Modern Philosophy[1]

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> Crafty Men Contemne *Studies*; simple Men Admire them; And Wise Men Use them; For they teach not their own Use: But that is a Wisdom without them, and above them, won by Observation.
>
> Francis Bacon

There is hardly any view so paradoxical that some philosopher somewhere or other has not propounded it. That everything is air, fire, water; that the world contains nothing but atoms and the void; that nothing (that is, *pace* Sartre, not anything) exists; that we know nothing; that the world is an idea in the mind of God; that matter does not exist; that the absolute does exist and that everything else is only appearance; that there is no past and no future; that what seems to be reality is an illusion; that propositions about the world that we have neither been able to establish nor refute are neither true nor false; that truth is relative, and that all matter is just a hologram in a one-dimensional space, is just a selection from such paradoxical contentions.

It needs only a little reflection to dismiss most of them. But what often happens when one challenges one of them is that it turns out that the man who put it forward did not quite mean what he said. He did not really mean to say that no-one knows anything in any sense that would make it necessary to pay attention to what he said. He did not go to the lengths of suggesting that I act on his belief that there might be no such thing as food, and so appear to die for what would seem to be the lack of it. He did not think that I ought only to ignore someone else's 'relatively true' belief that I am dead if I myself think I am still alive. If everything in the world is water, it is water that sometimes answers to all the tests of being wine. The world might not have a past, but eating what must then be my quite delusive breakfast allays the pangs of what one might think

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was present hunger as well as any real breakfast would have done. Space may have eleven dimensions, but I can find my way about London just as if there were only three. Propositions about the future may be neither true nor false, but one can bet on them just as profitably as if they were. Physicists quote with admiration the ancient view that there are only atoms and the void, but it has been rejected by Einstein, who thought that, though there are atoms, there is no void.

Not only do philosophers wisely tend to prevent their views from cutting any ice, which results in the curious philosophical vice of giving back with one hand what you have taken away with another. Often when a philosopher – or sometimes a scientist – propounds an apparently paradoxical view, he has a fall-back position, which is the one he defends when the view he claims he holds is under attack; he adopts some manoeuvre which nullifies it and deprives it of its sting. His more controversial view is what gives what he says interest. The fall-back view is what gives it plausibility. Confusing the two makes it seem as if he was saying something *both* interesting *and* plausible, which usually he is not. I once heard Derrida maintain that there was no such thing as giving, but he did not appear to mean that no-one could give anyone anything. He was really talking about 'true giving', on which topic his remarks were fairly platitudinous. They *seemed* important because he gave the impression that he was talking about actual giving. I thought he must have a terrible time at Christmas.

One difficulty in refuting such thinkers is that those who dismiss them are condemned to defending rather obvious and unexciting truths. The contradictory of what is exciting is usually (not necessarily) dull. Hardly anyone makes himself a great reputation by arguing that not everything is made of water, that there really are chairs and tables and that we know that there are, and that there are such things as beliefs. To gain such a reputation one has to say some such thing as that there are not any such things as beliefs. This, on the assumption that one believes what one says is, though logically consistent, pragmatically inconsistent; the person putting forward this view, if he is sincere, must *believe* that there are no such things as beliefs. Few arouse much interest by saying that there really are material objects, or that the universe has had a past and will have a future. So great is the hunger of philosophers and their readers to come to paradoxical, or at least adventurous, conclusions the easy way, by using only philosophical techniques without empirical premises, that philosophers seldom learn to reject the novel and exciting in favour of the dull and mundane. Their tendency to set aside the obvious is not diminished by their

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relying on arguments that are much more likely to be invalid than the common or garden views that they set aside are likely to be false. Fortunately, however, that a view is absurd does not necessarily mean that exposing the fallacies in the arguments used to establish it is not sometimes exciting. Much of this kind of work by G. E. Moore, for example, *is* exciting, partly because of the intensity and logical rigour with which the views he is criticising are exposed. Many philosophers with more enterprising views are intellectually flabby by comparison.

The men and women who are more impressed by what is obscure and pretentious than by plain truth expressed in simple, clear English often put down the fact that they find the former difficult to its being profound, when usually it is only muddled. And conversely, when the truth is so lucidly expressed that they do quite easily understand it, they think it must be trivial. One of the more recent ways of producing spurious problems is sometimes to be found in work put in the terminology of Logic, that branch of Philosophy usually most worthy of respect. For even the terminology of Logic sometimes gives rise to problems that do not appear when they are formulated in ordinary good English.

For example, there seems to be no way of simply saying 'perhaps' and 'whether' in the language of the propositional calculus. There is nothing at all wrong with saying that *perhaps* there is life on Andromeda, though no-one knows *whether* there is or not. There is no need to say that there *is* life on Andromeda, and (sic) no-one knows that there is. And I think it is desirable to translate, when possible, sentences in the symbolism of symbolic logic into normal English, to make sure they make sense, or at least to make sure you really do understand them.

Most advanced Philosophy – Logic apart – is mistaken. Aristotle said that there is only one way of going right, many ways of going wrong. There is so much different philosophy written in answer to the same philosophical questions that it cannot all be right, and most of it must be erroneous. (If I have produced some of this myself, my excuse is that I didn't know at the time *which* of what I wrote was mistaken.) The history of Philosophy is the history of error, and the histories of Philosophy themselves often concatenations of half-truths about the philosophers whose views are expounded, often too briefly for accuracy or proper comprehension.

