The Genesis of ‘Oxford’ Philosophy

Gilbert Ryle

By October 1945, I and lots of my philosophical colleagues had shed our military and resumed our academic uniforms. Most of us, I think, came back to our subjects with an increased, not a decreased appetite. The flood of graduate philosophers was not yet on us, but for a few years most of our undergraduate students were mature and responsible ex-soldiers, who would not be spoonfed with habitual answers. They would not let us be indecisive or tepid about philosophical issues. What sort of a philosophical era did they inaugurate?

I want to sketch first some influential changes in our curricular and departmental setting, and second some of the changes in the direction and strength of the philosophical wind.

(1) For one thing, the passage of time, with its deaths and retirements, had by now completed one process of which the First World War had been a murderous, and the inauguration of PPE had been a constructive, start.

a) In the 1920s the Oxford philosophers senior to, say, Henry Price, John Mabbott and myself, had been a handful of survivors of the First World War; and of that handful most had already been too old for military service in 1914. Ypres, Passchendaele and the Somme had destroyed the succeeding generation. For good and for ill the traditions and the habits of pre-1914 Oxford philosophy were, by say 1925, hanging by a very thin thread. Prichard, Joseph, Ross, Carritt, Joachim, J. A. Smith, A. H. Smith and Pickard-Cambridge were immensely co-operative and unsnubbing. But they were few, and they were separated from us by a wide span of years, during which there existed almost no middle-aged philosophers to bridge. Paton and Collingwood were the main, though not quite the only chronological intermediaries to survive and return to Oxford from that war. Those of my age need to remind ourselves that we are now of the age and seniority that Prichard and Joseph were when we
were young dons. But there is not that boundless military cemetery between us and the youngest of you that there was between them and us. It is I think significant that without any sentiments of secession, Price, Mabbott, Hardie, myself and later Lewis and Maclagan formed a regularly meeting dining-cum-discussion club. We felt too juvenile to talk easily at the discussions dominated by our elders. We continued to attend these, but we let our hair down only in our own little club. There was no hostility but sheer Anno Domini inhibited exchange.

b) PPE caused, in quite a short time, two major changes. First, the sheer number of undergraduates reading Honours philosophy expanded rapidly and remorselessly; and the number of teachers of philosophy followed suit. While at Cambridge, say, or Edinburgh, the philosophy staff remained fairly static, and, it sometimes seemed, somewhat ingrowing, our Sub-Faculty grew apace – and inevitably the average age of its members went on dropping. When I myself sat PPE in 1924 Oxford could boast of only four or five economists, and few colleges could boast of a second philosophy tutor. The second major change caused by PPE was this. It soon became necessary for a tutor and even for a professor to be decently grounded in set books additional to Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s Ethics. Indeed when, as soon became general, a college had two philosophy tutors, and later even three, it became quite a common thing that one of the tutors was exempted from teaching Plato and Aristotle, taking on, in exchange, the Rationalists, say, and Kant. Among other, mostly greater benefits was this one, that our philosophical ‘shop’ became three or four times as interesting, since we now had partly non-identical repertoires. An obviously greater benefit was this. The number of people needed for lecturing and ‘required’ bread-and-butter subjects increased, but not so fast as did the number of teachers of philosophy. Consequently a tutor or professor could, much more often than not, without inconvenience to the Sub-Faculty, lecture on whatever he liked. Colleagues and students from other universities began to gaze enviously at our terminal lecture lists for the sheer variety of topics on which lectures were given – or anyhow offered. We had time to work up and put into lecture-shape ideas which were not requisite for this or that Final Honours School. One might lecture on Locke, Berkley and Hume in one term; and on Tomorrow’s Sea-Battle the next term.

After the Second World War these tendencies were fortified by the largely unanticipated influx of graduate philosophers. It would be pleasant to be able to boast that the Sub-Faculty’s invention of the BPhil was inspired by a prevision of the tide that has since come into existence. Although I personally
had, I fancy, more to do with the starting of the BPhil than anyone else in particular, I fear I must not claim much more foresight than this: I, and we, saw that graduates from ‘Redbrick’, or overseas, would tend to gravitate towards Oxford as distinct from other United Kingdom universities because of the sheer size of the Sub-Faculty and the sheer variety and comprehensiveness of its philosophical pabulum. It was obvious too, but this had been obvious even in the 1920s, that English-speaking philosophy graduates would not, save for a few strays, be going any more to Continental, and particularly German, universities in the way in which they had done up to 1914. But the notion that we should by the 1960s be coping with an annual intake of three, four or five dozen graduate philosophers did not, I am glad to say, occur to us. In the middle 1940s the Sub-Faculty showed a lot of courage and resolution in getting the BPhil into existence, against the suspicions of the University. We might not have had that courage and resolution if we had foreseen the scale of the task that, in the event, the Sub-Faculty was going to cope with so effectively and so calmly.

