

largely due to the sturdy faith which the Irish pioneers handed on to their children. Their sacrifice has equipped England with thousands of churches, chapels and schools. (In the past hundred years the number of churches has been multiplied five times: the number of schools has increased from 350 in 1870 to well over 2,000 today.)

The new generation of immigrants presents a magnificent opportunity for the future: let us hope it will be grasped.

NOTE. This article is based on a contribution to *Catholicisme Anglais* (Editions du Cerf), of which an English edition is being prepared for early publication by Messrs Sheed and Ward.

OXFORD PHILOSOPHY

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MR GELLNER'S now celebrated little book¹ is an attack on a philosophical school, centred in Oxford, called 'linguistic philosophy'; in assessing it we have therefore to ask, 'Is there such a school?' The idea that there is, of course, is not original to Gellner. Professor Flew, for example, has long proclaimed the existence of such a school, membership of which apparently depends upon nomination by Professor Flew. Now it is certainly the case that there was before the war an identifiable and self-conscious group of *révoltés* among the professional philosophers at Oxford: men like Austin, Ayer and Ryle, who had been variously influenced by Moore, the Logical Positivists and Wittgenstein, and who formed a common front against Joseph and Prichard. Their cohesion derived from the contemporary Oxford situation: they could not even then be said by themselves to form a school against any wider background than that of Oxford. This group was so successful that after the war it captured almost all the philosophical posts in the University. Victory attained, its cohesion fell away; apart from certain publicists like Flew, philosophers at Oxford ceased to think of themselves as belonging to any definite group or party. This may, of course, be an illusion, or, as Gellner appears to think, a deliberate pretence: we have still to ask whether there are any tenets to which all the members of this 'school', and only they, subscribe.

¹ *Words and Things*. By Ernest Gellner. (Victor Gollancz; 25s.)

Although Ayer was the only card-carrying member, the predominant influence on the group before the war was the Logical Positivist movement. Wittgenstein's ideas filtered through mostly at second hand, and Moore's writings were, I think, more exploited than formative. After the war, with Ayer absent, Oxford philosophy took on a definite tinge of its own: the polemical attitude to other philosophy ('metaphysics') was dropped, and the cult of ordinary language set in. For this there were three main causes: the original influence of Austin; the lingering of the tradition which Prichard had represented; and the endemic disinclination from such activities as mathematical logic or the kind of system-building represented by Carnap's *Aufbau*. Although Austin has been extremely influential, at no time has more than a very small number of philosophers accepted the pure doctrine which he has preached: the majority never formed anything so cohesive as a school, but rather, each in his own way, exhibited a general trend. Moreover, although this majority treat Wittgenstein with respect, he never very seriously influenced them, and the small group of his close followers have for the most part been hostile to the cult of ordinary language, as have Ayer and his followers.

If, in this situation, one wished usefully to criticize present-day Oxford philosophy, one could do one of two things. One could make a very broad classification, say, of all those who would on the whole have sympathized with the original revolt in Oxford, or, perhaps, all those who have to some considerable extent been influenced by either Moore, the Logical Positivists, or Wittgenstein. This group would of course include many American as well as British philosophers, and also Ayer and, indeed, Gellner's patron Lord Russell. It would, admittedly, be very hard to elicit presuppositions held in common by all the members of so heterogeneous a group; but if, having done so, one could effectually criticize them, it would be all the more rewarding. Alternatively, one could, setting aside the close followers of Wittgenstein, of Ayer and of Austin, attempt to isolate the majority group at Oxford, and to characterize its doctrines. In doing this, one would have to take care to distinguish the philosophical beliefs *now* prevalent at Oxford from those prevalent twenty or even twelve years ago, since, as I have explained, the outlook has changed considerably from what it was before the war, when the Logical Positivist influence was at its height. This task would also be difficult, just because the majority forms no party every member of which has acknowledged certain tenets; so one would have to

document one's ascriptions of doctrines to this majority by convincing quotations from their writings.

Gellner has not attempted either of these tasks. Just as Professor Flew reserves the right to nominate to the party he conceives himself to lead, so Gellner reserves the right to nominate to the party he conceives himself to be attacking. I have been able to find only one principle lying behind these nominations. This is not, as one might expect, membership of the University of Oxford, for, although most of Gellner's enemies are there, Wittgenstein was not, and had indeed a great contempt for its philosophers; rather, the qualification seems to be: being the object of Lord Russell's hatred. Lord Russell has, indeed, reasonable grounds for hating Oxford: the older generation, such as Joseph and Cook-Wilson, made fools of themselves by treating him as a charlatan, and the new lot have displayed provincialism by their disrespect for mathematical logic. He has grounds, too, for hostility to Wittgenstein, whose behaviour towards his former teacher and friend was, it appears, ungrateful. But Lord Russell's personal feelings make poor cement with which to build a philosophical school.

