Editorial: Thirteen Versions

William James was once castigated by Arthur Lovejoy for having put forward 13 versions of pragmatism, some of them mutually incompatible. James' disciple F. C. S. Schiller replied that pragmatism looked for many more than 13: truth could not be as confined as that. Like T. S. Eliot, James regarded each philosophical venture as 'a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate, with shabby equipment always deteriorating'; and he shared with his brother a sense of the infinite difficulty of the articulation of the meaning of human experience.

In truth, James' philosophy has survived even Russell's devastating critique. At least, we go on reading James; some try to find new reasons or extra formulations to circumvent Russell, or point out certain problematic assumptions in the Russellian criticism.

Professor R. M. Hare once wrote that 'if old mistakes are resuscitated, it is often impossible to do more than restate … the old arguments against them. Philosophical mistakes are like dandelions in the garden; however carefully one eradicates them, there are sure to be some more next year, and it is difficult to think of novel ways of getting rid of their familiar faces.' Doubtless there are some simple mistakes of this sort, but if this were all there was to philosophy and its history, then philosophy would be a depressing business indeed, a mechanical re-treading of paths already taken, a case of learning nothing and knowing nothing.

A dialogue is not like that. It moves through argument, but it moves. If the vision is fertile enough and the speakers creative enough and the argument penetrating enough the journey is worthwhile. It is our privilege to continue the conversations begun by Plato and Aristotle and the rest, and our opportunity too. Descartes or Spinoza may have made mistakes, but their philosophy as a whole was not a mistake, any more than James'. Looked at in this light, the ability to generate 13 or more versions is a virtue in a philosophy rather than a vice.