Anyhow the swiftly growing population of BPhil students, plus the other graduates, needed, merited, got and repaid lectures, seminars and tutorial instruction on a width of front and at a depth of treatment of subjects that few philosophy departments could or can emulate. And my point is not the obvious one that this has been good for them, but the more forgettable point that this has been very good for us. Without, I think, reducing any of us to philosophical Jacks-of-all-trades – save when examining in Final Schools, the BPhil or the John Locke – it has resulted in nearly everyone becoming at least rather well-founded or at least rather enterprising down not too many, but down two or perhaps three different tracks at the same time.

Philosophical scholarship, by which I here mean only serious consultation with past philosophers had, very unfortunately, become a despised thing in Wittgenstein’s Cambridge. Here, it had never been a despised thing – sometimes it had been an over-solemnized thing; but the structure of the BPhil multiplied the change that had earlier been brought about by PPE. It was now not merely condonable or commendable but imperative that some Sub-Faculty ears should be cocked for the voices of philosophical ancestors besides those of the authors of the Republic, the Ethics, the Critique of Pure Reason and the Grundlegung.

The old pressure on us to know too few things too well has not, I think, been replaced by a new pressure to know too many things too shoddily. For one thing our own healthy indolences, and for another thing graduate pesterings and pertinacities, combine to inhibit unsecured catholicities. When there is an
expert just around the corner, one does not dare, but also one does not need to pretend to be an expert. If my graduate student wants to know, really to know, his Leibniz, then he both can and ought to go to Martha Kneale. Maybe I should too, but I don’t.

So much for, so to speak, Sub-Faculty business. After we got back to Oxford in the middle 1940s, the philosophical atmosphere did not smell very different from what it had been five or six years before. But it was different in some ways, of which I shall pick on only two or three.

1. George Paul had come to us, directly from Australia and indirectly from Cambridge. He was never an echo, but he did know for himself, and not like us by hearsay, the philosophical voices of the Cambridge Wittgenstein and of Wittgenstein’s Cambridge.

Waismann was also with us, and he had known the Vienna Circle and the Viennese voice of Wittgenstein. The busy Cambridge-Oxford grapevine also helped to keep us posted. So when we invited Wittgenstein (of course in vain) to give the first of our newly allotted John Locke Lectures, we had a fairly good idea of his absorptions, tones of voice and abominations. When the Philosophical Investigations came out, they were not very much like, but they were not totally unlike, what we had expected.

2. Whether in or out of parallel with this current, John Austin’s influence quickly affected the tempo and the temperature of things. In particular, his Saturday morning sessions with his coevals and juniors were soon engendering not indeed unanimities, but zeals and scruples which almost justified, if anything could justify, the invention by some non-insider of the labels ‘Oxford philosophy’ and ‘the Oxford school of philosophy’.

3. Though dogged by persistent ill-fortune, the Sub-Faculty had been since the thirties trying to get modern formal logic to sink a major root in Oxford soil. By the early 1950s a number of rootlets were growing promisingly. In the fields of the philosophy of logic and the history of logic some of our number could now in level competition with the world’s experts take their own steps forward. There remained one field, or the field in which our best were still amateurs; but still they were now at least amateurs. They could read, even if they could not yet contribute to, the Journal of Symbolic Logic. During that memorable meeting of this society at which Bill Kneale and Karl Popper physically wrestled for the duster, it was not Kneale’s chalked inscriptions on the blackboard
that clamoured for erasure or correction.

