

# Editorial: Dandelions and Smoke Signals

'The History of Philosophy begins with Thales, and ends with Hegel'. This is said to have been the first sentence of the first lecture in a history of philosophy course at Trinity College, Dublin in the nineties. According to Jonathan Rée, a similar view is found in 'the classic Marxist treatment of the history of philosophy', Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, 'which argues that Hegel summed up and brought to an end the history of philosophy'. The allusion occurs in Mr Rée's essay 'Philosophy and the History of Philosophy', in *Philosophy and its Past* (Harvester Press, £8.50, £3.50 paper). Michael Ayers contributes an essay on 'Analytical Philosophy and the History of Philosophy' and the volume ends with 'Hegel's History of Philosophy' by Adam Westoby.

Mr Rée seeks to challenge the picture of the history of philosophy as a catalogue of engagements between warring schools, though he is prepared to be polemical on his own account against a conception of the history of philosophy that he attributes to 'recent Western philosophers':

... they have regarded philosophy's past as an embarrassment, and have wished to pass over it in silence. They have felt that modern philosophers have no more reason for studying past systems of philosophy than radio engineers have for studying smoke signals. Philosophers in the 'analytic' tradition are one example. They have taken over the neo-Kantian idea that nineteenth-century philosophy was almost entirely overgrown with a luxuriant, self-indulgent rhetoric, for which Hegel was largely responsible. But they believe that at about the turn of the century philosophy came of age and that the humiliations and disappointments of its overambitious adolescence gave place to a mature and sober understanding of its limitations, allowing it to take up the less glamorous, but more sensible, task of trying to establish a few incontestable, if unexciting, truths. The writings of past philosophers then appear as the flotsam and jetsam deposited on the beaches of history by retreating tides of incautious speculation.

The prize exhibit is Professor R. M. Hare, who is pinned to the blackboard by a quotation from his 1963 British Academy Lecture 'Descriptivism':

If old mistakes are resuscitated, it is often impossible to do more than restate, in as clear a way as possible, the old arguments against them. Philosophical mistakes are like dandelions in the garden; however

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carefully one eradicates them, there are sure to be some more next year, and it is difficult to think of novel ways of getting rid of their familiar faces.

Mr Rée's polemic against oversimplification is sometimes over-simple. Gorgias of Leontini and Sextus Empiricus might have been surprised to learn that a preoccupation with sceptical issues was a post-Renaissance aberration. Plato's Battle of the Gods and Giants, the severities of Heraclitus against his predecessors, *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *Radical Philosophy* are not the only excuses in ancient and modern times for seeing philosophers as liable to the pleasures and pains and vices and virtues of plain speaking and pugnacity.

Dr Ayers is at least equally severe, and by apt and pithily presented examples he exposes some grave errors that are too nearly typical of the work of historians and commentators. He is persuasive when he rebukes Russell on Leibniz and Price on Hume for looking at their authors through the blinkers of their own philosophical preoccupations, or C. B. Macpherson for seeing Locke through a Marxist glass, darkly. Yet he too is sometimes carried into exaggeration by the impetus of his criticism. Philosophy has its continuities and its recurrences as well as its revolutions and its idiosyncratic geniuses. When reading the *Iliad* we may be struck both by the strangeness of the Funeral Games and by the familiarity of the sight of Astyanax in the arms of Andromache or the sound of Achilles bewailing the death of Patroclus. When reading Aristotle or Spinoza or Hegel or Husserl we are as likely to find a familiar problem or an immediately intelligible insight as a mystery calling for extravagant feats of scholarship and imagination.

It is also Dr Ayers who supplies a clue to a way of approaching our philosophical predecessors that deserves at least to run parallel to the strait and narrow path of historical scholarship. He speaks in one place of 'the conflict that arises between the desire to achieve an historical understanding of the genesis of a text (the intention of the author and its meaning for its original readers) and the desire to use it for one's own philosophical purposes'. Such a desire is as respectable as it is ineradicable, as Mr Westoby reminds us when he writes: 'Every new generation must try to redigest the past, transforming the substances of which it is composed and drawing from them the nourishment which its own inner appetites demand'. Philosophy is as much of a living tradition as literature or painting, and Picasso's pastiche of Manet, or Pound's of Propertius, Prokofiev's Classical Symphony, Eliot's mining in Donne, Shakespeare and Webster, Joyce's exploitation of the *Odyssey*, while they are certainly no substitute for accurate academic history of art or literature or music, are something even more important: they are food for the inner appetites of further generations, the substantive works from whose value and importance the value and importance of academic accuracy must be derived.