

PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHERS

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People who don't know anything about philosophy courses are likely to be astonished and dismayed by their effects. The main thing they will notice is that the philosophy student acquires a very mannered way of speaking and a knack of shrugging off serious ideas with half frivolous complaints about the words in which they are expressed.

It is not surprising if non-philosophers come to see philosophers as a self-perpetuating clique, like freemasons. It sometimes looks very much as though the professors are guardians of meaningless rituals, who force the eager young flatterers who surround them to prove their devotion by undergoing ordeals - degrees, fellowship exams, and so on; and if the candidate survives these he wins a 'license to practise his trade and mystery' and naturally acquires a personal interest in maintaining the prestige and exclusiveness of the clique.

Even the professional philosophers seem to regard philosophy as a rather pointless subject. The prospectus for Oxford University Department of Education advertises the philosophy component of its Certificate of Education course like this:

Questions posed by educational thinkers, from Plato to the present day. No knowledge of texts is required. Philosophical analysis and education with special reference to the concept of education, the problem of aims, the social philosophy of education, the curriculum, and the concept of teaching.

Problems of current interest may be included from time to time.

Candidates are not expected to show familiarity with philosophical techniques, but should show awareness of the main lines of argument and some capacity for clear thinking.

Surely, the philosophers ought to be able to tell the trainee teachers something more interesting than this? The reason why they don't is that they believe that philosophy consists of mysterious 'philosophical techniques' which are so exalted that they could not expect their students even to 'show familiarity with' them.

Nevertheless, they do think that they can teach some techniques of 'clear thinking'. It is in this spirit that philosophy students are taught things like how to distinguish causal or empirical from logical, descriptive from evaluative, factual from emotive, analytic from synthetic and description from explanation; and how to use phrases like 'it follows that', 'one wants to say', 'it seems odd to say', 'in a sense', 'thesis', 'proposition', 'incoherence', 'cash-value', 'meaningless', 'the question doesn't arise', and so on; and how to show that a thesis is 'either trivial or false'. Of course such skills have their uses. But the effect of courses which simply aim at equipping a student with them is likely to be that he will acquire a glib and superficial facility in argument. The student will leave his philosophy course fully armed against all the ideas he is ever likely to meet with. As Mark Pattison said, he "loses reverence without acquiring insight".

The argument of this paper owes a lot to several members of the Radical Philosophy Group, especially Tony Skillen.

But what exactly is the intellectual tradition which has these sad results? The common answer, 'linguistic philosophy' is useless. For one thing, modern philosophy is not always more concerned with language than other philosophical traditions; and for another, it would not be a bad thing if it was.

The main phenomenon of modern British philosophy is the Oxford definition of philosophy, which says that philosophy is 'conceptual analysis'. This became influential after the war, though its roots go back to the thirties. It is associated above all with four Oxford professors of philosophy - Gilbert Ryle, J.L. Austin, R.M. Hare and P.F. Strawson - of whom the last two still hold their chairs. The idea is, in Ryle's metaphor, that the philosopher is a 'logical geographer', (Ryle, 1949). The thoughts of scientists and ordinary people are 'first order' thoughts about the world, while philosophy is a 'second order' study, having the 'logic' of such thinking as its subject matter. A.R. White (the professor of philosophy at Hull) develops the idea by saying that 'very much as physical positions are spatially related, so positions in thought - that is, concepts - are 'logically' related' (White, 1967, pp. 7-8). Philosophy then 'maps' these logical relations. White says 'Practitioners of the various arts and sciences, as well as all of us in our everyday thinking, employ these ideas, or ways of thought; philosophers examine them.' (p.6) Other people study things; philosophers study the concepts by means of which people conceptualise things. That is the Oxford definition of philosophy.

Having defined his subject in this way, the philosopher has made a profession of amateurishness. He has thought of himself as an intellectual lone ranger, who travels light, righting wrongs in various intellectual areas (e.g. politics and psychology) and never waiting around after his task is done. Or perhaps a more appropriate simile is Einstein's 'philosophical police' (Einstein, 1945).

