

A TERRIBLY SERIOUS  
ADVENTURE

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Philosophy at Oxford 1900–60

NIKHIL KRISHNAN

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Those who know they are deep strive for clarity. Those who would like to seem deep to the crowd strive for obscurity.

Nietzsche

There is no philosophical idea, however deep or subtle, that cannot and should not be expressed in everyone's language.

Bergson<sup>1</sup>

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## Dramatis Personae

### *Principal characters*

*R. G. Collingwood* (1889–1943). English philosopher, historian and archaeologist who made serious contributions to all three disciplines. His philosophical work concerned questions in all branches of philosophy, but his work on the philosophy of history was especially influential. Major works: *The Principles of Art* (1938), *An Autobiography* (1939), *The Idea of History* (1946).

*Gilbert Ryle* (1900–76). Pioneering philosopher of mind and a foundational figure in the tradition of ‘ordinary language philosophy’. Waynflete Professor of Metaphysics at the University of Oxford and editor of *Mind*, an influential philosophical journal. Major works: ‘Systematically Misleading Expressions’ (1932), *The Concept of Mind* (1949).

*Isaiah Berlin* (1909–97). Émigré from the Russian Empire after the Bolshevik Revolution; historian of ideas, liberal and anti-Communist political thinker. Major works: *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (1939), *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953), ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ (1958).

*A. J. Ayer* (1910–89). Influential figure in the reception of Austrian logical positivism in the English-speaking world. Public intellectual, secularist, liberal and rationalist. Major works: *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936), *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956).

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*J. L. Austin (1911–60)*. Pioneering figure of ‘ordinary language philosophy’, aiming to ‘dissolve’ philosophical problems by showing them to emerge out of misunderstandings of language, as well as the theory of ‘speech acts’. Major works: ‘Other Minds’ (1946), *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962), *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).

*G. E. M. (Elizabeth) Anscombe (1919–2001)*. Student of Ludwig Wittgenstein at Cambridge. Later, his literary executor and the English translator of his later works, including the *Philosophical Investigations*. A convert to Roman Catholicism. Major works: *Intention* (1957), ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ (1958).

*R. M. Hare (1919–2002)*. Moral philosopher associated with a ‘prescriptivist’ theory of morals, according to which moral language is understood not as describing the world but as prescribing courses of action. Major works: *The Language of Morals* (1952), *Freedom and Reason* (1963), *Moral Thinking* (1981).

*Iris Murdoch (1919–99)*. Moral philosopher and novelist best known for her work on moral psychology and an approach to ethics inspired by Plato. Major works: *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953), *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992).

*Mary Midgley (1919–2018)*. Philosopher and public intellectual best known for her work at the intersection of zoology and moral philosophy. Major works: *Beast and Man* (1978), *Wickedness* (1984).

*Peter Strawson (1919–2006)*. Philosopher of logic and language who did pioneering work in reviving metaphysics and on the theoretical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Major works: *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (1959), ‘Freedom and Resentment’ (1960), *The Bounds of Sense* (1966).

*Philippa Foot* (1920–2010). Moral philosopher best known for her contribution to the revival of Aristotelian approaches to ethics and her original work in applied ethics. Major works: ‘Moral Arguments’ (1958), ‘Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives’ (1972), *Natural Goodness* (2001).

*Bernard Williams* (1929–2003). Moral philosopher best known for his sceptical views about the authority of morality, and for his conception of philosophy as a humanistic discipline whose concerns are continuous with those of history and literature. Major works: ‘A Critique of Utilitarianism’ (1973), *Moral Luck* (1981), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985).



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### Giddiness

One may as well begin with Socrates. And with Socrates, it always begins with a boy and a question. This boy is sixteen. He likes to wrestle, and he likes geometry; he will die one of the greatest mathematicians of the age. He is called Theaetetus, and he gives his name to a dialogue by Plato about an episode, very possibly historical, when he, an adolescent mathematical prodigy, meets a Socrates who is shortly to be charged with heinous crimes – impiety, corrupting youth – and sentenced to death.

Theaetetus is not beautiful, but he is bright, even-tempered and intellectually eager, which makes him just Socrates's type (Socrates was a soul man). In his usual way, he asks the boy, 'What is knowledge?'

Theaetetus would like to play, but he doesn't know how. 'I assure you, Socrates, that I have often tried to think this out, when I have heard reports of the questions you ask. But I can never persuade myself that anything I say will really do ... And yet, again, you know, I can't even stop worrying about it.'<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, he admits, 'when I'm looking at them' – Socrates's questions – 'I begin to feel quite giddy.'<sup>2</sup>

'I dare say you do, my dear boy,' says Socrates. 'For this is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else.' Where philosophy begins: in wonder, giddiness and sleepless nights.

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Reading a book without a preface, the logician Michael Dummett (b.1925) once wrote, ‘is like arriving at someone’s house for dinner, and being conducted straight into the dining-room’. No one is required to read it, but a reader ‘who wants to be personally introduced has ... the right to be’.<sup>4</sup> Even an impersonal history needs a personal note to set off the rest; even Oxford’s short, packed terms have room for a ‘noughth’ week, when introductions are made, and the quaint ways of a strange town explained to the newcomer.

This book is a history of philosophy at Oxford in the mid-twentieth century. Who would want to write the story of such a thing, and why? The question might be asked with either curiosity or disdain: disdain from those who come to the subject armed with strong prejudices, curiosity from those persuaded the history needs to be written but surprised to see it written by someone with so exotic a name.

