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The Hatreds of Philosophers

An examination of the curious explosion of antipathies between and towards philosophers which was released by the refusal of the periodical *Mind*, edited by Professor Gilbert Ryle, to review Mr Ernest Gellner's book *Words and Things* on the grounds that it was abusive to other scholars

BEFORE compiling a philosophers' glossary of who now hates whom, one had better define what the "linguistic philosophy" which it was Mr Gellner's purpose to attack is supposed to be. Gellner, who teaches philosophy to sociologists at the London School of Economics, supposed his target to be a sort of philosophy particularly common at Oxford and possessing three special characteristics. First, it confines itself to discussing, in minute detail, the meaning of expressions in ordinary language, the language of everyday untechnical speech. Secondly, it is ostentatiously neutralist, in all sorts of ways: it professedly tells us nothing substantive about the world, morality, or society, but confines itself to a supposedly objective examination of the language in which such questions must be discussed. Thirdly, it thinks that most, though not all, traditional philosophical problems are based on confusions about language; by close attention to our ordinary speech philosophers, although not usefully answering these problems, can at least prevent us wanting to ask them.

The view of Gellner is that all the philosophical premises of this sort of philosophy are false. Since, in his view, no philosophy can in fact be neutralist, he accuses "linguistic philosophy," under a bogus guise of neutrality, of insinuating certain substantive opinions about the world and morality—in favour, roughly, of an uncritical common sense and thus a demure acceptance of the world as it seems. His book supplemented this depressing picture with an historical account of linguistic philosophy's supposed origins, and some brisk "sociological" matter on the linguistic philosophers themselves.

GELLNER'S critics have not been slow to retort that he vastly exaggerated the monolithic quality of what he calls "linguistic philosophy"; the philosophers whom he mentions as "linguistic philosophers" do not form a unanimous body of opinion. It is also important to note at this stage that there is a good deal of philosophy which is linguistic—in the sense that it discusses philosophical problems in terms of the meaning of expressions and so on, rather than in psychological terms—which Gellner himself was not concerned to attack.

One such philosophy is "logical positivism," the philosophy which was expressed in A. J. Ayer's famous book in the thirties, "Language, Truth and Logic." Positivism, though in a sense "linguistic," is exempted, because it certainly does not set out to defend our ordinary language or common sense. Few men on the Clapham omnibus will be found to share its radical central thesis that the only statements which are meaningful at all are statements of natural science, logic and mathematics. (It should be said that few philosophers will now be found to share it, including Professor Ayer himself.) Similarly, none of the writings of Bertrand Russell, though sometimes "linguistic" in tone, falls into the class Gellner was attacking. Russell indeed has never shown anything but contempt for uninstructed common sense, and is himself a strong champion of Gellner's book.

Who, then, are the linguistic philosophers subjected to assault, and where do they preach? A striking fact about British philosophy in this century is that all its important developments, with one possible exception, started in Cambridge and ended up in Oxford. (The one possible exception is logical positivism, which started in Vienna; but even that was influenced by the early work of Wittgenstein, who worked in Cambridge.) Cambridge produced the three great, though not equally great, innovators: Russell, G. E. Moore, and Wittgenstein. It does not itself tend to develop the work of its innovators, or to contain a school; it is Oxford where that happens. (Of this there is a perfectly simple explanation: there are far more philosophers in Oxford, because philosophy is there joined to other subjects in the syllabus, so that far more undergraduates study it, and far more teachers teach it.)

It was Moore (1873-1958) and Wittgenstein (1889-1951) who mattered for "linguistic philosophy." They were utterly opposed in temperament. Wittgenstein—an extraordinary character, devoted, unworldly, almost prophetic—had the characteristically metaphysical gifts of great logical power, profound insight, and imaginativeness. He tended to express himself with a dark apothegmatic obscurity. His first work, the "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," was indeed a work of metaphysics: an ambitious attempt to describe the necessary structure of reality in purely general terms. In later years he came to think (what indeed is paradoxically suggested in the Tractatus itself) that such an enterprise was impossible: that there was no necessary structure of reality; that all that philosophy could do was to get an insight into particular problems by examining the structure of various parts of our language as it is. His later works, published posthumously (most importantly, his "Philosophical Investigations"), are the strange, insightful, and often infuriating monument to this view.

G. E. Moore, on the other hand, was essentially a scholarly type of man. Fascinated in philosophy only by the strange assertions of other philosophers, he deployed great intellectual power and a precise, involved, literary style in the unfolding of the minutiæ of philosophical positions. Above all, he defended common sense, with an utterly individual kind of pedantic boldness. "Of course I know that the material world exists" was his reply to the traditional sceptics, Russell among them.

TRANSPLANTED to Oxford in more recent years, these two influences have grown in different ways. The influence of Moore joined there with an already existing concern for the niceties of meaning: it is not an accident that Moore, like most Oxford philosophers, came to philosophy from classical studies, while Russell and Wittgenstein came from mathematics. This has yielded an activity which perhaps most

closely approximates to Gellner's "linguistic philosophy." Mr J. L. Austin, the White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, the leader of this school, devotes himself principally to the very careful examination of distinctions in ordinary speech, regarding this as at least a necessary propædeutic to the study of philosophical problems. A recent book by a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, Mr G. J. Warnock, "English Philosophy since 1900," is sympathetic to this view, and expresses a notable admiration for Moore and for the virtues of commonsense.

