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'I'M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE'

An hour-long dialogue with Stuart Hampshire on 'Oxford philosophy', especially J. L. Austin; one of six films comprising Logic Lane (1972), a series of educational films on philosophy in Oxford made by Michael Chanan. These films are now available online to universities participating in the British Universities Film and Video Council's Education Media Online project (log on at <<http://www.emol.ac.uk/>> and search for 'Isaiah Berlin'). There is an excerpt from the Berlin–Hampshire film in the first, introductory, film of the series, also called 'Logic Lane'. In its current version this transcript aims at fidelity, within the bounds of comprehensibility, rather than publishability. Frequent occurrences of 'Yes' and other minor interjections from one participant during utterances by the other have been omitted.

PRESENTER Isaiah Berlin, one of Oxford's most colourful figures, is best known for his work in political theory and the history of ideas, but he began his career at Oxford in the 1930s in conventional philosophy, and was one of the members of a group which was the beginning of what came to be known as 'Oxford Philosophy'. The group included A. J. Ayer and J. L. Austin as well as Stuart Hampshire, who discusses the Oxford tradition, and especially Austin's work, with Berlin in this film. Hampshire has recently returned to Oxford after periods as Professor of Philosophy first in London and then at Princeton. He has written literary criticism and a book on Spinoza, but is best known for a work of moral philosophy called *Thought and Action*.

HAMPSHIRE For me Oxford Philosophy begins really in 1936, but for you it has a longer background, and I think we ought to talk about the background, because there are some conditions which are permanent in Oxford philosophy in any case, no matter what the school.

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BERLIN Yes, certainly Oxford Philosophy didn’t come out of the blue in 1936, even what is *called* Oxford Philosophy. I suppose I must have begun philosophy as an undergraduate in 1929 or so, and it was a very lively place. It was by no means uniform. There were all kinds of philosophers about. There were some Hegelians who represented the sort of fag-end of the Hegelian tradition in England – people like Joachim, like Collingwood; their disciples, people like Muir and [T. D.] Weldon and so on – on the one side, and on the other side there were the British realists: there was Prichard, there was Ross, and their disciples, people like Price; there was Ryle and so on; and the discussion was extremely lively. But there were two quite different approaches. The Hegelians really wanted to have some kind of large world-view, and wanted to fit everything into it. But of course in the British tradition it did become rather degenerate. Huge inflated constructions began, language became inflated, and the whole thing, some of it anyhow, was rather like bad literature. Some of it was rather good scholarship. Against that – there were people who reacted sharply against this kind of inflation, and under the influence certainly of Moore and Russell wanted philosophy to be precise, to be clear; before building an enormous building they wanted to test every brick, because of the discredit into which huge Hegelian inflation had fallen. That’s really what happened, I think. These two schools of philosophers were really at odds with each other and each accused each other of different things. The clear-headed philosophers who wanted to do things piecemeal said the Hegelian philosophers indulged in what they called ‘talkie-talkie’. The Hegelian philosophers accused the piecemeal philosophers of ‘argy-bargy’. And so we were divided into argy-bargy and talkie-talkie. However, this communicated a great deal of life and spirit.

HAMPSHIRE But it was all contained within Oxford, actually within the walls of Oxford; there wasn’t a world audience in the sense of the United States; and furthermore, we were cut off, when I remember it, that is, in the early 1930s, up till 1936, from Cambridge, largely, apart from the influence of Moore. Is that fair or is ...?

BERLIN Yes, I think it’s fair, yes. I think it’s fair. In the early years, certainly, I don’t know that we knew what was going on.

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Moore, of course, yes; Russell was no longer there; and in the later years, of course, Wisdom made a considerable impact upon us, but that was a bit later, that was a bit later.

HAMPSHIRE Ah yes. By the time Wisdom’s writings became influential, and they were very influential where Austin was concerned – Austin was greatly impressed by Wisdom in the 1930s – then by that time, taking it from 1936 onwards, by that time there was something you could call analytical philosophy. It existed.

BERLIN Yes, the thing about Oxford was, you see, that there were a great many philosophers here always, at least in my time. The sheer number was very large. Philosophy thrives on discussion, on dialogue, on conversation, and if we could convince each other, that’s all we wanted. We didn’t – I mean, the reason why so comparatively little was published was that if we could convince each other in our little discussion groups, or in tutorials, or whatever it might be, this was enough; people didn’t really seek a wider audience, nor did they feel that there was one.

HAMPSHIRE Perhaps the easiest way to mark the transition which occurred in the mid-1930s, when analytical philosophy began, would be to consider the discussions that took place in your room from about 1936 onwards, at which Ayer was present, and Austin was present, and four or five others, and the topics we discussed; because we were then self-consciously the new philosophers, and Freddie Ayer’s book *Language, Truth and Logic*, which was written really under the influence of Carnap, who ought to be mentioned – I mean in effect it was the adaptation to English empiricist philosophy of Carnap’s logical ideas, which were at the centre of the old Vienna circle – Carnap was the central figure of the Vienna circle – and Freddie Ayer brought the ideas of the Vienna circle, turned them into excellent English, and adapted them to fit the philosophy of Hume and Moore, in which he was brought up at Christ Church with Ryle.

BERLIN I think that’s clear, yes.

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HAMPSHIRE Now we took this as the text which we were to discuss – not literally the book, but the set of ideas which went with it, which Freddie Ayer defended and Austin and you attacked. And I can recall very well, as I am sure you can, the range of topics we discussed. We discussed hypothetical propositions, we discussed your celebrated proposition that pink, as of that chair, is more like red than it is like blue – and how can we exhibit that proposition as fitting into either of the two boxes which Carnap and Ayer provided, namely, logical truths or empirical statements? It doesn’t appear to be either a truth of logic or a truth certifiable by reference to the meaning of words alone, nor to be an empirical statement. That we discussed endlessly. We discussed also induction and the nature of natural laws. We discussed disjunctive propositions – propositions of the either/or kind – we discussed, I suppose, ethics occasionally, though it’s very important that one of the effects of positivism – of the Vienna circle and that form of it which Ayer represented to us – was that it made ethics and political philosophy seem to have very little rational content of any kind, and they were – yes.