I arrived in Oxford in 2007, on a scholarship that paid for me to do a second undergraduate degree. Having completed one already, in economics, a moderately useful subject for which I had little affection, I was resolved not to waste a chance to study something I might, recklessly, enjoy. But at that stage, ‘philosophy’ was a subject about which my ideas were vague and largely romantic. I had grown up in India, a country with a long and sophisticated philosophical tradition honoured today chiefly as a piece of inert heritage. One was glad to know it was there; few people were particularly inclined to study it. Still less was there any inclination to treat it as a going concern. Few universities offered it as an option, and those that did taught it as history, as if it were part of the essence of the subject that a philosopher must be not only wise but dead.

What I associated with the word philosophy was a particular quality, call it *depth*. Philosophy was (as the etymology of the Sanskrit word for it suggests) *vision*, the philosopher a sort of seer (or, see-er). Abstraction was the mark of philosophy, and outlandishness the sign of a philosophical claim worth taking seriously,

the more radical its rejection of common sense the better. I was drawn, before I had read very much of it, to a view of philosophy as mystery, as poetry, as paradox. The idea that philosophy was about solving problems – as in, say, trigonometry – would have struck me then as both vulgar and silly.

My undergraduate tutor at Oxford did not share my view. He picked on what I had thought an innocuous line in an essay. ‘Now what *exactly* do you mean by ... ?’ I cannot remember the sentence that provoked the question. It was probably the sort of thing I used to think made for a good, a philosophical, sentence: figurative, allusive, oblique, long, and entirely indeterminate in meaning. I offered up my paraphrase, equally figurative, allusive, etc. ‘But what does that mean, *literally*?’

‘Well,’ I said, being young, a little cocky and very ignorant. ‘Aren’t these sorts of things essentially ... *ineffable*?’ He paused, as one might at a swear word from an altar-boy. Then, shortly, ‘On the contrary, these sorts of things are *entirely* and *eminently* effable. And I should be *very* grateful if you’d try to eff a few of them for your essay next week.’

How I resented it at the time. The demand for the explicit statement of theses, for arguments laid out in steps, for claims backed up with evidence, all felt like they belonged to the world of economists, accountants and engineers that I had hoped to leave behind. Why must essays have these unimaginative structures, giving away the game at the start? And why the infernal symbolism, all Greek letters and arrows pointing both ways?

Because I was earnest and anxious to please, I did as I was told. It helped a little that I had a native impulse to pedantry that could be put to useful work. My essays became tamer and shed their attempts at poetry. There was a great deal more ‘I shall argue that’ and rather less mystery. That much was part of a quite familiar undergraduate experience, of learning the rules of a game, the conventions of a genre, the norms of a discipline. But there was something else about these norms that I resented: their

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insistence on making flights of philosophical fancy accountable to something variously called (impressively) ‘intuition’, (earthily) ‘common sense’ and (prosaically) ‘the ordinary’. The idea that philosophy might have to doff its cap to such things was, to me, not so much objectionable as contradictory. It was as if the queen had to seek permission to rule from a mere pawn, or – to change the metaphor – as if the astronomer had to run his calculations by the local palm-reader.

Week after week, I had it put to me that the views I was defending – with increasing confidence and adeptness – didn’t ring true. That the man or woman on the street would find them absurd. That they were pushing against the boundaries of what our words usually meant. My essays came back with dozens of little scribbles in the margins – “‘the” or “a”?”, ‘necessary or sufficient?’, ‘does this really follow?’, ‘loose’, ‘obscure’ and (most damningly of all) ‘unclear’. These criticisms were delivered with the wit and gentle English cruelty that made them hard to ignore. My reports ended with sentences like, ‘Mr K. is yet to learn the difference between truth and beauty, open-mindedness and vacillation, the provocative and the absurd.’ Here, I found myself not an outsider to philosophical conventions so much as on one side of an old disagreement about philosophy itself.

I found the point well stated in an essay by the philosopher-novelist Iris Murdoch, in whose divided self I found my own ambivalences reflected. ‘There is a two-way movement in philosophy,’ she wrote, ‘a movement towards the building of elaborate theories, and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts. McTaggart says that time is unreal, Moore replies that he has just had his breakfast. Both these aspects of philosophy are necessary to it.’<sup>5</sup> I did not then know who McTaggart and Moore were; I thought perhaps they might be dummy names, variations on the generic ‘Jones’ and ‘Smith’ familiar from the reading list.

I suppose that what I was rejecting was the idea that Murdoch

had put so well: that philosophy is flight of fancy as well as curt reminder. I desired the fantasy and resented the grunt work, and most of all, the idea of having to be accountable to so lowly a thing as common sense. Today, many years of education later, I teach students in whom I recognise some of my own impulses. And now, it is me with the gentle put-downs, the red pen running wild in the margin of essays that tell me how ineffable it all is.

I had thought, in my initial resentment, that my tutors were telling me, absurdly, that nothing was ineffable, that everything could be put into sentences that might be written by a well-trained bureaucrat. That claim would have been a mistake, but that wasn't their point. Some things may well be impossible to put into words. But most of us are bad at telling those things apart from the ones we simply haven't yet found the right words for – because we lack the wisdom, the clarity of vision, or perhaps the purity of heart. That was the moral lesson of my cruel tutelage, and it was several more years before I understood that a *moral* lesson is what it had been.

