

Preface

The Royal Institute of Philosophy lectures for 1983–84 were arranged in consultation with the new Society for Applied Philosophy (which now has its own Journal). The contributors, but not the topics, were suggested by the Society; and it was therefore interesting to see, as the series unfolded (and the lectures are printed here in the order in which they were given), what a group of twelve philosophers and two philosophical lawyers conceived ‘applied philosophy’ to be.

It was not the policy of the new Society, and it has never been the practice of the Institute, to lay constraints on the content of the work of invited speakers. In this case, we were even more open to suggestions than usual; even the very topics were chosen by the invited speakers, assuming only that they were about philosophy and practice. Furthermore, we did not wish to limit them to a narrow notion of practice, as concern only public affairs or public or private morals; without, of course, wishing to exclude such matters. We intended ‘practice’ to be taken in a wide sense, as involving practical concerns which those who are not philosophers may have. I put it this way to exclude those practical concerns—for philosophy itself is a practice—which only philosophers would have: we wanted to avoid narcissism.

Having these fourteen essays before us, have we been given any help in deciding what applied philosophy is supposed to be?

Well, they are very disparate; and I find it impossible to apply any useful general description to them. My own response is this: I think there is one thing which I perceive one sort of applied philosophy to be: it is very important; and it is nothing new. (It is age-old in fact; but I limit myself to speaking of what is old or new over the last fifty years or so, in British philosophy.)

Some of those who welcomed the advent of the Society for Applied Philosophy did so because they were irritated, even outraged, by what they regarded as the aridity, the esoteric abstraction, the detachment from ‘real issues’, into which they thought contemporary British philosophy had fallen. Certainly, the sorts of considerations about substantive ethical or political issues dealt with by R. M. Hare, Ted Honderich, Don Locke and others in this volume were thought for a time to go beyond the scope of philosophy, which must limit itself to what fell under that unfelicitous expression ‘meta-ethics’. But apart from that, I think we have been doing applied philosophy all along.

Preface

Let us look for a moment at what the critics of so-called ‘Oxford philosophy’ sometimes cite as the paradigm of aridity, the work of the late J. L. Austin. I remember, when at a seminar in Oxford thirty years ago Austin first outlined his investigation which later eventuated in his paper *Excuses*, Mr (now Professor) David Armstrong, taking advantage of his Australian immunity and perching himself on a high cupboard, challenged the formidable Austin, asking him ‘And what particular philosophical problems is all this meant to solve?’ Austin’s reply was ‘Roughly, all of them’. An exaggeration, no doubt. But *Excuses* and his previous seminar with Honoré, which so influenced the latter’s work on law, I would claim to be of the first importance with regard to commonsense and legal appraisal of action.

What Austin was engaged in, and what all of these contributors some of the time and some of them most of the time are engaged in, is conceptual investigation. I do not say ‘conceptual analysis’, because this presupposes, or is at any rate too redolent of, a particular and questionable view of the structure of thought. Conceptual investigation is not only a matter of achieving clarity, though to do so is of the first importance. (‘Clarity is not enough’ it was once said: but it is plenty.) What people do must, unless they act mindlessly, depend on their conceptions, and their conceptions can be more or less coherent, and where coherent more or less explicit, and where implicit there is the greater danger of confusion. But conceptual investigation can also be creative. For example, Roger Scruton, starting from the conceptual distinction between intentional and non-intentional pleasures, develops a notion of arousal which deserves, in my opinion, to be allowed to give a new meaning to the word. (The *OED* definition gives no hint of reciprocity.)

As I say, conceptual investigation is not new. Perhaps it got a bad name, or was anyway obscured, by the school of linguistic analysis; for there were those who would have said that the only way to pursue conceptual investigation, if it could be distinguished from it at all, was by linguistic analysis. But the work neither of Ryle (throughout, but especially in his last book, *On Thinking*) nor the later Wittgenstein, can be so represented. Austin was thought by some to be trivializing when he said the first thing to do was to chase up a word and its cognates in the *OED*; but that can be a good way to start, so long as it is not also where we end.

Mr Warner’s paper was highly appreciated by the audience at the Institute, and one member, who has made clear on many occasions his distaste for what he calls logical positivism or linguistic analysis, complimented him warmly, saying that Mr Warner’s paper almost

reconciled him to linguistic philosophy. Mr Warner was pleased, but also amused, remarking that he had had no idea that he was a linguistic philosopher. What Mr Warner is engaged in is conceptual investigation, an investigation into the concept of language. He is not entering into the arena of controversy about the most correct or desirable reforms of liturgical language; he is showing that there, as must be the case elsewhere, the ways in which language is conceived will give different directions to people's practical recommendations, whether they have made explicit, and thought through, their concepts or not. And they better had, or listen to those who do. If they get it wrong, they may be responsible for distorting not only the meaning of liturgical practice but our very religious consciousness.

I used to say, to some extent for the sort of reasons given by Dr Newton Smith at the end of his paper, and to the dismay of my colleagues who thought I was demeaning philosophy in the eyes of our university departments of Engineering and Business Studies, that philosophy is useless. This was hyperbole: in part I wanted to guard against a tendency, to use a witty spoonerism from a review in *Mind*, to sell my birthright for a pot of message. I can no longer say philosophy is useless if people will listen to it. But, if as I claim we have been doing applied philosophy all along, why talk of applied philosophy rather than just philosophy? Because there can be the investigation of specifically philosophical or metaphysical concepts such as substance, or universals, or the thing in itself; and the investigation of purely theoretical concepts in the sciences or in literary or art criticism; but there are concepts embedded in people's lives and practice, which would go on living if everyone who called himself a philosopher or a theoretician were dead, such as those of sexual desire, dishonesty and madness.

Dr Scruton's paper, *Sexual Arousal*, is adapted from *Sexual Desire, its Meaning and its Goal* to be published by Wiedenfeld, autumn 1985.