A philosophy exam at Oxford last year included, rather surprisingly, a question about structuralism. It was "Is it important to be able to answer the question 'What is structuralism?'" Clearly, no knowledge of texts was required!

One reason for the wide appeal of the Oxford definition of philosophy was that it seemed to offer a reason for the existence of philosophy departments. Given the technocratic carve-up of human knowledge by university administrators, in which the more profitable parts of the sprawling philosophy industry had long ago been hived off to other departments, the philosophers had become university teachers in search of a subject. And they wanted their subject to allow for cumulative, piecemeal, detailed, objectively assessable research and to be clearly defined, so as not to overlap with studies pursued in other university departments.

These results of the university teacher's feeling of insecurity about his subject had parallels in other humanities departments. In English departments the idea of teaching an aspect of cultural history was criticised from the point of view of the idea of teaching abstract, second order, a-historical technique of 'criticism'. And in history departments, especially in association with Namier, a new emphasis was put on piecemeal research. Namier dreamed of teams of historians working through old documents just as the Oxford philosopher Austin dreamed of teams of philosophers working through dictionaries.

The effect of the Oxford definition of philosophy was that philosophers started to write about curious second order subjects like 'The Language of Morals', 'The Concept of Mind', 'The Language of Politics' and 'The Concept of Law'. There was even an advertisement the other day for a philosophical article on 'The Concept of Physical Education'. New subjects were invented like 'the philosophy of social science', 'philosophical psychology', and 'meta-ethics'. The one area where this did not occur was the theory of logic and meaning. This was a subject philosophers had always had to themselves. It is not surprising that many of the best modern professional philosophers are working in this area. Indeed, some are barely distinguishable from members of linguistic departments. But the 'second order' subjects which professional philosophers have invented in other areas have been disastrous. They have been deliberately cut off from historical, sociological, psychological, anthropological and scientific ideas, because such ideas are thought to belong to first order subjects and therefore to have nothing to do with philosophy. But the reasons philosophers gave for their intellectual isolationism were very flimsy. A.R. White says his book on the mind is not a work of psychology because:

Philosophy gives one no special competence to understand behaviour... Its task in this field is not to explain behaviour, but to explain the kinds of explanations we normally offer (130). It is important to distinguish clearly between an examination of the meaning of 'thought' and an examination of the features of thought. In the former, we are analysing a concept, in the latter, a phenomenon. The former is philosophy, the latter, psychology (87). Freud's discoveries and theories are the concern of psychologists. (38)

These reasons evidently depend on the Oxford definition of philosophy as a "second order study". But the first order-second order distinction simply won't survive scrutiny. You cannot sort out problems into two piles, questions about concepts and questions about things. A discussion of the concept of motivation, for example, cannot help being a study of motivation, subject to criticism from the point of view of facts about motives. If there seems to be an element of truth in the Oxford definition of philosophy, this is because philosophers typically see things in a very abstract way; but this does not mean that they are concerned with concepts rather than actual objects. And then, philosophers aren't the only people who approach things in an abstract way; so the Oxford definition of philosophy cannot really excuse or justify intellectual isolationism.

To the extent that anything does fit the Oxford definition of philosophy, it is the historical study of ideas. Weber's description of the links between the concept of salvation by faith and concepts which constitute the spirit of capitalism is clearly a conceptual study. And, coming closer to philosophy, so is the work of classicists like Snell, Dodds and Adkins on changing concepts of the self, rationality, merit and responsibility in Ancient Greece. But modern professional philosophers have refused to regard such historical studies as part of philosophy. They have deliberately eradicated any sense of history from their subject.

In particular, they have refused to recognise that the concepts of morals and psychology are evolving historical products. In his very influential *Concept of Mind*, for instance, Ryle dealt with an aberration in psychology which he called 'the dogma of the ghost in the machine'. But Ryle did not explain the important connections between the dogma and religious ideas about the soul surviving bodily death, or the Protestant emphasis on the inner life. Nor did he regard the dogma as something which has been, and still is, embodied in ordinary concepts of mind. He regarded our conceptual scheme as something existing outside history, and so he represented the dogma as a *misinterpretation* of our conceptual scheme, rather than as a part of its historical development.