Plato, of course, had anticipated it all a couple of thousand years ago. It now seems to me grimly ironic that the scene had to be re-enacted before its lessons could be absorbed. So many of Plato's dialogues are versions of the same parable of the older man and the younger. Old Socrates claims to know nothing at all and speaks only in questions; the young man blithely professes knowledge of all the answers. It takes him a while to learn he should not be so blithe.

The young man is exposed for not knowing what he claims to know. But something else is also exposed, something about the distinctive style of the philosopher. What must have struck the cocky youths in their first encounters with Socrates is the unsettling effect of being taken at their word; not at being taken seriously – rich and glib, they were used to that – but at being taken literally.

The second surprise was that of being called to account.

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Philosophical questions – are we free? can we know? – seem accountable to nothing. What conceivable experiment could prove, or disprove, an answer? How would we even know if we got it wrong? Moreover, little seems to hang on getting the right answer. Indeed, the very idea of a right answer seems to bring in standards improper to a question of that kind. The natural temptation is to take the question not as a request for a straight answer, but as an invitation to be interesting. Before one has been exposed to Socrates's questions, it is natural to think that the only demands philosophical chat makes are expressive ones. The most common folk model of the philosopher's style is not that of the weatherman telling you to leave your umbrella at home, but that of the oracle, whose power relies on its every utterance being able to mean itself, its opposite and everything in between. The folk idea of philosophy, sometimes to the credit of the subject and sometimes to its discredit, finds its essence in complexity and ambiguity, not in simplicity and clarity.

The peculiarity of Socrates, and what people must have thought his vulgarity, lay in his insistence that we say no more and no less than we mean. Also in his insistence that we stand by what we have said, until we can no longer mean it. A Socratic education in philosophy is, above all, an education in responsibility. I had thought at first that the technicality of the philosophy I was being taught, its desperate fealty to common sense and its clinical literal-mindedness were signs of its betrayal of the Socratic legacy to which it laid claim. I was wrong.

\*

This book is a history of something sometimes called 'linguistic philosophy', or – to use a term in one way broader and in another narrower – 'analytic philosophy'. More precisely, it is a history of some strains of this style of philosophy, as practised by a dozen or so figures at Oxford between 1920 and 1960. On any account, that

style took a central concern of philosophy to be language. Most people in that tradition had high hopes for a philosophy done in that style, most ambitiously, that their new linguistic methods would simply ‘dissolve’ traditional philosophical problems. Even those without such ambitions shared a commitment to using language in a distinctive way: as free of jargon as possible, and with a vigilance to subtle verbal distinctions that outsiders couldn’t always distinguish from pedantry.

As in any intellectual tradition, the differences within it are as significant as the differences between it and its rivals. Where it is debatable whether some particular figure or text belongs in this tradition, I have erred on the side of inclusion. I tend to take the view that a tradition is composed of both establishment and rebel, legitimate heir and pretender. A tradition without a heterodoxy is only half a tradition.

The reader should be warned that most of the figures in this tradition were white men, most of them at least middle class, their cosy common-room repartee only occasionally disrupted by the appearance of a woman, or an émigré from central Europe. Under whatever name, linguistic philosophy – or something descended from it – still dominates the academic philosophy of the English-speaking world. Rumour has it that brave evangelists have even managed to find converts in deepest France. In any case, it was – or had shaped – the kind of philosophy that I was taught to do, the kind that I in my turn teach my own students.

I have tried to keep the story short, which has meant leaving out many books and many people.<sup>6</sup> Not all have received their due; in particular, there is a good deal more to be said about the *arguments* of the philosophers than I have said here. But there are many books that cover the texts and arguments, rather fewer that make anything of what is called the human drama of the story.<sup>7</sup> I have tried to make more of that drama, if only as compensation for the cold impersonality of the conventional histories, where idea communes with idea, argument clashes with argument,

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without anyone having to stop for lunch. Because it is roughly chronological, this book cannot avoid being a work in two parts: one part full of travel and youthful uncertainty, the other full of men and women in their thirties and forties settling down to write the books and essays that have been many years in the making. What I have sacrificed in depth and detail, I hope to have gained in scale and pace. If I am not always explicit in my defence of a particular interpretation of this history, it is because I hope to allow my readers to spot the patterns for themselves.

That phrase – ‘Oxford philosophy’ – evokes something of a bygone age, the age commemorated in the row of photographic portraits in the seminar room (the ‘Ryle Room’) at 10 Merton Street where I spent so many hours of my youth, and the crisp English names of the philosophers under them: Ryle, Foot, Strawson, Anscombe ... But by the time I got there, the subjects of the portraits were all dead or dying. The elbow patches of the old days were gone, as were the patrician vowels and the smoke that made Oxford philosophy the thing it was.

