Philosophy – Wisdom or Technique?

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> 'Philosophy begins in wonder. And at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains. There have been added, however, some grasp of the immensity of things, some purification of emotion by understanding. Yet there is a danger in such reflections. An immediate good is apt to be thought of in a degenerate form of a passive enjoyment. Existence (life) is activity ever merging into the future. The aim of philosophical understanding is the aim of piercing the blindness of activity in respect to its transcendent functions.' (A.N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, Capricorn Books, New York, 1938, 232).

Notice the key concepts: wonder, purification of emotion, piercing the blindness of activity, transcendent functions. There are echoes here of the Platonic doctrine of philosophy as the care of the soul, therapy, the turning of the soul from fantasy to reality.[1] Education, says Plato (and not just philosophy), is the art of orientation, the shedding of the leaden weights which progressively weigh us down as we become more and more sunk in the material world and the world of desire, eating and similar pleasures and indulgences. All this is in the context of the Cave, and a form of vision which is to become able to bear 'the sight of real being and reality at its most bright... which is a form of goodness'.

So philosophy and education should be aimed at a form of conversion, certainly moral conversion, but something more as well covering the whole of life. Plato also warns us against the petty minds of those who are acknowledged to be bad, but who are clever, sharp-eyed and perceptive enough to gain insights into what they are interested in, and 'consequently the keener their vision is, the greater the evil they accomplish'.

Evil? Can philosophy be an adjutant to evil? If philosophy can be a force for good, for taking us through to its or our transcendent function, can it, if misused, by a force for harm too? Plato thought this and maybe when we think about it more, it isn't so far-fetched. After all the sophists were philosophers (of a sort) and were well known to Socrates and Plato. Maybe some of what they did, in fostering and

[1] *Republic*, Bk VII, 518b–519b.

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encouraging doubts about morality and truth, wasn't too good. Maybe[2] some of what Socrates and his followers did, qua philosophers, wasn't too good either, at least not if you were an Athenian democrat of the time and an opponent of oligarchs and dictators. In *Crito* when the laws of Athens are speaking to Socrates, they speak of Sparta and Crete as constitutions he admires, hardly bastions of democracy. Maybe, more even than *The Republic, The Laws*, with its nocturnal council and its draconian regimentation of life might give intellectual aid to would-be dictators and their repressive laws and inquisitions. This sort of thing is, of course, the burden of writers like Crossman and Popper who attack Plato as politically evil (though usually wanting to exonerate Socrates).

When you think about it, the great philosophies have rarely been neutral on matters of value. Philosophy is always done against a background of commitments, intellectual and other, which the philosophy is in a sense an attempt to work through, even if the working through may sometimes involve refining and modifying the commitments. Aquinas is often criticised for having very explicit commitments which his philosophy would not be allowed to challenge in a serious way; but all philosophers and all philosophies start from some framework of belief, even if that framework is one of fallibilism or even of scepticism. It is just in these cases the commitment is not as blatant as Aquinas's, or in our day as objectionable. So Plato's notion of philosophy (or education) as a turning of the soul one way or the other may not be so far fetched after all.

> 'Winifred Nicolson tells an anecdote of her great-grand-mother, who was also Betrand Russell's grandmother remarking after a visit from her grandson, "I don't know why it is that all my grandchildren are so *stupid*." I don't know why she thought the great logician stupid at that time; but the stupidity of logical positivism lies, if anywhere, in its premises... If it is true that the crassness of English philosophy has lain always in the quality of its premisses Lady Stanley may in this respect have been right about her grandson's "stupidity"'.[3]

Stupidity is strong, some may think, particularly as applied to Russell, though maybe not too strong if one reflects on some of his educational and political adventures; but what Kathleen Raine is talking about is not the intellectual brilliance and acuity of the logician, of however high an order. She is talking about choice of

[2] If I.F. Stone is to be believed.
[3] Kathleen Raine, *Autobiographies*, Skoob Boos, London, 1991, 347.

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premises. And here it may be that intellectual dexterity, even of the quality of a Russell, is not enough.