Such intellectual isolationism had no convincing theoretical justification. Was it any more than a rationalisation of the comparatively recent institutional isolation of philosophers in higher education?

Modern British academic philosophers see themselves as working within a wider movement - *analytical philosophy*. Analytical philosophy began about seventy years ago, and its ideal of philosophy was Russell's work in the theory of logic, known as 'Russell's theory of descriptions' (1905).

The distinctive feature of analytical philosophy is scientism. Like thinkers in other fields, analytical philosophers were overawed by the rise of science, which they mistakenly conceived as a unified movement, utterly different from anything that went before and completely superseding earlier attempts at intellectual inquiry. Analytical philosophers have always had a great fear of being caught conducting inquiries which belong to a bygone age of superstition and metaphysics, rather than to a brave new world of science. Albert Einstein himself criticised modern philosophy for scientism. He claimed that in all Russell's works 'the spectre of the metaphysical fear has done some damage' and he described

this fear of 'metaphysics as 'the malady of contemporary philosophy' (Einstein 1945). Part of the malady caused by scientism was that it came to be assumed that all worthwhile philosophical ideas should be expressible in short formulas. As Hare says, in a perceptive and startlingly frank article:

British philosophers, by and large, will not be bothered with a philosophical thesis which is not stated briefly and in clear terms (Hare, 1960)

Hare suggests a quick way of dealing with 'German metaphysicians':

We have the greatest aversion to cutting ourselves off from our base in ordinary speech; we have seen what monstrous philosophical edifices have been erected by slipping, surreptitiously, from the ordinary uses of words to extraordinary uses which are never explained; we spend most of our time explaining our own uses of words to our pupils; and when we find ourselves in the position of pupil, nothing pleases us so much as to sit back and have a German metaphysician explain to us, if he can, how he is going to get his metaphysical system started. And as he is usually unable to do this, the discussion never gets on to what he thinks of as the meat of his theory.

The trouble, as Hare observes, is that the German philosopher doesn't understand what the English one is after.

What the British philosopher wanted was to take just one sentence that the German had uttered - say the first sentence - or perhaps, for a start, just one word in this sentence

This attitude dates back to the origins of analytical philosophy. In 1900, Russell published a brilliant but unfair book on Leibniz which began by reducing Leibniz's philosophy to five propositions and declaring them incompatible!

The trouble with this insistence on formulating ideas briefly and succinctly is that some philosophical ideas are too complex, too unified, too subtle or perhaps too nebulous for such expression. Such philosophies have been treated with an unyielding refusal to take them seriously, thinly disguised as puzzled reasonableness. Perhaps Hegel has suffered worst of all. In 1876, in the Preface to *Ethical Studies*, Bradley said that Oxford moral philosophy was out of date because it had refused to learn from Hegel. But nearly a hundred years later, analytical philosophers still tend to accept Russell's smug assurance that 'almost all Hegel's doctrines are false' and that Hegelianism was only instructive as a warning that 'the worse your logic, the more interesting the consequences to which it gives rise'. (Russell 1946, pp. 701 and 705).

Analytical philosophers have been unjust to Wittgenstein too. In spite of the efforts of some commentators, Wittgenstein cannot be fitted into the analytical tradition. For one thing he was passionately opposed to scientism - this was the main motivation of the *Tractatus* (1921). For another, the ideas developed in his later works, especially *On Certainty*, concerning the essentially historical and social nature of consciousness and meaning are not only very similar to Hegelianism, but also hard to formulate in the scientific idiom favoured by analytical philosophers.