Philosophy once used to be defended for its lack of progress by saying that it consisted in a residue of the unsolved problems which were left behind when its more successful branches – Psychology, for example – split off and became sciences. But the number of

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such problems should then get progressively smaller, whereas in fact it gets larger.

In reply to the jibe that philosophers say what everyone knows in a language that no-one can understand, it can be said that if no-one can understand philosophers' language, how could anyone know that what they say is what everyone knows? And one can add that there is a large amount of perfectly comprehensible philosophy which laymen do not read because, though not technical, it is closely reasoned, and demands more application than laymen are accustomed to give to have informed views on problems that they do not hesitate to talk about. One can also say that laymen themselves are to some extent responsible for the incomprehensibility of some, especially French, Philosophy. They are in some respects like the people who complain of being misled by some journalists, who might prefer to tell the unvarnished truth, but know that their newspapers would not be bought if they were to.

The triviality of much Philosophy is also a cause for reflection, if not for concern. A layman would not think that the nature of the relationship between a proper name and what it stood for was a matter of great moment. As John Stuart Mill said, proper names name rather than describe or classify, and one might think (wrongly, as it happens) that that is all that one really needs to know about them. But the amount of man-power and intellectual weight that has gone into attempting a solution of the problem of proper names – and some cynical person might say into making it – must be simply enormous. Indeed, in some cases one suspects that there sometimes wouldn't be much of a problem if the rewards for seeming to solve it had not seemed so great. (I sometimes suspect that American influence has done as little for our Philosophy as it has for our waist-lines.) But this does not mean that the people who devote themselves to trying to solve philosophical problems are not very able, or the literature they produce not of a very high quality. And the relative triviality of much Philosophy does not alter the fact that the subject of Philosophy includes matters of the greatest moment, and that it is sometimes highly influential. There is after all the story of the philosopher whose later editions were bound in the skins of those who laughed at the first (though nowadays one would have been lucky to be sufficiently read to be laughed at, or to cause as many deaths as one might have liked). And neither the kudos attached to philosophical writing nor its actual merit varies with its (practical) importance.

In defence against the charge that there is too much Philosophy one might reply that Philosophy, like every other academic subject, is infinite. But that knowledge is infinite does not mean that more than a

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tiny part of it is worth having. It is worth knowing that Charles I had his head cut off, but one doesn't need an account of the behaviour of every molecule in his head, his neck, the axe that removed it or the block on which it rested. Knowledge is supposed to be valuable for its own sake, but such pieces of knowledge aren't valuable at all.

Some argue that philosophical questions arise naturally in the course of life. It is natural to ask who we are, how we got here, and why there is something rather than nothing. So it is, but I doubt whether these questions make sense. There is no answer to them more profound than the following. (1) I am Jonathan Harrison, a retired Professor of Philosophy. (2) My father fell in love with my mother at a dance during the first world war, and I was the result. (I didn't say 'the immediate result'.) (3) One cannot ask for an explanation of the existence of the universe, over and above the existence of the things in it. You can ask the question: 'Why was there a fire in that house, but not in those other houses?' because there are other cases, often cases of houses in which there was no fire. But the question: 'Why in those cases, was there a universe when in those other cases there was not?' does not make sense. By definition there can only be the one case. To use more pretentious language, it involves a transcendental application of the categories. The universe is as it is. And there is no point in philosophers trying to discover the meaning of life. Life doesn't have a meaning. Some try to draw religious or metaphysical conclusions from the improbability of their existence, but though it is true that on the information available at the beginning of the universe the chances of its containing a person like me must have seemed very small, yesterday these chances were extremely good, and today leave no margin of error. Incidentally, I do have religious experience, which I value, but I don't think that it is veridical.

Philosophers do not investigate the world at first hand, and so are unlikely to come honestly, by an application of Philosophy alone, to any truths about it. They *can* come to such truths, but only in conjunction with premises supplied by those who do investigate the world at first hand (together with, in Moral Philosophy, Philosophical Psychology and the Theory of Perception, the results of a certain amount of rudimentary first-hand observation).

One permissible thing philosophers can do *viz-a-viz* science is to familiarise themselves with the more elementary work of those who can and do come to conclusions about the world. One result of doing this is the realisation of just how paradoxical some of these views are. That since time is a fourth dimension, nothing really changes, is just one of these paradoxical views. I think it is quite

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wrong to claim that the universe is static for the reason that a language which mentions things changing is replaced by one in which adjacent slices of a four-dimensional universe are described as being similar or dissimilar to one another. Adjacent time-slices of things in the universe being dissimilar to one another *is* the substances whose time-slices they are changing. And I myself am highly suspicious of physicists (and philosophers) who talk of men travelling rapidly through space coming back much younger and healthier than those they left behind, or than they would have been if they hadn't travelled. They could well be healthier, but they can't be younger. If they leave on the 1st of January and come back on the 1st of January a year later they are (by definition) just one year older. The earth has been once round the sun in that time, and that is what being a year older means. It is not that I dispute what physicists say about the behaviour of clocks at high velocities; that would be an exercise in hubris. Whether one is in a spaceship travelling at a very high velocity (that is, fast) or not, one's chronological age is determined by the number of revolutions of the earth that have elapsed between the time at which one started on one's journey and the time at which one returned; this does not vary with the speed at which one travels. The speed of the clocks with which, on one's journeys, one measured this time is different from the speed of our clocks, as is the speed of one's aging process. But their clocks, measured by the revolutions of the earth, are just slow. If one was born in 1950 AD and died in 2050 AD one is one hundred years old, even though one has led a more interesting life and looks better preserved at the time of one's death than other men of one hundred. Of course, it is a matter for decision how one measures time-intervals, but the convention is that on the earth one uses revolutions of the earth round the sun, and we are on the earth. If the whole solar system were to start travelling through the galaxy at a different rate, the case might be different. And despite the eminence of some of the theoretical physicsts who have espoused it, time-travel is a nonsense.