'If meinongianism isn't dead, nothing is,' Gilbert Ryle is reputed to have said in the heyday of Oxford Philosophy. I think Ryle was exactly right.' Thus Graham Priest[4] thinks Ryle is exactly right in exactly the opposite sense to that intended by Ryle. Nothing is *ever* dead in philosophy (and in 2007–8, when Priest is but one of a phalanx of defenders of non-being, least of all the meinongianism Ryle took as his touchstone of philosophical moribundity). Some of us might wish for a healthy dose of Ryleanism (as we would put it) in philosophy of mind as well as in the philosophy of possibility and contradiction (where inconsistent beings are now sometimes countenanced, as well as nonbeings), but, as readers of contemporary philosophical journals will appreciate, that is not how it is. And Priest is surely right to point to the transience and power (both) of philosophical fashion when it comes to premises. In a sense, more power to Priest's elbow in shaking us out of a certain ontological complacency.

That said, how are we to chose premises? And further, how are we to judge conclusions, when philosophers like Priest and Williamson are simply not prepared to accept *reductio ad absurdum* arguments when applied to their conclusions about such topics as noneism and vagueness, and can, in a sense, argue for their conclusions against the most robust-seeming objections? Do we simply toss coins here? Are all defensible premises epistemologically equal, so to speak, simply awaiting their time or their defenders? This would not actually be such a surprise, given that at one time or another, just about every imaginable philosophical position has found its time and its able defenders. Or might there be something a bit more at stake, humanly speaking? Do the philosophies of the great philosophers reflect their own values and commitments in ways which lie deeper than the arguments they deploy in their writings?

'I no longer believe that the apparently impervious rationalists who demand so aggressively that we others should 'explain what you mean by…' (God, love, beauty, the good, the soul, the Logos,) are always victims of what the Church calls 'invincible ignorance'… To judge others by myself, I would judge that in many more it is the will that has at some time denied and rejected spiritual knowledge. In the choice of premises the will is free: logic cannot dictate the ground from which its conclusions proceed; and I wonder whether the loveless, beautyless state is not the cause rather than the effect

[4] In *Towards Non-Being: the Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 1.

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of such systems? If, disregarding those superstructures so dazzling to ignorance, we regard their foundations, they will be seen for what they are. Blake never answered Urizen's arguments, but merely drew his portrait.'[5]

Kathless Raine fought a lifelong battle to extricate herself from the cast of mind of progressivist Cambridge natural science and philosophy of the 1920s and 1930s, which seemed to her to push her into the position of denying the insights into transcendence she had had as a girl in Northumberland, so we may perhaps forgive her a degree of stridency here. She knows that of which she speaks. But is the will operative in premise choice? In recent times philosophers have fought against allotting the will *any* role in belief formation (Descartes' brilliant arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, which they usually show little sign of having pondered either deeply or sympathetically). Maybe the denial of the role of the will in belief formation is itself a feature of a form of intellectualism or rationalism neither Plato nor Aristotle would have recognised, for both understood the way that moral and other evaluative dispositions played a role in choice of ends, and maybe of premises too. We do in a sense have to choose for or against Urizen, but can this be done by means of argument, in the sense that argument one way will show the other way rationally indefensible?

It is often at this point that one begins to hear about judgements of sense and robust senses of reality, as if there might be some touchstone available to the worldly-wise, allowing them to brush off those with other fish to fry. I am not denying that to the person of good sense some things will seem whimsical, far-fetched, superstitious and just plain incredible, astrology, ley-lines and homeopathic medicines being among the usual and obvious suspects. To people brought up in a certain way, or with a certain cast of mind, Blake to whom I have already referred, is going to seem just off the wall. To speak personally, and Kathleen Raine notwithstanding, I am in no sense an uncritical admirer of Blake, or even really an admirer. But I'm reminded here that a philosopher friend of mine has used Blake's famous image of Newton for the cover of a book on the philosophy of science. He had not realised that Blake intended this image to be one of repression, of cruelty, of enmity to life and above all of a blindness to all that was not material, below and measurable, or that the primary sense of Blake's expression 'dark satanic mills' was to refer to the reductionist and mechanistic laws the constrained and constricted geometer Newton was mapping out in Blake's image.

[5] Raine, *op cit*, 347–8.

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This is not, of course, an argument against the historic Newton or his philosophy, nor does it show that my friend was entirely wrong to take Newton in a positive sense. As I said to him, attempting to soften the blow I had just landed on him, you could even see the Newton of Blake's image as an angel, albeit fallen; and, as Peter Ackroyd has pointed out, there is indeed a monumentality about Blake's Newton, reflecting his creativity and mental isolation, akin to Blake's own, albeit in Newton's case maddened with unbelief.[6] My point is rather that it simply did not enter my friend's mind that Newton's science should be seen as hateful and life-denying, so he was unable to imagine that Blake's intention might be to show Newton as such.

