

Editorial: Uplift and Backlash

'I fancy that a few of the promoters and several of the early supporters of our Institute of Philosophy itself were influenced by intermittent but rosy visions of some acts of edification and inspiration issuing out of the philanthropically unbolted doors of our philosophy departments into the home and haunts of the Common Man.' This masterly meiosis is probably not the only sentence in his Jubilee Lecture that Gilbert Ryle spoke with a forked tongue in his cheek, but its stringency and astringency certainly make it the most invigorating point of departure for the thoughts about the present and the future that should accompany and follow a ceremonious celebration of the past. Those who heard Professor Ryle last May and those who read him in this issue will recognize that the tensions and questions of the 1920s have their parallels in the 1970s, and will remember that their shapes have been familiar at least since the times of Protagoras and Socrates, Plato and Isocrates, Pericles and Aristophanes.

Ryle rightly makes much of the professionalization of philosophy in his working lifetime. But the questions he raises in these institutional terms have pressed upon philosophers since long before there was a philosophical profession. The human reason is both theoretical and practical, and it is concerned both with everyday problems and with large scale and long term issues. Since these two distinctions are quite distinct—they are not even approximately parallel—there is great scope for disagreements and cross-purposes between thinkers and doers, doers and doers, thinkers and thinkers, about the distribution of time and effort, money and man-power, dignity and dignities, between pure mathematics and technology, archaeology and radiotherapeutics, social services and symphonies, the topical and the utopian, this world and the next.

Major Ryle is an eminent veteran of some memorable campaigns, and he continues to snipe and sharpshoot with energy and accuracy at some of his old enemies: not only against cant and humbug, but against some of the confusions about the human understanding and its powers and provinces that are often in symbiosis with cant and humbug. Yet the ironies that abound in his lecture include some of which their author may not be clearly conscious. The fervour of his onslaught against missionary fervour retains its own missionary flavour. His influential article 'Taking Sides in Philosophy' can be called influential primarily because it has caused many young philosophers to take sides against taking sides. In his recent lecture the paean to the 'sanitary sect-neutrality' imposed by the symbolism of *Principia Mathematica* and kindred 'technical categorial terminologies' is on the same page as the not extravagantly penitent confession that 'Psycho-

Editorial

logism' and 'Idealism' served the young philosophers of the twenties as terms of abuse.

None of this is surprising. It is typical of the give and take, zeal and backlash, by which the growth of understanding in every generation is fostered and smothered. Nor is any of it regrettable, except in so far as some of the *obiter dicta* misrepresent the inescapably contentious character of the story and its telling. Old gangs always breed young Turks, and young Turks always survive, if they survive at all, to form old gangs, and to possess themselves of those positions of dignity and emolument of which Ryle speaks in the last section of his lecture:

I myself am not ashamed but, when I happen to think of it, slightly complacent to have made, as a philosophy don, my own living—and quite a good living—for half a century; and I am not ashamed but thoroughly proud, when I think of them, to have achieved, as a philosopher, certain offices and distinctions and to have exercised a bit of influence, authority and even modest powers.

The last lesson that a young Turk learns is how much the old gang has to teach him. He is fortunate if he learns it even a year or two before he rises and declines into being an old gangster himself, for he will then be sufficiently in sympathy with the generation he was reacting against to understand, as the whirligig of time brings its revenges, what strange gods guide the generation who are reacting against him. He may also remember, what after all he knew when he was young, how much any old gang has to learn; even, though not especially, from young Turks.

Professor Ryle's Friday afternoon sermon illustrates both horns of this dialectic. It is as modish today to call for a socially concerned philosophy, with or without cracker mottoes about changing the world and not merely understanding it, as in the (and Ryle's) twenties and thirties it was to lash back against uplift. Now that philosophy is largely free from the illusions that the pre-Rylean old guard inherited from their Doric mentors, there is bound to be a backlash against the backlash, and there is bound to be some sense in it as well as some backsliding to old fancies and fantasies. We can recognize that the philosopher can philosophically exercise his practical reason, and not merely anatomise it, without swallowing any pot of message, old or new. And if Ryle did not know this, he need look no further for the proof of it than to the part of his own lecture where he explores the concept of a profession and its relations to neighbouring and foreign concepts. Though these cogent remarks are formally addressed to survivors from the infancy of the Institute, they are well calculated to scotch some misconceptions that are now commoner among the young than the old. The whirligig has come full circle.