The situation in Philosophy is not improved by a system which demands that all professional philosophers produce a certain amount of published work in order to gain promotion or keep the respect of their colleagues, whether they want to publish or not, whether anyone wants to read what they write or not, and whether they have anything to say or not. It is as if Tantalus had been condemned to be buried in enormous quantities of grapes which he was not only compelled to eat until they made him ill, but also forced to work in order to produce even more grapes.

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As a result of there being too many philosophers, when a new problem crops up, philosophers throw themselves upon it like a pack of hungry wolves, worry it to what would be extinction were it not that the problem seems to thrive on the treatment, and then pass on to something else. They leave its mangled remains to the history books – if there are any sufficiently detailed to notice – to record another failure. And PhD students are set to work to write theses presupposing current views, without being taught to develop the independence of mind which might enable them to see that some of the views they are working to elaborate and refine are simply mistaken. It might even be that neither student nor supervisor has much incentive to discover this.

The result of the increasingly large number of academics in Philosophy is too many philosophers chasing too few important problems; everything gets excessively complicated and diversified, and philosophers themselves become excessively specialised. The number of philosophical problems expands in proportion to the number of people employed to solve them. There is a constant stream of ephemeral writing in periodicals which, until a human eye falls on them, are simply vast collections of dead paper-molecules. Heads of departments, of which I was once one, are not to be blamed for this overproduction. It is their duty to 'encourage' their staff to write. But the results of everybody's doing their duty can be disastrous – though in this case 'disastrous' would be an exaggeration. Philosophical writing is funded by the tax payer. (The tax payer, of course, could and does fund far worse things.) If philosophy, like sudoku cubes, were simply a form of mental exercise and entertainment it could easily be justified, were it not that, unlike sodoku, there is no way of checking whether one has got the correct answer. But one would like to think that Philosophy was something more than a game.

In the sciences, specialisation pays dividends. You can work on an area yourself, and take on trust at least some of the results of scientists working in areas in which you are not a specialist. (I am told by a friend who is a scientist that this is no longer true; the volume of publications is so enormous that it is impossible to check it all.) In Philosophy one cannot trust one's colleagues to get things right, and whole areas of enquiry are often based on fundamental mistakes.

All search for knowledge should in the last resort be justified by there being a chance of discovering something that, directly or indirectly, satisfies a human need, even if the need is only curiosity. (Curiosity is biologically useful and so commendable by the way.) All of what claims to be worth finding out should be either useful

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or agreeable, both of which features tend to depend, among other things, upon its scope and its certainty. (On this latter virtue Philosophy falls rather low.) It is, of course, the end result that should be agreeable, not the search; assessed simply as a search, Philosophy comes out rather well. But what human need much Philosophy satisfies is doubtful.[2] Quite a lot of people seem to think they can do without it.

It is not difficult to see ways in which Philosophical work can multiply. One way is this. First of all some philosopher puts forward a view. Then a second philosopher puts forward reasons for thinking that this view is incorrect. Then a third philosopher puts forward reasons for thinking that the second philosopher's reasons for thinking that the first philosopher's view is incorrect are incorrect. Then a fourth philosopher puts forward the view that, though the second philosopher's reasons for thinking this view is incorrect *are* incorrect, the view *is* nevertheless incorrect, but not for reasons given by the second philosopher. Then a fifth philosopher comes along and says that the third philosopher is mistaken about the first philosopher's view, which is in fact no different from the view the third philosopher himself put forward on some past occasion, and has been ignored. And, alas, all these variations on a theme seem to have acquired names.

With longer work, it is the first step that counts, and the first step is more often than not wrong. And the tendency to think in jargon, like 'truth conditions', 'assertion conditions', 'defeasibility', 'rigid designators', 'best explanation', 'existential choice', and so on, causes possibly erroneous views to get enshrined in what becomes familiar language, and so to escape proper scrutiny. (The quantity of jargon associated with the language of possible worlds is horrific.) And it produces clichés. The greatest gift a philosopher can have is the gift of not understanding things, especially things that everyone else thinks they can understand.

Peer assessment may produce a high minimum standard, but inhibit originality. Philosophers read too many books and pay too little attention to actual experience, especially moral and perceptual experience. There has, I believe, been a decline in teaching by official lecturing. Lecturing has always been a questionable way of disseminating information. There are usually books which treat the subject of the lecture better by a person who knows more about it than does the lecturer. And lectures are too often given over to discussion, where the strong and vociferous tyrannise the weak and inarticulate.

[2] See my 'The Importance of Being Important' (1978).

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But it does sometimes save the lecturer a lot of the trouble necessary for systematic presentation. Discussion in small groups is a different matter. Bacon wisely said: 'Reade not to Cotradict, and Confute'. But, since what philosophers say is usually wrong, this is just what a philosopher should do when reading the work of another philosopher. But it does slow you down.

