

AYER, A.J., *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982.

"Thus we now meet the view very usually taken of the history of philosophy which ascribes to it the narration of a number of philosophical opinions as they have arisen and manifested in time. This kind of matter is in courtesy called opinions... This history, considered only as the enumeration of various opinions, thus becomes an idle tale, or, if you will, an erudite investigation, for erudition is, in the main, acquaintance with a number of useless things..."¹

Ayer's latest book is conceived as a sequel to Russell's ambitious *History of Western Philosophy*. What was ambitious about Russell's *History* was not that it covered events of about two thousand years in about seven hundred and odd number of pages; or even that he managed to speak about so many philosophers that he did speak of. There have been, if this is the criteria, even more ambitious works written and published much before Russell's own.² Its merit lies elsewhere as Russell himself indicates :

"Philosophy, from the earliest times, has been not merely an affair of the schools, or even of disputation between a handful of learned men. It has been an integral part of the life of the community, and as such I have tried to consider it. *If there is any merit in this book it is from this point of view that it is derived.*"³

Russell was dissatisfied with the then existing histories of philosophy because he found that,

"(i)n most histories of philosophy, each philosopher appears as in a vacuum; his opinions are set forth unrelaxed except, at most, to those of earlier philosophers. I have tried, on the contrary, to exhibit each philosopher, as far as truth permits, as an outcome of his *milieu*, a man in whom were crystallised and concentrated thoughts and feelings which, in a vague and diffused form, were common to the community of which he was a part."⁴

In other words, Russell's "excursions into social and political history" (Ayer's characterisation) was guided by a vision about the nature of philosophy and its relation to the community at large (not just the philosophical community). From two opposite spectrums of philosophical thought, separated by more than a hundred years, two voices – that of Hegel (as the first citation makes it clear) and that of Russell – join in chorus to declare that philosophy is "more" than an opinion of a solitary individual and that its history, therefore, something other than a collection of such "idle tales". Their ideas about the nature of philosophy were ambitious in *conception*: hence, the histories they authored were ambitious in *execution*. The point at issue is not the relative merits of their conceptions; it is one of recognising them for what they were. In other words, it has to be realised why the "social and political history" in Russell's work is not a mere "excursion" like a Sunday tour through the history museum, but an *essential* and defining element of philosophy itself.

Ayer does not, as a matter of choice and as a result of decision, follow the "example" that Russell has set. And that is because, "Russell's excursions into social and political history did not throw much light upon the views of the

philosophers with which he sought to associate them." (p. ix). Besides, or so Ayer feels, why attempt a "performance" when one can not improve upon that which is already performed? In that case, it is obvious, to the extent there is some performance at all it will be of *another* kind. What we will then get is not a sequel to Russell's *History* shorn of all its useless embellishments and unilluminating excursions. Rather, it will deliver us a type of history which sets forth certain opinions and "a few biographical details about the philosophers" upon whom the attention is focussed; and "in certain cases... refer to the ways in which they influenced one another" (p. ix). Or, if you will, it will give us precisely the kind of history that Russell did not find especially illuminating; a sort of history that Hegel called an "idle tale".

And that is exactly what Ayer has given us in this book under review. We are presented with, in about 250 pages, some opinions of some 30-odd philosophers (along with details regarding birth, marriages, divorces and death for some of them), together with Ayer's own considered 'objections' to their opinions.

The first chapter formulates Ayer's thoughts regarding the nature of philosophy and its progress. Philosophy, to him, is a set of perennial problems; accordingly, progress in philosophy consists of "the evolution of a set of perennial problems" (p. 3). And these problems? They pertain to the objectivity of knowledge, the basis of knowledge, the status of logical and mathematical sciences, the reality and the ideality of the external world, the constituents of the world etc. When we look at the history of philosophy as a history of attempted solutions of these problems then we realise that "none of the issues have been resolved" and that "many conflicting theories remain in the field" (p. 13). Progress, accordingly, is neither "the disappearance of the age-old problems" nor "the increasing dominance of one or other of conflicting sects" (p. 13); it is to be located in the way problems are formulated and, perhaps, "in an increasing measure of agreement concerning the character of their solution" (p. 14). Today, in Ayer's opinion, philosophers are more or less agreed upon that "philosophy lacks capital to set up its own business" (p. 15) i.e., that it borrows its subject matter from the sciences. Instead of proceeding "deductively from allegedly self-evident first principles and arrive by pure reflection at a picture of the world which has an independent claim to validity" (p. 15) — like philosophers of yesteryears were prone to — we have progressed to the point of realizing that the elaboration of a world view requires that it "incorporate the deliverances of sciences and possibly also of the arts" (p. 15). Progress, in other words, is a mighty fine thing indeed!