In the beginning, I found it a nuisance to be surrounded by people for whom ‘Gilbert’ and ‘Philippa’ and ‘Peter’ and ‘Elizabeth’ (and others you will meet in the following pages) were not only items in a bibliography but the names of teachers, friends and unforgiven nemeses. Now, I’m rather inclined to make a virtue of my never having met them. Coming to this terrain from another country, another language, and another generation, I have ended up feeling something like the proprietary entitlement to it that Jorge Luis Borges, speaking as an Argentine, felt about all Western culture: ‘We have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have.’<sup>8</sup>

The sense of a proprietary right came to me in slow degrees, beginning in resentment and culminating in an affection and loyalty that are all the fiercer for having come so slowly. I wouldn’t want to tell the story of people I did not like, or at least like to read. Nor, equally, would I be able to write about people against



whom I refused to hear an ill word. I can't claim to be impartial about Oxford philosophy. It has made me, to the point that I couldn't reject it as worthless without rejecting myself with it. But I do believe I possess what Susan Sontag once said was an essential qualification in the historian of a sensibility: 'a deep sympathy modified by revulsion'.<sup>9</sup> I needn't say that the sympathy heavily outweighs the revulsion. But I hope to have given the prosecution all the evidence it needs to make the case on the other side.

The critics shall, then, have their due. But the many people who have decried Oxford philosophy have decried it for different and often incompatible reasons. Oxford philosophy, it has been said, was pedantic yet amateurish, made a fetish of science yet showed an ignorance of it, was too secular, too reductively materialist, too reactionary and somehow also too blandly moderate. The critics can't, surely, *all* be right.

Others before me have defended Oxford philosophy against these charges.<sup>10</sup> But there is a specific sort of critic who has not, to my knowledge, been adequately addressed. The sort of critics I have in mind hold Oxford philosophy up to standards of a broadly humanistic sort. Their challenge to this philosophy is that it fails to be humane, as philosophy ought to be: to provide insight into something called 'the human condition'. To critics of this stripe, Oxford philosophy's emphasis on questions of language and meaning, its disclaiming of the speculative ('metaphysical') aims of the philosophy that came before it, are a betrayal of the tradition whose name it claims for itself.

The critics appeal to a standard I share, and they are certainly right to find particular works in this tradition wanting. But I think they are quite wrong in their stronger criticism that nothing in this tradition *could* ever answer to these humanistic standards. I want to say something in defence of Oxford philosophy that isn't typically said of it. I want to praise it for a quality it has never claimed for itself: that of being edifying.

I admit this is a peculiar strategy, a little like praising the

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Spanish Inquisition for its clemency. Few people have come away from reading the philosophy of this period with a sense of having been edified. I suppose I think such readers are missing something important about it. I was one of those who was improved, morally and (one might say) spiritually, by my immersion in the philosophy of this period.

One of the understated heroes of the following pages, J. L. Austin, is best known for what he did to sharpen our eyes to the difference between what one says, what one does in saying it, and what one's saying it brings about. 'Fire' can be the name of one of the elements, a warning to leave the theatre, and the inadvertent cause of a stampede. In the same spirit, I am interested not only in what the Oxford philosophers in my story were saying but also in what they were doing in saying it and what their saying it brought about. Oxford philosophers rarely claimed to do more than clarify a couple of ideas, to make a couple of distinctions. But I shall be arguing that they delivered vastly more than the little they promised. Some philosophy can edify without meaning to. Indeed, some philosophy is all the *more* edifying for not trying to be anything of the sort.

I need to convince humanistic critics of Oxford philosophy to accept an unfamiliar description of it. The trouble is that Oxford philosophy comes, to such readers, weighted with a received interpretation. According to the received view, Oxford philosophy is the most regrettable stage in a regrettable shift in the history of philosophy: the 'linguistic turn'. At a certain point in the nineteenth century, European philosophers decided to abandon the worthy metaphysical speculations of their predecessors and to turn their attentions instead to the *language* of that speculation. In the beginning, the 'turn' produced a certain amount of ingenious technical achievement in symbolic logic and the foundations of mathematics. In the form it took in inter-war Austria, the 'turn' had the modest effect of getting philosophers to think seriously about the significance of scientific discoveries. But by the time the

‘turn’ reached Oxford, it had been reduced to a debased kind of amateur linguistics that could keep the Bertie Woosterish types who practised it occupied in verbal puzzles while fancying themselves the inheritors of the Socratic mantle. Only the conceit, the imperial hubris of its practitioners – upper middle class, and privately educated nearly to a (white) man – could have sustained them in this delusion.

For now I shall do no more than propose an alternative description of the same tradition. My own origins, in a world utterly unlike mid-century Oxford, make it hard for me to take seriously the idea that its appeal must be restricted to the white and expensively educated. Moreover, the notion of a ‘linguistic turn’ is in my view a red herring. The idea of a ‘turn’ is only one of many ways in which the story can be told; my reservations about the conventional way of telling that story come down to the fact that it obscures the many continuities between what came before the turn and what came after.

My own view is that Oxford philosophy was just one more stage in the slow evolution of a basically Socratic picture of philosophy, one that views philosophy as concerned with the pursuit of truth through rigorous, self-aware dialogue. That original picture, captured in Plato’s famous depictions of Socrates interrogating young Athenians about their beliefs, adapted like any living tradition to the demands and structures of modernity. Like Socrates did in his day, the tradition distinguished itself from the sophists and rhetoricians of its own. The central idea in this tradition is that of *philosophy as responsible speech*, and of *responsibility as accountability*.

The challenge of philosophy is that the standards of argument themselves are up for grabs. By contrast, modern science in its everyday form makes itself accountable to the results of experiments and the law makes itself accountable to authorities. Nothing in philosophy counts uncontroversially as either an experiment or an authority. What then makes one philosophical claim any worthier

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of assent than any other? The ‘linguistic turn’ proposed a sort of answer: at the very least, what we *should* say should be held accountable to what we *do* say.

