



Philosophy

Cambridge Moral Sciences Club, Friday, 20 May 1955

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[Minutes of] 18th Meeting

Dr Isaiah Berlin: Philosophy

Before Dr Berlin¹ gave his paper, the secretary² reported that the club was in danger of running at a profit for the year 1954/55. After a motion that the excess should be carried over to next year had been defeated, a compromise was suggested: 30/- would be spent on coffee or beer at the last meeting of this term and the remainder carried over. Beer was, by an overwhelming majority, preferred to coffee.

Two things happened to arouse in Dr Berlin an interest in the nature of philosophical questions. The first was a visit he made to Scheffer, who lamented that in philosophy only two subjects were capable of genuine progress – logic and psychology. Nobody can be a scholar in any other branch of philosophy: there are no learned epistemologists; we always seem to go around in circles. Again, a lecture which Dr Berlin might have given at Columbia University on philosophy and liberty made him ask why a philosopher should have the right to express himself, and why one can't be a philosopher under a despotism.

Wolff's attempt to apply Leibniz's great discoveries to other fields was entirely futile. We can teach, within limits, the techniques of history, and a fourth-rate historian may be useful if only to collect information. But a fourth-rate philosopher is likely to be worse than useless – he will be dangerous. For, as opposed to empirical studies, where we know the sort of obstacles we are

¹ A courtesy title: IB had no doctorate.

² Austin Harvey ('Andor') Gomme (1930–2008).

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up against, philosophy proposes questions to which we don't know where to look for the answers. As subjects hitherto considered to be part of philosophy are seen to be empirical or deductive, they drop away from philosophy on either side: puzzles cease to be of direct interest to the philosopher once the technique for dealing with them is determined.

The scandal that philosophy never makes any progress has led some people, e.g. Nietzsche, to speak of philosophy as a *Weltanschauung*. But not much is gained by pretending that one subject is shared by Byron and Meinong. So then there have been attempts to make philosophy into a science, deductive as with Descartes, empirical as with Hume and Russell, who make philosophy like psychology. It is an interesting point that those men who have contributed most to philosophy have on the whole been wrong about its nature; whereas those whose contributions have been small have often got it right. Husserl saw that philosophy is concerned with problems which are neither empirical nor analytic, but what Kant called a synthetic a priori.

The so-called linguistic philosophers are on the whole right, but they do give the impression to ordinary men that they are lexicographers. And many philosophical problems are insoluble by the methods of linguistic analysis: some propositions belong to philosophy inherently, because they're part of the structure of experience.

Philosophy deals with the categories which textbooks don't talk about. Why, asks the child, can't I see now Napoleon at the Battle of Lodi? There is no empirical technique: but we could collect the fragments of Napoleon from St Helena and remake him, and the child would not be satisfied. Or again, there is a logical impossibility – the past isn't the present. Altering the language is no use in bringing Napoleon face-to-face with the child, who, if he goes on crying at this point, is becoming a philosopher. Why can't we go back to the past? Or why can't I be in Oxford and Cambridge at the same time? The older metaphysicians said that the nature of space and time forbids it:

this is not helpful, but we must accept as a non-empirical brute fact that space is three-dimensional. We can imagine talking tables; we can just imagine a world without material objects, four-dimensional space is barely conceivable, and time is really uncomfortable, though no textbooks say why. The attempt to explain why we can't go back as empirical or logical merely forces philosophy into a straitjacket from which it will soon escape. Philosophy is here to set the bones of the age, in the way of the age.

We can be a historian and write totalitarian history; or we could choose a harmless subject for study – arithmetic won't hurt regimes. But philosophers must ask questions without knowing the kind of answers they will get: so philosophy dies under a despotism

At the start of the discussion, *Dr Berlin* argued that Russell thinks it is a fact that the world is made of events. But this isn't a fact at all, nor the sort of answer that philosophy can give (even though Russell doesn't claim it to be empirical). Commenting on *Mr Thomson's* question as to how the two characteristics – very great generality and not proposing a technique – of philosophical questions are related, *Dr Berlin* admitted the connection seemed tenuous. *Mr Thomson* suggested that philosophy was concerned with the delimitation of the two spheres of inductive and deductive questions. But *Dr Berlin* remarked that history, which is very respectable, is empirical but doesn't work inductively. Scientists work by connecting particular propositions with general laws: this can only be done in history by distorting facts to fit theories. Thus there is more evidence that Napoleon was ambitious than of a general law from which this could be inferred: this must always be the case where history is on firm ground, and the argument is always from the particular to the general, if at all. *Mr Hanson* objected that historians do make inferences: what from? *Dr Berlin* said that these inferences are like the sort we express in, say, 'He forgave her because he loved her'

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– the ‘because’ is accepted as corresponding to something in our experience. Good historians are better than bad, because what they say is more plausible. And history will reject a law when one negative instance arises: science will always seek to find another explanation. Facts are what historians pit against facts – not theories.

In answer to *Prof. Braithwaite*, *Dr Berlin* said he thought there might be a real connection between philosophy and *Weltanschauung*: a logical positivist, for example, will certainly tend to be a liberal. *Prof. Braithwaite* described how being a Humean with respect to causation removes the fear from determinism.

Amongst many other things, *Dr Berlin* denied the truth Wittgenstein’s remark that for an answer that cannot be expressed, the question too cannot be expressed, and he thought Wittgenstein in later years would also deny this. Industry, said *Dr Berlin*, is fatal to philosophy.

Prof Braithwaite was in the chair.

[*Andor Gomme*]

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