of Hampstead and Highgate to take a stroll. I think you do just that, in philosophy, with your account of "Proletarian Philosophers," but, alas, you only dig amongst our dead bones - our tombs - and miss the spirit in which we lived. Sad!

But life goes on: the crisis Marx foretold, in Chapter 32 of Capital, is upon us. Except that the working class has not yet found the unity which he saw as necessary. It will be built, I expect by proletarian philosophers of whom we know nothing at present. I do not expect the philosophy, or the practice, will mature in our Academic Institutions - if British Capitalism lets them exist that long....

Only ten years ago I would be trying to break into your philosophy class to challenge them to state what philosophy they have found to challenge the dead - as I am politically - the "Proletarian Philosophers" [29].

I really do not know how to respond to that challenge. Every time I read it, it reduces me to silence.

Notes


[12] So Marcus went wrong when he suggested that "academic sadism, self-humiliation and self-denunciation" were introduced into philosophy by Wittgenstein and Austin; they are, rather, a consequence of the structural constraints on the philosophy-class. (See Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, 179).


[21] Mind I, 1876, i; XVI, 1891, 557-60.


[27] Paul Levy, Moore, 11.
