Ordinary Language Philosophy and Radical Philosophy

1. Sean Sayers

The Editorial of Radical Philosophy 6 (1) concerns ordinary language and ordinary language philosophy. It is a vain and compromising piece of writing on a topic upon which radical philosophers have previously been clear and decisive: and what it says is such an abandonment of what little radical philosophers have so far managed to unite about (specified in the Radical Philosophy Statement of Aims, significantly omitted from this issue) that some response is needed.

The Editorial concludes by stating:

To escape the crushing embrace of ordinary language it is necessary to do more than turn one's back.

What more? We are not even given a hint. But in any case, it is not ordinary language which exerts a 'crushing embrace' (how could it?) On the other hand, many radical philosophers have argued that ordinary language philosophy does not exist in ordinary language which dictates that the primary or even sole source of data for the philosopher should be the usages of ordinary language. For example, David Ingleby argues this at length and with great clarity in the very same issue (pp43-4 - why no mention of this in the Editorial?). Ordinary language philosophy, in the sense defined above, is the very epitome of everything that Radical Philosophy was set up to fight (see Statement). It is therefore extraordinary to read in this edition:

the slogan 'ordinary language philosophy' does not really pick out a question on which it makes much sense to take sides anyway.

(What a grotesque sentence!)

On the contrary, it is essential for Radical Philosophy to oppose ordinary language philosophy (whether explicitly labelled with that slogan or not), because it represents the anti-theoretical, anti-scientific, conservative and ideological tendencies of recent British philosophy in their clearest form.

Furthermore, it is said to be hard to generalize about 'orthodox English-language philosophy'. This too is false. One can certainly generalize about recent British philosophy - it would be an entirely unique historical phenomenon if one could not. And moreover, it is essential to generalize about it if one is going to oppose it. Indeed the reply that it is impossible to generalize about recent British philosophy has been the standard ploy of these philosophers who ignore and dismiss the consistent stream of criticism which has been levelled at their work from Gellner, Macnese and Anderson right down to the criticisms of the Radical Philosophy Group. Recent British philosophy has been academic in character, it has predominantly functioned as bourgeois ideology supporting the academic, intellectual and social status quo; it has been predominantly (though not exclusively) emiricism in various forms, and one could go on to be more specific on all these points, and also talk about its history and evolution, its effects on intellectual life, etc...

And it is for these reasons that radical philosophers have been opposed to it: the effect of adopting the position we find in this editorial is to abdicate from any critical stance towards the predominant tradition of recent British philosophy.

But to return to ordinary language philosophy; the major virtue claimed for it in this editorial is its supposed 'anti-elitism'. This is yet another bit of the self-congratulatory ideology of recent British philosophy which is completely false. In fact ordinary language philosophy has been overwhelmingly abstruse, pseudo-technical, apparently irrelevant to anyone but the initiate (and his unfortunate students), unreadable by the intelligent 'layman', to say nothing any more 'ordinary' mortal. These are hardly 'anti-elitist' qualities!

For an illustration of the significance of this fundamental (for philosophy we are referred to Bernard Harrison's article on 'Fielding and the Moralists' (pp7-16). It hardly exemplifies the 'anti-elitism' we are led to expect by the editorial. I found it, however, an interesting, provocative and valuable piece; but also, I found myself in profound disagreement with what Harrison has to say on one of its underlying themes: the relevance of ordinary language to philosophy.

The article is not itself a piece of ordinary language philosophy - it does not argue on the basis of ordinary language, 'what we would say ... ' etc. Rather, it is, in part, a defence of the primary importance of ordinary language as data for the philosopher and, as such, may be considered as a defence of ordinary language philosophy, i.e. philosophy which dictates that the primary or even sole source of data for the philosopher should be the usages of ordinary language. For example, David Ingleby argues this at length and with great clarity in the very same issue (pp43-4 - why no mention of this in the editorial?). Ordinary language philosophy, in the sense defined above, is the very epitome of everything that Radical Philosophy was set up to fight (see Statement). It is therefore extraordinary to read in this edition:

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language in fact provides no guide whatever to what is correct or incorrect in morality or in any other area of ordinary language. 'Ordinary language' is not incompatible with any theory, it just depends whose ordinary language you are considering and what their philosophy is. What 'we' would ordinarily say depends entirely on how 'we' understand the world; i.e. what 'our' philosophy is. The whole attempt to argue philosophical results on the basis of 'ordinary language' is circular.

