

is 'dead', desiderates the inauguration of what is apparently to be called 'radical philosophy'. It is seldom easy in cases such as this to discern, amidst the polemical rhetoric, the exact nature of the charge; but I believe, unconfidently, that the complaint is not so much that our philosophers are worthlessly bad at doing what they do, but rather that they ought not to be doing that at all, but something else instead. It is true—and this, I conjecture, is the root of the hostility—that philosophy in this country is and long has been regarded as an academic discipline, a rather professional affair, with its own problems and standards and proper concerns, and in particular directed towards the purely intellectual goal of understanding, not that of directly bringing about any practical effect. One is familiar nowadays with the idea that universities should be regarded *primarily* as

instruments of social change; my guess is that 'radical philosophy' is meant to be an application to philosophy of this general sentiment. Philosophers should not do things—should not, perhaps, be *allowed* to do things?—that, in terms of direct social action, makes no difference at all—the revolution first, as it were, and perhaps meditation afterwards. If this is right, then 'radical philosophy' is not really directed towards changing philosophy, but towards replacing it by something else. It will be easier, however, to judge what all this amounts to when 'radical philosophy' emerges, if it ever does, from the stage of rhetorical programmatic pronouncements, and actually does something. The 'alternative' will be more easily, as well as more usefully, considered when it actually exists, and is not merely, in rather menacing tones, said to be going to.

Towards a Radical Philosophy

Sean Sayers

Recent British philosophy is not a matter about which the general intellectual public is either well informed or much interested. It has become used to regarding philosophy as a specialized academic subject, written in a forbidding and technical language aimed only at academic professionals (and their students), and of concern and interest only to them. But it is only recently that philosophy has come to be regarded in this way; philosophy used to be of the most universal intellectual concern, a part of every educated person's knowledge. To begin to understand the reasons for this change it is necessary to know something about recent British philosophy.

If you studied philosophy in a British university today you would probably be taught that philosophy is an academic subject, separate and distinct from other academic subjects. Whereas the sciences have an empirical subject-matter, and rely for their content on observation of and activity in the natural world, philosophy, by contrast, is not directly about the real, material world—its subject-matter is rather the way men *think* about the world, the concepts they use. The sciences, you would be told, are 'first-order' studies which investigate reality directly, while philosophy is a 'second-order' reflection upon such 'first-order' knowledge and activity. For example, G. J. Warnock sums up this idea of philosophy when he writes:

*Philosophy is the study of the concepts we employ, and not of the facts, phenomena, cases or events to which these concepts might be or are applied. To investigate the latter is to raise political or moral or religious but not philosophical problems or questions.*¹

Philosophy, according to this picture, is one thing; the sciences, other studies of the real world, and practical

thought and activity (politics, morality, religion) are another; philosophy and these other things are distinct and mutually exclusive. Philosophy, you would be taught, is a branch of knowledge separate and self-contained; it is pure, abstract thought, unadulterated by any experience of, or practical involvement in, the real world.

There would be courses on a fairly predictable range of topics, but despite the fact that, for example, moral philosophy will be among them, no knowledge will be required of psychology, the study of social life or of any genuine moral thought. Likewise, the theory of knowledge and the philosophy of science would be studied without any real acquaintance with the history or present state of science or any other body of knowledge; philosophy of mind will require no concern with psychology nor any interest in the mind as such; no knowledge of religion will be expected or encouraged in the philosophy of religion. Vital and influential developments of modern knowledge, which have given rise to the most urgent current philosophical debates, will be ignored: there will be no mention, for example, of Marx or Freud.

All this is the practical side of the theory that philosophy is an isolated and exclusive intellectual exercise, a 'separate academic subject'. The picture of the field of knowledge displayed in this account is the quintessence of academicism: it is the ideology of academicism. In its essential features, it is an outlook shared by many other supposedly isolated and self-contained academic 'subjects'. The picture is of the field of knowledge as a plot of land which has been divided, without remainder, between the various competitors. There may be a degree of overlap or fuzziness at the edges, but in the main each bit of theoretically organized knowledge is readily assignable to one and only one particular 'subject'.

This picture of the divisions between subjects, as exclusive, territorial ones, is incorrect—not in the sense that no such distinctions exist, for there are indeed relatively autonomous and distinct areas of study, but rather in the sense that the relations between these areas are not as absolute and exclusive as they are portrayed to be in the academic ideology.

