# Philosophy in the Twentieth Century

A.J. Ayer

# PHILOSOPHY *in the* TWENTIETH CENTURY

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*Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*

*To Vanessa*

# *Preface*

This contribution to the history of philosophy was originally conceived as a sequel to Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*. It fulfils this intention to the extent that it also confines itself to the West, that, apart from a revaluation of William James and a considerably expanded treatment of what Russell called Logical Analysis, including a chapter devoted to Russell himself, it takes up the story at the point where he left off, and that rather than mention a whole host of philosophers who have made some contribution to the subject, and devote a few lines to each, it deals with the work of a relatively small number of outstanding philosophers at some depth. There is, however, one area in which I have deliberately failed to follow Russell's example. It seemed to me that his excursions into social and political history did not throw much light upon the views of the philosophers with which he sought to associate them and I did not believe that I could improve on his performance. I have, therefore, been content to give a few biographical details about the philosophers on whom I concentrate and in certain cases to refer to the ways in which they influenced one another.

It will be seen that the greater part of the book is devoted to the representatives of two main schools for which I have a personal predilection, the American pragmatists, ranging from William James and C. I. Lewis in the earlier part of this century to my near contemporaries Nelson Goodman and W. V. Quine, and what is loosely called the analytic movement, covering philosophers as diverse as Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap and other members of the Vienna Circle, C. D. Broad, Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, the Americans Donald Davidson and Hilary Putnam, the Australian D. M. Armstrong, and, among my more recent colleagues at Oxford, Peter Strawson and Michael Dummett. I am not sure that Broad would have been pleased to find

himself in this company, but if we consider the distinction that he drew between critical and speculative philosophy, his own work fell on the critical side. I have not ignored speculative philosophy, or metaphysics, and have chosen R. G. Collingwood as the metaphysician whose views I could most sympathetically expound.

To diminish what might appear to be a bias in favour of Anglo-Saxon thought, I have included a chapter on Phenomenology and Existentialism. Here I have concentrated mainly on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whom I regard as the best representative of this philosophical trend. If I have said nothing about Neo-Marxism, it is not because I fail to find any merit in the writings of such philosophers as George Lukács and Lucien Goldmann but because I did not think that I could improve on Leszek Kolakowski's treatment of these authors in the third volume of his *Main Currents of Marxism*. To have attempted to tackle structuralism would have meant too much of a diversion into literary criticism and anthropology.

Considerations of space, and my own inclinations, have limited my exposition of moral philosophy to the first half of this century. While paying tribute to the extraordinary progress that the subject of formal logic has made during the last hundred years, I have not entered into mathematical technicalities. This is not to say that I have fought shy of the philosophy of logic. On the contrary, one of the themes which emerges from my story is the shift of emphasis which is mirrored in the titles of two of Russell's books from *Our Knowledge of the External World* to *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*.

In writing about Russell, Moore, James, Ryle, the Vienna Circle, and also about essentialism, I have drawn rather freely on previously published work of my own. If these echoes disturb any of my readers, I can only ask for their forgiveness. My thanks, as so often before, are due to Mrs Guida Crowley for typing my almost illegible manuscript and otherwise helping me in preparing the book for the press. I am indebted also to Mrs Rosanne Richardson for her retyping of the chapter on Bertrand Russell, which I chose to revise.

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*51 York Street, London W.1*
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# I Philosophical Inheritance

One of the difficulties that faces the historian of philosophy is that his subject is not at all clearly demarcated for him. Not only has the prevalent view of its relation to other subjects, and especially to the natural sciences, been liable to frequent changes in the course of time, but at any given period there may be very wide differences in the aims and methods of those who are deemed to be engaged in its pursuit. This would not be a very serious matter if it came to no more than the fact that the word 'philosophy' was used rather loosely. If the different sorts of enquiry to which it was applied could be effectively distinguished, we could attach different labels to them, and leave to the lexicographers the drudgery of deciding whether the whole set of labels was to be grouped under the heading of 'philosophy' or whether some different grouping, which gave a narrower sense to the term, was more advisable. Unfortunately, the position is not so simple. We do, indeed, distinguish different branches of philosophy, such as logic, the theory of knowledge, the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of language, ethics and political theory, but the conflicting views of the aims and methods of philosophy operate within these branches themselves, even to the point where it is disputed whether some alleged branch of the subject, such as metaphysics, is a genuine pursuit at all, and here the differences are seldom, if ever, so straightforward as a disagreement about the correct or most fruitful application of a word. They are traceable rather to different conceptions of the world and of man's position in it.