Of course Philosophy is not the only subject having difficulties. History was in my day largely a matter of learning one damn thing after another, and I remember turning with relief to Economic History, which involved some kind of rationale. English, apart from the set texts, which were wonderful, was a matter of learning the right kind of thing to say. French, my inability to do which was the cause of my academic success, was the same, except that here one had to learn the language, something which was supposed to be unnecessary when one was studying English. (I wonder, by the way, why English children often have to wait until they are eleven to learn French when French children, who one hopes are not cleverer than English children, can learn French from the age of nought.)

To some extent the situation I have described is produced by too sharp a division between arts and science. On an extreme view, too much of an arts education consists in learning to produce the right kind of waffle. I am not suggesting that producing the right kind of waffle does not demand intelligence, and that those who are good at it often deserve and get better degrees and better-paid jobs than those who are not – though I do note that business people are complaining about the kind of educated person being turned out by schools and universities. (This may partly because the examination system in arts, though scrupulously fair, is very inaccurate.) But the result of the separation between arts and science – I don't just mean physics by 'science' – sometimes involves a divorce from reality which results in the feeling that in academic thought anything goes so long as you can find enough people to agree with what you say. In my experience the kind of thing I am complaining about is often to be found in most speculative Theology, especially that trying to reconcile Christianity with what the speculators accept to be the fact that there is no omnipotent, omniscient perfectly good being. My remarks also apply especially to some Literary Criticism and certain types of French Philosophy. (Sartre, I used to think, was a brilliant novelist and playwright, but a rubbish philosopher.) Indeed, I see there is one French philosopher who holds that nothing is real. One might think that he intended to defend the view that everything is an illusion – in which case I am sure that it would have turned out to be an illusion which precisely resembled

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reality – but all he seemed to have meant is that man's values are hollow and can give no permanent satisfaction, a view which I seem to have heard before.

If the people who produce all this had some elementary training in science, which is more rigorous than arts, perhaps some of it might be avoided. Indeed, the best thing might be for all students to have to study a small amount of science – not necessarily an exact science – through the whole of their university careers, which would then have to take longer. In Philosophy some of the benefits of science are produced by Logic, and it might be a very good thing if students other than philosophers, as well as philosophers, had to do some Logic at some time or other, though I think there are better ways of making people think more rigorously than learning Logic; one needs to think more rigorously about one's own subject. But what is needed in much – not all – 'analytic' philosophy is a standard of rigour which emulates mathematics. (I don't, incidentally, think that *all* Philosophy must be analytic, whatever analytic Philosophy may be. It was once associated with the view that all philosophers can do is to analyse common sense; a view which is certainly mistaken. ('Common sense' is a misnomer, incidentally. It is a matter of common sense that you should change your wet socks; it is not a matter of common sense that you have socks.) Reflections on human life and morals, politics, the satisfactoriness of cosmological speculations, the destiny of man, the nature of wisdom and the possibility of an after life are all quite proper subjects for philosophical enquiry, and these involve reaching substantive conclusions, not just analysing things. And getting to these conclusions does presuppose having a certain amount of empirical information.

It might also be a good idea if scientists were compelled to read some arts subjects, partly because some arts subjects do help us with the proper enjoyment of life – though I don't see why enjoying life should be made compulsory. Studying English – at least to the extent of reading good literature, rather than hearing people talk about it – might enable scientists to write up their results and communicate with other scientists and laymen more lucidly than they do. It has been suggested to me (by a scientist, as it happens) that reading some arts subject might improve scientists' powers of disseminating important warnings. There are some important warnings – about global warming, for example – that they have failed to give, or at least effectively to bring home to us. But the main failing concerning global warming is the ignorance of science both among politicians and the general public, which more science in schools and universities might have remedied. With more

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science among the population politicians would not be able to get away with their present pusillanimity, which is the result of the electorate itself being so short-sighted, so self-indulgent and so badly informed. As it is, politicians are usually too ignorant and too terrified of losing votes to do anything effective. They commonly argue that we are such a small country that our emissions can make no appreciable difference to the eventual outcome, but if every country (and every individual) whose limiting emissions made no difference refused to limit them, the result would be disaster. But hope for the future is more likely to be dependent on technologists finding new sources and new ways of producing energy than on politicians learning self-control. One only hopes that the politicians do not muck things up.

Another reason why a certain amount of science might be a good discipline for arts people is that the subject matter at least of the exact sciences, unlike that of Philosophy, is inexorable; if you make a mistake about it, it punishes you, perhaps with your own or, worse, someone else's life. I sometimes think it might be a good idea if the same fate sometimes befell philosophers who made mistakes, but then few people would write Philosophy. In science, making a mistake slows you down; you have to go back and do it correctly. In Philosophy, it speeds you up, and may add to your list of publications by provoking someone to point out the error. If so you may score a double by replying to him. Even in mathematics, which has no empirical content, mistakes are easier to spot, and wrong mathematics may lead to actual experiments going wrong or predictions being falsified. (My favourable remark about science does not always apply to writing about science, as opposed to doing it.)