BERLIN Yes, yes – something in that, of course. Well, I think what happened about ethics – ethics was quite fashionable when I was first up, because people – very passionate moralists, like Prichard and Moore – talked a great deal about it, and this certainly communicated itself to both dons and undergraduates, but it’s true that politics in particular, or political philosophy, had become rather discredited owing to the fact that it seemed a monopoly of these decayed Hegelians, and therefore suffered from the general discredit into which this kind of twopence-coloured inflated language had fallen, and that I think is why political philosophy was disregarded. The whole atmosphere was towards – away from huge, not wholly intelligible, masses of words into something which was clear and distinct and honest and lucid and empirical, and provided one could sort of deflate the language, and get talking about something which one really could understand and operate with, one felt that perhaps there was a subject there worth discussing. Otherwise one was constantly moving about in this foggy atmosphere. And I am afraid that’s what made politics suffer. The curious thing was, of course, you see, that – although of course there were papers in it in the examinations for the young

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men; indeed, in PPE, which was meant to be a school which emphasised political philosophy to a large extent, Karl Marx was a set book. I read it as a set book; textual criticism of Karl Marx was enforced upon all undergraduates doing PPE, quite a large school, and it certainly wasn’t there just to be knocked down or refuted or mocked, and as far as I know that went on until the War. But somehow the relevance of what Karl Marx said, or what political philosophers said, to the question of appearance and reality, as you say, or empirical versus logical propositions, and so on, didn’t seem self-evident, and even very lively and imaginative Marxists – you remember our friend N. O. Brown, for example, who wrote *Love’s Body*, who has since then achieved a huge reputation in America, certainly never allowed his passionate Marxist views of that period to have any relevance at all to the question of, say, the nature of perception, or the nature of truth.

HAMPSHIRE Yes, well, that was the great utility within English thought of the Vienna circle, that it provided something – a hard doctrinal position, very clearly stated, logically articulated, which we could then say ‘Well, it fails at this point, it fails at that point’, but it focused discussion, and we felt that we’d left the past of amateurishness and indeed of a certain provincialism of the Oxford of Prichard and Joseph, where indeed there was very formidable argument about moral philosophy, but it was all in a very small enclosed world, really, an Oxford world, which clever young men did, and they became clever at argument, but really these tricks of argument which they learnt – it’s perhaps unfair to call them tricks, but skill in argument which they acquired – was something they applied elsewhere, but scarcely at all to the issues, after they left. I mean, it didn’t leave any trace. While after all the Vienna circle was a conscious anti-clerical – what would now be called anti-establishment, because it dismissed most of traditional religious and moral belief as wholly unscientific and therefore not tolerable: no rational man was allowed to pay any attention to these beliefs.

BERLIN Yes, I think you are quite right. I think the general – there were certain general implications of logical positivism, and of all these positivist doctrines which we imbibed. They were of course incompatible with metaphysics, incompatible with theology.

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They did have, in this sense, an effect which was frightfully deprecated by people who liked that sort of thing, I mean the conservatives, and particularly, I don’t say religious, but theologically-minded, orthodox persons, certainly looked on this as a most terrible subversive movement, in that sense ...

HAMPSHIRE Oh yes, there was a strong ...

BERLIN ... rather like Hume in the eighteenth century. It was regarded as exploding the whole thing, I mean, dissolving the fabric of society, almost, for people who really feared it and hated it. And it went fairly well with our general convictions at the time. I don’t know about most philosophers in Oxford, but there was no doubt that in our particular group the tendency was on the whole, I would say, towards the left rather than towards the right. The horizon in Europe was terribly clouded, of course. I mean with Hitler and Mussolini and Daladier and Chamberlain and Schuschnigg about, with only Roosevelt as a point of light in the world, we were on the whole turned in that particular direction. I remember very well about Austin, for example, who is normally regarded as an unpolitical person. He went to the Soviet Union as a tourist in – I can’t remember when, I should think about 1933 or 1934 – and came back deeply impressed by the discipline, and by the austerity of life and so forth, and remained under that influence for some time. And certainly I should have thought – I don’t know how he voted, but I’ve no doubt ...

HAMPSHIRE Oh, he was a labour voter (BERLIN I’m sure ... I’m sure) at all times that I knew him, and he was also very ...

BERLIN I’m sure. And Freddie Ayer certainly had left-wing views. I was brought up during Abyssinia and Spain, and these things have permanently altered my thought. I can’t think about politics except in terms of a certain amount of black and white, where totalitarianism does represent a very very black kind of regime indeed. We were conditioned by what went on in the 1930s and remained permanently under the influence of that; at least, speaking for myself, this is what shaped my thought ever after. I really can’t escape from the influence of those dreadful years.

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HAMPSHIRE It’s interesting, particularly about Austin, that he was very much a practical reformer in all practical matters, and practical matters were something that greatly absorbed him. I mean, he was one of the most efficient administrators that the university has known, in many ways, in the Press and as a Proctor and so on – later, though I am speaking now, of course, of after the war. But from the very beginning he had this very strong practical bent, and curiously enough the practical bent goes with, in him and I think in many others, a desire to separate issues into distinct issues, and a great repugnance for large, sloppy, all-embracing systems of thought, which really filled him with a disgust. And this disgust that he had for the kind of pre-Moore – pre-G.-E.-Moore – systems of thought was the same impulse that made him attend to problems in a very fair-minded and very deliberate and very unprejudiced and un-establishment-minded, I think one could say – unconservative, unstuffy way.

BERLIN Well, it’s part of Oxford, that: I wouldn’t say that it was something original and new in him. I mean the idea of piecemeal solutions, one by one, is something which all these – which I think he was taught by people – I don’t say taught, but anyhow which was of a piece with ...

HAMPSHIRE Prichard particularly.