The second chapter, titled "The revolt from Hegel", begins with a cursory glance at the state of philosophical scene at the turn of the century (More about this soon.) The rest of the chapter discusses the views of the two major figures who lead this revolt in Britain; Russell and Moore.

The next chapter discusses two pragmatists: James and Lewis. The fourth, titled "Witgenstein, Popper and the Vienna circle", includes Ayer's personal memoir of the circle. The later Wittgenstein's notion of language games, Ryle's theory of 'mind' and Carnap's distinction between 'internal' and 'external' questions take up the fifth chapter.

The sixth chapter discusses physicalism and Collingwood's ideas are analysed in the seventh. Phenomenology and existentialism get a short shrift in

the eight chapter. It is the turn of 9 modern philosophers, including Quine, Kripke and Putnam, in the last chapter titled "later developments". These accounts are, as to be expected, peppered with Ayer's own considered opinions on the subject, some banal observations and a few trivial biographical details.

I would like to treat Ayer's book the following way: His metalevel notion of what philosophy is, structures his narration of its history in the twentieth century. However, Ayer's meta-level notion is, for us, part of the history of the twentieth century philosophy whose representation — if not *the* then at least *a* representation — the book is. Looked this way, Ayer's commentary becomes an expression of what he is commenting upon viz., philosophy of today. We can, in other words, infer many things about the nature of contemporary philosophy by reading through Ayer's book and, in the rest of what follows, I would like to limit myself to *three* such inferences.

Russell, as we have seen, attempted to portray philosophy as an articulation of those thoughts and feelings which were present in a vague and diffused form in the community at large. The philosopher was a member not merely of a small segment of a community of philosophers, nor even of a small circle within the community of scientists but, *above all*, of a larger community of fellow human beings. We can infer that philosophy (if not in its entirety then at least of that segment of which Russell was a part) formed an integral part of a wider community; it tried to express the thoughts and feelings of the age.

What can be said of its intended sequel? Except for biographical details, philosophy appears as a collection of individual opinions. The twentieth century philosophy, or at least the picture that we get, expresses nothing but the 'opinions' of those who call themselves 'philosophers'. At the most some individuals 'influence' others; at the least what they say is relevant to none but to those who say it.

Secondly, as must be evident, the organisation of the book is chaotic. The only thing that makes it into a book is that it is *bound as one*. No common set of questions animate the book, no common concern dominates the structure and we are treated, in the course of the 250 or so pages, to a bewildering array of names interspaced with many 'isms' such as 'physicalism', 'existentialism', 'essentialism' and such like.

If you will allow me the liberty of looking at the *structure* of the book as a representation of the structure of philosophy in the twentieth century, then you will not be offended, perhaps, if I predicate of the latter the afore-mentioned properties of the former viz., philosophy of today has lost its 'coherence'. Interconnections are lost, communality of concerns have disappeared leave alone a collaborative effort at articulating a common set of problems and working towards a solution. As a result, any and every 'meta' reflection becomes 'philosophy': philosophy of coca-cola bottling, philosophy of computer programming, philosophy of ambi-dextrousness, philosophy of car repairing... Why ever not? After all, have we not "progressed" to the point of recognising that "philosophy lacks capital to set up its own business" and that it has to borrow its subject-matter from elsewhere? What matters where you borrow "capital" from, as long as the interest rates are low? This insight of philosophy is nothing new though. When Titus, the son of the Roman emperor Vespasian, reproached his father for taxing the public lavatories, the emperor's reply (reputedly) was: "*Non olet*" (i.e., money has no smell). The

emperor's reply is the insight of philosophy: what matters where the subject-matter comes from? *Non olet!* How could it be otherwise? Twentieth-century philosophy has lost all contact with its very life-spring: the community at large.

Thirdly, "An outstanding feature of twentieth-century philosophy", writes Ayer, "has been the growth of its self-consciousness" (p.14). How "self-conscious" it is really? Let us look at the way the twentieth-century philosophy characterises itself.