To put it another way, I propose to understand Oxford philosophy not in terms of shared doctrines (there were none), nor a shared canon (always contested), or a shared ‘methodology’ (the very word would have induced nausea). I propose to understand it in terms of the particular virtues it aspired to embody. Some of these virtues were, by any reckoning, moral ones: humility, self-awareness, collegiality, restraint. Others are better thought aesthetic: elegance, concision, directness.

The greatest works of this tradition, which you shall meet in the following pages, are some of the great works of twentieth-century literature. In them, abstraction is balanced by a striking attention to particulars, impersonality by moments of dramatic individuality. There are passages in them that have moved me as much as anything in music or poetry, and they possess the power to move or enthrall because of, and not despite, the constraints under which their authors labour. If one wants a low-brow example, one might consider a claim that has been made about the fiction of Agatha Christie: that in her love of formal complexity, her perfunctory way with traditional ideas of character and incident, the endless range of experiments she pulled off even within a circumscribed world of vicars and village gossips, she belongs with Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.<sup>11</sup>

For a higher-brow example, one might turn to such composers as Bach and Schoenberg, about whom it has been suggested that their achievement consisted in reconciling the apparent tension between the baroquely formal and freely expressive. The closest analogy I can find in my own experience is that of classical Indian music, especially in the highly formalistic southern variation that I studied in my childhood: ‘It is strange, but right,’ says one writer of this music, ‘to think of ecstasy not as a function of breaking out (as the Greek word would suggest) but as breaking *into*

bonds.<sup>12</sup> There are passages in *The Concept of Mind*, *Sense and Sensibilia*, *Intention* and *Individuals* – to name only four of the books I shall discuss in these pages – for whose effect there is no better analogy.<sup>13</sup>

To put the same point another way, this is a history of philosophy written as a history of people, their dispositions, their habits, or more precisely what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called a *habitus*: their habits of thought, speech, accent, cadence, their physical postures as they walked and talked and wrote, and their more abstract habits: how they saw, heard, felt.<sup>14</sup> Its basic unit of organisation is not the argument but the anecdote, and what it is concerned to understand is not just what people thought but what they were like. I should be happy if some readers finish the book finding themselves agreeing with some of their conclusions or persuaded by some of their arguments, but I should be happier still if they came away simply admiring them.

# 1

## Fog

Gilbert Ryle (b.1900), the first-born of the protagonists of this story, grew up in Sussex, sunniest of English counties. In later life, he told a sort of origin story for himself. A bright young schoolmaster at young Ryle's school, just 'down from Oxford', asked his class the kind of question Socrates would have relished: 'What is colour?' 'Paint,' replied one unassuming lad. Ryle smirked knowingly. Asked if he could do better, he said something to the effect that a colour is the power of an object to produce a certain kind of sensation in us. It was what, a few years later, he knew to call 'a Lockean sort of answer'. 'I scored five marks for my sapience,' the grown-up know-it-all recalled in his memoir.<sup>1</sup>

Ryle belonged to a generation of men who had just started to call each other by their Christian names, but he was inconsistent on the matter.<sup>2</sup> We had better play it safe and call him 'Ryle'. His grandfather was the first bishop of Liverpool, and the author of a steady stream of readable theological treatises with titles like *Knots Untied*. Old Bishop Ryle sought salvation in the Word of God, 'the Word made clear to the head and applied to the heart'.<sup>3</sup> Woolliness was the chief instrument of the devil, his way of dividing Christian from Christian; God's work called for his servants to do better. 'If men would only define with precision the theological terms which they use, many disputes would die. Scores of excited disputants would discover ... that their disputes have arisen from their own neglect of the great duty of explaining the meaning of words.'<sup>4</sup>

He managed to raise an agnostic son – Gilbert’s father – who became a prosperous general practitioner with a sideline in philosophical speculation; he was one of the early members of the Aristotelian Society. His own ten children, clever and variously gifted, never had a faith to lose. Gilbert Ryle repudiated the evangelical inheritance but imbibed the family manner and always wrote in the punchy style of his grandfather.

He was born in the late summer of 1900, a lucky year to be born an English boy. Just a year older and there was every chance that he would have been one of the 149 boys from Brighton College who died at Ypres, the Somme or in Palestine, and whose deaths were announced at school assembly. As it was, Ryle survived, eighteen years old at the Armistice, and ready to head for – or ‘go up to’ – Oxford, armed with the confidence of a happy childhood spent under a Brighton sun.<sup>5</sup>

His Oxford college was Queen’s, on the High Street, dubbed by Pevsner ‘the grandest piece of classical architecture in Oxford’, a product of ‘the short phase which one has a right to name English Baroque, i.e. Baroque with English reservations’.<sup>6</sup> A surviving photograph of Ryle in his twenties could be that of an officer on leave, or a young schoolmaster capable of going from joshing to sternness in a blink. His jaw is set, his eyes hardened; the high forehead portends the baldness of middle age. The one decorative touch is the wet gloss of the Macassar oil holding his immaculate side parting in place.

The degree for which he was ‘reading’ was *Literae Humaniores*, with its two phases, ‘Moderations’ and ‘Greats’. Mods – Oxford leaves nothing serious without a nickname – ended with a gruelling set of exams, two a day on average, in Greek and Latin language and literature. It has been said that only the ten-day ordeal that is the Chinese civil service entrance exam is harder. Ryle was half-hearted for those first five terms, a succession of eight intense weeks punctuated with long vacations. He achieved distinction as a rower, rising, as he later put it, ‘to the giddy height

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of Captain of Boats'. But he found also that he 'lacked the ear, the nostrils, the palate, and the toe' of the real classical scholar.<sup>7</sup> It didn't stop him getting a first-class degree anyway, in the only way one is supposed to get a first at Oxford: without trying.