I am going to wind up with a bit of autobiography, which I give to you not in pride or in humility, but because it illustrates some of the yeasts that were working in and after the second half of the 1940s. In late 1945 or in 1946 Paton pressed me to contribute a book to the new Hutchinson philosophy series of which he was General Editor. I agreed, but had as yet no idea what the promised book was to be about. However, I was, from the start, clear about one thing. During the thirties we had all, I think well-advisedly, been writing papers for societies and articles and discussion-notes for journals on what philosophy was and wasn’t; how philosophical method resembled or differed from scientific method; whether philosophers’ results, if any, could rank as propositions; and so on and so on. Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, Freddie Ayer’s Language, Truth and Logic, and Carnap’s Logical Syntax, different though they were, were alike in leaving this domestic meta-question clamouring for an answer. I don’t pretend that any of us scotched that question then, or have scotched it yet; but, to put it boastfully, we already knew quite well a lot of the tempting answers that wouldn’t do, and why they wouldn’t do. I think we, or anyhow I, would have claimed to be further ahead even than that. Well, in 1946 it seemed clear to me that what the subject and the clients of the subject needed was not any more lapidary statements to colleagues of what philosophy was and wasn’t, but a full-scale application of these lapidary ideas to some integral and comprehensive philosophers’ tangle. The thing to be done now was to show working the thing that we had been telling each other was the only thing that would work. Not a treatise on Method, but a treatise with a method and for the sake of a method – a philosophical treatise with a meta-philosophical moral. But it was quite a time before I switched away from my first meditated subject, the Freedom of the Will, to the final subject, The Concept of Mind (and incidentally even this title which seems now to have been divinely inspired, was about the best thing to occur to me before sending up typescripts for printing. I had considered and rejected dozens or scores of alternatives first).

Why did I settle, and settle, I still think, profitably on this particular subject? Well, I can’t give the whole answer, but part of it is this. To the twenties, and still, dwindlingly, to the thirties there had survived the tail end of a party-contest between something called ‘Idealism’ and something called ‘Realism’. Part of the contest was fought over perception and the perceptible; the other part was fought over thought and the thinkable. It happened that I, unlike Henry Price, G.E. Moore, C.D. Broad, Prichard and others, was much more interested in the pros and cons of Realism about the Thinkable than I was in those of Realism about the Perceptible. On the other hand, I very soon
became sceptical of the well-meant Platonisms of Bolzano, Husserl, Meinong, Russell, Plato and others. I did not want Price or Moore to have their immediate acquaintance with sense data, but nor did I want Russell or Meinong or Plato or, I fancied, the author of the *Tractatus*, to enjoy their trout-like apprehensions of universals, objectives, propositions or the constituents of propositions. What was wanted was (a) Realism without additional entities to apprehend or (b) Realism without fabricated apprehensions. It was in this spirit that, a bit ahead of my time, I studied fairly thoroughly the intentionalist accounts of thinking of Brentano, Meinong and Husserl, and it was in this spirit that in my Tercentenary Lecture on John Locke I tried to sort out some of the various things that the word ‘idea’ muddle up together.

So far my motivation was that of a would-be antibiotic epistemologist. ‘Fidgetty Cook-Wilsonian’ would, so far, have been a fair title for me. But – and here I can’t tell you why – I was, from a very early stage, in the 1920s, hooked by the twin notions of meaning and the meaningless. Though grossly misunderstanding the whole thing, I spotted in very early days that the *Tractatus* had this pair of notions for its focus. Russell’s Theory of Types and his troubles that the theory was to remedy soon rang bells with me. And I read my Brentano, Husserl and Meinong much more because their intentionality theory was, though they did not know it, a knight’s move into the theory of meaning, than because it claimed to be a bishop’s rectilinear move into the bases of Psychology. I was much interested in what Husserl said about Logical Syntax; despite what some commentators are now reporting, only conscientiousness made me track Husserl a weary half mile or so further into his apparatus-ridden Phenomenology. I was fairly clear that what was wanted was not an intentionalist Phenomenology but a Nichomacheanised *De Anima* that was also syntactically circumspect.

Well then, to bring things together, *The Concept of Mind* was meant to be a sustained exercise in applying the general theory of meaning versus nonsense to those mental terms which, I thought, both idealists in their ways and realists in theirs had been so trouble-generatingly misplacing, fabricating, ossifying or beatifying. I had never been hugely interested in Descartes; but I was hugely interested in the unquestioning Cartesianisms of, for example, Kant, Russell, Moore, Broad, Prichard, Ross, Brentano, Meinong and Husserl.

Of course, there is a lot more to it all than that. But that is part of what organized the later 1940s for me. And if for me, then in different degrees and ways, for that philosophical generation to which I owe everything.