Ayer writes that it is a *revolt from Hegel* which announces its birth i.e., the first chapter in the philosophy of the twentieth-century (the second chapter of the book) begins thus:

"At the turn of the century idealism was dominant, mostly in the forms inspired by the philosophy of Hegel. It is true that Marx and Engels had set out to 'turn Hegel on his head' retaining his dialectic while converting his idealism into materialism but their views made little impact on the philosophical world." (p. 19)

Ayer assures us, continuing this "history", that there were some redeeming features to this otherwise depressing scene: the existence of some counter-acting forces in Germany viz., the school of Brentano even though his pupil Husserl was to develop it into a phenomenological school. It was a one-sided reading of Descartes, and not the influence of Hegel as the 'doyen' of British philosophy comforts us, that is responsible for Husserl's views acquiring an "increasingly idealistic tinge" (ibid.). Hegelianism was represented in the U.S. by Josiah Royce and in Britain by Bradley and McTaggart. The pragmatist William James was one of the main architects in the downfall of Hegelianism. So far, Ayer's version.

Most of this story, however, is *utter nonsense*. Let me begin with the second of Ayer's statement cited above. In the very same passage where Marx, allegedly⁵, speaks about turning 'Hegel on his head', is also the following observation about the German *philosophical scene* to be found :

"... just when I was working at the first volume of *Capital* (in the first half of 1860s – reviewer) the ill-humoured, arrogant and mediocre epigones who now talk large in educated German circles began to take pleasure in treating Hegel in the same way as the good Moses Mendelssohn treated Spinoza in Lessing's time, namely as a 'dead dog'." ⁶

This remark, from Marx who was a keen observer of the fads of the German intellectuals, is worthy of careful consideration.

No philosophical school, as those who have made *some* effort at becoming literate in the history of philosophy know, is a monolithic, homogeneous entity. This is even more true of Hegelianism than is dreamt of by the doyen of British philosophy.

Hegel's impact, on the Prussian intellectual life, before 1816 was virtually *nil*. It is only between 1820 and 1830 (but 10 years!) that Hegelian thought becomes, as it were, the state-philosophy enjoying a great intellectual and political popularity. The disintegration of Hegelian thought begins in the early part of the 1830's; so much so that by the late 1840's Hegelianism, in Prussia at least, is certified to be more or less dead – in all its forms.

Before 1816 (specifically, between 1805–1816, after Hegel wrote *Phenomenology*), it was the 'romantic' thinkers like Schelling, Schlegel and Schleiermacher who enjoyed a wide acceptance and great popularity amongst the public. Apart from a small number of disciples in Jena, Hegel had to wait

till he went to Berlin before he could speak of any kind of school formation.⁷

Between 1820 and 1830, however, Hegelian disciples were not only in control of the Prussian *Kulturministerium* but also were, due partly to this very control itself, the leading elements exercising hegemony over the intellectual and literary elite of Berlin. This period also witnessed the growth of Hegelian schools outside of Berlin.

The very process of the formation of the Hegelian school contained, as it were, seeds of its disintegration if not its destruction. Different generations, formed in different *historical* periods, sought in Hegelian philosophy an articulation of the problems of their age which, being different, led to, or threatened to lead into, disintegration.⁸ With the death of Hegel, the school splits into *three* tendencies: the left, the centre and the right Hegelians. Here, I would like to indicate two factors which contributed to the disintegration of Hegelianism.

The first, *to some extent* external, factor was the death of the emperor Fredrick William III in 1840 as a result of which the special relationship that Hegelianism had established between itself and the Prussian state came to an end. The succession to the throne by Fredrick William IV made matters worse, for the latter was hostile to Hegelianism and was one of its most powerful opponents since 1830's. This specific administrative and political reforms of 1840-41 – symptomatic of a changing society in Prussia spurred on by the social crises which shook many European countries – resulted in the eclipse of Hegelianism from its dominant position due, in no small measure, to the active struggle the Prussian state waged *against* Hegelianism; one of the strategies used consisted of luring Schelling to Berlin “with a huge salary with the hope that he would be able to expunge the “dragon’s seed” of Hegelian rationalism from the minds of the Prussian youth.”⁹

The internal factor was the evolution of the left-hegelians. The dynamics of their evolution was such as to lead them into “materialism” (of various types) under an over-riding attempt at realising the hegelian project. Hegelianism, to rephrase the above, disintegrated precisely in an attempt at carrying out its programme.¹⁰

Be as it may, from the year 1840 onwards what we see in Prussia is not so much a waning of Hegelianism as a formidable growth of “naturalism” or “scientific materialism”. An enormous *explosion*, that is the only way to describe it, of scientific activity characterises the intellectual climate. The scene for a philosophical elaboration of materialism based on the natural sciences was *prepared* by the left-hegelians, principally Feuerbach,¹¹ Karl Vogt, Jacob Moleschott, Ludwig Büchner – to name but a few – were the leading figures of this period, of this development.¹² By the late 1860's – when Marx was working on *Capital* in exile – the general climate in Prussia was anything but idealist, anything but Hegelian in character. Hegel was, in the full sense of the term, a dead dog. The universities, the cultural elite, the intelligentsia were all brimming over with the ideas and thought-structures of empiricism, sensationalism, naturalism and what-have-you.