In the passage I have just quoted, Warnock says that 'philosophy is the study of the concepts we employ, *and not* [my emphasis] of the facts, phenomena, cases or events to which these concepts might be or are applied.' However, the investigation of concepts (philosophy) is not absolutely distinct from, or opposed to, the investigation of reality (science)—these two cannot be separated from each other in such a simple way. Our concepts embody our understanding of reality, and philosophy examines and actively *develops* these concepts in order to deepen this understanding. But there is no question of the philosopher investigating concepts '*and not*' facts, as Warnock would have it: any serious investigation of concepts must involve a knowledge of the reality to which those concepts are supposed to apply. And yet most recent British philosophers, like Warnock, have argued that direct experience was unnecessary for their work. They have felt fully qualified to pronounce on questions of morals, politics, science and religion without any serious knowledge or interest in these fields.

Any student of philosophy will be familiar with these academic attitudes and practices; they will be a part of his everyday experience. But there will be other aspects of his experience which may lead to a questioning of the adequacy of the academic ideology. For example, when I was a student it would sometimes happen that I would discover something which I felt to be of relevance and importance to the question under discussion. I was, however, immediately informed that my ideas and questions constituted 'psychology' or 'sociology' and not 'philosophy.' By such repeated and restricting definition of 'the subject,' I was in effect prevented from drawing on my knowledge of these other areas in my study of philosophy. And yet even as a student—perhaps particularly as a student, with the naivety of new acquaintance—one realises that philosophy and these other subjects are essentially related.

First of all, it is a matter of experience that a knowledge of psychology—that is to say, of theoretically comprehended facts about people's thought and action—arises naturally as a *need* out of the study of the philosophy of mind. You cannot go very far in considering even the most abstract questions about the mind before it seems that some concrete knowledge of people's thought and action becomes necessary.

This is confirmed by a further observation, namely, that philosophers of mind, no matter how distinct they imagine their subject to be from psychology, are constantly making substantial psychological pronouncements. The theories of mind which are put forward as 'philosophy of mind' are never *mere* philosophy; they

also have a substantial psychological significance. Thus, for example, a currently dominant philosophy of mind declares that a man can never be mistaken about his immediate thoughts and feelings and that a man's consciousness is reducible to his behaviour; i.e., that there is no unconscious and that there is no sphere of inner subjectivity. These views are substantial in the field of psychology: in combination they effectively legislate away both the discoveries of psychoanalysis and Marx's account of ideology and false consciousness. Furthermore, they legitimate and support the frequently mechanistic and manipulative work of much experimental psychology. And they do so *a priori*, without any detailed investigation of the actual experience upon which these ('psychological' and 'sociological') theories are based.

This *a priori* mode of procedure has other bad effects which the student will soon experience. He learns that not all philosophical thought is recognized as a valid subject of attention in university philosophy departments. The 'history of philosophy' (as it is conventionally called, although courses bearing this name are usually 'historical' solely in the sense that they attend to *past* philosophers) ends on the eve of the French Revolution, with Kant, Hegel, Marx and the traditions of philosophy which they initiated are ignored. In central parts of the course, no attention is paid to such important philosophers as Husserl, Heidegger, Lukács, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, etc., etc. The now familiar ploy of attempting to brand their work as 'not philosophy' but something else is used. For example, I was often told in Cambridge as a student that Sartre's philosophy was 'nonsense' for the most part, and where not nonsense 'not philosophy but psychology' and even then so obscure and full of elementary 'confusions' as not to be worth bothering about. Marx was quite simply 'not a philosopher.' So I looked to psychology and sociology. What I discovered, however, was that Sartre's work was excluded from psychology as 'not psychology but philosophy'; and similarly, the areas of Marx's thought in which I was most interested were excluded from academic sociology as 'not sociology but philosophy.' Such experiences, which are common in universities, do not engender confidence in the conventional definitions of these subject labels. Whole areas of knowledge have been, in effect, banished from existence with the aid of the academic ideology; and in this way many academics have absolved themselves from any need to know about anything outside their own little speciality.

The confining of academic philosophy within such narrow limits has had a disastrous effect upon it. This is clear from the striking contrast which now exists between the abstract and dead philosophy of the professionals, and the urgency and prevalence of philosophical debate and important philosophical thought which has arisen outside the confines of the academic philosopher's world—within the radical movement and in different areas of study, psychology and the other 'human sciences' in particular. Professional philosophers

should have been learning from this work, but too often they have deliberately chosen to ignore it.