The thesis that a theory is inadequate - over-simple and crude for example - the answer is not to abandon all attempt to work out a theory, rather one should attempt to construct a more adequate, a more sophisticated, theory. That, at least, is the philosophical way, for philosophy is an essentially theoretical enterprise; and ordinary language is not a substitute for theory, on the contrary it is a concealed and mystified way of insinuating theoretical notions without arguing for them. Furthermore, it is not because Fielding is using 'ordinary language' (as opposed to a theory) that his work is significant to the moral philosopher. It is rather because, according to Harrison at least, he has a more adequate and sophisticated perception of moral realities, and the ability to communicate these in writing. Indeed, Harrison even goes on to suggest that Fielding does have a theory, the central concepts which are 'disinterested love' and 'Good Heart', although this is untypical presented (are these concepts from 'ordinary language' as Fielding uses them??)

One of the most valuable aspects of Harrison's article is that he argues strongly that moral philosophers should learn much more from literature than they have been willing to do in the past. It seems to me that this is a particularly urgent point to make in Britain, where the literary tradition has been exceptionally rich in moralists, whereas the dominant tradition of moral philosophy has been overly abstract and metaphysical - tending to see moral philosophy merely as a branch of epistemology and logic.

Therefore, it seems to me, at least 2 ways in which the moral philosopher can learn from literature. Both can be illustrated from Harrison's discussion of Fielding, although he explicitly acknowledges only the first.

The novel presents important data for the moral philosopher. For example, Harrison claims that Fielding provides such data for the refutation of egoism, showing Tom Jones behaving in a genuinely altruistic fashion over the £50. This is a case of 'assembling reminders' of the reality of moral life to which the moral philosopher can learn from literature data base, in which it would be just as possible to 'assemble reminders' of egoism, or any other moral outlook. Such cases are mere data for the philosopher, however, and not yet philosophy. In order to construct a moral philosophy it is necessary to say more than that egoism, e.g., is false because don't forget that altruism is possible (actual in this case). It is necessary to construct a theory, for example, of egoism, altruism, and of their relations to each other and to other moral concepts.

In fact many novelists (more or less) implicitly operate with theories of this type. On the evidence Harrison presents (I have not read Fielding), Fielding may be one such. We are told that he tries to reject the dichotomies of the competing moral philosophies of his day, and that he tries to replace them with the concepts of 'disinterested love', the 'Good Heart' etc.

Finally, it is not because 'ordinary language' is so, but because 'ordinary language' (and what they select from it) and their 'common sense' is so. Finally, let us look at the standard argument for ordinary language philosophy. Austin's version of it is referred to with approval in the editorial. It goes as follows:

Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have thought about, and the connections they have thought worth making, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our armchairs of an afternoon - the most favoured alternative method.

It would appear that this incredibly complacent argument has long been a popular one amongst academic philosophers: for Bacon (one of the greatest critics of academicism) was familiar with it in the 17th century, and attacked it then as a 'conceit' which impedes the advancement of learning. He writes:

Another error ... is a conceit that of former opinions or sects, after variety and examination, the best hath still prevailed and suppressed all the rest; so as if a man should begin the labour of a new search, he were but like to light upon somewhat formerly rejected, and by rejection brought into oblivion: as if the multitude, or the wiseast for the multitude's sake, were not ready to give passage rather to that which is popular and superficial than to that which is substantial and profound; for the time seemeth to be of the nature of a river or stream, which carrieth down to us that which is light and blown up, and sinketh and drometh that which is weighty and solid.

Bacon is surely right. Great scientists and thinkers in all ages have initially had to battle against the conservative prejudices and ignorance of the 'common sense' of their day. 'Ordinary language' and 'common sense' are, as much as the expert's view, a two-edged sword. They embody all the common ignorance and prejudice of the day; and it is only because people have dared to question it and think beyond it that knowledge and learning have advanced.