How was it in Austria? Did Hegelianism influence the scene before Brentano or his pupil Meinong? Once again, the situation in Austria was anything but that.

In the first place, ever since the mid-18th century, the policy in schools

and universities (including the formulation of curriculums and professional appointments) was *completely in the hands of the imperial bureaucracy* of Austria. The policy of Joseph II who ruled between 1780–90 encouraged a rapid absorption of the clergy into the state-bureaucratic apparatus, a trend which continued during the reign of Francis I (1792–1835). The official body, the *Studienhof Kommission*, prescribed the text-books to be used, the intellectual trends to be promoted. Even Kant did not penetrate Austrian education – the commission having, in 1798, rejected Kantian philosophy as being too difficult.¹³ The well-known anti-intellectualism of Francis I was anything but an incentive to the spread of new ideas and thought-styles.

Secondly, till about the late 1860's the only 'philosophy' that was popular with the state-officials was that of Herbart – Kant's successor at Königsberg. Herbart's resolute rejection of the emphasis on historical evolution and dialectic "which had seduced so many German students into dangerous political activity"¹⁴ was very congenial to the officials.

Thirdly, the skepticism of the officials against idealism was not merely of a passive variety; in the 1850's Hegelians were persecuted in Austria. Finally, as Brentano's inaugural lecture in Vienna makes it clear, philosophical milieu during this period was anything but lively.

In other words, German idealism never penetrated Austria in any significant way. By the time Austria was open to new ideas, it was too late to 'import' Hegelianism; it was dead and buried in its country of origin long before.

Reasons of space render it impossible to follow the vicissitudes of Hegelianism in the U.S. Suffice to say that one would do better to look for it Ohio and St. Louis than in the "person" of Royce.¹⁵

What picture do we get from all of this? It is that the philosophical scene in the German speaking countries was anything but Hegelian in nature. In fact, Frege revolts *against* the materialism, empiricism and sensationalism of his contemporaries and not against Hegelian idealism.¹⁶ Contemporary philosophy, if we follow the conventional dating, from Frege onwards never did have to revolt against Hegel or Hegelianism; it was merely *continuing* along the lines set during the previous 40 years or so.¹⁷ And where it *did* revolt, it simply could not have revolted against Hegelianism or idealism.

Russell and Moore, we are told, revolted against Bradley and McTaggart. While this could be true of *them*, they merely returned to the home-grown variety, their revolt was not *the revolt* of the 20th century philosophy. It was anything but that.

The 20th century philosophy, supremely "self-conscious", seems to be amnesic when it comes to remembering whom it was revolting against or even why! Perhaps, that explains the retrograde movement that occurred in philosophical thought; the return of Moore, Russell & Co., the logical positivists to "sensationalism", "sense-data", "sensa" and "sensibilia"; "brute facts", "naked facts", "observational languages" etc., which, even when compared to Kant leave alone Hegel, is an enormous regression indeed!

All of the fore-going brings me to the *third* observation regarding philosophy in the twentieth century: it is a philosophy which has no history. Given that history and historical events are contingent at best, what matters as to what passes off as history? It could be collection of trivial details (like the number of wives or the illegitimate off-springs of a philosopher); it could be a couple of

opinions (manifestly false) sucked, literally, out of the thumbs of those who fancy like it — what do these things matter? When philosophy has no connection with the community at large, what else can its history be except narration of opinions peppered with anecdotal details regarding some individuals?

This is a *sad picture* of our age, our times, our heroes and our intellectuals. Perhaps that is reason enough to read a book like Ayer's; to learn how not to philosophise. The utter irrelevancy Ayer's history to us, to the extent it is coextensive with philosophy in the 20th century, is the utter irrelevancy of philosophy to the outside world: to its concerns and to its problems.