Ryle's one early classical love was Aristophanes, whose bawdy plays spared no one but were especially rude about philosophers. (Socrates in *The Clouds* is mostly interested in examining the rear end of a gnat.) His other early love was logic, 'a grown-up subject, in which there were still unsolved problems'.<sup>8</sup> 'Unsolved' meant, among other things, that the only advantage the old had over the young was that of having had longer to think about the questions.

Greats was a peculiar and somewhat unsystematic coupling of history (ancient Greek and Roman) with philosophy (ancient and modern). Ryle 'did think that the Academy mattered more than the Peloponnesian War' – the Academy in question being Plato's original – but was left cold by his tutors' attitude to the *Republic*. They treated it, he recalled, 'like the Bible, and to me most of it seemed, philosophically, no better'.<sup>9</sup>

His tutor at Queen's was Herbert James 'Hamish' Paton (b.1887), a Glaswegian in his early thirties who had arrived in Oxford on a seventeenth-century scholarship that had once been held by Adam Smith. Paton had a keen but, as Ryle remembered it, 'unfanatical' interest in the philosophy of an Italian contemporary, Benedetto Croce (b.1866), himself an unfanatical follower of Hegel (b.1770).<sup>10</sup> Hegel's cult in Germany had tended – or so it certainly seemed in England – to fanaticism of one kind or another. But Croce, by then the author of a sprightly little book called *What Is Living and What Is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel*, preferred the Hegel who decried the more mystical sort of philosophy, 'with its frenzies, its sighing, its raising the eyes to heaven, its bowing the neck and clasping the hands, its faintings, its prophetic accents, its mysterious phrases of the initiates'. No, said Hegel-as-presented-by-Croce, 'philosophy should have a rational and intelligible form'. It should be 'exoteric', that is



to say open to public interpretation, ‘not a thing of sects, but of humanity’.<sup>11</sup>

When Ryle started at Oxford, Paton was just returning from Versailles, where he had attended the Paris Peace Conference as an expert on Polish matters. He had picked up his expertise as a member of the intelligence division of the Admiralty, where he, like a few other lucky dons of the decade who managed never to see the inside of a trench, had spent his war years. His students often found him ‘unforthcoming’, but that could mean simply that he refused to give them the answers.<sup>12</sup>

Not giving students the answers was at the heart of the distinctive style of teaching Ryle would have encountered at Oxford. From being one of a few dozen boys at Brighton College, he found himself alone in a study with Paton – or occasionally, with one other student – with his opinions being given the closest attention by someone vastly better informed on the subject. There have always been many ways of running an Oxford tutorial, but Paton’s model for the task was that of the courtroom cross-examiner. Ryle was among the few to find provocation and excitement in his almost-catchphrase, ‘Now, Ryle, what *exactly* do you mean by ... ?’<sup>13</sup>

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Ryle was lucky to have had Paton easing his path into philosophy and Oxford. Paton was one of the few members of ‘the lost generation’ to be found in the senior common rooms of Oxford in the early 1920s. R. G. Collingwood (b.1889) was one of the few others; as Paton’s memoir had it, ‘generals had not then discovered that brains may have a greater military value than can be displayed in trench warfare by platoon commanders’.<sup>14</sup> The two of them were ‘a slender bridge between predecessors at least ten years older and successors at least ten years younger’.<sup>15</sup> ‘For good and for ill’, Ryle remembers ‘the traditions and the habits

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of pre-1914 Oxford philosophers were, by say 1925, hanging by a very thin thread.<sup>16</sup>

In Ryle's remembering of the twenties, 'the philosophic kettle in Oxford was barely lukewarm'.<sup>17</sup> This was in spite of the presence there of sectarians of at least three stripes. And in other climes, the battle between sharply distinct worldviews is the stuff of *Sturm, Drang* and excited undergraduates. There was that lonely 'pragmatist', F. C. S. Schiller (b.1864) at Corpus Christi, who took truth to be a matter of practical usefulness and devoted himself to such useful tasks as managing the finances of the Mind Association (formed to oversee the running of the flourishing journal of the same name), ghost-hunting (still a respectable occupation for gentlemen), and the sterilisation of the poor. Then there were the last of the Victorian 'idealist' metaphysicians, greatly interested in the gap between Appearance and Reality, the manifold and the Absolute (and much given to Germanic capitals). At its ascendant in the nineteenth century, idealism spoke in the inspiring tones of Thomas Hill Green (b.1836), much loved by his students for liberating them, as one put it, 'from the fear of agnostic mechanism. He gave us back the language of self-sacrifice, and taught us how we belonged to one another in the one life of high idealism. We took life from him at its spiritual value.'<sup>18</sup>

The philosophical, argumentative voice of British idealism was that of Francis Herbert Bradley (b.1846), who declared in 1893 that 'reality is sentient experience'. The famous lines continue: 'What I repudiate is the separation of feeling from the felt, or of the desired from desire, or what is thought from thinking or the division ... of anything from anything else.'<sup>19</sup>