It is because these differences are so persistent that philosophy is exposed to the charge, which is frequently brought against it, especially by natural scientists, that it fails to exhibit any progress. Problems which were raised by Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century BC are still discussed, and the work of all the intervening centuries has brought us no nearer to finding a solution of them which

even a majority of contemporary philosophers would accept. I believe this charge to be unjust, even though the appearances are in its favour. What must be conceded is that if there is any progress in philosophy it does not take the linear form which characterizes the progress of a natural science. The historian of physics can show how the Ptolemaic system of astronomy was supplanted in the fifteenth century by the heliocentric system of Copernicus, how the Copernican system led to the development a century later of the theories of Kepler and Galileo, how these theories were improved and incorporated in Newton's classical mechanics, how Newton's principles came into conflict in the nineteenth century with the electromagnetic theory of Clerk Maxwell, himself building on the discoveries of Faraday, and how the conflict was resolved in Einstein's theories of relativity. The speculations, say, of Kepler may still be profitably studied in their historical context, but they do not still stand as rivals to the theories of Einstein. Like the instruments of technology, the theories of physics work for a time and are then superseded. The transition is not always smooth, but however revolutionary the new theory may be, however much, like the quantum theory, it breaks with established concepts, once it has proved its value as a tool of explanation and prediction, it wins general acceptance.

It is otherwise with philosophy. The historian of philosophy can, indeed, trace the influence of one philosopher upon another, especially within the confines of what is represented as a particular 'school'. He can show, for example, how Berkeley reacted against Locke and in what ways Hume followed and repudiated both of them. He can go even further and establish the connections between members of different schools. He can show the extent to which Descartes, the seventeenth-century founder of modern western philosophy, still makes use of mediaeval concepts. He can show how Kant was inspired by what he saw as the need for refuting Hume, and what Hegel in his turn owed to Kant. There is, however, no question of one of these philosophers superseding another, except in the sense that his work may enjoy a period of greater popularity. One can still maintain, without forfeiting one's claim to competence in philosophy, that Hume was right and Kant wrong on the point at issue between them, that Locke came nearer to the truth than either Berkeley or Hume, that as against Kant it was Hegel who took the wrong turning. One can still be a Platonist while fully understanding

Aristotle's criticism of Plato, and without being ignorant of all the positions that different philosophers have taken in the centuries that have passed since Plato lived.

In what then can the progress in philosophy consist? To find an answer, we must, I think, look not to the contributions which have been made to the subject by a series of eminent persons, but rather to the evolution of a set of perennial problems. Chief among them perhaps is the problem of objectivity, appearing sometimes as a source of division between realists and idealists, sometimes as the issue between absolute and relativistic theories of truth. The fundamental question is whether, and to what degree, it is possible for us to describe things as they really are, independently of their relation to ourselves: and here, if a relativistic position is taken, it has to be decided whether the frame of reference is supplied by human beings in general, by one or other society, by a society at different stages of its development, or simply by oneself. The division between realists and idealists also has many facets, comprising as it does a number of conflicting views concerning the constitution of mind and matter and their mutual relation, this question calling in its turn for an enquiry into the character and scope of human knowledge.