Of course, the exact sciences cannot give one the whole truth. They don't give one moral judgements – which most people seem to think they can make – though to make moral judgements is often to use a bludgeon when it would be better to use a scalpel. That men should *act* morally is necessary to mankind – we would not have evolved to be moral beings otherwise – but it is difficult to defend the rationality of the moral judgements men make, though one can point out the bad consequences of not acting on them, hoping one's audience will care. The more set in their ways of thinking morally they are – and I am not convinced that deontological morality involves more than being set in one's ways of thinking – the less they will be inclined to care. And the exact sciences are *too* exact to be useful in many spheres of life. The trouble with science and mathematics as disciplines is that, though they train people to think clearly on subjects which admit of precise measurement, it is enormously

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important that men and women be trained to think well on subjects where such precision is impossible. To some extent subjects such as Economics, Psychology, Sociology, and perhaps some Politics might fit this bill. Though I understand that they are to some extent taking students away from more demanding sciences, they might also take students away from the less demanding ones. But it is unavoidable that much, if not most, intellectual activity is a matter of making correct assessments, which involves coming to uncertain conclusions on inadequate evidence.

It is not to be inferred from my admiration of science that I think that Physics is perhaps the preeminent science – whatever this may mean – from whose conclusions all the facts investigated by the other sciences can be deduced. In fact I think this is very great rubbish. And in any case, even if it were true, an entailment of the other sciences by Physics would not be enough. One would need an equivalence. Without the equivalence all the allegedly derivative sciences could quite happily go on – as in practice they can – even though Physics were false. And an equivalence seems even more implausible than an entailment.

Most of people's opinions beyond the immediate province of their everyday life – and many that are not – are highly irrational. It is a good thing that man is an irrational animal in *behaviour*. A rational man would be something of a monster. But to gain truth he must be rational – that is, where empirical matters are concerned, scientific – in all walks of life. This includes being rational about problems concerning the existence of God; the efficacy of prayer; the superiority of Islam; the relative intelligence of black, white and other varieties of people – a subject which should be approached scientifically and dispassionately with a view to finding out the facts, not used as an excuse for moral exuberance. It includes being rational about the value of marriage; the success of various different methods of education; the evils of segregation by colour; religion or nationality; the efficacy of prison; the desirability of wars, and so on almost indefinitely. But most men's opinions are based on inadequate information and prejudice. More fundamental science teaching in schools might do something to combat this, especially if the 'hard' sciences could be supplemented with subjects that more concern probability and have to do with people's behaviour. Some elementary knowledge of statistics could well help people – especially doctors – to think more rationally. As the Duke of Wellington nearly said, statistics are the guide of life. (I am thinking of people who don't use the MMR vaccine, do use homeopathic medicine, believe in astronomy, go for psycho-analysis, trust bookies and financial advisers, can't compare

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the safety of trains with that of cars, grossly over-estimate the chances of being killed in some accident, don't know that obesity is bad for you, gamble heavily on the national lottery, believe in dowsing, are guided by astrologers, are convinced that their chances of finding a quarter of a million in a sealed box are improved by their willing that it should be there, and who sacked the England manager because England did not win the World Cup.) Just as we have evolved to be creatures who eat and drink too much and exercise too little in the circumstances of modern living, so we have evolved to be creatures who take quick decisions even when they have time to base them on thought that is more rational. But in trying to achieve all this sophistication, we might well be expecting too much from teachers, who waste too much of their time wrestling with unruly classes whom they are not allowed to discipline.

I understand that British engineers are relatively poorly paid, and not in the top jobs; these are then sometimes occupied by men and women without the technical knowledge to do them properly. This may be a regrettable manifestation of the fact that science, perhaps especially technology, is underrated in this country. Though the British Empire was won on the playing fields of Eton, the battle to prevent global warming may have been lost in the class rooms of Harrow. It is scientists, and more particularly engineers and technologists, that we will increasingly have to rely on to solve the problems raised not only by global warming, but by the world population's outgrowing its food supply, and multiplying too rapidly. They may even, by brain modifications and additions, eliminate man's disposition to violence, group intransigence, and religious bigotry. (Religion, I suspect, is like alcohol. Though individual people may benefit from both, the world would be a better place without either.) Scientists will almost certainly be able to increase man's intelligence. If they were allowed to use genetic engineering, they could considerably improve the quality of men and the lives of men. Prison may come to seem an even cruder way of dealing with dishonesty and violence than it does now. (Having the satisfaction of punishing people can be purchased at too high a cost.)

My critical remarks about Philosophy do not mean that some Philosophy is not highly desirable, at least in preventing bad Philosophy, and sometimes bad thinking, which can be a dangerous. It can offer very great enlightenment, interest and intellectual satisfaction, which does not exclusively consist in escape from previous error. And the best philosophers do work of the very highest order. Part of the difficulty with at least the central problems of Philosophy, is that there is no elementary part which those of more pedestrian ability can master and build on. In History, say, it is important to remember what one

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has been taught, even if one does not understand it. In Philosophy just remembering (and when necessary regurgitating) is valueless.

Descartes' remedy for avoiding error was to be guided by clear and distinct ideas. (Of course one can't always tell when one's ideas are clear and distinct, but one can try.) Berkeley's remedy for much Philosophical error was always to clothe one's words with ideas. Not writing in good, ordinary English is one of the most common causes of *not* clothing one's words with ideas. For example, a bête noire of mine is the artificial language of possible worlds. If Leibniz had only said that this world could not be any better than it is, think what a lot of muddled thinking would have been avoided. Quine, writing more than fifty years ago, and arguing against the metaphysician McX, pointed out that Pegasus was not a possible object, inhabiting another sphere of reality. 'Possible' is not a word for an attribute at all. To say that Pegasus is possible is not to describe anything, and certainly not to describe a kind of horse, but is just to say that something answering to a certain description – the description of Pegasus (a winged horse) – might possibly or could conceivably have existed. And to compare two things they must both exist. You cannot compare an object with another object that might possibly exist but doesn't. For example, you cannot raise the question whether the Albert Hall is larger than Valhalla. All you can do is to say that there might have been a place answering to the description of 'Valhalla' which would then have been larger than the Albert Hall. Whether Smith is identical with the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo (i.e. *is* the man who broke the bank) is a perfectly genuine question, if someone did break the bank at Monte Carlo. The question whether Smith is identical with the man who broke the bank, when no-one actually broke the bank at Monte Carlo, is just muddled. If no-one broke the bank at Monte Carlo, there is no-one to be identical or not identical with the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo. The problem of transworld identity is just confused.