The awareness of this contrast—between the poverty of academic philosophy and the richness of philosophical concern which has arisen independently—has led to a very widespread disillusion and discontent with the state of contemporary British philosophy among young philosophers (both staff and students). The enthusiastic response to the Radical Philosophy movement and to its journal, *Radical Philosophy*,² is an indication of this. What is revealed is a widespread conviction that philosophy need not be the esoteric pastime of a small clique of professionals, together with an urgently felt need for a reassessment of the nature and function of philosophy and of the role of the philosopher himself.

As a first step in this direction one is tempted to deny any independent validity to philosophy. One is tempted to regard all philosophy as a *a priori* metaphysical dogmatizing about the nature of the world, and turn for a more informed understanding of reality to psychology, sociology and the other sciences. However, when one does so, one discovers that psychology, say, on its own, cannot provide the solution to philosophical problems. It becomes apparent that psychological theories do not present a coherent body of 'objective fact' which can be used immediately to confirm or refute philosophical views.

It may appear that this discovery has vindicated the academic ideology of 'separate subjects,' but it does not do so. This discovery does indeed show that philosophy cannot simply be replaced by psychology, or reduced to it, and that philosophy has an existence which is autonomous from psychology. But it does not show that philosophy and psychology are absolutely *distinct*; on the contrary, it demonstrates the complete interpenetration of philosophy and psychology and their mutual interdependence. It demonstrates their essential *unity*.

A psychological theory presupposes a certain philosophy: it is a *form of embodiment* of a particular philosophy. But equally, a certain view of how men think and act, a certain theory of psychology, is expressed in any philosophy of mind. Philosophy cannot be divided off from other areas of thought by its subject-matter. The subject-matter of all knowledge, philosophy included, is essentially the same: the real world as experienced in sensation and thought. Like any other form of knowledge, philosophy must derive from active experience if it is to have any valid claim to be knowledge. And yet, philosophy must not be immediately identified with, or reduced to, any other field, whether social science or political practice. Philosophy is a relatively autonomous *level* of thought about reality. It is at once the deepest, the most general, level at which reality is comprehended and organized in thought; and at the same time it is the barest, the most abstract, the poorest in concrete content. Nevertheless, philosophy *has* a concrete content—just as the sciences each have a determinate form—and it is important to insist on this in the face of the academic attempt to make philosophy into a purely

formal study, empty of any empirical content. Philosophy is a particular level of thought, of knowledge, and it is essentially the same knowledge which exists at another (less abstract, more concrete) level as science, or as political and social practice.

Philosophy exists in unity, then, with other spheres of thought and activity; and although I have made this point in relation to psychology, it applies equally to every area of thought and action. Philosophy is not something absolutely distinct and separate from social and political practice. Although it cannot be *reduced* to social practice, philosophy and social practice form an essential unity. Philosophies arise out of, and describe and justify, certain ways of life.³ Philosophy is, in this way, social and ultimately political in nature; it is, in this sense, ideology; and particular philosophies are revealed as such with the passing of historical time.

The radical philosophy movement has been accused of distorting philosophy by making it political.⁴ As though it was not so already!—as though academic philosophy had hitherto been the disembodied pursuit of pure reason! The radical philosophy movement has no need to *make* philosophy political; it finds it so already. The intellectual climate fostered by recent British philosophy has been an uncritical and a conservative one. Philosophers have all but given up even the attempt to seriously confront and think through the theoretical and practical problems which they and their society face. The theoretical work which is most directly valuable in this task—Marxism and psychoanalysis in particular—has been systematically ignored and excluded from consideration, and academic philosophers have provided the justification for this. In its stead we get an uncritical liberalism, and a complacent faith in common sense and the benefits of science—a perspective which is unquestionably a socially active one, even if the activity involved is acquiescence to and justification of the *status quo*.

To deny that academic philosophy has anything to do with social or political matters increasingly appears to be an almost wilful unconsciousness of the ideological significance which such philosophy does in fact have. Like all socially significant philosophy, recent British philosophy has a social, as well as an individual-mental existence; and it has played a social and historical role. The denial of this role on the part of so many recent British philosophers does not abolish it; rather it means that these philosophers remain unconscious of it in their work. Such philosophers thereby condemn themselves to ignorance about real and significant features of their own work. The radical philosophy movement refuses to follow them in this.