BERLIN Well, Prichard particularly – Prichard deeply impressed him anyhow, the whole doctrine, even the performatory doctrine, owes something to Prichard. But also Ryle and Price and all these instructors of our youth dealt with problems rather in that fashion – I mean, systems were out because, as I say, of the discrediting of these huge inflated monsters which I referred to earlier. But it’s perfectly true about Austin. He wanted to be rational above all things. Whenever he used the word ‘rational’ it was for him the highest possible adjective of praise, and I used to disagree with him about that. He used to think that life had rational ends: we must discover what they are and pursue them. He really had an absolute eighteenth-century faith in rationality of a certain kind, and that is why, I think, he liked examining these problems, as you say, one by one. He just wanted to be absolutely clear about what we were saying without any interference by some

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kind of bullying or tyrannical system or box into which these things had to be stuffed, owing to some a priori conviction that the truth had to be like this or had to be like that, and that was very refreshing.

HAMPSHIRE It is of course very strange that someone who uses ‘sensible’ as almost the supreme adjective of praise, which he did about persons, should be a philosopher, because on the whole one doesn’t look to philosophy, traditionally speaking, as the repository of this rather prosaic quality, as it appears, but it was really a sort of feature – it *was* a feature, it absolutely was a feature of analytical philosophy as derived from Moore and from the logical positivists of the old Vienna circle via Ayer, and later of Wittgenstein, because we haven’t yet spoken of him, that we should always discuss philosophy in a very quiet and if possible ironical or at any rate unexcited and unrhetoical – I mean, rhetoric of any kind was excluded and would have been thought just absurd. And Austin carried this to an extreme. Even the most solemn questions, solemn in their associations, had to be disinfected by a very calm, committee man’s tone of voice in speaking about them.

BERLIN Yes. Mind you, I think there were two Austins in that sense: there was the private Austin and there was the Austin in group discussion, whether in philosophical societies or otherwise. I suppose I must have known him since 1932. I used to talk to him every morning about philosophy for two or three hours. He was certainly the ablest person I ever knew intimately among philosophers. When he was alone with one he was marvellous to talk with, because he didn’t insist on one’s translating one’s own language into his language or some particularly official language into which everything had to be translated. He understood what one said perfectly, talked about it with extreme acuteness and lucidity, and made one’s thoughts race – really had a profound effect on one, was very clever, very firm and was not obviously trying to convert one to a particular point of view, wasn’t either preaching to one or bullying one or trying to trip one up or any of those things. When of course he found himself with a group or a society, then a certain competitive instinct undoubtedly took over, and one can’t deny that he then wanted to win. And this desire to achieve victory sometimes led him into arguments which perhaps

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were slightly specious, at times. He was usually much cleverer than his interlocutors and usually did win. But the kind of way in which one wanted to talk to him was when he was entirely alone, face to face; then I think he was at his best. I learnt more from him in that way than I think I ever learnt from anybody.

HAMPSHIRE Yes, well, it is worth going into the history, I think. I also had very long conversations with him in All Souls in the afternoons, after lunch, we talked for a long time – in 1936-7 when he’d just moved to Magdalen. Before that, from the point of view of the history of Oxford philosophy, a turning-point was the class which you and he gave on C. I. Lewis’s *Mind and the World Order*, which was I think the first class ever given on a modern and living author within the Oxford philosophy school – if not the very first, very nearly the first – and no one had heard at all of C. I. Lewis, who was a professor at Harvard, nor of his book *Mind and the World Order*, which I think you had noticed in Blackwell’s and read with pleasure, and this appeared on the lecture list. And I and three friends from Balliol came, two of whom were people of very strong political convictions – came to the classes. And there weren’t very many persons there, it was in the small room at All Souls, yes, the small lecture-room (BERLIN There were about fifteen, I think, that sort of number), fifteen or so. Norman Brown, whom you mentioned, was one of the two or three who came. And that was a discussion which was completely without any apparatus of historical scholarship, and above all the tone of voice was one of complete relaxation. I mean, it wasn’t a solemn University occasion, to put it mildly. You used to make sort of argumentative plans, this group of Balliol persons, to protect you against Austin’s onslaughts. (BERLIN Thank you!) I remember the scene very clearly, forming these little – rather like American football players. But this absence of solemnity began then, and indeed the main themes that I mentioned before of hypothetical propositions, propositions about the relations between general properties, and how these could be fitted into any scheme as either logical truths or empirical truths, the relation of physical objects to sense-data, if there are such things, which Austin even then was beginning to doubt, and wrote his famous book after – or posthumously published book after the war on – gave the lectures

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after the war, and the book was posthumous, *Sense and Sensibilia* – he already had doubts about the existence of sense-data.

BERLIN Yes, I remember that class very well because Austin showed up at his best and worst there, I mean he dominated the class through sheer force of intellect, and was very good, and it was – I think it was literally the first class on a modern philosopher which was held, and it’s very typical that C. I. Lewis should have been the subject, I mean, or his views should have been the subject we discussed simply because I happened to pick up a book which looked to me quite interesting in Blackwell’s – nobody had ever heard the name at all and I had read it by pure accident, so had Austin, at least I recommended it to him, and we thought it had a lot of topics which it would be profitable to discuss. As far as I remember we didn’t get beyond the first six pages of it, but still, it was all very lively and good, and the class was undoubtedly an occasion, and I think that’s directly what led to those discussions in the evening in my rooms in All Souls between you and him and Freddie Ayer and Woozley and MacKinnon, yes, which is really the official start of what might be called Oxford Philosophy rather than philosophy at Oxford. And the atmosphere was quite different. At the class Austin had to win, but in the evenings it really was a perfectly – I mean, a discussion in which we were all equals, and in which a lot of very interesting things were said, and we had a feeling, which was perhaps rather vain, perhaps rather conceited, that no better discussions of philosophy were occurring anywhere in the world at that moment – at least I felt that, I don’t know if you did – than in my room on those evenings, on those Thursday evenings or whenever it was; we felt that we were talking about subjects much more interesting than those which were being discussed by our seniors, we felt that we were better at it, that we were discovering truth, that we were progressing, and the atmosphere was one of cumulative excitement, I would have thought. In memory – I seem to remember those occasions as being the things which shaped the thought of all of us for many years to come.