There is a view of philosophy which sees it as primarily critical and analytical, philosophy itself as the organon of criticism, perhaps. We could think here of J.S. Mill's idea that one thing philosophy should do, perhaps the main thing it should do, is continually to challenge and criticise our assumptions and prejudices, even the most apparently solid. In a Millian spirit it would, of course, be easy to come up with arguments against many of Blake's ideas; Blake would be slain by the sword of critical rationalism. His ideas would not survive testing by experience and observation, if only because most of them are not in that sense testable. Nor are his views immune to logical analysis. No doubt there are plenty of contradictions in his writings too. There is, though, this:

> 'once atoms had no color; now they also have no shape, place or volume... There is a reason why metaphysics sounds so passé, so *vieux jeu* to-day; for intellectual perplexities and paradoxes, it has been far surpassed by theoretical science. Do the concepts of the Trinity, the soul, haecceity, universals, prime matter, and potentiality baffle you? They pale beside the unimaginable otherness of closed space-times, event-horizons, EPR correlations and bootstrap models.'[7]

> No doubt we will be told that the theories which deal with space-time and the rest have survived severe testing at in the most precise way; but does that make the theories more believable? Does that in itself dissipate the air of paradox and uncertainty which hangs over them? Does it do much to close the gap

[6] Peter Ackroyd, *Blake*, Vintage, London, (1999), 201.

[7] Bas van Fraassen, 'Empiricism in the Philosophy of Science', in *Images of Science*, edited by P.M. Churchland and C.A. Hooker, University of Chicago Press, (1985), 245–308, at 258.

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> between the calculations and observations and the extraordinary conceptions these calculations and observations are held by men of impeccable scientific sense to support?

Maybe it does. Maybe critical rationalism, if it leads us to quibble over the best scientific theories of our time, fuss over their apparent contradictoriness and so on, should just be told to get lost here, given that the theories in question are immensely workable, useful and empirically precise to an unimaginable degree. In any case scientists are not going to dispense with them, whatever philosophers might say, any more than you or I are going to stop treating our friends and lovers as free or our inductive beliefs as probable, whatever Hume and his followers tell us. The point here is that if we are thinking of philosophy as the organon of criticism it is hard to cordon off our essential commonsensical beliefs from its strictures. One lesson Hume teaches is that they will fall too, if examined too critically. Too critically, we say. But is excess of criticism a notion available to the Millian critical rationalist? Mill: 'even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth, unless it is suffered to be, and actually is vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds'.[8] *Rational* grounds *after* vigorous and earnest contestation... amazing really that Mill wrote this decades after Hume.

One feels that a perceptive reader of Hume should not be so certain of any of this, and in true anti-foundationalist/rationalist spirit might instead manage at least one cheer for prejudice, or at least for animal belief. If we are honest, we have to acknowledge that there is a sense in which we do not really believe in philosophy as critical rationalism. We will tend to use philosophy's critical edge highly selectively, against believers in fairies and in the literal truth of the book of Genesis, but not against the things which go to constitute our own 'robust common sense', hardly recognising the variability of what over the years has been taken to shelter under the umbrella of robust common sense.

The whole Millian enterprise of continuous criticism, the enterprise of critical rationalism, in other words, is open to question in further way, as Jacob Burckhardt maintained: 'Keeping everything persistently subject to discussion and change... will end up with a host of irreconcilable contradictions'. The point is that continual

[8] J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Ch 2, in *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Essay on Bentham*, Fontana edition, London, 1962, 180.

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scrutiny and review of one's assumptions will deprive one of any firm ground from which to base judgements. In the practical, but not only the practical sphere, there can be many starting points and many goals which are not simultaneously reconcilable. To take a standard example, in the political sphere equality will conflict with liberty and liberty may impede security. But similar tensions will arise in the epistemological domain. Certainty may be bought, relatively speaking anyway, but at the expense of content and creativity. In aesthetics concentrating on formal perfection may well produce dullness; on the other hand exuberance may undermine structure and clarity. Trying to achieve all these goals together will be impossible, as they are not reconcilable in a pure state. In so far as criticism may proceed simultaneously from any and all directions, it too will undermine the coherence of one's projects. We are drawn back once more to the adoption of priorities, to premises, in other words.