Because, parallel to the evolution of the set of "perennial problems" which apparently characterises our intellectual history, there has also been an 'evolution' in the problems of mankind. Unlike problems in philosophy, there seems to be no general agreement concerning the character of their solution. Confronted with this situation, philosophers seem to be increasingly at a loss to say anything relevant regarding either the evolution of, or the solutions for, problems of humanity.

Of course, it is not the unique task of philosophy alone. Philosophers, says Ayer, do not have any professional competence to tell the world how "it ought to live" (as if there is any danger of such a thing today!). This is an all too familiar refrain — ever since the days of Hegel at least.¹⁸ Who, then has the "professional competence" to tell the world how it ought to live? If none have it, then how has it come about that there *are* people who not only tell the world how it ought to live but also succeed in enforcing their opinions on the rest of us? Should we not at least do so much as to show that *none* are "professionally competent" and yet that there are those who pretend to be?

When philosophy, philosophers withdraw from the public world under the plea that they are not specially competent to help run the affairs of mankind, the rest of the world does not follow suit: the charlatans take over and run the world for us. Look how they are running it though.

In summary: Ayer's *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* is a depressing work, one which I wish was not written. Insofar as philosophy *is* what it is portrayed to be in Ayer's book, it is perhaps a wish that the world was not what it is. To the extent Ayer's work is a commentary on our age, I can only say that *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* is a sad commentary on philosophy in the twentieth century.

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¹Hegel, G.W.F., *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1. London; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 11–12.

²To name but one such work: Barnes, H.E., *An Intellectual and Cultural History of Western World*. First published in 1937, it is reissued by Dover books, New York, 1965.

³Russell, B., *History of Western Philosophy*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975, p. 8; *my emphasis*.

⁴ibid., p. 7.

⁵'Allegedly' because, Marx says nothing of that sort. He is talking about dialectic; not Hegel: "With him (Hegel - reviewer) it (the dialectic - reviewer) is standing on its head. It must be inverted. in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell" in *Postface* to the second edition, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Hammondsworth: Penguin books in association with the New Left Review, 1976, p. 103.

⁶Ibid., p. 102; *my emphasis*.

⁷For further details, Toews, J.E., *Hegelianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

⁹What these problems were and some of the dynamics of the disintegration are recounted in detail in the cited work of Toews. To get some idea of the problems which occupied Hegel, and for which he sought answers, consult at the least, Plant, R., *Hegel*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973. Solomon, R.C., *In the Spirit of Hegel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

⁹Toews, op. cit., p. 254.

¹⁰More or less a hundred years later we see something similar happening with logical positivism; disintegrating not so much under external attacks as in its attempts at carrying out the original project.

¹¹For some idea of his life and evolution, consult, Wartofsky, M.W., *Feurbach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

¹²Gregory, F., *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1977 is a scintillating source to consult.

¹³Lindenfeld, D.F., *The Transformation of Positivism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, for some details.

¹⁴ibid., p. 41-42.

¹⁵Reidl's articles in the following two collections and the bibliography contained therein is a starting point for those interested: O'Malley et. al. (eds.), *The Legacy of Hegel*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973. Verene, D.P. (ed.), *Hegel's Social and Political Thought*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980.

¹⁶For a more focussed analysis of Frege's time, see, Sluga, H., *Gottlob Frege*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980. The classic, conventional story is provided by Dummett, M., *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy*. London: G. Duckworth & Co., 1981. Dummett's work also contains a detailed appendix refuting Sluga's story.

¹⁷The neo-kantianism of Marburg returned to the Kant of *Critique of Pure Reason*; the generation formed under Fichte were under the influence of the Kant of practical reason. Göttingen neokantianism is a product of the early parts of the 20th century and it was reacting to Marburg. The Heidelberg school cannot be seen as reacting to Hegel either.

¹⁸This is how Hegel puts it: "One word more about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it... When philosophy paints its grey in grey then has a shape of life

grown old... The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk." *Philosophy of Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 12–13. And this is how his pupil Marx puts it : "Hitherto philosophers have left the keys to all riddles lying in their desk, and the stupid, uninitiated world had only to wait around for the roasted pigeons of absolute science to fly into its pen mouth... .. we shall (not) confront the world with new doctrinaire principles and proclaim: Here is truth, on your knees before it!... We shall not say: Abandon your struggles, they are mere folly; let us provide you with true campaign-slogans." in a letter to Ruge. Marx, K., *Early Writings*. Hammondsworth: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1975, p. 207–209. As I say, this sentiment is nothing new !