HAMPSHIRE Yes, I think that is true ...

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BERLIN I think Freddie was more complete – I must say, Freddie Ayer, I think, was already in much better shape than any of us. I think he had a position of his own, which he had evolved for himself, no doubt partly out of the writings of Russell and Carnap and such people, before the class had ever begun, and didn’t really budge from that very much. But the rest of us I think were in a rather fluid intellectual condition, in the sense that we were using old-fashioned weapons, it’s true, but, you see, we didn’t actually want our philosophies to approximate to what Moore was saying, what Carnap was saying, what anybody in particular was saying. In a way, the *Zeitgeist* works in mysterious ways: in our own fashion I think we were working towards this kind of looseness of structure from 1936 onwards, not with the boldness, brilliance, imagination of Wittgenstein, of course, not in that sort of way, and it would have helped us a great deal if we did know what the Blue Books and Brown Books contained. I am sure it would.

HAMPSHIRE It would have done, yes.

BERLIN Yes, but still in our own fashion, we were – I wouldn’t say that we were quite in the state in which Keynes describes himself as being when first Moore began teaching these people – they suddenly felt the heavens opened and they discovered what generations of men, for thousands of years, hadn’t known; at last they knew the truth about ethics – for the first time the full truth had been revealed. You remember there’s a very rhapsodic account by Keynes of how marvellous it was. I don’t think we were ever quite in that condition. Still, we were in a condition of intellectual vitality. We were – we thought we were making progress, breaking through old categories, escaping from all kinds of cages, and this is of course an absolutely irreplaceable feeling. It’s a thing which I’ve never had with similar intensity since. In Cambridge they must have felt this much more violently because Wittgenstein was a man of genius and he really did excite people immoderately. And we were – didn’t have that – we were ...

HAMPSHIRE We were workmanlike.

BERLIN Yes, we plodded along, he raced and we rather plodded. And Austin’s methods – and Austin was certainly the dominant

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figure at those classes, it can't be denied – Austin's methods were different to Wittgenstein's. Wittgenstein employed his marvellous imagination for the purpose of producing completely imaginary examples. What would happen if – a clock suddenly spoke to you? This was the sort of thing that then entered into Wisdom's writing. What would happen if this and that happened, which of course didn't happen, and then from that you tried to read off on to real life. Austin obviously thought this was too fanciful and wouldn't teach one enough. The great thing was actually to discover how people used words, what they actually meant, what was implied by what, and wanted to keep us on the ground, wanted to keep our feet on the ground, didn't think that these magnificent flights into all kinds of imaginary possibilities, which Wittgenstein, who had, as I say, an unparalleled force of imagination, excited his listeners with – didn't think that this would lead to profitable results. And the great thing was to keep on the ground and use actual examples from actual life for the purpose of refuting over- confident theories.

HAMPSHIRE Yes. But before the war verbal nuance in the sense in which Austin introduced it after the war – attention to the difference between different adverbs used in excuses – this was not a feature. We attended to words with exactness in the sort of way that Prichard and Moore did under Austin's guidance, but no more than that. We didn't claim that philosophical problems would disappear if you followed minutely these differences of force ...

BERLIN We didn't claim anything, we made no claims of any kind.

HAMPSHIRE Freddie claimed, Freddie Ayer claimed, but the rest of us didn't ...

BERLIN No, we didn't claim, we just wanted such knowledge as came to us. We just advanced, we asked questions which appeared to us to be central, such as whether there were propositions which are neither strictly empirical nor strictly logical, which if true took us back to Kant, and took us back to all kinds of important philosophical views. We asked questions about appearance and

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reality, we asked questions about human freedom, we asked questions about hypothetical propositions and the general nature of speculation, and we hoped to obtain light simply by the aid of reason, by the aid of natural light, without submitting to specific disciplines and without having really worked out any unique method for solving these problems.

HAMPSHIRE Yes, Austin himself certainly hadn’t assumed a general position.

BERLIN Hand to mouth, I think, and bit by bit. But the thing I want to convey is, you see, that we were – anyone who is making progress in a subject becomes naturally excited about it and takes an intense interest in it, and therefore when people sometimes ask: ‘Well, what about politics, what about ethics in this connection?’ – we took a certain amount of interest in these matters, but when one is deeply interested in a subject the last thing one does is to ask oneself about its implications for something else, because one’s too absorbed. One’s like a scientist who is actually discovering about the properties of radium, or the properties of neutrinos or something, and then if you say, ‘Well, what are the implications of this for biology?’ or ‘What are the implications of this for physiology?’, at the moment of actual experimentation and discovery a scientist is wholly absorbed in what he is doing and he can’t bother about these other things. If he did, his attention would become distraught and dissipated, and it wouldn’t work at all, because fundamentally Oxford philosophers were not interested in the history of philosophy. They were interested in discovering the truth.

I remember a peculiar parody of this. We were always told that in the Moral Sciences Club in Cambridge there was a philosopher called Dr Ewing, a respected philosopher now in Cambridge, who had just moved from Oxford to Cambridge. And there was some discussion, I suppose – I don’t know if Wittgenstein was actually present, but certainly his disciples were. And Dr Ewing said, ‘Professor Dawes-Hicks used to say’ about something or other, and the disciple said ‘We don’t want to know what Professor Dawes-Hicks used to say, what we want is the truth.’