As a serious piece of philosophical criticism, Gellner's book is totally vitiated by his failure to distinguish between the different targets of his attack. He does indeed acknowledge that 'linguistic philosophy' is not Logical Positivism; but in fact he attributes to it ideas that were in vogue only during the early stages of the revolt, when the Logical Positivist influence was strong. Worse still, although he perceives a slightly different slant to the writings of the Wittgensteinian group, he seems quite unaware that Wittgenstein's later philosophy is totally distinct both from Logical Positivism and from the ordinary-language movement. The hodge-podge of ideas, picked up from disparate sources, which Gellner attributes to the 'school' he has constructed is thus not only not attributable to all members of it, but not even, taken as a whole, attributable to any single member of it.

What in this way the book loses as a serious work it gains as a work of polemic. Having created a structure by picking up inconsistent bits from various sources, Gellner is able gleefully to expose the inconsistencies in that structure. He cites opposing quotations from one philosopher last year and a quite different one twenty years ago, and leaves the reader to gasp at the presumption of this school which imagines it can get away with such flagrant self-contradiction. Nor are his victims permitted to defend themselves against criticism of this kind, for Gellner is a great

hand at what Newman called 'poisoning the wells'; indeed, he devotes a whole chapter solely to this. (Gellner calls it 'sociology'.) He informs his readers that one of the evasive devices of this school is to indulge in sham battles amongst themselves, to pretend not to belong to any one school with a common body of doctrine at all; so if any one of them were to plead, 'Why don't you criticize me for what *I* say, and not for what some quite different—and often unidentified—person may have said?', the astute reader, forewarned by Gellner, would be equal to his tricks; he would know that all members of this school believe just the same things, and have done for the past twenty-five years—they only *pretend* not to when they are unable to rebut a refutation.

Gellner's thesis is that 'linguistic philosophy' is characterized by a common theory of meaning and a common theory of the nature of philosophy, theories which determine the conclusions reached on other matters, and on which those conclusions *depend*: hence it is necessary only to refute those theories, and all the work of this school will collapse. This is his justification for concentrating almost entirely upon the views which his opponents have expressed about the nature and method of philosophy: he quotes hardly a single example of an *application* of the methods of 'linguistic philosophy' to an actual philosophical problem, but contents himself with observing that faulty methods *must* lead to fallacious results, without attempting to demonstrate this in practice. One of the few such examples is Strawson's criticism of the Theory of Descriptions (p. 179), and this illustrates the utterly shoddy character of what Gellner will pass as an examination of the work of others. Strawson had argued that the problem how terms without reference can have meaning does not require Russell's theory for its solution, since it is the terms abstracted from any particular context which have meaning, but the terms *in* the particular context which have or lack a reference. Gellner's reply is, 'But so what? The problem of how expressions of that kind manage to refer survives *even if restated in terms of particular utterances*.' But the problem was not how they managed to refer, but, as Gellner had stated ten lines earlier, how, when they do not refer, they still manage to mean something; and Strawson is denying that one can ever sensibly ascribe meaning to *particular* utterances of expressions.

I think it is true to say that for *none* of the various groups and individuals whose views Gellner conflates to form the monstrosity he labels 'linguistic philosophy' does any of their work *depend* upon their theory of the nature of philosophy. It is true that

