

IN DEFENCE OF HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

During recent times, history of philosophy has come in for a great deal of criticism both from modernists as well as traditionalists. H. G. Wells writes, "What is wanted is philosophy and not a shallow smattering of the history of philosophy." In other words, students must show a grasp of philosophical problems and must show originality in statement and explanation of philosophical problems. It is said even by traditionalists that Indian philosophy must be studied problem-wise and not in a mechanical history of philosophical schools. Thus we should take the problem of causation and state the views of the schools like Nyāya, Buddhist, Sāṅkhya and Vedānta. At present Indian philosophy is only mechanically taught system by system. (But to my mind history of Indian philosophy shows a progressive reaching of Vedānta.)

In recent times, Wittgenstein exclaimed 'we cannot go back to the fog' "some" oxbridge students are fond of boasting that they get first class marks in spite of their not properly studying history of philosophy. There is no doubt that history of philosophy has fallen into disrepute due to attacks from those who claim to have participated in recent revolution in philosophy (alā Ryle and others).

But I wish to maintain that the 'revolution in philosophy' has its roots in the writings of previous philosophers. And as I said in my book "*Linguistic philosophy and other essays*" that "language plays an important part in shaping philosophical problems is nothing new, though some overenthusiastic linguistic philosophers would like to have us believe that dawn broke with the publication of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*."

To take an instance at random, Berkeley writes "Upon the whole I am inclined to think that the greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers and blocked our way to knowledge are entirely owing to ourselves, that we have first raised a dust and then complained that we cannot see."

Again it is not Wittgenstein who has written the following passage "So far are the students of metaphysics from exhibiting

any kind of unanimity in their contentions, that metaphysics has rather come to be regarded as a battleground quite peculiarly suited for those who desire to exercise themselves in mock combats, and in which no participant has ever succeeded in gaining even so much as an inch of territory.... This shows beyond all questioning that the procedure of metaphysics has hitherto been a merely random groping and what is worst of all a groping among mere concepts."

The writer of this interesting passage is Immanuel Kant of course. I do not mean to suggest that there is no difference between ancient and modern criticism of metaphysical philosophy. The modern criticism is much more radical. It questions the basic tenets of metaphysics and doubts whether that is at all possible. But it has been necessary to show this continuity with the past philosophical thought because people still persist in thinking that linguistic philosophy is something that is entirely new. This belief is shared by its admirers as well as its critics. Nothing is entirely new under the sun and I even believe that Indian philosophy bears signs of linguistic influence if one takes pains to ferret it out.

Some parts of analytic philosophy have already passed into history. Thus writings of Bertrand Russell have already passed into history of philosophy, and very soon Wittgenstein, Ryle and others will follow suit. One can't understand the writings of later philosophers of analytic movement like Austin etc. without understanding Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein. What I wish to attack is the shallow smattering of the present day philosophers who do not go back to the source of the analytic movement.

Upto now no large scale history of analytical movement has been written (barring some anthologies to make papers easily available in book form or a chapter or two in history of philosophy).

Two schools of philosophers are prevalent to-day. The Wittgensteinian school and the school of "Systematizers of philosophy". Thus D. F. Pears writes in his book on 'Wittgenstein' (Modern masters series) "Why should linguistic philosophy not be systematic?" What is wrong with the suggestion that philosophy

ought to theorize about language in a way that would reveal the general nature of the material to which language is applied? It is not universally true that to generalize is to falsify."

(The Wittgensteinians would reply that if critical philosophy is done in a systematic way it will come closer to science both in its methods and in the general form of its results.)

I belong to the systematizing school and my point is that it cannot be done unless parts of earlier linguistic philosophy becomes history of philosophy.

Nelson writes in a review that "The rejection of absolutist justification for system building does not itself constitute justification for the extremely asystematic character of typically current British analysis. Unwillingness to accept any postulates of geometry as absolute or self-evident truths hardly diminishes the importance of the systematic development of geometries. Unwillingness to take any elements as metaphysical or epistemological ultimates does not make pointless all systematic construction of philosophy. There are virtues in knowing where we began, where we have gone and where we are going even if we fully acknowledge that we might as well have been somewhere else. Emphases on "on the spot analysis" is a natural reaction to heavy-handed system building, but too little regard for systems can lead us to run in circles or to overlook important likenesses while we are busy cataloging subtle distinctions."

Systematizing of present-day philosophy must have as its prerequisite the history of philosophy. Only a history of the present linguistic movement of philosophy will make the movement precise and systematic. Repetitions will be found out, aberrations (I have in mind Ryle's concept of the Mind) criticised and the direction in which linguistic philosophy is proceeding will be made evident. Opponents of the 'history of philosophy' school are suspicious of histories of empiricist movement. But it is an established procedure to study Locke, Berkeley and Hume together. English empiricism started with Locke who was a half-hearted empiricist. Berkeley carried it further, criticising Locke for his abstract idea of matter. Then Hume criticised

Berekely for his abstract idea of mind and finally Hume carried empiricism to its logical conclusion.

Attempts have been made to decry this historical development of empiricism. (I remember to have read an article in a philosophical journal 'Did Hume ever read Berekely'.) But certain ideas are 'in the air' at particular epochs and this is bound to influence its successors.

History of philosophy of rationalism supports my point even more than the historical treatment of English empiricism. Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz (especially the first two) show continuous development. And some portions of rationalism passed into Locke professed to start with a clean slate, but the slate was already littered with scholasticism.

Of course the greatest protagonist of 'history of philosophy' school was Hegel. But I do not wish to go that far with defence of history of philosophy. (Hegel thought of history of philosophy as a series of gropings towards the concept of Absolute Idea.)

I wish to state in my defence of 'history of philosophy' that it broadens the mind, gives us sympathetic insight into philosophy of the rival school and shows us the development of philosophy (conscious and unconscious) in true perspective. Without a proper history of philosophy I would like to say—distorting Wittgenstein—there would indeed be a fog.

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