

# Discussion

## Ordinary Language Philosophy and Radical Philosophy

### 1. Sean Sayers

The Editorial of *Radical Philosophy* 6 (p1) concerns ordinary language and ordinary language philosophy. It is a vapid 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 do so - 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 editorial that:

*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, Marcuse and Anderson<sup>1</sup> 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) empiricist 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 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', let alone any more 'ordinary' mortal. These are hardly 'anti-elitist' qualities!

For an illustration of the significance of ordinary language 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.

Harrison's thesis is that ordinary language is able to capture the complexity of reality, whereas philosophical and moral theories have distorted and simplified for the sake of ease and comfort. He argues for this view by contrasting Fielding as a moralist, with the moral theories of Hobbes, Mandevillè and Butler, or rather the degenerate and crude form which their philosophies had assumed in the 'ordinary' consciousness of Fielding's times. Fielding, we are told, does not attempt to reduce the complexity of moral life to simple formulae. Rather, Fielding's technique is one of

*compelling us to recollect the force of ordinary moral concepts and distinctions... In all cases his intent is to recall us from shallow and oversimplified philosophical schematisations to a full consciousness of conceptual distinctions which we are quite capable of making in everyday life although we seldom bother to inspect or to analyse them, and whose complexities go far beyond the persuasive generalities to be found in the works of philosophical moralists. Wittgenstein says somewhere that the task of philosophy is to 'assemble reminders' of the full richness of our everyday conceptual scheme; and I think this phrase is not inappropriate to Fielding's practice as a novelist. (p9)*

The conclusion of this argument would appear to be that philosophy should abandon the attempt to theorize, and merely content itself with 'assembling reminders' of what is wrong with existing theories. The anti-theoretical attitude entailed by the ordinary language approach to philosophy could hardly be expressed more clearly. I want to argue that this anti-theoreticism has not been argued for, and that it has disastrous consequences for philosophy.

When Harrison finds that current philosophical theories are over-simple his conclusion, apparently, is that theories in philosophy are inherently untrustworthy: much better to stick to 'ordinary language' (and, he might have added, 'good common sense'). Such an anti-theoretical attitude, however, is in no way guaranteed to produce a consciousness with the subtlety of Fielding's: it is just as likely (much more so in fact) to produce all the moral platitudes and banalities which are just as much embedded in 'ordinary language'. Ordinary

language in fact provides no guide whatever to what is correct or incorrect in morality or in any other area of philosophy. '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.<sup>2</sup>

When one finds 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 of which are 'disinterested love' and 'Good Heart', although this is vaguely 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.

There are, 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, by 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 (it has nothing to do with *ordinary language*, *nota bene*, 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 presented by Harrison (I have not read Fielding), Fielding may be one such. We are told that he tries to reject the shared 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.

A novel may be of importance to a moral philosopher in a second way, therefore. As well as providing mere data about moral life, a novel may also contain philosophical argument and even a coherent philosophy - i.e. a way of seeing the moral world. However, such a philosophy is unlikely to be presented in a novel in a philosophical form. It will probably be implicit only, and not explicit (particularly if the novel is a good one). To be put into a philosophical form, such a philosophy

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. Of course, 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 is 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 uncritical empiricist. Indeed, uncritical and naive empiricism has been the predominant philosophy of the ordinary language school, not because 'ordinary language' is so, but because *their* '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 found worth drawing, and the connections they have found 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 long 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.<sup>4</sup>*

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 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 wisest 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 truth is, that 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 drowneth that which is weighty and solid.<sup>5</sup>*

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', as much as they embody truth, also 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

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

- 1 E. Gellner, *Words and Things*, 1959; H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1964; P. Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review* No.50, 1967.
- 2 David Ingleby makes this point in *Radical Philosophy* 6, p44.
- 3 Cf. G. Lukacs, 'Art and Objective Truth' in *Writer and Critic*.
- 4 J. L. Austin, 'A Plea for Excuses', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1956-7.
- 5 Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) in *Selected Writings*, (ed.) H. G. Dick, Modern Library, NY, 1955, p190.

## 2. Jonathan Rée

I am very sorry that Sean Sayers - one of the creators of this magazine - so disliked the editorial in *Radical Philosophy* 6. But I am glad to say that this 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 everything 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 like 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 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 defined 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 best 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) Mandevillian and Hobbist 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 what Kant would have called phenomenal ends. Both these doctrines are reductionist in the sense that, if true, they entail that many conceptual distinctions which we draw in everyday life (or 'mark in ordinary language') are epistemologically baseless.

One general strategy to adopt against reductionist doctrines is presumably (i) to examine carefully the nature of the distinctions in ordinary language 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, quota-

tions and then hacking away at the rest of the paper to fit it to the procrustean bed thus constructed has not unnaturally led him astray.

Incidentally, I don't think Sayers' distinction between 'ordinary language philosophy' and 'theory' is really of much use as a touchstone for diagnosing what is reactionary about English-speaking philosophy 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 theorist 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 philosophical theorist.