One thing that limits speculative Philosophy is the fact that almost all first-hand knowledge of the universe on which such speculation must be based can be obtained only by empirical investigation of a kind which philosophers are not usually qualified to undertake. However, one does not oneself have to make the basic discoveries of science in order critically to discuss them, and perhaps to build on them, though it would be nice to understand more of the relevant mathematics. And in order sometimes to see that something is wrong with what even eminent physicists like Einstein say about the world, it is not necessary to have knowledge of the specific

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details of their science. Sometimes all that is necessary is imagination and a certain kind of logical rigour. The main function of all academic work is to discover facts about and understand the universe or parts or aspects thereof, and the function of Philosophy, by acting as a preventive to erroneous thinking, could help this enterprise to no inconsiderable extent. (What help the view that the morning star is necessarily, instead of only contingently, identical with the evening star is to astronomy, however, I can't think. It won't make a blind bit of difference which it is.)

There are also some very important moral and political questions involving philosophy coming up or getting more serious. Global warming will produce moral questions concerning whether whole communities may be allowed to perish. Partly as a result of global warming nationalism may come to be considered as a vice; unfettered nationalism may, among other things, mean that a country which does not cut its emissions will have to be compelled to do so, which implies an international organisation capable of enforcing such reductions. War, international crime and international business, faster-moving populations, globally infectious diseases, space exploration and the need for ever more energy are further reasons for international government. International government is a (logically) interesting case, as it is something that is necessary, but may not be possible. (To be more serious – but the point shows how important it is to use English correctly – it is *having* international government that is necessary, *getting* it that is impossible.) No individual nation can solve these problems itself, or enforce the relevant solutions. And, as the speed of a convoy is the speed of its slowest ship, the speed of a democracy is the speed of its slowest and most ignorant voters, so the necessity for decisive and prompt action to stop global warming quickly enough may spell the death of democracy. (In this case, the people who write extolling democracy's virtues will probably write condemning it.) The steady increase in longevity will increase the seriousness of questions concerning euthanasia and assisted suicide and whether women should have licences to reproduce. Our present often ridiculous attitude to contraception, abortion and euthanasia must become much more permissive if we are to survive in an over-populated planet. A lot of quite imaginary rights, many of which are the result of prolonged moderate affluence such as the supposed right to have as many children as one wishes and to do what one likes with one's own body will probably have to go. And the development of brain technology will mean we will have to decide when to allow and how to control the production of superintellects, whether ganic or (more likely) organic, whether detached

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from our brains or partly ingrained in them or embedded in them. Advances in genetic engineering will revolutionise human beings. Satisfactorily to anticipate and discuss such problems it is necessary – though not sufficient – to have a certain knowledge of science. But whether such academic discussion will make much difference to the outcome, I very much doubt.

Despite my complaints about the quantity of professional Philosophy, I think that *elementary* Philosophy should be indulged in by everybody. Some of it is, after all, a more rigorous attempt to think about questions that many will think about anyway. It would be nice if it could be taught – but taught informally, without being examined – in schools. Some elementary Philosophy is really indispensable to a properly educated man or woman. The trouble is finding the people to teach it. I suspect that teaching elementary Philosophy in schools is more, not less difficult than teaching advanced Philosophy in universities. And though in an ideal world there would be no lawyers and no physicians, everybody would be a philosopher and, in an ideal world, a good one.

Perhaps the world would be an academically better place if people did not raise philosophical problems, but were content with knowledge of the world, of *a priori* subjects like Logic and Mathematics, and perhaps also with epistemological questions – the solutions to which are a species of *a priori* knowledge – concerning how such knowledge is arrived at. (It *could* be held that all other philosophical questions are meaningless.) The question whether or not we know something is on this view not really a matter for a philosopher, but for the specialists in whatever branch of knowledge is at issue. One should ask a historian how one knows historical truths, and a scientist how one knows scientific ones – though I very much doubt whether either would be able to give a satisfactory answer. Philosophers should, for example, ask how we know that this is, say, a chair, rather than interminably considering the question whether we really do know that it is one. The former question is surprisingly difficult to answer, and involves explaining how we conflate or synthesise actual sense-data or views (and to a lesser extent feels) of an object, with remembered views seen from different places, to build up a picture of an object as a whole, and an object in space.

