

A Hundred Years of Philosophy

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This is a survey of recent history in philosophy, and by philosophy is meant the analytic philosophy associated primarily with the English tradition of empiricist philosophy as exemplified by Locke, Berkeley and Hume. It is a philosophy of knowledge, and whose main focus is epistemological, how can we know about the external world, taking our own consciousness and our own logical intuitions as point of departure? This is of course a somewhat narrow view as to philosophy, but it is also a central one, and I believe the one that speaks to us most directly, at least for intellectuals.

The survey starts with John Stuart Mill and then proceeds with the British idealists, such as Bradley, of the 19th century. In fact the author brings up many secondary figures in the history of philosophy, and the effect is that of being introduced to many people at a party. The names and faces tend to blur, and you appreciate the familiar faces you encounter. What strikes you is the provincial nature of philosophy compared to that of science. The tradition of analytic philosophy is usually thought of as being confined to the Anglo-Saxon world, although the German influence has been decisive, more so than in Germany itself. Kant plays a central role, and Frege is often honored with the title of being the father of analytic philosophy.

How to find secure knowledge? Mathematics, along with logic, seems to be the places where to start. The German Frege and the American Peirce are pioneers in conceiving of a formal language to provide scientific precision to philosophical thinking, but of course such ambitions can be traced at least as far back as Leibniz. The baton was taken up by Russell in Cambridge, who along with his contemporary Moore had freed themselves from Idealism, which had dominated the philosophical scene. Russell's main philosophical contribution of scope, was that along with Whitehead of 'Principia Mathematica' in which they tried in Fregean manner to found mathematics on logic. The work was formidable, but in spite of improvements by others, seems in retrospect to have been a cul de sac. The effort exhausted Russell, who henceforth focused his mental energies on less exacting tasks, and thus managed to become a peoples philosopher. His foray into semantics, by making a clear distinction between names and description under the rubric of Logical atomism, although not as profound, may have had a more lasting influence on philosophical practice by its emphasis on piecemeal progress. Moore was quite a contrast to his more flamboyant colleague¹, his forte was the careful analysis, finding distinctions where no one else would have expected any. His manner of philosophizing was imbued with common sense, and a typical argument for the existence of material bodies was to hold up his hands, one after the other, pointing out that this kind of argument is far more convincing than the sophisticated verbal arguments supplied by philosophers.

¹ Moore seems to have been a paragon of innocence, something that aroused the scorn of the more worldly and devilish Russell.

Russell is widely known, at least among mathematicians, for his Russell paradox. The paradox is implicit in the works of Cantor, and can be traced back to the Liars paradox of antiquity, but an idea has to find its right time to be expressed, and the time for it came at the turn of the century and shook the foundations of mathematics, which were formalized through intuitive set theory. It led to a formalization of not only logic but also mathematics, as a means of making it mechanical and hence empirical. It was the hope of Hilbert that in this way mathematics, by depleted of meaning and reduced to marks on paper, would become a mathematical object by itself and hence amenable to mathematical analysis and proved consistent. Those ambitions were thwarted by Gödel, whose contribution really belongs to philosophy, although philosophers refer to him as a mathematician, maybe because they cannot understand his proof.² Concomitant with the formalization of logic and mathematics there developed a movement to extend the ambition to include everything, in short to develop a strict language which would make it impossible to phrase meaningless statements, and such that to each statement there would exist a procedure to anchor it to an empirical reality. The aim was thus to once and for all to free philosophy of inexactness and ambiguity, make it a part of science and abolish metaphysics permanently. The movement found its most systematic and enthusiastic proponents in a loose discussion group in Vienna, known as the Wienerkreis (Vienna Circle) under the tutelage of Schlick. With the exception of Schlick, none of the members were professional philosophers but were drawn from the ranks of mathematicians and scientists. Among the most active members were Carnap and Neurath, the former being the most committed, the second the most radical. The ambition became known as logical positivism and were subjected to a lot of external resentment and internal dissension. Karl Popper was never a member, although he was allowed to publish in their journal *Erkenntnis* and for that reason often has been dismissed, to his lasting chagrin, as a mere logical positivist. In the end, even the logical positivists came to realize that their ambition was not tenable, as Popper remarked, their whole ambition to abolish metaphysics was by itself a metaphysical project.