In short: ordinary language philosophy is an

must be made explicit. This means presenting it in theoretical and general terms, abstracted from the concrete (fictional) situations in which it is presented in its literary form. Consequently novelists and writers themselves often present their ideas abstractly; but to the extent that their abstract ideas become divorced from the concrete situation in which they are supposed to be being lived-out in the novel, the novel is diminished in its impact (a very common failing of much science fiction).

In good literature abstract ideas, when they are present, are firmly embedded in the concrete situation. I have been arguing that philosophy is a theoretical enterprise which cannot be conducted merely by reporting ordinary usage. What then of the ordinary language philosophy which the articles I have been discussing seek to defend? Is ordinary language philosophy therefore non-philosophy? No it is not. It is, almost invariably, bad philosophy, because philosophy unaware of what it is doing, but philosophy nevertheless. And it in philosophy because ordinary language philosophers invariably do not merely 'report ordinary usage', 'assemble reminders' etc, but in the process also suggest a certain general view about how things are. Harrison (Fielding), for example, suggests that 'disinterested love' is a basic motive for people as well as egoism. And Austin, in his writings, comes over as a naive realist and unreflective empiricist. Uncritical and naive empiricism has been the predominant philosophy of the ordinary language school, not because 'ordinary language' is so, but because of their 'ordinary language' (and what they select from it) and their "common sense" is so.

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In short: ordinary language philosophy is an
essentially conservative style of thought: it is incompatible with any genuine radicalism. It is anti-theoretical and anti-scientific, and thus also anti-intellectual: it is anti-philosophical. It should therefore be rejected by anyone who calls himself 'a radical philosopher'.

NOTES


2 David Inglesby makes this point in Radical Philosophy 6: 844.

3 Cf. G. Lukacs, 'Art and Objective Truth' in Writer and Critic.


2. Jonathan Ree

I am very sorry that Sean Sayers - one of the creators of this magazine - so disliked the editorial in Radical Philosophy 6. But perhaps that is because he completely misunderstood it. In the discussion piece printed above he attacks it as a 'defence of ordinary language philosophy' and therefore an abandonment of the Radical Philosophy Group stands for. But it was not a defence of 'ordinary language philosophy' at all. In it, I discussed the notion of 'ordinary language philosophy', which some modern philosophers use to characterise their work: and when I referred to its 'appearance' of anti-elitism and to the 'expectation' that this might arise, I was not expressing 'approval' of its 'virtues', but recording its misleading appearance.

The editorial was meant to indicate that we, as supporters of the Radical Philosophy Group, should not allow the issue between ourselves and orthodox English-language philosophers to be defined by the other side; and in particular that we should not accept their self-image as 'ordinary language philosophers' - as though the important point at issue was whether to study, or for that matter use, 'ordinary language'. For us to accept that this was the issue would, I think, be a workers' revolutionary party accepting that its aim was to replace democratic institutions with totalitarian ones. We won't get anywhere if we are content to think about the philosophy we are attacking in the terms provided by its own ideology.

To escape the crushing embrace of ordinary language it is necessary to do more than turn one's back - so said the editorial. 'What more?' asks Sean Sayers. The answer is that we need to have knowledge - scientific, and historical, knowledge - about people's languages, because these are one of the main forms in which philosophical ideas are encoded and transmitted. We should not accept that self-styled 'philosophers of ordinary language' have given up the study of languages the treatment it deserves, or that we, as their opponents, should therefore have nothing to do with it. Sean Sayers apparently thinks that the fact that languages are repositories of ideology means that we should not be interested in them; but that is like thinking that a revolutionary party should not be interested in actual social relations.

Sean asks why Radical Philosophy no longer reprints the 'statement of aims' in every issue. Two reasons, I think, led the editors to this decision. 1. Whether we like it or not, the identity of Radical Philosophy will be determined not by a statement of aims but by what it prints; a reiterated statement of aims would be either superfluous or at odds with the contents.

2. The policy of the Radical Philosophy Group ought always to be open to discussion, rather than being given the formal timeless anonymity of a reiterated statement of aims. It is not enough to have discussions about it (like this) - but perhaps it was wrong to include them in an unsigned editorial.