Reality, Bradley was saying, is not something distinct from and outside the mind; the mistake of both philosophy and 'common sense' (which is almost as bad) is to separate the inseparable. In his youth, he was a formidable polemicist and a stylist of great talent. But Bradley had by 1920 turned into a recluse, his ears and kidneys failing, his polemical instincts sublimated in armed

nocturnal expeditions around the grounds of Merton College that ended in a tally of dead cats. (He loved birds.)<sup>20</sup> Collingwood, a kindred spirit who ‘lived within a few hundred yards of him for sixteen years’, didn’t see him at all; Ryle saw him once, but they said nothing to each other.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, there were such figures as Paton and Collingwood, and some of their teachers keeping the old Bradleian spirit, if not the old Bradleian fire, alive, but they seemed, even to a sympathetic Collingwood, ‘the *epigoni* of a great movement; and like all *epigoni* they felt that what needed to be said had been said, and need not be repeated’.<sup>22</sup>

The whole set of them would get labelled ‘idealists’ or, worse, ‘Hegelians’. The label was applied principally by sectarians of the third Oxford school: the ‘realists’. At the notional head of this school was the redoubtable John Cook Wilson (b.1849) – in Collingwood’s description, ‘a fiery, pugnacious little man with a passion for controversy and an instinctive eye for its tactics’.<sup>23</sup> Cook Wilson took up what he saw as the central idealist claim: the interdependence of knower and known. As the idealists saw it, there is no reality separate from the mind – and so knowledge could not be understood as a simple matter of ‘mind’ coming into contact with ‘world’. Among the many subtle arguments Cook Wilson presented against the idealist view, the most effective was the simplest: suppose we think of knowledge in terms of an analogy with the collision of bodies: ‘the very nature of the collision between two bodies, A and B, necessitates itself that A and B should be different from one another’.<sup>24</sup>

This was Cook Wilson’s doctrine, and the remark also embodies his unconcessive style, with its ‘*necessitates*’ and the unnecessary algebraic notation. The style didn’t make for easy reading, but the difficulty was not that of the subject matter. Cook Wilson’s student and colleague H. A. Prichard (b.1871) put the point more fluently:

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If there is to be knowledge, there must first *be* something to be known. In other words, knowledge is essentially discovery, or the finding of what already is. If a reality could only be or come to be in virtue of some activity or process on the part of the mind, that activity or process would not be ‘knowing’, but ‘making’ or ‘creating’.<sup>25</sup>

A young Ryle esteemed Prichard for his provocations, his ‘vehemence, tenacity, unceremoniousness, and a perverse consistency that made our hackles rise, as nothing else at that time did’.<sup>26</sup> He even went so far as to dub himself a ‘fidgety Cook Wilsonian’.<sup>27</sup> In time he would disclaim all labels, dub the standard histories of philosophy chronicles ‘sham crusades’, and simply dismiss those who wondered, ‘How can one advance except behind a banner?’<sup>28</sup>

True, there had survived into the 1920s ‘the tail end of a party-contest between something called “Idealism” and something called “Realism”’ that the young had to make up their minds about, but the important thing to them was not what it was called.<sup>29</sup> Ryle had the advantage of regular challenges from his siblings, none of them philosophers but none the stupider for that. ‘I remember thinking that it would be rather hard to convince my sceptical brothers that my peculiar subject of philosophy could matter very much if it only amounted to championship of realism, or alternatively, championship of idealism. They would have said, “Why not just stop bothering about both -isms?” and I pretty soon did.’<sup>30</sup>

‘For good and for ill,’ Ryle had said. His generation’s ‘questions, accents and impatiences’ were not those of their ‘pedagogic grandsires’. The ‘pieties, lores, sagacities, equipments – yes, and fetishes too’ of antebellum Oxford:<sup>31</sup> these would not make it to the other side of the ‘boundless military cemetery’ that separated the generations.<sup>32</sup> The war had had something to do with it, even for the lucky few, like Ryle, for whom it had meant not trench foot but the near-daily announcement at school assembly of another

dead prefect: 'Our often brash personal ambitions, aspirations and resolutions were those of young men who knew that there might not be very much time.'<sup>33</sup>

Among these brash aspirations was the aspiration to write, and even the ambition to be published and read. The old tended not to trouble themselves with such vanity; every word published was another confession of vulgarity. 'The (printed) letter killeth,' Cook Wilson had said. An encomium for a recently deceased colleague, H. W. B. Joseph (b.1867), read: 'His best memorial, unlike that of many other teachers, perhaps consists in the books that his pupils refrained from writing.'<sup>34</sup>

This suspicion of the written word goes back, like so much else in the period, to a belief put into Socrates's mouth in Plato's dialogue the *Phaedrus* that philosophy is *too* accessible when written down, even to those 'who have no business with it'. Much better 'the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows', a discourse written down only figuratively, 'in the soul of the listener'.<sup>35</sup> Plato's chosen form, the Socratic dialogue, may have been an attempt to square the circle: to write, but only as a way to evoke that superior thing, conversation.

Conversation, rather than mere speech, was the thing. Were it otherwise, philosophers might have made more of that other possibility for quasi-publication: the lecture. But lectures were never popular at either Oxford or Cambridge, possibly because it was never made in anyone's interests to do them better: no lecturer's job depended on his lectures being well attended, and no undergraduate's examination results depended on his having attended the lecture. Yet they persisted. Maybe to abolish them just because no one attended them would have set a dangerous precedent.

