

# Radical Philosophy 6

Orthodox English-language philosophy may be pretty boring, ignorant, and mystifying; but beyond this it is hard to make generalisations about it. One of the complications concerns its attitudes to the conceptions which characterise the minds of non-intellectuals or non-academics, to 'common sense' or 'ordinary language'. On this issue, there have been two wings in orthodox modern philosophy. On one side, thinkers like Bertrand Russell have contrasted the ordinary language of ordinary people ('the metaphysics of the stone age') with the pure and precise language of scientists. On the other side, thinkers like Moore, while comfortably settled in old-fashioned university life, have adopted a seemingly anti-élitist attitude, cultivating a plain man's honest bafflement at the abstractions and technicalities of scientists and intellectuals cut off from the practical concerns of everyday life. There is a similar appearance of anti-élitism in post war Oxford philosophy, especially in Austin's dream of setting teams of philosophical technicians to work at codifying the concepts of ordinary people. Austin said it might be necessary 'to torture, to fake, and to override, ordinary language', but still he thought it should be treated with enormous respect, because it embodied 'the inherited experience and acumen of many generations of men'. Amongst Austin's followers, the slogan 'ordinary language' became a rallying cry.

The formation of the Radical Philosophy Group has been, amongst other things, a protest against the ideas and influence of the self-styled philosophers of ordinary language. At the same time, it has always been one of the Group's main aims to get away from the élitist idea that philosophy only concerns professional intellectuals; and one might expect that this would lead the group to adopt the respectful attitude to ordinary language which Austin recommended. And several of the articles printed in *Radical Philosophy*, particularly Bernard Harrison's 'Fielding and the Moralists', in this issue, have indeed been based on a conception of philosophy which resembles Austin's; they have aimed to rescue the refined and subtle concepts or ordinary language from the crudities perpetrated by philosophical theorists.

Now it might well be thought that Althusser has completely discredited the idea that philosophy should pay attention to ordinary language. Althusser's work seems to indicate that ordinary language expresses and enforces ideologies which systematically conceal the realities they refer to. As John Mepham put it in *Radical Philosophy 2*, "ordinary language", far from being something to which we should appeal in theoretical discussion, is something which we have good grounds for suspecting of distortion... Ordinary language, and the philosophy which makes a fetish of it, has, as Marx says, things standing on their heads.'

Thus the question of ordinary language seems to loom quite large both when the Radical Philosophy Group defines its own attitudes to orthodox philosophy, and in disputes within the group. But the issues are not as simple as they may seem.

It is a mistake to think that the division between mystified, ideological consciousness on the one hand and lucid, scientific consciousness on the other corresponds to a division between enlightened individuals and unenlightened individuals; and it is an even worse mistake to assume that it corresponds to the distinction between intellectuals and non-intellectuals. (See John Mepham's 'Who Makes History?' below). The division between science and ideology may be a division *within* the consciousnesses of individuals or classes; it is not only or even primarily a division *between* them.

But the slogan 'ordinary language philosophy' does not really pick out a question on which it

makes much sense to take sides anyway. Ordinary language and scientific language are not really languages; still less are they different languages. Technical language is not independent of or separate from ordinary language. So it would be silly to renounce the study of ordinary language in the name of technical language. To escape the crushing embrace of ordinary language it is necessary to do more than turn one's back.

The Radical Philosophy Group has always realised that a lot of what's wrong with orthodox philosophy results from its place in the institutional framework of academic life. But although most of us work in academic institutions, we have not yet succeeded in analysing what we are doing in them, let alone in changing them significantly. The recent conference at Middlesex Polytechnic, on The Role of Philosophy in Higher Education (see p.45 for full report) showed that some philosophy teachers at least - and not only supporters of the Radical Philosophy Group - are getting interested in the problems of designing new courses, or new types of courses, and of teaching different types of students etc.

Informal discussions at the conference resulted in moves towards the formation of a permanent organisation of philosophy teachers, to be concerned with philosophy as a teaching subject. The organisation will be set up at a conference which will be held within the next few months. Those interested should contact Mark Fisher, Middlesex Polytechnic at Enfield, Queensway, Enfield, Middlesex.