Well, I don’t think we went to that extreme, but there was a touch of that amongst us. The history of the subject didn’t interest

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us much, we were not learned, we were not scholars. What we wanted – we thought we really could establish the truth for ourselves, and this was sufficient reward. And this really follows from the whole Socratic nature of Oxford Philosophy, which depends on argument, depends on irreverent examination of assumptions, depends on discussion and not on learning. I mean, we always had this image, perhaps it’s a caricature, of, say, German philosophy consisting of some eminent professor, who is very authoritative indeed, speaking in a very despotic, awe-inspiring manner to his disciples, who were not really allowed to contradict and who would ask only in very polite and respectful terms, until they imbibed sufficient wisdom from the great man to become professors themselves. This was the exact opposite of what reigned here. I must say I don’t think this was a bad thing. I think on the whole it’s highly defensible.

Sometimes people wonder or ask whether Oxford philosophy wasn’t too self-contained, wasn’t too self-regarding, wasn’t too insulated from the great issues which shook the world, and the great political and spiritual issues. Collingwood, for example, in his autobiography, himself accuses people like Prichard and Joseph of being so arid and so trivial as to drive people into impossible political attitudes by reaction, because it didn’t give them any spiritual pabulum – people turned into virtually Fascists. Freddie Ayer was the most unjust object of attacks of a similar kind in the *New Statesman*, I think. I mean, he was told that the triviality and the verbalism and the aridity of his philosophy drove people into dreadfully reactionary attitudes, again by reaction against this dry and completely spiritually empty stuff which was being served to them. This was monstrous, these charges were absolutely monstrous, they were unjust to a degree. We were dealing with problems of great interest which certainly had implications of a direct kind for the way in which we would weigh political and moral problems, and this is in fact what did happen in the case of the political convictions of most of us, and moreover where were we to look for light if we didn’t look to light amongst ourselves?

It may sound rather smug and rather self-satisfied, but if you consider what was happening to philosophy outside – take Marxism, for example, which had a great burgeoning after the war. English Marxism worked at a very low level: there were certainly no works by philosophers of a Marxist kind which were worth

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anything at all. There was nowhere to look. It was an absolute slump, nobody of ability was dealing with it. The communists of first-class intellectual ability had nothing to do with Marxist philosophy or dialectical materialism, or anything of that kind. Russia? Well, I read Russian and I can testify to the fact that nothing poured out except bureaucratic gibberish, absolutely mechanical stuff which wasn’t up to any kind of intellectual standard at all.

HAMPSHIRE Those of us who formed this smaller group and were interested in logical positivism still had what one might call a general point of view in resistance to any kind of metaphysical claims, which isn’t after all just claims within philosophy itself, but this spills over into ordinary life; I mean, one read the newspapers or read, above all, things like literary criticism in a perfectly different spirit, because notoriously literary criticism is filled with unverifiable statements, and so is criticism in all the arts, criticism in painting; and this had a very strong intellectual influence which literary persons in the *New Statesman* and elsewhere resented, resented strongly, because they felt their disciplines threatened with a kind of reductive criticism which would have cut the ground from under their feet. So although the word ‘ideology’ doesn’t help very much, because it’s too imprecise a word, those who were deeply influenced by the Vienna Circle, as I certainly was, and took the verification principle seriously, namely, the claim that all statements had to be in some way or other testable – their truth or falsity had to be discovered by a regular procedure,¹ whether or not this was an experimental procedure, or a procedure within mathematics or logic of a strictly deductive kind – there must be *a* procedure. You can’t have statements which claim to be believed, which hang in the air without your knowing how to find out whether in fact the evidence or argument supports them. Now this led one to be not only extremely sceptical about standard left-wing writing, standard sociological theories which often consisted of wildly metaphysical statements – Marxism itself, which contains carry-overs from Hegel of a notoriously metaphysical kind, and so on – it did affect one’s general outlook. Therefore when we had

¹ [The words spoken seem to be ‘... testable for their truth or falsity to be discovered ...’; a correction like the one made seems necessary for the sense.]

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arguments about whether pink is more like red than like black, which was trying to discuss whether there were propositions which we all would recognise as to have a sense and as being true and still weren’t in any precise sense verifiable, there was a certain heat or – it wasn’t just a kind of intellectual game, one minded very much how this came out. But all these things mattered to us, for example, the question of whether value judgements had any rational structure. After all, this is a highly ideologically or emotion-laden question, as to whether our fundamental moral beliefs are really just emotional reactions, as was sometimes suggested, or had no rational structure whatever; these are the sort of questions which people don’t contemplate calmly, and the old men who protested that – I say just in a kind of joke sense ‘old men’, they weren’t necessarily old, but respectable opinion outside the University – which said, ‘Well, what’s happened to the young men? They’re all taught that value-judgements are mere exclamations.’ They did fear for the body politic a little. I mean, they thought something very subversive was going on. So it’s in no case a simple opposition – *either* we were all thinking about Marxism and left-wing movements in Europe, *or* we were politically apathetic – because in a wider sense of ‘political’ which includes general moral attitudes, the issues were highly charged, and I certainly, I remember, felt emotionally very attracted to the verification principle. I mean every time it suffered a ...

BERLIN Rather more than I did, I daresay.

HAMPSHIRE More than you did. Every time we suffered a reverse by a very good counter-example being produced, and we couldn’t give a decent account of a singular hypothetical proposition, I was distressed, I felt ...

BERLIN That’s what pink, red and black was about. Let me explain about this proposition. It’s quite simple. If you say that pink is more like red than it is like black, what kind of proposition is it? It’s obviously true. Nobody would deny – it’s general, any instance of pink is more like any instance of red than it is like an instance of black. Now, if it’s an empirical general proposition one ought to be able to conceive of what it would be like for it to be falsified, but nobody could conceive of any universe in which pink

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was more like black than it was like red and was still pink. If it wasn't that, if it was an a priori proposition, then in those days we used to think that the contradictories of a priori propositions had to be self-contradictory.

HAMPSHIRE Well, yes, or they had to be inferred from definitions of terms ...