But Hegel and Wittgenstein are not the only ones to suffer. Every great dead philosopher has been either domesticated or ignored. The whole history of philosophy has been rewritten to make it look as though analytical philosophy is its final culmination. Hundreds of books and articles reproduce a historiographical mythology which provides us with off the peg refutations of silly dead foreign philosophers. For instance, there are the rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, who are represented as having been even in their own time relics of a silly belief in the power of pure thought as opposed to scientific inquiry. They are supposed to have thought that they could discover particular facts by closing their eyes and thinking; they are represented as intellectual frauds who tried to practice a sort of scientific clairvoyance. But (according to the myth) the British Empiricists (Locke, Berkeley and Hume) were not to be deceived by such imposters. As Russell says

Empiricism has made such a view impossible; we do not think that even the utmost clarity of our thoughts would enable us to demonstrate the existence of Cape Horn (Russell, 1948, p.172)

Modern professional philosophers are part of the analytical tradition; but they also belong to an older and less self-conscious tradition - the tradition of *academic philosophy*, which in its present form, dates from about 1870. Its features were brilliantly drawn by Mark Pattison in the first volume of *Mind*. He said that 'the present stagnation of philosophical thought among us' (in Oxford in 1876) was caused by 'the regime of examinational tyranny under which we are living'.

Of course, the exam system goes back further than 1870. It was in 1822 that written papers were introduced for the Oxford B.A. But the system did not become the tyranny

Pattison describes until the 1850's, when university degrees became the essential qualification for the new meritocracy. Then, in Pattison's words, Oxford became a 'cramming shop' and a 'desert of arid shop dons'.

Pattison was astonished by what candidates wrote in their final examination papers:

I have never, in the capacity of examiner, analysed the papers which are handed in in the examination-rooms as the results of these two years preparation, without astonishment at the combination of scholarship, varied knowledge, command of topic, and scientific vocabulary, which the candidates can bring to bear upon the questions! I have a thrill of awe at standing in the presence of such matured intellectual development detected in young men scarcely out of their teens! The thought has inevitably been forced upon me: if these minds are already arrived at this stage at twenty-one, where will they be at forty they can have nothing more to learn!

A nearer acquaintance, however, with the whole result of the system dispels the illusion. If from the papers we turn to the minds from which all this clever writing has emanated, we shall find no trace of philosophical culture in them. The question, or thesis, is on a philosophical subject, but the process by which the question has been answered has not been a philosophical action of the mind, but a purely literary or compositional process. (92-3).

The tyranny of the examination system, could not fail to affect the content of the teaching:

What the aspirant for honours requires is a repetiteur, who knows 'the schools', and who will look over his essays for him, teaching him how to collect telling language, and arrange it in a form adequate to the expected question...Training, be it observed, not intellectual discipline, not training in investigation, in research, in scientific procedure, but in the art of producing a clever answer to a question on a subject of which you have no real knowledge. (89)

The memory is charged with generalised formulas, with expressions and solutions which are derived ready made from the tutorThe utmost that the student can acquire from the system is that he has learned to write in the newest style of thought, and to manipulate the phrases of the latest popular treatise (93)

The exam system and the form which it imposes on teaching mean that philosophy must not only be cut off from other subjects, but must itself be carved up first into separate areas (such as morals and psychology), and then subdivided into separate topics for weekly essays and possible exam answers. Under the regime of examinational tyranny, the standard exam questions became the main problems of philosophy.

After nearly a century, academic philosophers have become quite reconciled to having the content of their thinking determined by the forms which their institutions impose on it. Its values - orderliness, brevity, objectivity, the exaltation of intellectual technique - have become the values of academic philosophy. Professor Hare says:

In all our philosophy, the virtues which we seek are clarity, relevance, brevity Philosophical arguments, conducted in the way that I have described, have the same sort of objectivity that chess games have. If you are beaten at chess you are beaten, and it is not to be concealed by any show of words; and in a philosophical discussion of this sort, provided that an unambiguously stated thesis is put forward, objective refutation is possible. Indeed, the whole object of our philosophical training is to teach us to put our theses in a form in which they can be subjected to this test.

This is exactly what Pattison foresaw a hundred years ago.