At Cambridge, the lecture had formidable opponents: the academic reformer Henry Sidgwick (b.1838) had made the case for getting rid of them, or at any rate, for transforming them into something more Socratic. But the most he managed to achieve

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was the reform of the supervision (the Cambridge word for the tutorial), from another occasion to deliver an impromptu lecture to a chance for a confusion to be clarified. Progress in philosophy, he wrote, came from ‘stating perplexities clearly and precisely. The art that has to be learnt in order to achieve this result has been called the art of “concentrating fog”.’<sup>36</sup>

Intellectual fogs, said Sidgwick, were ‘liable rapidly to envelop large portions of a subject’. The pedagogical challenge was not to dispel it – an impossible task – but simply ‘to concentrate it’. How did one do that? By forcing the student ‘to state the difficulty on paper. Sometimes, in the mere process of writing it down, the difficulty will disappear like the morning mist, one does not know how.’<sup>37</sup>

But the writing down had never been the point. The ulterior aim of the exercise was a clearing of the mind, and minds could be cleared as well in a sentence spoken as in one written down. But either way, it was the undergraduate and not the don who spoke first; and in this, too, the tutorial encounter was, and was recognised to be, Socratic.

The temptation among the dons to play Socrates must have been strong. The tutorial system at Oxford certainly encouraged the image: the old man in conversation with the young; wisdom and naïvety; sophistication and earnestness. The tutorial was supposed to be, and in the hands of some dons succeeded in being, co-operative. But other conversational practices existed, especially when the match was between supposed equals. These non-tutorial conversations were reminiscent not of a friendly chat with Socrates but of the pseudo-gladiatorial practices of ancient ‘dialectic’. But antagonistic or not, the idea was that philosophy thrives in conversation.

Sometimes, the conversation needed kindling, and the job was done by the student’s essay, placed in the don’s college pigeonhole a few hours earlier or, more likely, read out during the tutorial itself. But the essay wasn’t the point: it served the same function as

the naïve remark of one of Socrates's young interlocutors that sets off the dialogue that bears his name. 'Knowledge is perception,' says Theaetetus. Is it then? Socrates wonders.<sup>38</sup> And off we go, on a journey of clarification, counterexample, objection, until we're left with our original question, 'What is knowledge?', knowing only that we don't know the answer.

The institution of the tutorial had, notoriously, erotic possibilities (Plato makes much of them). But there is little evidence that the Oxford philosophers of the early twentieth century ever availed themselves of what opportunities the tutorial system afforded them. Tutorials were a lot of work. Many a philosopher's obituary noted, with a combination of envy, pride and pity, the sheer number of hours he had devoted to delivering them. Such discipline made enormous demands on body and soul, 'even of the most robust' (latter-day practitioners will confirm that it still does).<sup>39</sup> But the focus on tutorials tended to encourage 'the belief that philosophy lives in the intercourse of mind with mind rather than in books and systems'. There's something to that, though it did tend to 'lead to a dangerous dissipation of effort'.<sup>40</sup> To put it more bluntly, tutorials often proved a terrible (and expensive) waste of time, conveying in an intimate setting with a senior statesman what could have been done as well or better in a lecture delivered by a competent journeyman.

The ubiquity of the tutorial also had a dangerous effect on people's conceptions of getting it right. 'It is far too easy', Paton wrote, 'for a body of clever men ... to arrive after discussion at some conclusion which they take to be final.'<sup>41</sup> It had an equally chilling effect on people's anxieties about getting it wrong: 'The practice of dialectic may also become too gladiatorial and may produce in the timid a fear of publication which naturally increases with advance in years and in local repute.'<sup>42</sup> And the thing devolves into a vicious circle: one is too exhausted to think a new thought, and so one fears to write; in panic at the thought of not writing, one takes on more teaching to fill up the evening

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hours. The tutorial system had much to answer for, for good and for ill, and it didn't get better with the changing of the guard.

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Ryle triumphed at Greats; so much so that he was asked to stay on for a couple of years and sit the exams for a new degree course, to set the standard for a first-class performance in 'Modern Greats', or 'Philosophy, Politics and Economics'. Oxford had started to admit students to read PPE in 1920; the first students arrived in the Michaelmas – autumn – term of 1921, and in 1924 were preparing to take their final exams. The demand for such a course had been felt for a while, not least among the philosophers of Oxford. J. A. Smith (b.1863) – Paton's old tutor at Balliol College – was the likely author of an anonymous pamphlet published in 1909 titled *Wanted! A New School at Oxford*.

'School' was being used in its Oxford sense of 'degree course'. The pamphleteer made the case for taking philosophy to the Greekless. Philosophy, the pamphlet said, 'alone forces on the mind a systematic analysis of the ordinary terms employed'.<sup>43</sup> And in so much of life, and more to the point, in much of politics, 'the common disputes and misunderstandings are due to the absence of the habits of mind thus produced'.<sup>44</sup> Why restrict the opportunity for acquiring these happy dispositions to those who wish to study – and are therefore required already to know – ancient Greek?

The author noted, dispassionately, that 'in increasing numbers men are coming up to Oxford with but a very slight knowledge of Greek', and they were choosing – alas – history. Which meant that 'a large and growing number even of those who would profit most by an element of Philosophy in their education are deprived of all chance of receiving it'.<sup>45</sup> But what of the old Greats? Well, those who wanted to study Greek and Latin would do it anyway, having been prepared for it through years of schooling. And would this