Parallel with the concentration on formal languages there was a movement back to natural languages, to some extent inspired by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was a cuckoo egg laid in the nest of Russell and Moore. A romantic figure whose obscure thinking intimated the promise of a corresponding depth. He was soon to distance himself from his mentors, and from philosophy altogether only to return and advocate a completely different approach. Charitably one may characterize it as an investigation into the relationship between thinking and language, claiming that bad or misunderstood language leads thinking and especially philosophical thinking astray. Wittgenstein is certainly clever, but his cleverness is ultimately based on cynicism and hence liable to go stale. With him philosophy ceased to be a serious study and instead, in the words of Russell, degenerated into a frivolous parlor-game. As a consequence an entire branch of analytic philosophy broke off with its emphasis on the subtleties of human language and with an obsession with detail, the more inconspicuous the better. As such philosophy does not significantly differ from linguistics. A similar development can be seen in the pursuit of formal systems becoming

² Passmore remarks that philosophers usually find mathematics hard to stomach and even balk at simple symbolic notation. This certainly was not true of the classical philosophers.

a dead-end when divorced from the problems that initially motivated them. Philosophy without metaphysical speculation runs the risk of becoming an irrelevant technicality. Passmore is fair and devotes a whole chapter on Wittgenstein and his followers, among them Wisdom and Austin. On Wittgenstein he is polite, but does not hide his suspicion of him being somewhat of a charlatan. He notes that his writings on mathematics are more or less considered worthless. For one thing Gödel's theorem was utterly beyond him.

With the decline of metaphysics followed the decline of the prestige and importance of philosophy and instead science came to the foreground. The radical materialism of science manifested by the rise of chemistry and the rejection of vital forces as being redundant as well as the success of Darwin's theory of natural selection went beyond the courage and daring of philosophers speculations and surely the relativity theory of Einstein settled once and for all a controversy of the nature of time and space that philosophers had in vain struggled with. Was it not true that philosophers rather than guiding science had a hard time catching up with its advances, and at best qualified to comment on its success? And if so, the real philosophers were not the professional and academic ones, but scientists themselves. And in fact many scientists, especially physicists did turn to philosophy, notable examples being Mach and Herz, but also the mathematician and mathematical physicist Poincare ventured into the fray, expounding along with Mach on instrumentalism, which is another case of liberating concepts with the baggage of meaning.³ However, many scientists who ventured into philosophical territory were dismissed due to their naive and primitive approaches, one example being Eddington. Others, like Whitehead, who more successfully engineered the transition were praised but to the non-philosopher turned obscure.

Closely related to instrumentalism was the attitude of pragmatism that arose in the States and was pioneered by Peirce with William James and John Dewey as his followers. James is an interesting character in the context a philosopher by temperament he won his laurels as a psychologist, his psychological insights not to much based on laborious empirical research as on introspection and a priori philosophical principles. The rationale being of course that psychology is concerned about the inner life and the most authentic experiences (and hence knowledge) of such is through your own inner life, accessible by introspection philosophically guided. Peirce who had a more rigorous scientific training, proposed his theory in the unlikely venue of *Popular Mechanics* claiming that a distinction which had no practical consequences could safely be ignored as irrelevant not to say non-existing. The idea was enthusiastically endorsed by James, who carried his own vision of pragmatism to silly lengths⁴. Peirce ideas were later developed by Popper, although it is

³ It is noteworthy that Passmore refers to Poincare as a mathematical physicist by training making no reference of his being considered the foremost mathematician of his time. Similarly J.M.Keynes contributions to probability theory are mentioned without any hint that Keynes made his name as an economist. In the latter case this can hardly be due to the authors ignorance, in fact the author may assume that this fact is widely known among his readership, but this cannot be assumed in the case of Poincare. Can the reason be that the author wants to be unscrupulous fair and consider every contribution on its own merits, without invoking spurious authority due to notable achievements elsewhere, if so a commendable principle, regrettably hard to uphold in daily life.

⁴ Peirce was so annoyed by this usurpation that he renamed his own theory 'pragmaticism' sure that

far from certain that he was aware of the former, after all to be honest there are really very few truly original and significant ideas in philosophy, and those tend to be in the air since a long time, different philosophers merely presenting different formulations. Popper later discovered anticipators among the pre-Socratics. Basically significant statements should have consequences, i.e. be liable to testing. The originality of Popper, some would even say his perversity, lies in his putting more emphasis on refutation rather than verification, noting that universal laws can never truly be verified, that there is a true problem of induction, going back at least as far back as Hume. The problem of induction has troubled philosophers for a long time, in fact Passmore starts his survey by discussing J.S.Mill's book on logic. Poppers radical solution was simply to give up all hope of justifying induction, any such attempts of justification would need to involve principles even more open to doubt.

Another approach to induction is to introduce degrees of truth, or rather uncertainty, as truth cannot be compromised only our conviction of it. We are of course talking about probability theory⁵ It is easy enough to devise a symbolic calculation for it, but the relationship between the formal calculus and 'real life' is problematic. Different approaches were tried, the frequency theory of van Mises, of which Popper approved and slightly modified, being perhaps the most intuitive. Others, such as Keynes pointed out that there is no such thing as a probability to an event, unless considered in a context, thus probability merely measured our lack of information⁶. Much of empirical science, such as clinical medical science is based on probabilistic induction, in which there is an arbitrary threshold level imposed. Popper shocked his contemporaries by claiming that good theories are good in virtue of being improbable. Their improbability stemming from the fact that they exclude so much, and hence have a very high informational content.