Such being the general conditions under which teaching here is carried on, it is easy to see what must become of philosophy. For speculative effort, there is no place in such a system. For an original thinker to stand forward to expound a philosophy, to demand of his followers habits of meditative thought, to rouse the spirit of inquiry, to offer a connected scheme of life and mind, or a synthesis of the sciences, would be impossible. He would lecture to the walls.

Henry Sidgwick made the same point in his article on Philosophy at Cambridge in the same volume of *Mind*.

In the Cambridge of 1876 it would be difficult for Aristotle himself to obtain a serious audience of undergraduates, unless his teaching was understood to 'pay' in some Tripos.

This reminds one of Hare's remark that British philosophers 'will not be bothered with a philosophical thesis which is not stated briefly and in clear terms'. Hare also says:

So on the whole we do not write long or difficult booksWe write books and articles only to fix a thesis so that people will know exactly what they are discussingThe best thing to do is to be a brief and clear as possibleWe do not think it a duty to write books; still less do we think it a duty to read more than a few books which others write.....We find out which 'essential books' are by each reading a very few and telling the others about them.

The result is that, if one wants a book to be read by one's colleagues, it will have to be short, clear and to the point. They will especially like it if, besides reading it themselves, they can give it to their undergraduate students to read, so the more practical and down-to-earth it is the better. The best way to get one's ideas discussed in Oxford (and this is the limit of the ambition of most of us) is to write a book which every student in the university will have to read; this means that every person teaching philosophy in the place will have to discuss it several times a week with his pupils...If one can write that sort of book it will be discussed, not only by the students, but by one's colleagues, who are the ablest collection of philosophers in the country; and that is fame. (114)

One special pressure on Oxford as an institution is its role in preparing an educated ruling class. Hare recognises its importance:

Most of my pupils are going to be, not professional philosophers, but businessmen, politicians, school-masters, lawyers, journalists, civil servants, and indeed almost anything but professional philosophers; and a substantial number of these may be expected to reach the highest ranks of their professions. So the Oxford tutor, if he can teach his pupils to think more clearly and to the point, can have much more influence on the life of the country in this way than he is likely to achieve by writing books, unless the books are outstandingly successful (108)

It is interesting to compare Hare's interest in teaching our top professionals to think clearly and to the point, with what Collingwood says about the influence of an earlier generation of Oxford philosophers - of which the chief representatives were Green and Bradley. The seriousness and comprehensiveness of these philosophers excited Collingwood's admiration. But he said,

The real strength of the movement was outside Oxford. The 'Greats' school was not meant as a training for professional scholars and philosophers; it was meant as a training for public life in the Church, at the Bar, in the Civil Service, and in Parliament. The school of Green sent out into public life a stream of ex-pupils who carried with them the conviction that philosophy, and in particular the philosophy they learnt at Oxford, was an important thing, and that their vocation was to put it into practice (17)

But such a movement was bound to be stifled.

by the old academic tradition, labouring to eradicate what it had always regarded as a growth foreign to its own nature. The old stock was shooting up from below the graft, the scion was dying back, and the tree reverting to its old state (17)

In higher education in Britain today these forces are stronger than ever. Philosophy is an academic profession rather than an intellectual tradition. And the isolated opponents of academic philosophy, though numerous, are dwarfed by the institutions they face. Unless we organise ourselves, philosophy will remain a mere formality.

1. F.H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, (1876)
2. R.G. Collingwood, *Autobiography* (1939)
3. Albert Einstein, 'Russell's Theory of Knowledge', in Bertrand Russell ed. P.A. Schilpp (1945).
4. R.M. Hare, 'A School for Philosophers', *Ratio* (1960)
5. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marcuse* (1970)
6. Mark Pattison, 'Philosophy at Oxford, *Mind*, Vol. I (1876)
7. Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Leibniz* (1900)
History of Western Philosophy (1946)
Human Knowledge (1948)
8. G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949)
9. Henry Sidgwick, 'Philosophy at Cambridge', *Mind*, Vol. 1, (1876)
10. A.R. White, *The Philosophy of Mind*, (1967)