3. Bernard Harrison

Sayers misconstrues my paper as a sort of covert defense of something called 'ordinary language philosophy', the central dictum of which is that the main or even perhaps sole business of philosophy is to describe the logic of ordinary language.

The philosophical doctrines with which I was primarily concerned in the paper are (a) Mandevillean and Hobbsist egoism, (b) the doctrine, expressly stated by Kant but, as I argue, covertly assumed in Eighteenth Century English moral philosophy both by egoists and anti-egoists, that the only intrinsically morally good thing is a good will, and that a good will is, among other things, a will divested of all that Kant would have called phenomenal ends. Both these doctrines are reductionist in the sense that, if true, they entail that all conceptual distinctions which we draw in everyday life ('myself in ordinary language') are epistemologically baseless.

One general strategy to adopt against reductionist doctrines is presumably (i) to examine carefully the nature of the distinction in question which must, if the reductionist is right, be abandoned as baseless, and then, (ii) to show how it is that we manage to make these distinctions, and in showing this, with luck, to show that, and why, they are epistemologically soundly based after all: in short to produce an alternative theory to the reductionist one.

My article was intended mainly as literary criticism, but certainly as literary criticism with a philosophical bearing. From a philosophical point of view my argument was (a) that Fielding uses certain technical resources of the novel to (implicitly) conduct a two stage anti-reductionist argument of the sort sketched in the foregoing paragraph, and (b) that he emerges from this with a theory about the nature of morality (which I state as clearly as I know how in Section V of my paper) superior to (a) and (b) above.

Sayers clearly half sees that a theory is at stake (I say so often enough), but has plainly not managed to grasp what it is. With the best will in the world I cannot resist the suspicion that this is because he has not taken the trouble to read Fielding before dashing into print against what he imagines to be my views. How can you make anything, good or bad, of a piece of literary criticism - even philosophical criticism - if you have not read the author under discussion? Battling against intellectual reaction is a fine and stirring activity, but you need to take along your gun: and even occasionally to oil it.

Be that as it may, there is nothing in my paper which makes me a protagonist of 'ordinary language philosophy' as he defines it. I do indeed say at one point that Fielding's technique protects us against reductionist philosophical schematics by reminding us of the real complexity of the conceptual distinctions which we draw without thinking about it in everyday life. But how else could one go about the attempt to refute a reductionist doctrine? Certainly it would not be enough just to do this: one needs in addition a theory which exhibits the epistemological bases of the distinctions in question. But then my whole claim is that Fielding offers such a theory, and that it is a better one than those held by his philosophical contemporaries. Sayers' technique of hunting for brief, as it were incriminating, nuanta-
what is reactionary about writing in English at the present time is a philo-
sitions and then hacking away at the rest of the paper
at the present time. The trouble is that the aim
of just "describing" ordinary usage has been more
talked about than put into practice. I'm not at all
sure what Sayers means by 'theory', but if a theor-
ist is anyone who dissents from the dictum that the
sole task of philosophy is to describe the logic of
ordinary usage, then not only am I a philosophical
theorist but virtually every significant philosopher
writing in English at the present time is a philo-
sophical theorist. They certainly this is true, to take just one example,
of Professor R. M. Hare, a philosopher whose views
I do not altogether share, but whom I greatly respect;
who seems to have become a regular aunt sally for
saying what is more, some of them will need to do the un-
screwed up life is the life of the man who Screwed up a model of the un-screwed-up-life, as far as
fulfillment is concerned, and who hasn't even got the troubles of an active
company director. The natural inference from Norman's
position is that this is the man who is to provide
us with a model of the un-screwed-up-life, as far as
we can int one: maybe the institutions even screw
him up a little, but he's the nearest we can get.
And surely he is not a good model; not for our lives
here and now, anyway. Explicit praise of the aristo-
crat may suit Nietzsche, but hardly liberals - even if
he does quote Nietzsche with approval.
...and I think he was right to have them.
To begin with, I don't like the company he keeps.
...and I think he was right to have them.
...and I think he was right to have them.
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