Wittgenstein's work is full of very general remarks about what philosophy is, such as that philosophy should propound no theses, or at least none that could be questioned. This is probably the weakest part of his work, and doubtless affected his manner of presentation; but there is nothing in what he says on any other topic the arguments for which presuppose acceptance of these views, and indeed it seems to me that his actual practice belies them—it is, e.g., quite easy to formulate philosophical theses which Wittgenstein advanced. Gellner is, in any case, quite wrong in supposing that acceptance of Wittgenstein's views on the nature of philosophy is at all widespread, even among close followers of Wittgenstein. What is indeed common to almost all the philosophers Gellner attacks, and to many others—Ayer, for example—is the view that philosophical problems mostly arise from misunderstandings of certain concepts, and are to be resolved by giving a correct account of those concepts. Gellner complains that this excludes the possibility of a philosopher's enunciating any substantive truths. I think that most Oxford philosophers would not be dogmatic on this point (thereby eliciting Gellner's accusations of evasiveness). They would not reject the possibility that philosophy could arrive at substantive truths: they would merely say that they do not see how this is to be done, and add that, while much past philosophy makes clear sense, understood as elucidation of concepts, they have not found a single convincing example of a philosophical demonstration of a substantive truth. I think indeed that a Catholic philosopher could not be content with this position. Natural theology is certainly part of philosophy, and the existence of God is not just a fact about concepts. Nevertheless, I do not see any point in a *general* defence of the view that philosophy can attain substantive truth. What is needed is a convincing philosophical demonstration of some particular substantive truth: whining about philosophers who attempt no such demonstration, without providing the slightest indication of how one is to be constructed, will not get us anywhere.

Gellner is correct in saying that a theory of *meaning* underlies the work of the 'linguistic' philosophers: it is his theory of meaning which determines what a philosopher *counts* as an elucidation or analysis of a concept. Of the Logical Positivists, of Wittgenstein, of the 'ordinary language' philosophers, one could in each case say that certain views about meaning lay at the heart of their philosophy. Only: in each of these three cases it is a quite different theory of meaning; it is therefore not surprising that Gellner makes a fearful hash of expounding 'the' theory of

meaning which they all hold in common. The ordinary-language group hold that a concept may be elucidated by giving an exact and detailed description of the everyday usage of an expression, both the verbal forms used and the occasions on which it would normally be considered appropriate to use them. According to Wittgenstein, however, language gets its life from the role which it plays in or the connection which it has with other—non-linguistic—human activities. It follows that a description of, e.g., the way in which we in fact make a certain classification will in general be inadequate as an account of a concept; it must be supplemented by saying what interest making just this classification has for us, what role it plays in our lives. In trying to conflate these utterly opposed points of view, Gellner makes no attempt to give a serious exposition of either: instead, he reduces what he calls the ‘Wittgensteinian’ theory of meaning to a few rhetorical devices such as the ‘argument from paradigm cases’ (APC).

Of these devices, the APC and the ‘Contrast Theory’ were indeed much in vogue in the Logical Positivist period. Gellner says that the APC ‘is absolutely essential to Linguistic Philosophy’ (p. 30). This is simply not true: it would be very hard to find examples of its use in recent writings, and it is typical of his polemical methods that, of the two examples of its use which he cites (p. 32 fn.), one is an article by Austin which does not contain, either in the passage referred to or anywhere else, anything which even looks like an application of the argument (I have not had time to check the other alleged example). In any case, there is a crucial difference between applications of such arguments made by the Logical Positivists and by, e.g., Wittgenstein. The Logical Positivists were genuinely making a deduction from a general thesis about the meanings of words, e.g., that a term could be meaningful only if it applied to some things and not to others. Wittgenstein’s uses of these particular arguments, on the other hand, do not depend on prior acceptance of any general thesis. (Wittgenstein had a theory of meaning, but, unlike the Positivists, never claimed to have a *criterion* for what is meaningful.) E.g., Miss Anscombe relates that when she remarked that people used to think the sun goes round the earth because it looks as though it does, Wittgenstein asked, ‘And how would it look if it looked as though the earth rotated on its axis?’ It would clearly have been ludicrous for her to reply, ‘Oh, but you are appealing to the Contrast Theory, and Gellner has exploded that’. It requires demonstration that any actual example of this style of argument, used by Wittgenstein or an Oxford philosopher, is in fact falla-

cious; since only the Positivists claimed to derive the validity of such arguments from any general thesis, the refutation of the general thesis is quite beside the point.

I believe that future generations will regard Wittgenstein as a great philosopher. I do not believe that they will look back on 1945-1959 in Oxford as a Golden Age in philosophy, though I think philosophy in Oxford is very much healthier than it is, say, in Paris. There can certainly be fruitful criticism of predominant trends in recent and current Oxford philosophy from a Wittgensteinian point of view, and also from the standpoint of mathematical logic: there *could* also be constructive criticism of Wittgenstein's later philosophy from some independent position, though no one has wholly succeeded in producing it yet. But of Gellner's book one can say only that it is a depressing illustration of the philistinism of what he calls the 'general educated public' in this country that they could be deceived by a book which does not even have the smell of honest or seriously intentioned work.

NOTICE

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