I say adoption rather than choice here because I do not think that people chose premises or ends in the way they might chose a tin of biscuits. Normally we do not see ourselves as confronted with equally valuable or valid alternatives, for one of which we simply have to opt. Many factors bear on which premises people adopt, social, psychological, stylistic, developmental and, up to a point, rational. Nor do I want to deny that sometimes people do change their fundamental commitments, intellectual and moral, as much as any others. The claim I am making is that intellectual-cum-argumentative factors are not going to be sufficient in the sense that they are rationally compelling in themselves and on their own. Even if they seem to be to the one who loses a faith, they will not really be. Faiths can always be rationally defended as well as attacked, and if a particular line of defence seems to a majority at a particular time to be unconvincing and if a particular convert chooses not to give much weight to the defences offered by those whose group he is leaving, that may not be for wholly rational reasons.

In *The Russell/Bradley Dispute and Its Significance for Twentieth-Century Philosophy*,[9] Stewart Candlish shows convincingly enough that Russell, though defeating Bradley comprehensively in terms of influence and the course of philosophical history (including the later writing of that history), did not actually provide rationally compelling refutations of Bradley's views. In discussing this episode Candlish refers to a remark of Geoffrey Warnock, that philosophical systems such as Bradley's are more vulnerable to *ennui* than to disproof. Comparing the turgid and convoluted texts of the English

[9] Candlish, *The Russell/Bradley Dispute* . . . , Palgrave, 2007.

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idealists with the briskness and crispness and day-light feel of Russell and Ayer, one can certainly appreciate Warnock's observation. Further for many, now as then, there is something reactionary and claustrophobic about the atmosphere of idealism, as compared to the progressive and energetic debunking of worn-out pieties and religion, spilt or otherwise, which we find in Russell, Ayer and their successors, as they force their opponents to say what they mean and profess to find their answers incomprehensible. But that does not mean that they are incomprehensible, or that an iconoclast's sense of *ennui* is much of a criterion philosophically. Maybe what Bradley was striving to articulate is complicated and difficult and maybe Bradley himself was not as gifted a writer or arguer as Russell; but maybe a philosophical faith in science as the touchstone of reality is itself cramping and claustrophobic (as Blake intimates in 'Newton'), inducing in its adherents a form of blindness to genuine aspects of experience.

What then is left for philosophy, if there is no absolute rationality over choice of ends and premises, if what is at issue is in part a mood, an atmosphere, a style, a basic intuition about the way things are, a sense of conviction owing as much to one's disposition as to rational argument? Is the claim of philosophy to take us nearer the truth at a deep level not just empty, but deceptive in that these deep truths, or what we take to be deep truths, are not susceptible of rational proof or argument? I must admit that when I reached this point in my reflections as I was writing this, I began to feel rather depressed, having appeared to reach a point of convergence with Athenian sophists and contemporary post-modernists: that there is no ultimate truth in these areas (or if there is we cannot recognise that we have reached it), and that all that is left to philosophy is persuasion, philosophy being, as it was for the sophists, the art of persuasion. Of course, if we could get to ultimate truths by philosophical means, then philosophy would in another sense be the art of persuasion (as I imagine Russell believed it to be).

I want in the rest of this essay to contest the idea that philosophy aims primarily at persuasion, in either sense. It should not aim at the sophistical type of persuasion through rhetoric, because that would be manipulative of others; nor should it aim at persuading others of ultimate truths by means of rational argument, because rational argument cannot take us that far. Although I do not think that philosophy is a matter of therapy (because I do not think that it deals with philosophical illnesses), the view I am not going to sketch has more in common with the therapeutic view than with thinking of philosophy as attempting to persuade others.

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Philosophy, properly conceived, has as much to do with self-discovery as with making a noise or having an influence in the world outside, taking self-discovery in a wide sense to include discovering my fundamental orientation to the world outside me. It is, in a certain sense (Descartes's sense), meditative; it does involve a Platonic care of the individual soul.

