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## **A Student's View of Cambridge Philosophy Post-Wittgenstein - 1947-9**

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I came up to Cambridge just after the Second World War, in 1947, to read Moral Sciences. For Part I this was Philosophy, Logic, Ethics, Psychology. For Part II I read Psychology, under Professor Sir Frederic Bartlett FRS. I was fortunate to stay in Cambridge for twenty years: first research in the MRC Applied Psychology Unit, then a University Lectureship in Experimental Psychology, which set the course of my life's career mixing experiments with some attempts in philosophy. Now 80, I remain active in Bristol with a Senior Research Fellowship allowing me to continue experimenting and writing, though without formal teaching. This is a great way to go.

Because of the war that had just ended, most of us were several years older than normal for students, and the contrast from the Services to Cambridge was intoxicating beyond description. I couldn't believe my luck when Downing College accepted me. My father and both grandfathers had been to Cambridge, but during the nearly six years of my mute inglorious time in the RAF, it seemed impossible I would follow suite. Actually, by a strange chance I was not entirely mute, as I was posted by the Air Ministry to explain war-time technologies of

communication to the public in an ambitious Air Force exhibition, in the John Lewis bomb site in Oxford Street in 1945. This perhaps led to an interest in presenting science to the public, founding the Exploratory hands-on Science Centre forty years later. But nothing made up for the failing to be a fighter pilot, due to an ear operation while at school, though of course this might have been life saving twice-over.

What Cambridge philosophy was like at that time, is brilliantly described in *Wittgenstein's Poker* by David Edmonds and John Eidinow. Here are the wonderful characters I knew – all except Wittgenstein who had just left, ill, for Ireland. He returned to Cambridge, but as a recluse in Dr Bevan's house, and never seen at any rate by us, even though we knew Dr Bevan's consulting room with its Blue oar on the wall. We lived in the turbulent stern-wave of Wittgenstein. He was a haunting presence, materialised by John Wisdom in his remarkable lectures. Wittgenstein's ideas were a voice in our minds, though his writings had not yet appeared in print. A tattered, typed version of the Blue Book (or the Brown Book?) was circulated but closely guarded by John Wisdom's students. I got no more than a surreptitious glance.

Our teachers were extraordinarily varied personalities; devoted to issues philosophical, and commendably willing to show and share with us their mental treasures. Supervisions, when our essays were dissected in depth and detail, could be exciting excursions into their adventures of understanding, as well as grounding on our shoals of ignorance. My main Supervisor was Dr Alfred Ewing, who though the least exciting, I owe a lasting dept, as he enforced discipline by demanding essays on uncongenial topics, showing one how to dig out or create interest as one went along. Richard Braithwaite (later Professor) supervised me for one

term, inspiring a lasting interest in the philosophy of science. John Wisdom was the most remarkable character and truly histrionic lecturer. I still don't know how seriously to take him, as he was more therapist than teacher, but he was a strong influence. He would conjure and live for weeks or months with an image, such as: Other Minds are, and are not, like a fire on the horizon. He would tell us the mind is not a *thing*, and – usefully - go on to examine what an acceptable *thing* might be. He loved creating and resolving puzzles, his somewhat hidden attachment to psychoanalysis being integral to his thinking and teaching. Professor C D Broad was utterly different, impressive almost to the point of intimidation. It is true that he read his lectures word-for-word twice over for our dictation; but I can't swear that he read the jokes three times to make it clear they were jokes.

Meetings of the Moral Science Club, held in Richard Braithwaite's rooms in Kings (No 3 on H staircase) were serious occasions, most often with detailed points on recondite topics which would be hard to appreciate; but they were enjoyable and occasionally there would be drama. In the famous poker incident, the year before (actually 25 October 1946), Wittgenstein, who was chairing the meeting, picked up and brandished the possibly red hot poker, on some accounts waving it around for emphasis but on others threatening the visiting speaker, Sir Carl Popper. This was a clash of basically different ideas of what philosophy is about; each held with passion by the proponents and their supporters. Wittgenstein urged (though perhaps never quite proved) that philosophy cannot solve problems, though may resolve linguistic confusions producing puzzles. Evidently he would become extremely annoyed with people claiming to make significant remarks on what for him could not be said. This was Popper's sin. Popper was an outsider, battling in this

charmed arena where the chosen few took turns for attention, with commanding gestures, but pretty well ignored the surrounding world. There were, however, some exceptions such as the distinguished American logicians. Having been present at a few meetings, one learned to anticipate from the preliminary gestures which line of argument was about to emerge. The primary division was between Wittgensteinians and the Broadians. Wittgenstein's gesture of holding his forehead in his hands, apparently looking inwards with a long period of enforced silence, was embodied by John Wisdom and no doubt remains immortal in his successors. Professor Broad and his acolytes would throw back the head with the arms upraised, as though looking for external revelation.