The assessment of our capacity for knowledge not only provides a principal point of entry for the philosophical sceptic, recurrently posing a challenge, which stimulates theory by calling for a fresh response, but also sets the stage for another deep division of philosophers into rationalists and empiricists. Here again the dispute takes different forms, according as the lines between reason and experience are more or less sharply drawn, but overall it is the mark of an empiricist that he looks to sense-perception, if not as the sole legitimate source of any true belief about the 'external' world, then at least as a final court of appeal which any acceptable theory must satisfy. The stumbling-block for anyone who holds a position of this sort is the development of the 'pure' sciences of logic and mathematics, which seem to possess a security which sensory observation could not bestow on them. One way of dealing with it has been to deny them this security by making the difference between them and the propositions of the natural sciences at most a difference of degree, so that they too are open to revision in the light of further experience. Another has been to grant them their security but to treat it as a gift that we bestow upon them. On this view, they do no more

than spell out the consequences of the meanings that we attach to logical or numerical signs. They are useful as tools of inference, but not descriptions of reality. A compromise put forward by Immanuel Kant, at least with regard to mathematics, is that its propositions owe their necessity to their stemming from our ordering of the world in space and time, which is a pre-condition of its being accessible to our understanding. This makes them descriptive not of reality as it is in itself but of the outcome of the way in which we are bound to process it, or rather of our contribution to this outcome. Whether this special form of relativism, which is peculiar to Kant and his followers, should be accepted is again a matter for dispute.

While empiricists concur in giving the leading part to sense-perception in their theories of knowledge, they do not all take the same view of what sense-perception is. The most common opinion, which John Locke, officially regarded as the founder of modern empiricism, inherited from the rationalist René Descartes, has been that the immediate objects of sight or touch or any other of our senses are what they both called 'ideas', conceived by them and by most, though not all, of those who have adopted a similar starting-point as mental entities which have no existence apart from the particular sensations in which they figure. For the most part, those who have held a position of this sort have treated the physical objects, which we are ordinarily said to see or touch, as mediate objects of perception. They are represented as being known to us only by inference as the causes of our sensations. This raises the problem how the inference can be justified and allows also for disagreement concerning the nature of these objects. How far do they resemble their sensory effects? Other philosophers, also claiming to be empiricists, have opposed the introduction of anything like 'ideas' as the immediate data of sense, on the ground that it artificially imprisons us in private worlds, and have conceived of physical objects as directly perceptible. In their case, the question has arisen whether they are doing justice to the scientific evidence, which anyhow creates a problem for all theories of perception. They need to explain how the particles, or other objects, which answer to the concepts of contemporary physics, are related to the physical objects of everyday discourse, which are credited with perceptible qualities by common sense.

For rationalists, mathematics tends to serve as a paradigm, not only because of the certainty which is claimed for it, but above all because of its employment of deductive reasoning. The rationalist typically holds

that men are endowed with a faculty of intellectual intuition. Truth is ascribed to the propositions which this faculty authenticates and to everything that follows logically from them. The ideal is to discover the fewest possible number of self-evident premisses, which deductively yield a complete description of reality. When rationalism is blended with idealism, as in the case of Hegel and his followers, reality is identified with a coherent system of judgements rather than with anything outside the system to which its constituents might be supposed to refer. In some cases, such as that of Descartes, the deductive or would-be deductive method is used to vindicate the theories of contemporary science. In others, these theories are condemned as failing to satisfy the demands of reason. Thus, the neo-Hegelians Bradley and McTaggart were not afraid to maintain that neither space nor time nor matter were ultimately real. The drawing of so sharp a distinction between appearance and reality has, indeed, been a relatively uncommon feature of western philosophy, but even more circumspect rationalists, like Leibniz and Spinoza, who saw their systems as according with the science of their day, gave accounts of the world which were greatly at variance with the beliefs of common sense. One reason for this is that the tendency of common sense has been to take the evidence of sense-perception at its face value, whereas in all rationalist systems sense-perception is downgraded. An outstanding example is provided by Plato, who advanced the view that the mutable objects of everyday acceptance owed the inferior degree of reality that he was willing to accord them only to their participation in a timeless system of abstract forms, by which the standard of reality was set.