Wittgenstein's influence has been very diverse. In part, it has been directly transmitted. Miss G. E. M. Anscombe, of Somerville College, Oxford, for instance, herself a pupil of Wittgenstein's and an editor of his writings, is an influential teacher, though her own work is more systematic and philosophically assertive than that of her master. Very differently, Professor Ryle himself has been influenced; his famous "Concept of Mind" bears the marks, though his own briskly realistic personality and an interest in Aristotelian categories have yielded a very individual product.

Other recent work is on quite different lines. Mr P. F. Strawson, of University College, Oxford, for instance, has attempted in a recent work the ambitious Kantian task, not sanctioned in "linguistic philosophy" as Gellner defines it, of justifying some of our normal categories by argument. The highly original "Thought and Action" by Mr Stuart Hampshire of All Souls is not uninfluenced by French phenomenological thought. And so on.

The closer one looks, the harder it is to see the Gellnerite unanimity in commonsensical complacency; and when one steps back again, one still cannot see it. One increasingly gets the impression that if there is complacency and pedantry, this is less the result of some philosophy than of the fact that any style of philosophy can be employed by some people in complacent and pedantic ways.

So why are modern philosophers hated—if they are? For the lay outsider, the clue might be found in this: that hardly any of them, despite their other diversity, would claim that, as philosophers, they can tell us what to do. When other direction posts are falling down, philosophers are assumed to be the people who ought to be giving us directions about life. But if they cannot, they cannot: and there are philosophical arguments for the belief that they cannot. If these arguments are valid, then the suggestion that they ought to give directions all the same is an invitation to disingenuousness.

Yet, even if there are not to be any directions, there might be something else. There might be some rather more imaginative and large-scale attempts to get to grips with our conceptual and ideological situation. We have not heard much like that; and (here Gellner has hit something) not *many* of the philosophers at this opening of the 1960s seem *very* concerned about it.

NOTES OF THE WEEK

THE SUMMIT

How Long?

The summit meeting starts on May 16th. If it lasts ten days or so (as Mr Khrushchev is said to want) and if Mr Eisenhower goes to Moscow in June, the prospect of semi-continuous Russo-American talks is intriguing. Everything can come up a second time, if necessary; and the second time will find Mr Eisenhower and Mr Khrushchev alone. This may be what Mr Khrushchev is after; it does not seem to be what General de Gaulle intended to achieve by his earlier alarms and excursions. So Mr Eisenhower will enter a sustained negotiation at a time when the Republican party's political needs must be most obvious to everyone, particularly the Russians. If a peace platform is to be put together, it has to be put together between Paris and Moscow.

For the Paris summit, Mr Khrushchev seems to be hankering after a broad agenda. Disarmament is just now at the top of the Soviet pops: Moscow's commentators now call the Khrushchev plan "the focal point of all international life." If the ten-power talks get into gear at Geneva in March, it should be possible to submit a useful working draft to the Big also made it clear on several occasions that he means business on Berlin, and he is thought to have ideas on economic aid to underdeveloped countries, too. All this will take time to mull over, particularly if a western "package" on Germany and Berlin has to be untied in the process. There should be no need for Mr Khrushchev to dig his heels in over a formal agenda, provided he is assured of the elbow-room that a ten-day affair would provide.

M. Couve de Murville's policy speech to the French Assembly on Monday, in which he admitted the possibility of a limited agreement in Berlin, provided western rights there were not diminished, gives some reassurance that progress at the summit on this issue is still not ruled out.

NUCLEAR TESTS

Vain Puffball

President Eisenhower's announcement that the United States will not extend its voluntary suspension of nuclear tests is a wrong move. It is bound to cost his can hardly see any counter-balancing advantage to be gained. Presumably the idea is to put pressure on the Russians to stop dragging their feet at the Geneva talks on test suspension, which have, admittedly, proved painfully slow: but, as a correspondent shows on page 38, it is not yet time to despair of reaching agreement there.

It is very doubtful whether the American announcement represents an effective form of pressure. The Russians know just how unpopular the first nuclear power to resume testing will make itself (they have indicated pretty clearly that they will not allow one or two minor French bangs to provoke them into resuming and thereby enabling the Americans to follow suit). They can scarcely believe that the United States will be imprudent enough actually to use the freedom it has now given itself. They are probably confident that, if it did, its political losses would be greater than its technical gains. So they are not likely to be much impressed by this week's puffball from Augusta.

The impatient men in the Pentagon and the US Atomic Energy Commission will not, for their part, be long mollified by theoretical freedom to get on with their fascinating experiments turns out, in practice, to mean that they are reined in just as firmly as before. And elsewhere in Washington—particularly in some sections of the State Department, and in Senator