There was plenty of underlying mythology. It was known to us that Professor Broad, who had Newton's old rooms in Trinity, would call up Newton's spirit in nightly ceremonies. It was also known that John Wisdom would tempt fate at the Newmarket races. Richard and his wife Margaret Braithwaite (Richard came nearest to being a saint than anyone I have ever met) practiced occult ceremonies, with mystic signs on the floor in a local windmill. They were all vivid personalities and were most generous to their students, socially and intellectually. Ewing stood somewhat alone, living in a tiny house with his mother and apparently with no social life. He was an 'old fashioned' Idealist, a Kantian scholar, and deep believer in objective standards of ethics. He disputed Ayer-type Logical Positivism (that for a proposition to be meaningful, it must be testable for truth or falsity) with a delightful argument on, Is there Life After Death? - which made him twinkle: "After my death I would be able to confirm continuing consciousness, but not its *absence*. As only the 'yes there is life after death' alternative is verifiable - yet the proposition is clearly meaningful - the Verification Principal must be false. This amused

his peers and students but they seemed not to take it seriously. Topics of conversation with Dr Ewing were limited to two: Table Tennis and the Lake District. Yet he was an excellent supervisor, especially for those of us who lacked academic discipline and skills, through leaving school early. (I missed the sixth form, filling sand bags to protect buildings, farm-boying, and teaching old ladies how to deal with incendiary bombs with a stirrup pump). Though physically a little man, Dr Ewing wore enormous boots. Listening to one's weekly essay in front of the gas fire in his little, far too hot sitting room, the boots would rise up in the air, as he looked for interesting propositions in the ill-written sentences. The huge black boots would rise highest with challenges to objective ethics. He confessed to responsibility for starting the first war. As he told me told me, in 1914 he gave a lecture at St. Anne's, near Blackpool, and the war started a day or so later. He didn't visit St Anne's again until 1939 - the second war immediately started. So induction suggested he caused the second war, and he looked guilty. We unfairly called Dr Ewing 'a sheep in sheep's clothing'. He defended his ground with a quiet dignity I at least found impressive.

Bertrand Russell, who was then 76, came to Cambridge each Thursday. He gave two very well attended lectures during the day, one on non-demonstrative logic and the other on ethics, which he said were the hardest to write. He also saw six of us for an hour or so, in his Trinity room over the gateway in Whewell's Court, overlooking the elms just re-planted after 400 years. We sat on sofas, the great man on his own, with two pipes alternately smoking and cooling for re-filling. At that time he was involved not so much with philosophy and logic, as the future of Europe and especially which of the great powers would move in and control Berlin. This was rather disappointing for us, for we were not

interested in war or politics; we were seeking Absolute Truth, and here we were, sharing sofas with the immortal Master who had sorted out the basis of logic and mathematics. But he would warm to comments and questions on Wittgenstein. We got the feeling that he did not really want Wittgenstein to be accepted by us as the Philosopher of the Twentieth century. Lord Russell was well aware of his own eminence and wished to preserve it for the future, and why not?

On one occasion which I remember particularly, a pile of his newly-written *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and limits* stood on the floor. For once I raised a worthwhile question: how to justify the prior probability of 0.5 to get the Keynes method if induction going. The great man picked up the volume on top of the pile, signed it, and gave it to me with a smile. I treasure the book to this day. The last of his philosophical works, it is I think an important account of the basis of scientific knowledge from inductive inference, though it never really took off.

We were not expected to read much of classical philosophy – the emphasis being on thinking, and formulating our questions and tentative answers – but I was attracted by Berkeley's *Dialogues* to issues of perception, and especially how perceptions are related to what seems to be perceived in the external world of objects. But I felt there was lack of appreciation of the many rich and interesting phenomena of perception. So moving into psychology was not a turning away from philosophy, but rather trying to develop and test philosophical ideas with experiments. The old term *Experimental Philosophy* which is still used in Scotland is very appropriate. This is not the place to recount what happened in the more than fifty years between reading Moral Sciences (as it was then called) and now; but briefly, I rejected Idealism, and the Direct relation of

‘naïve’ Realism; coming up with the notion that perceptions are predictive *hypotheses* of what is out there, actively created by the brain, from general Rules and Knowledge of kinds of events and objects. I put this notion, that perceptions are hypotheses somewhat like hypotheses of science, to a major philosophical meeting in 1971, but it fell like a lead balloon though without leaving a discernable mark in the world of philosophy. To me the notion links brain processes of perception to methods of science in an interesting way. Is it best judged by scientists or philosophers? I would look to the skills of philosophy for assessing internal coherence of ideas; to science for coherence to the way things are.

Has reading philosophy at Cambridge been useful? It was a wonderful experience to live in the centre of the known – and especially the unknown - Universe, especially at the time of Lord Adrian in physiology and the discovery of DNA, when Francis Crick with his atom-smashing laugh was very much in evidence. But was it *directly* useful? It gave one the courage (and on good days the skill) to challenge accepted ideas and attempt to clear confusions, which psychology being so difficult and so little understood were (and in spite of my humble efforts, are!) plentiful. The issue I looked at first, was localisation of brain functions. How could functions be localised when we didn’t know how the brain works – and so what the functions are? Rather more subtle: from changing or removing part of an interacting system, how is it possible to see from changes of performance what that part was doing? Unfortunately some of my friends engaged in these experiments saw this as an attack on what they were doing; it was intended as a help for interpreting what they found. These arguments have often been quoted since – and perhaps more often ignored!

But I have been more concerned with getting evidence, for or against, philosophical positions; most dramatically the study of a case of adult recovery from infant blindness, almost certainly from birth – following Molyneux’s Question raised by John Locke, which I read as a student: ‘Suppose a man born blind, and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and sphere . . . and the blind man made to see . . . query whether by his sight . . . could he distinguish and tell which was the globe and which the cube?’

We found some surprising instant vision, with something not anticipated by philosophers: he could immediately use his knowledge from touch, to read capital letters, and tell the time. Transfer from touch introduces another dimension to the issue of what these rare cases can tell us of the basis and status of perception. Didn’t Wittgenstein say that all new knowledge comes from science? This does not make philosophy useless – if only because it is as important to see the *conceptual* significance of data, as it is to establish *statistical* significance for believing them.

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