But what is the cure for that academic disease of which some but not all Philosophy is just one symptom? To allude again to education, though it has never really interested me very much, one should try to induce more students to read science, mathematics, medicine and certain subjects that are predominantly technological or sociological. A reluctance to do difficult science is entirely understandable, but an

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inability to do it – often the result of poor teaching and lack of discipline in schools – should mean that one cannot profit from the level of education to which one is being subjected. One would then hope that certain of the less demanding subjects would wither away – but not completely so – and perhaps also absorb some of the stringency demanded by the sciences. Conversely, scientists should not be allowed to devote themselves to science only. I am not quite sure why, but I cannot imagine anything more dreadful than a scientist who knows only science. But a scientist who is taught only science can learn other things in the course of living. An arts person who is taught no science is usually condemned to that ignorance for ever. Where at least the exact sciences are concerned, getting more people to read them would mean paying science teachers, both in schools and universities, more than others, and perhaps giving science students more financial help – but bread and butter before jam. And perhaps what was first done for money will come to be done for love. Since, or so I am told, there are so many bad science teachers already employed, change could not be brought about quickly enough without sacking or redeploying some of them. Substituting the International Baccalaureate, which has a higher science content than A-levels, might help, but probably wouldn't be enough. It is obvious, really, that the expenditure on scientific research ought to be drastically increased. The future of our country and indeed the world depends on scientists – and to some extent on the scientific knowledge of the whole population, especially politicians. The survival of mankind does not depend on those who teach English Literature or Latin and Greek, and still less on Film Studies. Culture is indeed valuable – though I'm not sure why – but it is not always worth its expense. (Philosophy, by the way, is an excellent subsidiary subject, especially for scientists.)

The cure for bad Philosophy, trivial Philosophy, obscure and pretentious Philosophy, muddled Philosophy, is not no Philosophy, but better Philosophy – which I myself think would involve less Philosophy. The benefits of doing Philosophy well are great. It should broaden the mind, prevent one from taking things on trust, reduce slavish conformity, cultivate the imagination, and produce accurate thinking and lucid expression. You would think the difficulty of its problems would produce humility, but the amount of hubris necessary to tackle them and to stand out against the majority opinion when one thinks this mistaken to some extent militates against this. A person even more pessimistic than myself might say that the trouble is that I have presented an ideal which is what many of us are trying to achieve and failing. But we don't always

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fail; it is just very difficult to know whether we have or have not succeeded, especially with so many helpful colleagues telling us that we haven't. Magna est veritas, and one hopes that it may often prevail. (If truth in Philosophy did prevail, we would all be out of jobs.) But in Philosophy it may be better to travel hopefully than to arrive, though one doesn't know what arriving would be like.

We will not arrive in our own lifetime, if ever. But when one considers the billions of years during which the earth will be able to support human life if human beings themselves do not wreck it, the chances of what one does now making more than a tiny and temporary bit of difference to the future are nil, especially when one considers the appreciable possibility of human brains being supplemented by implants that will greatly increase their owners' intelligence. Perhaps they will be too intelligent to do Philosophy at all. When one considers this fact, watching philosophers competing for publishing space at the cost of more useful or more entertaining activities is like watching men queue for the privilege of tipping what is done at the cost of their most valuable possession, time, over a cliff into the sea. (It is not a criticism only of having money that you can't take it with you; you can't take anything with you.)

I have space very briefly to discuss only four of the numerous philosophical views that I consider to be erroneous.

(1) If we look upon the world what we see and feel or introspect is spatially extended coloured patches, specks of colour, flashes of light, pains, itches, bodily sensations, the agonisings caused by intense thought and deliberation, and the pains of unrequited love. We do not, especially when we look inwards, come across anything like the description of an electron or an atom or a molecule, and that we should try and dismiss the former phenomena is the result of rejecting the evidence of our senses and of introspection in favour of what we think physicists tell us in books. In my youth the object of many philosophers was to reduce statements about unobserved entities such as protons and electrons to statements about observed entities, which they supposed to be sense-data. This was misguided. Nowadays the object of many philosophers is to reduce statements about observed things to statements about unobserved things like electrons, which is even more misguided.

(2) It is obvious that our perception of objects is mediated. Even if what we see 'immediately' and without inference are the front surfaces of material objects – and there is no reason in the

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definition of sense-data why what we see should not both be the surface of a material object and a sense-datum – 'sense-datum' is the word for what is immediately given in perceptual experience – we still cannot without investigation know that what we see is the front surfaces of what we take to be objects to find out what lies on the other side of them. If we try to do this, what we do then see is just new surface still – if you are determined to be pessimistic – 'getting in the way'. But if we were not aware of the front surfaces of objects, one could know nothing whatsoever about them. In order to get a complete picture of an object we have to go round to the back and piece it together with what we remember to be its front. (This is a process of synthesis, not one of inference.) It is partly because the sense-datum theory has been rejected that much brilliant and constructive work by philosophers like Bertrand Russell, C. D. Broad and H. H. Price, not to mention certain aspects of the work of Locke, Berkeley and Hume, have been misunderstood and neglected.

(3) One bad result of confusing sentences with propositions, and ascribing truth to the former, is Conventionalism. The rules determining the meaning of words and sentences are fixed by convention, but that does not at all mean that the things we use the sentences to say are true by convention. It is a matter of convention that the sentence 'The earth is round' expresses the fact that the earth is round, and not that it is flat, but not a matter of convention that the earth is round. If 'round' had not meant round, the fact that the earth is round would have had to be expressed in different words – perhaps in the sentence 'The world is flat' – but this would not alter the fact that the earth is round or make it a conventional one. It is a matter of convention that the words in the sentences. 'Two and two make four' and 'Things that are equal to a third thing are equal to one another' mean what they do, but that does not mean that the fact they express is true by convention. How could one change either of these obvious facts by legislation? All that one does by changing 'equals' from meaning what 'equals' means to meaning what 'is larger than' means is to cause the sentence 'Two and two make four' to express a different (eternally) false proposition; but this does not mean that it has changed the truth of the proposition that these words expressed before their meaning was changed to express a false proposition. If truth were a property of sentences, one would have changed the truth of

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something; but all one has in fact done is to change what truths these sentences express. Conventionalism in mathematics is open to the same objection, together with the further one that if mathematical truths were the result of human convention bridges would fall down and aero-planes crash, for human conventions are precarious to an extreme.

