

Tribute to Renford Bambrough (1926–1999)

As we reported in the April issue of *Philosophy*, Renford Bambrough, the editor of *Philosophy* from 1972 to 1994, died on January 17th, 1999. During the memorial service at St John's College, Cambridge, on the 24th of April, 1999, the following extract from Renford Bambrough's Sermon at the Commemoration of Benefactors, 1968, was read:

I know that you know all this, or you would not be here. But I also know, from some things that some of you and some others have said and written, that some of you need to be reminded of what you know.

Michael Brearley contributed the following obituary.

Renford Bambrough was a philosopher through and through, a philosopher by vocation. He argued passionately for the scope for reason in all areas of thought. He had no truck with fashionable positions such as reductionism, emotivism, relativism or subjectivism. He argued, conclusively in my view, for the objectivity of moral judgments as of philosophy itself. For him truth was not, as it was for Hume, the equivalent of the fox for a fox-hunt (something that gives an extra spice to the ride) but the in principle attainable end and justification of the activity of philosophy.

Bambrough was strongly influenced by the work of Moore, Wittgenstein and Wisdom in Cambridge, where he had won scholarships and prizes at St John's College. His earlier grounding was in Plato and Aristotle. He came to believe that Wittgenstein's work disproved his (Wittgenstein's) dismissal of theories in philosophy; he felt that after Wittgenstein it was possible to answer certain fundamental philosophical questions. Hence his influential and controversial paper, 'Universals and Family Resemblances' (1961).

He also wrote extensively on moral philosophy, on the meaning and logic of religious beliefs, and on the nature of philosophy and of philosophical problems. He maintained the classical position of the English-speaking world of philosophy, that there is a logical difference between first-order statements of different categories (Matter, Mind, Ethics, Time etc) and the meta-questions about the meaning and status of propositions from these first-order categories that constitute philosophy proper. But he also argued for a closer

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connection between some types of first-order questions, such as ethical, political and aesthetic questions, with philosophy itself than was usual in the '60s and '70s, a connection based, in his view, on the fact that in both areas reason proceeds in a case-by-case, informal manner, using the language of ordinary speech.

Bambrough was a wonderful teacher, rigorous, fair and committed to a dialogic style. He could also be unconventional, as with one student, who later became a Professional Philosopher, whom he encouraged, during a prolonged crisis, to leave aside academic philosophy and read the great Russian novelists. He also contributed generously to the administration both of his college and of the departments in which he taught, and in the wider world.

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As a person he was shy yet intellectually courageous. He had a deep seriousness about life, which at times led him not to tolerate fools gladly, but also a warmth of humour and a deep attachment to friends and family. He was a considerable poker player; later in life he took up golf; he was widely read in all areas of literature. He could be persuaded to take family holidays, but sometimes gave the impression that a flat tyre on the open road was a not unwelcome opportunity for reading a few pages of Wittgenstein while waiting for his wife to deal with the practicalities.

Renford Bambrough was born into a mining background, his father being an electrician at Silksworth Colliery, in the week that the General Strike began. His serious attitude to the big questions of life was nurtured in the toughness of a loving, proud north-eastern family and community.

His own life tragedy began in his mid-sixties, with the onset of an insidious degenerative neurological condition, Lewy Body disease, which quite quickly left him unable to express thoughts and increasingly shaky. This would be torture for anyone, but especially so for someone whose mind had been so wonderfully clear and incisive. He was cared for with devotion by, his family and nurses.

He is survived by his wife, Moira, and by his four children, Catherine, Mary, Richard and Annabel.

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The memoir which follows is by George Watson

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He was a year older, a little more, and in forty years of friendship I sometimes reminded him how much that year had taught him, since he often seemed to know and understand more. But then it is enjoyable as well as instructive to feel unequal, and the calibrations of his thoughts could amuse. Coming away from a lecture by G. H. von Wright, I remarked I was not sure I had understood all of it, and he replied 'I was quite sure I did not understand some of it.' Your views, even when accepted, could be returned in forms more exact than you had given them; though he was conscious enough of a fondness for correction to contrive, at times, to say nothing at all. In fact his silences could be memorable.

