A REACTION TO RADICAL PHILOSOPHY
J.M. Hinton

No one, I believe, can yet say with any confidence to what extent the 'mere' attempt to escape from one of the traditional forms of falsehood from our ways of thinking may itself change the world. If only for this reason, it is a mistake to reach the conclusion that contemporary British philosophy is 'at a dead end', from which or may not be that this philosophy has "largely abandoned" any more constructive kind of "attempt to understand the world". A great deal has been done, in detecting the subtler mechanisms of widespread false consciousness, by Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, Wisdom, Ryle, Austin and others. An indefinite amount remains to be done along the same lines - no fear of a dead end, there.

Nonetheless, a younger generation of international socialists, many of them associated with the New Left Review, has managed to convince some of us Old Leftists that the cultural-holushevist attitude towards would-be-constructive philosophy, which philosophers have tended to induce, has long ago become politically and hence philosophically reactionary in some of its aspects. (Not that it is too hard to see ways in which the rather culture-vulturnal attitude of the 'Jews' might become first philosophically and then politically reactionary, in its turn.) They have also convinced us that the first remedial steps lie in curricular changes suggested by the student protest movement, and which might have taken too much time to occur to us.

What I mainly have in mind is this. An international socialist, who is also a teacher of philosophy in the tradition which derives from Moore's and Russell's philosophically radical, anti-academic rebellion against English Right-Hegelianism and from Ryle's philosophically radical, anti-academic rebellion against Phenomenology, and from Wittgenstein's philosophically radical, anti-academic philosophy, finds a disresemblance between his political convictions and his way of making a living. Not only does his teaching not involve socialist advocacy, but also he may suspect that its social and political function is conservativistic in the main, even if it does undermine the prevailing vulgar-empeirist ideology to a certain limited extent. As already implied, I accept that the best way to escape from this trap is to broaden the syllabus. One will find enough to endorse in the area, Hegel-Marx-Anarchism-Existentialism, for a certain amount of political advocacy, philosophical rather than pragmatic, to emerge.

The problems of a period in which post-Moorean methods of scrutiny are applied to Marxism, and Marxism is applied to post-Moorean methods of scrutiny, promise to be interesting. It will also be interesting to see whether Radical Philosophy turns out to be a fruitful application of these problems. The ideal locus would be a group of international socialists who know about, and value a good deal more than, the Marxian and the post-Moorean traditions. In two-fold contrast, the Radical Philosophy Group appears to require no commitment to international socialism, and to be mainly a coalition of people who for various reasons are disposed to see little or no merit in the [post-Moorean] tradition. Indeed throughout Mr Hinton's note, "broadening the syllabus" seems to have given rise to this misconception, the Statement in fact says: "the Group will not attempt to lay down a philosophical line".

However, the emergence of the Radical Philosophy movement is most definitely occasioned by the extreme poverty of recent thought within this Tradition, and the major motivation behind the Group is a strong dissatisfaction with the present state of philosophy in this country. And so, major questions which the Radical Philosophy Group is seeking to raise are: What are the reasons (causes) of this poverty? and What is to be done to overcome it?

It is essential to keep these questions clearly in mind. Hinton continues the problem in terms of the question: The British tradition: For or Against? This is a fruitless and mystifying question which leads him to lose sight of the inadequacies of recent British philosophy.

One of the most unsatisfactory features of recent British philosophy has been the extraordinary narrowness of its intellectual and practical horizons. The student movement and New Left Review have impressed this upon Mr Hinton too. However, the only "remedial steps" he suggests are "curricular changes": "It is essential to keep these questions clearly in mind. Hinton continues the problem in terms of the question: The British tradition: For or Against? This is a fruitless and mystifying question which leads him to lose sight of the inadequacies of recent British philosophy."