This self-chosen ignorance which has been so characteristic of recent British philosophy is *justified* in terms of the academic ideology already described, which portrays philosophy as pure thought, without any necessary basis in practical experience and without any essential practical consequences. But to find the *basis* of this ignorance one must look beyond this justification. The

division of knowledge into isolated 'subjects' and the separation of these from their practical consequences has been the product of the professionalisation of learning which has occurred over the past one hundred years within an increasingly bureaucratic departmental university structure. Just as knowledge has been divided up theoretically amongst the various 'subjects,' so it has been distributed in practice around the various university departments. A radical criticism of academic ideology must, therefore, include a criticism of the institutional structures which give rise to it.

And this is not a matter of 'doing politics' or 'doing sociology' or whatever 'as well as' or 'instead of' philosophy. To indicate the social and psychological conditions which produce a philosophy and which it justifies is not to do something 'in addition' to discussing that philosophy. To do this is to point to essential aspects of the nature of a philosophy—its material, social embodied existence—of which any adequate philosophical understanding must be aware.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that there is nothing comforting or easy in these ideas about the nature of philosophy. This must be stressed for several reasons. One of them is simply that it would be wrong to underestimate the *convenience* of the academic ideology for those engaged in academic work. How much easier it would be! how much more secure and authoritative would be one's position as a teacher! if one could be an acknowledged expert in an isolated and specialized area.

Many of the criticisms of contemporary British philosophy which I have made here are shared by other members of the radical philosophy movement. The response of the philosophy profession to the radical

philosophy movement has for the most part been one either of disinterest or open hostility. The attempt has been made to dismiss its fight against academicism as a variety of what is now a prevalent anti-intellectualism and romantic distrust of thought in favour of feeling. This is a further reason for stressing the demanding intellectual character of a radical philosophy. The criticism of radical philosophy as anti-intellectual is a product of ignorance. On the contrary, we stand for a revival of serious and responsible philosophical thought, and for co-operation and mutual learning between all those who strive for theoretical understanding of reality. We believe that such work is fruitfully possible only within a radical and critical perspective. To say this is to reject anti-intellectualism and 'mindless militancy'; and it is also to reject the bankrupt academicism of so much recent British philosophy, which has failed to demonstrate the possible social value of philosophy, and which is thus itself partially responsible for the current blindness to the value of intelligent thought.

NOTES

¹ *English Philosophy Since 1900* by G. J. WARNOCK. (Oxford University Press, 1958; p. 167.)

² For further information please write to: R. J. Norman, Darwin College, The University, Canterbury, Kent.

³ Winch and other similar interpreters of Wittgenstein also make extensive use of this phrase, but in a way different from that intended here. When I talk of philosophy as having a social embodiment and as being associated with 'a way of life': (a) I would not reduce this philosophy to its form of life; (b) I would see the philosophy and its form of life as in dynamic contradiction and historical development; and (c) hence I would see a 'form of life' as a social and historical form containing contradiction within it.

⁴ See, e.g., MARY WARNOCK, 'Marxist Course', *New Society*, 8 June, 1972.

Pious sighs over the limits of our reason?

Michael Morgan

The Principles of Genetic Epistemology by JEAN PIAGET. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, £1.50).

Insights and Illusions of Philosophy by JEAN PIAGET. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, £2.50).

Biology and Knowledge by JEAN PIAGET. (Edinburgh University Press, £4.00).

The clearest short account I know of Piaget as a philosopher is in Milič Čapek's *Bergson and Modern Physics*,¹ where the influence of Bergson upon Piaget is carefully discussed. It is essential to appreciate this influence if Piaget is to be understood. Much that is obscure in his writing, including the numerous attacks upon Bergson himself, can be more readily interpreted if we bear in mind that Piaget's genetic epistemology has been influenced by the evolutionary epistemology of Bergson, who was in turn inspired by the evolutionism of Herbert Spencer. The distinctive character of Piaget,

Bergson and Spencer as philosophers is to relate (some would say, wilfully confound) the ontological question 'how do things come to be as they are?' with the epistemological question 'how do I find out what things are?' The very title of one of Piaget's books, *Biology and Knowledge*,² indicates that he would subscribe to Bergson's dictum that the theory of life and the theory of knowledge are inseparable. In *Insights and Illusions* he describes his first encounter with *Évolution Créatrice* as a 'tremendous experience.'

This is not meant to imply that Piaget is an uncritical admirer of Spencer and Bergson. On the contrary, he is very concerned to point out that to refer the problem of knowledge to its evolutionary origins, is merely to raise the traditional epistemological problems in a biological disguise. He attempts to show that the issues which divide evolutionary theorists are formally identical