I have suggested that philosophy cannot justify ultimate premises, and that the hostile criticism of rival premises has limited rational power. But it does not follow from any of this, nor do I intend it to follow, that philosophy may not be about premises. Each of us has a world-view, a fundamental orientation to reality and to our fellows. This world view is, as already remarked, formed by all sorts of influences, including philosophical influences, which have worked their way through the culture of our nation, through our families and friends, and through our own biographies. Most people do little to make their world-views explicit, and are often unconscious of their implications and starting-points. Their world-views may, as a result, have a degree of incoherence and certainly a degree of fuzziness. Lives and world-views often remain unexamined, and if we are concerned, as reflective beings, to know ourselves and our world, this must be a bad thing. The unexamined life may not be worthless, as Socrates contended, but, other things being equal, it may be worth less than an examined one.

As self-conscious and reflective persons, once we start to think about who we are and what we expect, this type of incoherence and fuzziness is bound to be unsatisfactory. The initial impulse to philosophy is not so much wonder (as Aristotle and Whitehead may have thought), though wonder may come into it, as a desire to become clear about the world and one's place within it. This will include becoming clear about what science, history, psychology, the arts and other forms of knowledge and experience tell me about the world and myself, and about their reasons for what they tell me. But this cannot be a purely scientific or historical or sociological or psychological or artistic matter, because part of what is involved here will be what I think about the role of science, history, sociology and psychology in the world, by which I really mean their role in my world view.

In becoming clearer about my world-view, I will also inevitably affect it. In making the inarticulate articulate I will be making clear and definite what is fuzzy and inchoate. Here there will be much to be said for reading and studying what others have said about the things I am seeking clarity on, for seeking reasons, in other words, both for and against. I will begin to understand just what I am

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committed to, just what its implications are. I will realise things about what I think that I did not previously know, just as in reading Proust on love and jealousy or Baudelaire on *ennui* I will come to understand much about my own emotions which I did not previously realise. In this process of intellectual and conceptual discovery or self-discovery, I may also come to change things I originally thought or thought I thought. Some of these changes might be at a high level of argument or exposition, a level which does not really affect my fundamental commitments, as when a physicalist realises that a type-type identification of mental and brain states won't quite work, but does not take this to impugn his commitment to physicalism, but rather to spur him on to further argumentative epicycles, or as when a theist abandons a literal interpretation of Genesis, but does not take this to undermine Scripture's deeper truth, and begins instead to follow Augustine's plea for more mature and spiritual understandings of Holy Writ.

Work at this level is important, but is on a different level from that which involves changes in fundamental commitments. At a more radical level I may find that some of my basic commitments are inconsistent at a deep level with other things I also believe, and cannot be solved in the manner of our physicalist or our Augustinian exegete. But in a case of deep inconsistency, the change will be against a background of commitment I am not altering. Or it may be because when I realise just how one of my commitments looks when spelled out and clarified, I do not like the look of it. I may come to realise that the image projected by a scientistic or Newtonian world-view is not such an attractive one after all. This seems to me to be a perfectly valid philosophical result, which may come from immersing myself in Wittgenstein as much as in Blake – but, in view of our strictures earlier, I should not expect my change of mind (or heart), or the considerations which led to it in my case to convince a Quine or a Paul Churchland. They may simply be, in William James' terms, tough-minded, disposed to be materialistic, irreligious and sceptical, and determined to hold on to these dispositions and work out their implications, striving to bring them into harmony with all of their experience and commitments.

The picture of philosophy which I am here sketching, in which philosophy is part of a rational, but personal quest for meaning might not be recognised in many philosophy departments (or not by their students, anyway), and would be hard to discern in many of the most acclaimed philosophical writings of to-day. This is partly because of the tendency of academic study in all areas to specialisation and impersonality, specialisation because more and

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more people concentrate on less and less in an effort to achieve originality (and so get published), impersonality because of an attempt in philosophy to appear scientific. Of course, some of the people who write and practice philosophy in these ways will see their tightly focused work as contributing to a larger vision, but it seems to me that the overall direction is false to the true nature of the subject. And although we can all agree that our endeavours are directed to the truth, and guided by reasons and arguments that bear on the truth of what each of us believes, we each have to face the fact that we will not achieve complete rational convergence on premises, because it is not there to be achieved. Nor will we come to a set of truths which will be so evident that they will command the assent of all who embark on the journey and pursue it in a rational and reasonable manner, aiming as best they can to seek the truth. It is just this picture which our earlier considerations on the nature and history of philosophical disagreement seem to undermine. In the beginning and at the end, philosophy is a personal journey, crucial to the examined life Socrates thought so integral to human flourishing.

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