Unfortunately, all our experience as teachers and students tells us that such changes (although important and desirable reforms) will not in themselves produce the sort of radical changes we are working for. Without other essential changes, the effect of broadening the syllabus is all too likely to be the substitution of a new academic orthodoxy for an old one. The academicism of recent British philosophy is a major source of our discontent. Hinton seems to be incapable of recognizing this academicism. He describes Moore, Russell, Wittgenstein and Ryle as radical anti-academic philosophers. It is difficult to see what he could have meant by this. Whatever else one might want to say about them, Moore and Ryle were academic professionals of the purest kind; and although Russell and Wittgenstein were not, their philosophy drew its problematic force from the academic tradition. The 'latent opposition' to Wittgenstein's critique of mechanism and science; the narrowness of his philosophical preoccupations. Apparent divorce of Russell's academic philosophy from his social and political life -- a divorce which is portrayed as absolute and not discussed by his academic commentators.

HINTON'S REACTION: A REPLY

We take this opportunity to reply to Mr. Hinton's note, first because it contains a misconception about the aims of the Radical Philosophy movement which we are in a position to correct, and secondly because it will illustrate some of the major problems of working in academic philosophy departments, problems which we are trying to confront and overcome.

It is a misconception about Radical Philosophy to think that it stands for the total rejection of the British philosophical tradition. It is certainly true that the Group, as suggested by the student protest movement, and which might have taken too much time to occur to us.

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The crippling effects of this academicism are well illustrated by Hinton's own words. Essential to the academic conception of the philosopher, which Hinton shares, is the idea that "The Philosopher" is aloof from political reality in his academic role as "Philosopher", even though he may also be an "international socialist". "The Philosopher" who has the fortitude -- or misfortune as it would appear -- also to be an "international socialist" is even perceptive enough to 'suspect' that his teaching is not merely an expression of his socialism, but virtually an "ideological null" in the main" and in contradiction to it (3rd paragraph).

But how can an international socialist philosopher be content merely to remain 'suspicious' that his life work might be conservative? Surely this is a matter which any self-respecting socialist or philosopher would investigate. This sort of 'distinction' between political convictions and philosophical work is the very division which Radical Philosophy aims to make people conscious of and then to question and subvert. Hinton again sees current thought as "parochial" -- the best way to escape from this trap is to broaden the syllabus". But this is remarkably complacent. Isn't there something much more fundamentally wrong with this, which fails to engage itself politically by confronting current ideology and mystification; and isn't there something much more fundamentally wrong with a form of politics which is uninformed by any philosophy and which fails to confront a great deal of contemporary British philosophy as ideological and mystifying?

The problems which Hinton's paper raises: (i) the nature of recent British philosophy and the reasons for its poverty; and (ii) the dilemma for the socialist academic - these problems are very real and profound ones and which are not trying to suggest that we have quick and ready answers to them. However, it is clear to us that Hinton's note obscures these problems and reveals a complacency which the kind of which the Radical Philosophy movement is committed to disturbing.

SANITY, MADNESS AND THE PROBLEM OF IGNORANCE

(A Reply to Trevor Pateman)

Martin Skelton-Robinson

Trevor Pateman has offered some reflections about one of the families Laing and Esterson studied and wrote up in 'Sanity Madness and the Family'. (Radical Philosophy. Jan.'72. I. 22-23). Whether he intends his remarks to be relevant just to this one case, or more generally, he fails to mention. However, it scarcely matters as they apply in neither case.

In the one case study his article discusses Laing and Esterson have provided comparatively little information about those features of the girl's experience that have occasioned her diagnosis and symptoms and which are probably intelligible in terms of family inter-relations. Apart from a set of conventional symptoms set out by the authors; 'She had auditory hallucinations and was depersonalised; showed signs of catatonia; exhibited affective impoverishment and autistic withdrawal. Occasionally she was held to be impulsive,' and their rather optimistic translation of these immediately fundamental terms of what Maya has suffered. What were the exact experiences the clinicians encountered; what did she hear when she was said to hallucinate, when and in what way was she depersonalized, etc., etc?

Only one of these features of her 'illness' is taken up in any detail in the ensuing narrative, her 'emotional impoverishment'. Her auditory hallucinations are glossed over, dealt with in one or two sentences. 'The voices, she said, were her own thoughts anyway. This neither clarifies, nor explains, what she is in fact saying. We are left to wonder if these were her own thoughts, or were they passive thoughts thrust on her from elsewhere? Were these thoughts silent or spoken aloud, and if aloud whose words were they? It was a voice and a voice alone. Moreover, just what were these 'thoughts' about? They cannot be explained till we know what needs explaining. That THIS suggestion about her voices is most misleading is its implication that the two things had got it all wrong and there are no voices, is shown by the observation made later that 'her thoughts thought themselves audibly in her head.'