That abstract entities are real, let alone that they serve as a model for the assessment of reality, has not been an uncontested thesis. It figures in yet another area of constant philosophical dispute. This dispute has several facets, of which the most prominent has been what is technically known as the problem of universals. The simplest definition of a universal is that it is either a quality or a relation, and the problem of the status of qualities and relations is bound up with the conflicting views that have been taken both of their connection with one another and of their connection with the particular things, if any, which they characterize. The extreme antithesis to Plato's theory of forms is the 'nominalist' view that there is nothing more to things having a common quality than our choosing to apply the same

label to them. In the interval, we find the view of Aristotle that universals are real, though not independently of the things in which they inhere; the 'conceptualist' theory, which found some favour in the Middle Ages, that concepts are mental but things naturally fall under them; the theory, held by Leibniz, which tries to resolve relations into qualities, and its converse, the more moderate form of nominalism, in which common qualities are replaced by special relations of similarity, which sort out objects into sets, united in each case by their resemblance to some particular exemplar.

It may seem strange that Berkeley, who upheld nominalism in this form, also maintained that things were bundles of qualities. This was because he could discover no sense in the notion of material substance: a rejection which other empiricists have extended to any sort of substance, conceived, after Locke's fashion, as 'an unknown somewhat', supporting some collection of properties. Among philosophers who have found the need to distinguish particular concrete objects from their properties, there has been disagreement over the questions whether or not these particulars can be numerically different, while sharing all the same general properties, whether the possession of any or all of their properties is necessary for their being what they are, whether we are bound to conceive of some of them at least as persisting through time, or whether they can be 'reduced' to a series of events. Nor is it only the notion of substance that has been put in question. Properties too have been considered suspect, and it has been suggested that they give way to classes which would then be the only abstract entities that we should countenance. This suggestion has, however, been opposed in its turn, on the ground that the admission of classes violates the 'nominalistic' principle that no two entities can have the same basic content. If, for example, I am allowed to distinguish myself from the unit class of which I am the only member, and this class from the class of classes in which it shares membership with the null-class, which has no members at all, I can multiply entities to any extent I please. One way of countering this logical extravagance has been to deny the existence of anything but individuals. It might be thought that this was yet another condemnation of abstract entities, but that turns out not to be so. In this form of nominalism an individual need not be something that can be sufficiently distinguished from other things of its kind by its spatio-temporal location, which is what is required of a concrete particular.

An abstract entity, like a colour, is counted as an individual if it functions as a single element in various composite wholes. All nominalists agree in accepting William of Ockham's famous principle, familiarly known as Ockham's razor, that entities are not to be needlessly multiplied. If this still allows them to differ over the question what entities are needed, it is mainly because they are at odds, not only with the rationalists but also with one another, in their responses to the deeper question what constitutes the need.

Attempts have been made to dispose of the Platonic view of universals by ascribing it to what is said to be the obvious error of construing general terms as names. Whatever the force of this argument, it does bring out the point that there is a close connection between the different views taken of the relative status of particulars and universals and different interpretations of our use of singular and general terms. For instance, the rejection of common qualities in favour of relations of similarity is an obvious offshoot of the thesis that we come to understand general terms through a process of abstraction which leads us to select the different ways in which things resemble one another. Another example is the manifest parallel between the thesis that things are bundles of qualities and the belief that singular terms can be transmuted into predicates. More generally, the reality attributed to abstract entities has been considered by some as essential, and by others as fatal, to the development of an adequate theory of meaning. The question is how a series of sounds, or written marks, succeed in functioning as signs of something other than themselves. Clearly, it is not merely a matter of their physical constitution. The mere fact that a written mark has such and such a size and shape cannot account for its being a singular or general term. It is not the acoustic qualities of a series of noises that alone make them form an indicative sentence, the utterance maybe of a truth or falsehood. If sounds and inscriptions assume the character of words and sentences, it is because they are so interpreted. But in what does this interpretation consist? A simple answer to this question is that it consists in our being induced by them to focus our attention upon one or other of a range of abstract entities. So the concatenation of the letters 'r', 'e' and 'd' in that order becomes an inscription of the English word 'red' by presenting an English speaker with the concept of redness. The same office is performed for a French speaker by the sequence of letters 'r', 'o', 'u', 'g' and 'e'.