BERLIN From the definition of terms, exactly. Well, as we didn't define 'pink', 'red' and 'black' except by pointing to them – you didn't, you can't of course define pink, or a particular shade of pink, a blind man wouldn't know what it was, whatever definitions you gave him – therefore since you defined these things ostensively, as we used to say, by just pointing to examples of them, and said, 'There's pink, there's red, there's black. Now, I say to you, anything like this will always be more like this than it will be like that', what kind of proposition was it? It didn't on the face of it appear to be a priori, because its contradictory was not self-contradictory; and it didn't appear to be empirical because it couldn't be thought of as falsifiable, and this puzzled us (HAMPSHIRE Yes, it rightly puzzled us) – rightly puzzled us, and this appeared incompatible with the simply stated verification principle which Freddie Ayer and others wanted to be true.

HAMPSHIRE Yes. And Ayer used to try it first one way and then the other way.

BERLIN Yes, and this was a great breach in the wall, and through this breach all kinds of terrible things might pour in. What people used to feel who felt like him was that, once a breach was knocked through the wall, all kinds of dreadful things would happen, metaphysics would find its way back again, and then all this work of dredging, all this work of removing all this huge mud of previous metaphysical confusion might after all be in vain, because through this chink all the horrors would pile up again. That's what the defenders thought.

HAMPSHIRE Yes. Now, we could go through each one of these subjects we say we discussed and produce an example.

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BERLIN That’s why it was of general interest. I mean, it wasn’t just a trivial proposition about pink, red and black. That’s – what I wanted to establish was that – why this was of importance – because of its huge general importance for the general nature of truth.

HAMPSHIRE Yes, because the axe which was used on all respectable beliefs, particularly of a moral and religious character, was the axe of the verification principle. And every time you showed that it was imperfect in accepted cases, that you couldn’t show that they were verifiable, then the axe became so much less effective. (BERLIN Blunted, yes.) So there was an ideological battle about it.

BERLIN We discussed other minds. We discussed what the verification was of supposing that other people had headaches which you didn’t yourself experience, and Ryle, I remember, speculated about whether someone else’s headache might suddenly strike you. You’d suddenly say, ‘Damn, I’ve got his headache. How can I get rid of it?’ Would this make any sense? And so on. This also had something to do with the apparent inadequacy of a simple verification principle for verifying propositions about experiences in other people’s minds.

HAMPSHIRE So it was desperately said – behaviourism was assumed as a possible posture of defence, namely that when I talked about your internal states of mind, your headaches or your giddiness or your feeling of nausea, I was really talking about the physical manifestations of these, and therefore they had – and that seemed very unpalatable because it didn’t seem that when I was talking about my nausea, giddiness or – that I was talking about my physical manifestations of nausea or giddiness, and we, therefore ...

BERLIN Well, I mean, in simple words: If I said ‘I have a headache’, I was actually referring to a pain which I was suffering, but if I said ‘You have a headache’ all I meant was ‘Your face is growing red, if I ask you “Have you a headache?” I shall hear a noise which says “Yes”’; and yet when I talk about my own headache I don’t mean any of these things, I mean that I’m

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actually in pain.’ Well, this seemed asymmetrical. Why should I assume that I had a pain whereas all you were was just an automaton emitting noises of a certain kind, and that ‘You have a headache’ was to be analysed wholly differently from ‘I have a headache’? This was always unpalatable and was another breach in this wall. Well, temperamentally some people like mending the wall and some people like knocking holes in it. Austin was on the whole a hole-knocker (HAMPSHIRE Very much so), and Freddie was a mender, and the conflict between them, as I remember it in those rooms in All Souls from 1936 onwards, was – Freddie was like an irresistible missile and Austin was like an impenetrable obstacle, and when one came against the other extraordinary things happened, it really – the sparks which were generated really enlivened us all.

HAMPSHIRE Yes, well, in fact in what is historically known as Oxford Philosophy, which is what happens under the influence of Wittgenstein and after the war, then most of the criticisms that you and Austin and others made of the Carnap-Ayer position have become an orthodoxy, have been supported – have become the accepted opinion because the discrimination of whole classes of judgements with only two or three or even four pigeonholes has dropped absolutely out of practice, and no one, no Oxford philosopher now, I think I may say, would make any such sweeping statement as ‘All statements are of this kind or of that kind’, and the influence of Wittgenstein, which we didn’t have, which wasn’t available to us, just was to make one look at the individual examples and sort them into smaller and smaller piles and see the differences and despair of making any ...

BERLIN It’s interesting historically that we should have been doing the same thing less skillfully and of course with far less ability than Wittgenstein was doing it at about the same time, without consciously knowing – even not consciously knowing, not knowing at all what was really going on in Cambridge at that time. We were always asking Wittgenstein to come, of course; it isn’t as if – we heard of this great genius from 1931 onwards. Every Oxford philosophical society was always begging him to come, and he was always saying he would come, and at the end a telegram

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would arrive saying he had a cold or was unable to make it for one reason or another. So he never came until after the war.

HAMPSHIRE Yes – he never in fact came. The great period really runs from 1945, just after the war, till the end of the 1950s. Waismann and Austin are the dominant figures when it begins, and their complementary gifts, one very precise and dry and reductive, and the other rather extravagant and imaginative, but both conveying quite distinctly the idea that very careful examination of varieties of usage, varieties of grammar, in traditional problems such as the problem of the freedom of the will, or the nature of the explanation of human actions, and motives and causes and so on – that this was the way to do philosophy. And back people came from the war and were convinced that this *was* the way. At the same time Ryle was writing reductively about thought and saying that we were quite wrong to think – also derived from Wittgenstein – we were quite wrong to think that, when we thought, a procession of mental events was taking place in our head which we could separately identify as episodes, that this was not at all the case.

Now all these, I suppose, are thoughts that came from Wittgenstein, with the exception of Austin, of whom this was not true, whose conviction that the verbal method, the way of words, and even the examination of dictionaries in a systematic way, would contribute to philosophy came from his own thought and, as Ayer suggested, perhaps a little from his experience in the war, because I remember him talking to me in Oxford Circus in, I suppose, about 1942, in the then shop Peter Robinson, which had been taken over by something called Cossek[?], which was the original staff for [the?] 21st Army Group, which became the invasion force for Europe; and he was sitting there at that time with a long room, with a lot of intelligence officers, and they were examining the sand on the beaches of Norway and various places, and the tides, and collecting all sorts of geographical information, and doing it in a very systematic way. And he was a famous figure throughout the staffs of the – indeed when I remember meeting him in SHAEF, as it later was, he was in charge at the time of the demobilisation of the German forces under an American general, he was the only person who knew where the German army was at the handover at Rheims[?], and he was a great figure in Frankfurt.