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 some Radical Philosophers, largely on the strength of his article 'A School for Philosophers'. Hare's own work, it seems to me, totally belies that article. It is indeed one of life's little ironies that a man who can assert, with every appearance of complicity, that a philosophical doctrine must be briefly stateable and wholly non-technical if it is to receive a serious hearing at Oxford should himself be the author of two long books of great technical difficulty and complexity which expound a very elaborate moral theory of the same general type as Kant's. Of course Hare claims *inter alia* that the theory he constructs is implicit in the everyday logic of 'ought' and other moral terms, but these claims themselves serve a theoretical function in protecting his doctrine against certain lines of attack, mainly having to do with the well-known problems about naturalism. The fact that Hare's methodological asides make him look a bit like Sayers' straw man should not blind us to the fact that the edifice which Hare's methodology helps to support is a 'theory of morals' in a quite traditional sense, and one which bears upon many traditional, and important, problems about morals. But perhaps Sayers has some other sense of 'theory' in mind which I simply don't understand.

In short, although I don't necessarily dissent from the claim that some of the views, and perhaps a lot of the views, characteristic of English-speaking philosophy at the moment are in some sense reactionary (I wouldn't accept the view that English-speaking philosophy is reactionary *root-and-branch*, but then 'English-speaking philosophy' seems to me to designate a very mixed bag of views and tendencies and not a single homogeneous entity), I cannot see that the ordinary language/theory distinction gets us any closer to discovering which, or why. I thought I was attacking some rather reactionary views in my article. But that had better be left now to speak for itself to other readers.

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## Putting Morality in its Place

Few readers of *Radical Philosophy* (except perhaps spies acting on behalf of non-radical philosophy) are likely to disagree with Richard Norman's description of recent moral philosophy as 'inadequate', or with his insistence that those who practise it are really committed to a morality of liberalism. [See 'Moral philosophy without morality?' in *Radical Philosophy* 6, pp2-7] And the hopes he expresses for what moral - or rather ethical - philosophers ought to be doing ('articulating a workable set of ethical concepts in terms of which one could direct one's life and activity'), and the wish that academic philosophers would stop sneering at the suggestion that philosophy has something to do with questions about the meaning of life; these will find an enthu-

siastic audience in most of us too, certainly in me.

What does not arouse such agreement or enthusiasm in me is the main body of the article. To be fair, Norman himself has doubts about the validity of what he says; and I think he was right to have them. Basically, he wants to replace an ethics of 'morality', 'ought', 'duty' and 'virtue' by one whose basic concepts are ones like 'health', 'harmony', 'self-realization', 'integrity' and so on. And it's this more positive section that gives me doubts.

To begin with, I don't like the company he keeps. The philosophers who have taken this sort of line in the past - who have they been? Plato, Aristotle, Bradley - are these the prophets of radicalism? Great men, undoubtedly, but not quote those we should normally expect to find lined up on the same side as *Radical Philosophy*. They were not liberals, true; but only because they were conservatives. (It may be significant that when Norman briefly considers jettisoning the concept of 'virtues', it is Warnock he criticizes, and not Aristotle or Plato.)

Still, perhaps that isn't really fair. The point isn't who else said something rather like what Norman says, it's what he says himself. Yet there are some funny things in that too. If we take seriously the question 'What is it that screws up people's lives?' we are told, then, ultimately, the answer must be: not individual failings and weaknesses, but corrupt and oppressive institutions. It's that 'not' that bothers me. For its implication is that the un-screwed-up life is the life of the man who *isn't* the victim of corrupt and oppressive institutions. And that suggest the man who is their *beneficiary* - the aristocrat, the *rentier*, whom the institutions serve 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 get 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 aristocrat may suit Nietzsche, but hardly Norman - even if he does quote Nietzsche with approval.

Is he a good model for the future, then? Do we hope ultimately for a Utopia in which everyone is (more or less) like this 'aristocrat'? That doesn't seem likely either. Even in Utopia people work; and, what is more, some of them will need to do the unpleasant or monotonous kinds of work. You can find fulfilment in a great many callings, but there are some that I suspect of having alienation built into them. It's not Utopia we need for a society of perfectly fulfilled citizens; it's Paradise.

But of course the 'aristocrat' I've been describing isn't Norman's ideal in the least, and I've had to admit it. In fact, the 'balanced' man in a corrupt society is as defective as anyone else; he is nicely adapted to crooked surroundings, and when they get straightened out he will no longer be balanced. Granted. But that only makes my point more clearly; it isn't balance or harmony or self-realization that constitutes the ethical ideal. At the most, it's what would be balanced or harmonious in an uncorrupted society, and that only because in an uncorrupted society a man could presumably live the ideal life without getting unbalanced. In an oppressive society the man who truly responds to his higher self will be a misfit, and quite right too. That is how radicals, revolutionaries, and even reformers, are made.

Do we then want to reinstate 'Morality' after all, with its old Apparatus of 'good', 'right', 'ought', 'duty' and so on? I suspect that it has got a place, though only a subordinate one. (It seems to creep back even into Norman's sketch of the healthy individual; isn't the 'higher self' rather like an improved and more humane version of the Kantian legislative will - as well as being a near-literal translation of 'super-ego'?) It has a place for two reasons. Firstly because, as Norman says, even the healthy individual (even, I should add, in an uncorrupted society) can't really act all the time