In spite of the narrow focus of Passmore, confining himself to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of analytic philosophy focused on the problem of knowing the external world, he does devote a chapter to continental thinkers. The fact that philosophy, unlike science, is so regional and thus in a sense provincial, should serve as some feed for thought. The archetypical continental philosopher is Heidegger, whose pompous and obscure pronouncements lent themselves to easy ridicule by the logical positivists. Passmore is no fan of Heidegger, but he is fair and conscientious, and presents this alien thinker in an almost sympathetic way making him appear not only sane but also interesting not to say urgent, especially as regards ultimate experiences, such as your own personal death. Heidegger is obsessed by Being but from a purely humanistic point of view. He knows no science and seems unaware of most contemporary analytic philosophers and the problems that guide them. Characteristically Passmore makes no reference to Heideggers flirt with National socialism, concentrating solely on what is interesting and relevant. He has a harder time

such an ugly name would attract no thieves.

⁵ There is a branch of logic called fuzzy logic which is multi-valued not to say continued-valued, it is not mentioned by Passmore, maybe because it had not seen the light by the time of the writing, Anyway the discipline seems to me redundant and should naturally be subsumed in probability theory.

⁶ Keynes book is forgotten nowadays, and I do not believe that many mathematical probabilists take it seriously after it was subjected by devastating critique by Ramsey, whose status as a prodigy meeting an untimely death indeed, is, however, duly mentioned by Passmore.

to swallow Jasper, who even denies Darwin, maintaining that Man has existed, maybe in different biological forms, for a very long time and that apes are merely degenerate men. As to Sartre he grants that he may be an interesting novelist, but he makes light of his pretensions as a philosopher. Sartre's remarks on Berkeley shows that he has not really read him, or if so that he is somewhat philosophically dense. One may argue that existential philosophers in the tradition of Kirkegaard and Nietzsche should be judged on other criteria. They address after all the predicament of being a man, a finite being headed for extinction, rather than the impersonal abstractness of nature. On the other hand the historian Collingwood, who very much opposed the prevalent analytic fashion of British philosophy departments, shows that a humanistic approach can be very rigorous and scientific without succumbing to mere quantification, by focusing on problems.

In summary, a survey of this kind runs the risk of degenerating into a mere catalogue, there are so many names and so many philosophies which hardly differ from each other, which are brought up, that in the end much of it blurs in the recollection of the reader. It is, as noted in the beginning, like being introduced to a lot of fellow guests at a party, the distinct individualities of each being absorbed in the general mass. If so it is always a relief in encountering familiar faces that stand out. When Passmore summarizes the achievements of a Popper or a Colingwood, in which cases I can check him independently, his summaries are fair and to the point, which makes you suspect that he is a reliable guide and hence that his judgment on people you do not know can be trusted. This is an important feature of a book, after all you do not want to waste your time. Also, by following themes of thought, the philosophers of the book are not placed like bricks in a wall, but as strands in a rope.

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A Hundred Years of Philosophy is not an introduction to philosophy, written to acquaint a novice with the concerns and methods of philosophy. Passmore assumes the reader has done some reading in philosophy and knows something of the background, such as Descartes's Rationalism, the Empiricism of Hume, Berkeley's Idealism, Kant's Critical Philosophy, and the rudiments of Mathematical Logic. I used to have a copy of this book many years ago but it got mislaid. I was therefore delighted to find it on Amazon for sale at the Wordery at a very reasonable price. The book is in great condition and it's nice to have it back again. It concentrates on the Anglophone tradition in modern philosophy but does not neglect the continental tradition, although it is rather sniffy about Nietzsche. THE prodigious output of philosophical literature in Great Britain during the last hundred years makes it difficult for one to attempt a thorough examination of the various currents cutting across the field of speculative thought. Such an attempt involves a mastery of the manifold windings of that thought itself and a spiritual acquaintance with its distinguished representatives. A British scholar might have found it difficult to undertake such a task: living in the very atmosphere he would have to analyse, he might feel perhaps a lack of perspective for an unbiased outline of the controversia... Cite this article. GREENWOOD, T. A Hundred Years of British Philosophy. *Nature* 144, 51-53 (1939). <https://doi.org/10.1038/144051a0>. Download citation. COPYRIGHT: © The Royal Institute of Philosophy 1959. Recommend this journal. Email your librarian or administrator to recommend adding this journal to your organisation's collection. Philosophy. URL: /core/journals/philosophy. Your name * Please enter your name. Your email address * Please enter a valid email address.