

Author's Preface

Some of these articles were written more than a quarter of a century ago, when I was teaching philosophy in Oxford; when Dr Henry Hardy proposed to me that they should be included in a separate volume, I demurred. Although I do not think that there is anything in them that I should now wish to withdraw or change radically (I could not bring myself to re-read them), it seemed to me that they belonged too much to their time and place – they were not untypical of the kind of discussions and controversies, mainly about positivism, that went on in Oxford in the years immediately before and after the war, but I thought that they contained little or nothing worth resuscitating nearly thirty years later. I felt similar doubts about the articles written in the years that followed. Dr Hardy thought better of these pieces than I did, and when I continued to be obdurate, he proposed that we should go to arbitration and suggested that Professor Bernard Williams be appealed to. Bernard Williams is an original philosopher and a just and candid critic, and I therefore expected him to agree with me. When he said that he favoured republication, I could not, of course, help being pleased, and I accepted his verdict even though I wondered whether it was not more generous than just. Dr Hardy pressed his advantage and persuaded Professor Williams to back his judgement by writing an introduction to the volume. For this act of what I can only describe as heroic friendship I record my deep gratitude.

I have occasionally been asked what made me cease to teach philosophy as it is taught in most English-speaking universities, and as I believe it should be taught. The answer is best given by recording a conversation I had with the late Professor H. M. Sheffer of Harvard, whom I met there towards the end of the war when I was working at the British Embassy in Washington. Sheffer, one of the most eminent mathematical logicians of his day, said to me that in his opinion there were only two philosophical disciplines in which one could hope for an increase of permanent knowledge: one was logic, in which new discoveries and techniques superseded the old ones – this was a field of exact knowledge in which genuine progress occurred, as it did in the

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natural sciences or mathematics; the other was psychology, which he thought of as being in some respects still philosophical – this was an empirical study and obviously capable of steady development. And, of course, there was the history of philosophy: but this was not part of philosophy itself; as for logic and psychology, they differed from philosophy proper, to which – unlike history or classical learning – the notion of growth, of cumulative knowledge, did not seem to him to apply. ‘To speak of a man learned in epistemology, or a scholar in ethics,’ he said, ‘does not make sense; it is not that kind of study.’ He went on to say that philosophy was a marvellous province of thought, but it had not been helped, in his view, indeed had been gravely damaged, by what logical positivists, influenced by symbolic logicians like himself, were now doing; the kind of work that ‘Carnap and Co.’ (as he called them) were engaged upon repelled him – it would ruin real philosophy as he and his master Royce conceived it: ‘If any work of mine has done anything to stimulate this development, I had rather not have been born.’ Although I did not, and do not, agree with Sheffer’s sweeping condemnation of the value and influence of logical positivism, or the rigid division he drew, repudiating his own earlier views, between logic and philosophy, his words made a profound impression upon me. In the months that followed, I asked myself whether I wished to devote the rest of my life to a study, however fascinating and important in itself, which, transforming as its achievements undoubtedly were, would not, any more than criticism or poetry, add to the store of positive human knowledge. I gradually came to the conclusion that I should prefer a field in which one could hope to know more at the end of one’s life than when one had begun; and so I left philosophy for the field of the history of ideas, which had for many years been of absorbing interest to me.

My reason for telling this story is mainly historical, because of the light it throws on the conception of philosophy held towards the end of his life by one of the fathers of modern logic, about whose general views little or nothing, so far as I know, has been published; and also because somewhat inaccurate accounts of this conversation have been in circulation, one of which has recently found its way into print – and I thought it as well to set the record straight.

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