Her depersonalisation is dealt with like-wise: 'Just as not she but the voices thought, so not she but her body acted.' What in its context is actually nothing. Finally her catatonia is not mentioned at all.

The other features of her 'illness' that are dealt with besides the emotional impoverishment are her ideas of influence (one wonders how prominent these were as there is no mention of them in the list of clinical ascriptions which, we are told, were the results of various observations), and her sense of lacking personal autonomy.

Her 'ideas of influence' are certainly the symptom in respect of which the best case is put up for social intelligibility. However even if the author recalls when she was 15 she began to feel her father was causing these sexual thoughts", an observation which is not translated into family praxis. And they write up this feature of her illness: 'These open yet unavowed non-verbal exchanges between father and mother were in fact quite public and perfectly obvious. Much (my emphasis) of what could be taken to be paranoid about Maya's case because she mistrusted her own mistrust. Much, but not all.

This reservation is part of the same inconsiderativeness Trevor Pateman cannot understand in the preface when Laing and Esterson say that they have not 'set out to test the hypothesis that the family is a pathogenic variable in schizophrenia.' They are also reserved in their conclusions about the Abbott family. They say of Maya's symptoms that 'They seem quite in keeping with the social reality in which she finds herself.' in keeping, as I have indicated in some detail a great deal more would be required of this family history (and besides that in other histories, and control work, etc.) to prove that they were the result of this social reality.

I spell all this out because Trevor Pateman says he cannot understand Laing and Esterson's differentiation. This failure perhaps explains his own singular boldness. He takes up this one case, fails to mention most of the symptomatology which Laing and Esterson have already abbreviated precisely, and they are doing nothing conclusive, but only illustrating the plausibility of an idea, and hypotheses just what are at the roots of this 'illness'. First we hear: 'The dominant feature of these encounters (between mother and daughter) was that there was in conflict over what is the fact of the matter. In this conflict, the feature of the "schizophrenic" daughter, as evidenced in her statements, while single as if possessed, came to either state or, more radically, to know what is true and what is false in a given situation. I shall suggest as a possible explanation this could be because she has not learnt how to tell true from false.' Even as a possible explanation some qualification would be in order since not being able to tell from false at all is absolute mental defect or some such pristine ignorance.

However if Trevor Pateman had read the text a little more carefully he would have discovered that 'Maya sometimes consummated fairly lucidly on these mystifications.' Not a possibility, presumably, if she had failed to learn the verification criteria required to make such comments.

This first suggestion Pateman elucidates with the magnificent contention that 'parents are our epistemological authorities, that is, authorities on questions like: what can we know? How can we know? How can we know that we know? When can we claim to know? and so on.' It is true that parents are not our 'legal' or our 'political' authority, but this is certainly implied. And so the theory of knowledge will have to study child rearing customs! More seriously the idea that the external world or at least its sensible phenomena, on one side, and the laws of logic, the objects of mathematics, and notions of space and time, grammar and certain universal functions of language, the meanings of some bodily gestures and possible all on the other side are and all connected to us by our parents, rather than, shall I say, (for a social nexus is of course one sine qua non of knowledge) is not really empirical or at all possibility of the empiricist, or observer himself, removed.

To conclude I will take up one valuable point Laing and Esterson put in their preface. 'Do these things go on in all sorts of families? Possibly.' If Pateman imagines there are no contentious or historical qualifications about 'schizophrenic children he must place the incidence of schizophrenia a little higher than the Registrar General's estimate of 0.85% of the population. With this point some real considerations about madness emerge. It is not the disputes, disagreements, flat contradictions which are more or less a feature of all human beings, it is how one comes to either state or, more radically, to know what is true and what is false in a given situation. I shall suggest as a possible explanation this could be because she has not learnt how to tell true from false.'