(4) The view that there are possible worlds other than this was refuted by Quine before it was propounded (by Kripke). Quine points out, when criticising the metaphysics of Wyman (in 'On what there is') that 'possible' is not a word for an attribute of, say (Quine thought) the Parthenon, or of anything else. And it should be obvious that it is not the world that is possible, but the proposition that there is or should be such a world. In my youth the 'probables' had to play the 'possibles' at football – I was never either – but this was not a football match between two different worlds of school-boy, but between those of whom it was the case that they would probably be selected and those who would only possibly be selected. To suppose that being possible is an attribute of worlds is a mistake nearly as absurd as the much-ridiculed mistake of supposing that being average is an attribute of men. Think what a lot of sophistry Leibniz would have avoided if, instead of saying that this is the best of all possible worlds, he had simply said that this would could not be any better than it is.

Scoring own goals is another bad habit of Philosophers. They assert as truths propositions to the effect that all propositions are false. They accurately reveal the fact that nothing can be accurately revealed. They attempt to prove that nothing can be proved, and claim to know that there is no such thing as knowledge. They obstinately refuse to revise their opinion that all opinions are subjct to revision. Many are certain that nothing is certain. Some believe that belief is impossible; others think that there is no such thing as thought. They authorise the translation of learned philosophical works that claim that translation is impossible, and write with the greatest lucidity words that mean that there is no such thing as meaning. They eloquently describe the ineffable. Some advance good inductive evidence for thinking that science may proceed counter-inductively and others give reasons for thinking that though the past is no guide to the future, there is every reason to suppose that a hypthesis that has once been refuted will go on being refuted in years to come. They provide inductive proofs that

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induction is untrustworthy, via the inductive generalisations that all inductive generalisations eventually break down. Some produce causal explanations of the fact that all causal explanation is impossible. Some write books proclaiming that it is absolutely true that all truth is relative. Others argue as if it were unequivocally true that there is a third possibility to truth and falsehood. They offer *a priori* proofs that there is no such thing as *a prior* proof. They maintain as an analytic proposition that there is no such thing as analyticity, and that there is, of necessity, no such thing as necessary truth. They build great edifices on the premise that Foundationalism is false. They hold it as a scientific fact that not all facts are scientific, and as a truth of philosophy that there is only scientific truth. They propound as a philosophical truth that there are no philosophical truths, but only techniques for dissolving problems. They take immense trouble stating convincing arguments for what they take to be the truth that it is not truth, but continuing the conversation, that matters. They argue with deep sincerity that it is important to play with ideas, rather than believe them, and then, though one would have thought they wanted to convince us, defeat this end by telling us that when they said this, they were only playing. They assert that all intellectual remarks are ironic, and expect this remark to be taken as being literally true. Having themselves transcended the limits of thought, they feel themselves to be in the best possible position to tell us that thought has limits. Sometimes they provide logical proofs of the validity of Logic, thus pressupposing the truth of what they are trying to prove. At other times they provide logical proofs of logic's invalidity, thus presupposing the truth of what they are trying to disprove. They are worried in case it is not consistent to hold that some inconsistencies can be true. Without having established the whole truth about anything, they announce that nothing short of the whole truth about everything is worthy of belief, and claim to know the partial truth that there is no such thing as partial truth. Without themselves understanding the whole of any one language, they state that it is impossible to understand anything in isolation from the whole of language, and appear to think they understand what they themselves say, isolated though their remark is. They are convinced of the useless truth that only what is useful can be true. They try to prove that in reality nothing is real, and that it is no illusion that everything is illusory. They provide rational arguments for the desirability of faith, but nevertheless put their faith in reason. From the centre of the self they lament that the self has no centre. As a result of careful reflection upon the function of material sense organs they conclude that there is no such thing

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as matter. They argue most rationally in favour of irrationalism. They provide their readers with the most moral reasons for believing that it is wicked to be good. They altruistically proclaim that all men should seek their own interest, and not bother about the interest of the person making this proclamation. They think that there are no opinions that may not be legitimately expressed, but try to prevent people from expressing the opinion that there are some such opinions. They immodestly proclaim their modesty, openly adocate the advantages of deception, and hold that not forgiving one's neighbours deserves severe punishment in this world and the next. They listen to the story of the Pharisee who thanked the Lord that he was not as other men are, and thank the Lord that they are not as that Pharisee. They insist that anarchism should be imposed by force upon the protagonists of government. Their concern for the welfare of man is such as to make them deplore universally doing good because of the harm it would do. They write as if moderation were a virtue that one could not have to excess. Though, like honest men, they say nothing of which they are not sure, they are, on the basis of past experience, rightly convinced that most of what they say must be wrong. I myself am one hundred percent serious in saying that I am only ninety-five percent serious about everything I say. And the fact that I have taken so much trouble to criticise certain aspects of modern Philosophy before an audience that contains so many distinguished members of this species must show that I have a greater respect for a much loved subject than my words must sometimes indicate.

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