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He was a tremendous organiser and he – his wartime experience gave him the belief that why philosophy hadn’t progressed was that we had all gone by inspired individual guesses. What we wanted was a disciplined attack where you solve other problems and he proposed, you remember, something called the Phrontisterion – you remember? – which was to be a building in which we should all meet and we’d have assigned tasks – to examine the various uses of ‘true’, ‘know’ and so on.

He wrote a famous article, incidentally, just after the war which had an enormous influence, particularly over people like Herbert Hart, on knowledge, which was a very brilliant article; also one on a priori concepts; but particularly the one on knowledge, which was read at an Aristotelian Society meeting and was about other minds, the subject we were discussing before, but actually he concentrated entirely on the notion of knowledge and indicated, or hinted in a very indirect way, that when we say ‘I know’ we make a kind of claim and we don’t simply make a statement about ourselves of an autobiographical kind, nor do we simply assert a proposition, we assert it in a particular way.

And this led on to his later doctrines of the performative uses of language, the different speech-acts that there are. And this is incidentally a subject which is still alive in America and is created by Austin, the study of speech-acts, which is on the borderline of linguistics and philosophy – I mean, the difference between recommending, praying, asking and so on. And what of course appealed to him was that when I say ‘and so on’ it really could go on for hours and hours and hours, and when he had a year off he did in fact write down endless speech-acts on large sheets of yellow paper. I remember walking around Addison’s Walk and him showing me these things, and I remember him saying, ‘Well, don’t you see there’s a big difference between describing her as an air hostess and calling her an air hostess?’ The example was rather typical – its flatness, the notion of an air hostess – and I couldn’t see any difference at all and he was very – but he was introducing these long lists, which was quite different from Wittgenstein, quite different from Waismann, and different again from Ryle.

PRESENTER Austin invented the term ‘performative’ to refer to certain utterances which cannot be said to be true or false in the ordinary sense, because they constitute an action rather than report

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a fact. For example, if you promise to do something, it’s rather like naming a ship or baptising a child: you can do it happily or unhappily, Austin used to say; that is, you can fulfil the action or you can fail to fulfil it.

Austin died in 1960. There’s one recording of him lecturing that survives. It was made by an amateur at a lecture in Göteborg a year before Austin’s death. The quality’s poor, but here’s an excerpt from it.

AUSTIN Even in ceremonies or rituals that are not verbal at all we have devices which in just the same way make explicit what act is being performed. For example, supposing I appear before you and bow deeply from the waist. It may be quite uncertain what I am doing. I may be simply bending down to observe the flowers, or to tie my shoelace, but it’s possible that what I am doing is some form of obeisance to you, some form of homage. Now in order to clear up this unfortunate kind of ambiguity we usually invent some little device such as raising our hat, or saying ‘Salaam’, with which to accompany the bow, and by means of which to make our act explicitly and unambiguously one of doing obeisance or homage. Nobody would wish to say, however, that raising your hat describes what you are doing: it merely makes it, constitutes it, explicitly, an act of homage; and so putting ‘I promise that’ at the head of the performative utterance makes explicit what act you are doing, and *eo ipso* does the act, but it does not describe it.

PRESENTER Austin came to doubt whether even ordinary statements of fact are always either true or false. He began to suspect that they too can be subject to happiness or unhappiness in the same way as performatives. For example, in the case of historical statements.

AUSTIN Also with Lord Raglan and the battle of Alma. Alma in case you didn’t know – why should you? – was what we call a soldier’s battle, if ever there was one, and of course Lord Raglan was in command. Or at any rate he was in command of the British, though not of the French, and the French were supposed to do what the British indicated they would like them to do, and to a minor extent possibly did so. It happens to be true that none of Lord Raglan’s orders were ever transmitted. Well, did he win the

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Battle of Alma or not? Of course in some contexts it’s perfectly justifiable to say so – something of an exaggeration, maybe – of course any question of giving the old fool a medal for it, that’s rather a different matter. One wouldn’t want to dwell on his having won the battle, in that case.

BERLIN What do you think really inspired Austin to all this? Just hatred of impressionism, and hatred of, as you say, disorganised guesswork? And the fact that if you propounded a theory the only way in which you could establish it was by looking at all the cases to which it might be applied and considering – and therefore having teams of people working concertedly in order to – at least to dehydrate one piece of territory upon which we could stand. Dry land. This bit had been done.

HAMPSHIRE Yes, done.

BERLIN The word ‘real’, for example, had to be examined. I mean, this was a kind of central word, wasn’t it, more central than any ... Well, then you had painfully to go through ‘real’. When you say ‘This table is real’, what are you contrasting it with? Are you contrasting it with a hallucinatory table, a hallucination of a table, or are you contrasting it with a table mountain, which can be called a table, but is obviously not a table in the ordinary sense, or are you contrasting it with a toy table, or are you contrasting it with some other use of the word ‘table’ – I don’t know, a multiplication table, something of that kind? And so on. And although this seemed rather tedious, perhaps this is a rather Moore-like attitude, by which maybe we shall be able to get to a great system in the end, but in the meanwhile we must simply clear the ground of the undergrowth, or the waterlogged condition into which it’s got, and for God’s sake can’t we have a team of people working on this first? – and then we shall have some dry land to stand on. From there we can proceed to the next point. But it’s got to be done systematically and thoroughly, and the ground, once won, must be for ever kept – something like that.