Born in Sunderland, he had worked in a coalmine in 1944–5 as a Bevin Boy before studying classics at Cambridge and his early years gave him an abiding contempt for posh Lefties. Never having studied modern philosophy, at least in any formal sense, helped to fuel a lofty disdain for those who affect fashionable opinions, and even as early as 1959, when we first met, he had seen through a good many terminologies designed to make beginners sound clever. Not that I would have dreamed of trying anything like that on him; those who did regretted it, and he was content to make enemies, on occasion—though his liveliest competitive instincts were more openly demonstrated in games, of which he was inordinately fond, especially croquet and poker. But then he had missed much in childhood because of the war.

The seminar we shared for some twenty years, called (among other things) Literature & Philosophy or Theory of Criticism, mainly attracted graduates in philosophical and literary subjects. Critical theory, it is too seldom noticed, is a philosophical rather than a literary activity, since no academic subject bears within it any responsibility to justify itself, which meant that he had more to say than I, though I may have talked more. The seminar gained a reputation as a lone defender of objectivity in moral and critical debates, and its progress, in a sceptical age, was stormy. Few things enrage arts students more than to be told that judgments can be right or wrong. (They think that is what science is for.) It was even preached about: at least the Rev John O'Neill, professor of New Testament Studies at Cambridge, preached in October 1980 in the University Church that righteousness had allies in improbable places. 'In St John's we've got Renford Bambrough and George

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Watson,' arguing that 'moral values are as solid as the pew you are sitting on, as unavoidable and discoverable as the contours of the wood that is supporting you,' while many a bishop denies it. That was perhaps missing the point. You can think morality objective, or the physical properties of a distant star, without thinking you know what they are. Or so, if I can presume to speak for him, Renford Bambrough would have said. His 1974 Hull lecture *Conflict and the Scope of Reason* says it better; *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (1979) more amply. Which is not to deny we do know some moral values, and some stars.

He lived a life of deep domestic happiness, with four children, having become a Fellow of St John's College in 1950 after submitting a thesis on Plato, and was later Dean and President. He edited *Philosophy* from 1972 until 1994 and broadcast and lectured widely abroad. His mind throughout was marked by the proud humility of a northern dissenting background, and his first book, *Reason, Truth and God* (1969) protested against the facile scepticism of modern theology, insisting that Christianity was a claim that certain events occurred in history and that certain moral values are true. Religion without transcendence seemed to him a cheat, like a slogan for Fat-Free Butter I once saw in a California supermarket. He thought it better to be simplistic, like a tele-evangelist, than merely gutless. At least you can see where the mistakes are.

His extensive teaching abroad, above all in the United States and Australia, was his delight, and he gloried in travel, which included all the continents except Antarctica. It confirmed a deep distaste for relativism which you can hear anywhere, and those who held that morality is never more than social or ideological conditioning could be amazed by the swift and deadly brevity of his reply. He had heard it all before, after all. Besides, he was congenitally sparing of utterance.

That was his pride. His humility lay in a horror of self-recommendation, so that even his most notable contributions, like his oft-reprinted 'Universals and Family Resemblances', were presented as the achievements of other minds. Though not an intimate of the famous Old Guard of Cambridge philosophy like Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein, he had sat in the same room and listened—mainly at the Moral Sciences Club when modesty prevented him, as a classical undergraduate, from attending their lectures. He later realized no one would have noticed. He was present on the celebrated occasion when Wittgenstein, wielding a poker, told Russell and Popper they did not understand philosophy. Profoundly influenced by Wittgenstein, he was yet something less than a disciple; Russell he held to have failed to understand, and it was with John

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Wisdom that his loyalties were most deeply engaged. His mind was exceptionally constant and undeviating. Though he belonged successively to three political parties, he probably felt they had changed rather than he; and he conscientiously had no religion. Indeed he was one of those rare beings whose integrity one might have wished the less, and among the disappointments of professional life his friendships did not waver. Nor will the memory of him fade wherever just opinions are held in due esteem.

(George Watson, who is a Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, is the author of *The Certainty of Literature* (Harvester Press).)