HAMPSHIRE And so people could never make very general statements about the word ‘real’ again. If he’d had six Oxford college tutors working for six months on the word ‘real’, then no

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one would dare say, given this body of evidence, the sort of things they are now saying about the uses of the word ‘real’ or whatever other word is involved. They wouldn’t dare do it any more, because there’d be this – and then gradually – why shouldn’t it be like science? After all, it’s taken people 40 years – and some of them men of genius – to discover how a nerve impulse goes along a nerve fibre; now they think they may know. Why should we, Austin would say, and I *think* he did say, but not with that example – why should we suppose we discover what the notion of reality is, or the notion of truth, by some sort of amazing short-cut? Not at all: we must get down to it. We must work away as people do in the laboratories.

BERLIN Similarly, you see, for example, Wittgenstein talked about language games, you remember, and Austin said: Games. Very well, in that case we must consider: Why is it a game? In what sense is it a game? Is it a game like football, or is it a game like cards, or what kind of game is it? Is it a game with – what about the rules of the game? And who establishes rules in the case of games? And who establishes the rules in the case of language? I mean, is this analogy to be pressed? How far? There are all kinds of games, which differ from each other. Which kind of game is language, if it is a game at all? This seems to me – this is the kind of thing he used to discuss in his Saturday mornings.

HAMPSHIRE Well, more than discuss, he actually got people allocated to look up the different kinds of games and how rules – so that people just couldn’t laxly say, ‘It’s like rules of a game when you have rules of language.’

BERLIN Yes, he didn’t want *aperçus*, did he? – he didn’t want just brilliant flashes.

HAMPSHIRE No – the last thing he wanted.

BERLIN Yes. He would say, ‘What about Arabian trictrac?’, which I remember, one of the rules of which was that if you cheated and weren’t caught out you could win. Was that a game? Was that a rule of the game? Or was it on the contrary a rule about rules? And in that case were there analogies in language? Were there analogies

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in thought? One of the things which Austin, it seems to me, although of course he was very fascinated by words as such, as Moore was too before him, and this sometimes led him into mere grammar and mere philology ...

HAMPSHIRE More than sometimes, yes.

BERLIN Undoubtedly did – nevertheless, I think what he was concerned with, and what everybody who did this kind of thing was concerned with, was of course the nature of human thinking. I think the philosophers of that particular school did themselves no service when they spoke about themselves as ‘linguistic’ because that conveyed the general impression that they really were interested in language for the sake of language. They weren’t.

HAMPSHIRE Austin was, you know. He really loved reading the dictionary.

BERLIN Yes, I know, but this wasn’t the programme.

HAMPSHIRE It wasn’t the programme, no.

BERLIN Psychologically it’s true about his – objectively it’s absolutely true, yes, and therefore it sometimes wandered off into mere study of language, I agree, and became rather uninteresting except to those who *were* interested. But the programme, the desire was the old philosophical desire, to examine the structure, if there was a structure – at any rate, ways in which we thought about things.

HAMPSHIRE Yes, but not to publicise any conclusions or utter any conclusions until one had really covered the ground systematically. I think he really believed that.

BERLIN No, but he thought we thought in words, he thought we thought in symbols, and unless we attended to the structure of the symbols we would never know what thought was.

HAMPSHIRE Oh of course he thought that, yes.

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BERLIN No, but this has to be said, you see, because after all he and his followers have been accused of mere linguistic knowledge, which somehow was remote from the great concerns of the world and the great spiritual agonies into which people get, and this just seemed to be a trivial word-game of some sort, fiddling while the world was burning in all kinds of ways, and it wasn’t that, it was concerned with precisely the same problems as Aristotle or Hume or Kant were concerned with, not different ...

HAMPSHIRE But there was a really different vision of what you could do in philosophy. He really thought you ought not to write about truth or the freedom of the will. I remember writing something about the freedom of the will and going to his class, which was always an enjoyable and amusing thing, and he produced counter-examples – there were a lot of students there, and we discussed them. Then I said to him afterwards, ‘Well, some of the counter-examples I agree, some were rather invented, they were freak counter-examples.’ And he said, ‘Oh yes, but that’s the point.’ I mean, one wants to have the freak counter-examples so that everyone could see that you can’t really systematise the field beyond a certain point, I mean, that it is utterly spread out ...

BERLIN He was a very serious man, wasn’t he? He really was a very serious thinker. The great thing about him – it wasn’t just fascination with his own skills. He was a serious thinker. The freedom of the will *was* a subject which I don’t think preoccupied him, but which undoubtedly was of interest to him, and he somehow believed that the arguments about the freedom of the will by determinists and anti-determinists were mere theoretical games, and weren’t serious, because he didn’t believe that anyone really believed in determinism. He may have been mistaken about that. What he said to me was, ‘It’s all very well these people saying they’re determinists. I’ve never met a determinist. I’ve never met anyone who behaved as if he were determinist. I’ve never met anyone who used language as if he believed it, and I don’t believe that anyone really has believed it, it’s just a theoretical construct.’ Well, he may or may not have been right, but it was a very different approach from someone who just pounces, if you see what I mean, on any linguistic expression, no matter what, and applies brilliant techniques for its analysis just for its own sake. I

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want to convey that he really was concerned with the solutions to the problems themselves, and not the mere application of a technique, which he thought really could shore anything up. I think it’s quite important to realise – and that was the source of his moral influence.

HAMPSHIRE And that is why he impressed ...

BERLIN Not his cleverness, but his intensity and his extreme, if you like, moral seriousness about it.

HAMPSHIRE Yes, and he did think that was the way to – as regards the burnings in the world and the horrors outside – that the best thing *we* could do, which was no doubt something small, would be to make people sensible, and that meant that they wouldn’t be governed by overarching theories, and that is what philosophy could do for them, and therefore he was a tremendously enthusiastic teacher from that point of view; I mean, he really enjoyed getting a Harvard audience to not believe that the whole of Quine applied perfectly to the structure of ordinary language, or something of this kind, and undermining – he began his lectures with the phrase, I think, didn’t he, ‘I’m going to tamper with your beliefs a little’? I think that was the phrase used.

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Posted 1 March 2006