Review of O'Connor's *Critical History of Western Philosophy*

Jonathan Bennett

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A Critical History of Western Philosophy, ed. D. J. O'Connor, Collier-Macmillan 1964.

Western philosophy, at least since Plato, has constituted a tradition. The increases in philosophical understanding and in the refinement and deliberateness of philosophical techniques, although not continuous, have been organic; and this shows in the complex overlaps of theme, attitude and insight among the philosophers in the tradition.

Half a million words on the major western philosophers, between one pair of covers, should illuminate this tradition by tracing some of the cross-connections and charting whatever progress there has been; and the volume under review seems to be so intended. By its emphasis on metaphysics and theory of knowledge and by its stress on the moderns (Bacon starts at p. 141), it focuses on a centre which is presumably taken to have some kind of organic unity; and there is an assumption about progress behind the intention 'to evaluate and criticize [the philosophers' views] in the light of contemporary knowledge and to bring out whatever may be in them that is of permanent philosophical interest'.

One writer cannot hope to expound adequately and criticize deeply all the philosophical writings which are major landmarks in the tradition. This must be known to anyone who has sought to master a single great philosopher and has discovered—even with one as limited as Berkeley, say—how demanding a task this is. The penetration and accuracy of Copleston's history are remarkable in the work of a single hand; but although it is the best we have it appears laconic and superficial when judged by the standard of what we need. Professor O'Connor has tried the other way: he writes on Aristotle, Locke and Russell; Ruth L. Saw writes on Ockham and Leibniz; A. G. N. Flew writes on Hobbes and Hume; and twenty-two others contribute one chapter apiece. The merits of this procedure are obvious, but so are the dangers. In a history of philosophy by twenty-five authors, however able they are, vital cross-connections are unlikely to be pointed up sharply, and may even be positively masked by differences of style, angle and emphasis. If this is to be avoided without drastic sub-editing, an analytical index is needed to help the reader to discern the continuing themes through the stylistic accidents. O'Connor, however, has left the index to an unprofessional assistant: as well as being extremely inaccurate and incomplete by any standards, the index is verbal and mechanical rather than analytic. It routinely lists by title over two hundred books which happen to be mentioned in the text (there is an eighteen-page bibliography), but has absurdly exiguous entries for Body, Concepts, Experience, Language, Meaning, Perception, Phenomenalism, Science, Scientific Experiment/Explanation/Theory, and many others. It has a

(wrong) reference for 'Roman Empire, Stoicism of', but has no entries for any one of the five senses, or for Emotion or Feeling, Finite or Infinite, Primary or Secondary Qualities, Objects or Subject or any of their grammatical cognates. The list could go on. The index, in short, does nothing to increase the book's unity—nothing towards making it *a* critical history.

Consider, for example, the concept of essence. Most philosophers now hold that particulars have essences only because kinds do, and that kinds have essences only because general words have meanings. These two views have put the word 'essence' out of favour: the former is relegated to 'history' as one of Locke's creditable insights; while the latter is likely to be expressed, without use of the word 'essence', by saying that the only definitions there can be are 'nominal' ones. Still, these are views about the old and durable concept of essence; and, properly understood, they lie at the heart of what is now the majority view of the nature of philosophy. The index has two items under Essence, plus a cross-reference to the five items under Universals; it has no entry at all for Definition, nor anything else which might enable a reader to piece together the story, which runs clear through the tradition, of the concept of essence.

An index, however well designed as a complex apparatus for the analysis of the text, cannot register points which are not even adumbrated in the text. Consider the entry for Substance. Of its seven items, those relating to Aristotle, Descartes and Locke are all right as far as they go; but Berkeley's reference ('237–45ff') is peculiar, Leibniz's is out by a page, Moore's is a mistake, and Hegel's presupposes a standard which would also demand references at least to Aquinas, Ockham, Spinoza, Kant and Bradley. These are defects in the index by its own lights, and in relation to what the text does contain. In a well-conceived index to a satisfactory history of philosophy, I suggest, the entry for Substance would at least point the reader to two distinctions which frequently have a role to play in the description and criticism of the philosophical classics. Just because the philosophers in the tradition have trampled on these distinctions, *critical* historians of philosophy need to attend to them repeatedly. First, there is the distinction between the concept of (countable) substances and the concept of substantial stuff; and second, the distinction between substantiality as consisting in the logical independence of that which bears attributes and is not itself an attribute, and substantiality as also involving the causal independence of that which cannot be annihilated by any natural process. It is not to be expected that twenty-five authors should explicitly draw these distinctions, in uniform language, wherever they are relevant; but many matters should arise which could, on a hint from the index, be understood in terms of them. 'The first of them, for example, bears heavily on Berkeley's' muddles about Locke; but it gets no grip on this Berkeley chapter, in which those muddles are not exposed. Again, although the distinction might just be connected with the Kant chapter's brief mention of the first Analogy of Experience, it is even more relevant to the second Antinomy, which is bypassed. The second distinction is also poorly represented; and it is particularly grievous that the Spinoza chapter gives no hint of a crucial fact about Spinoza, namely that he—perhaps alone of all the philosophers who have not made the distinction—rejected it deliberately and for theoretical reasons.

I do not demand detail at the expense of over-all shape. On the contrary, I ask for the kind of detail which brings out the real shape of the tradition. To illustrate the point I shall continue with the substance example. In the chapter on Descartes, his doctrine of substance is said to be 'in reality

a doctrine of categories; when he spoke of "a substance" he did not mean "a thing" but "a kind of thing"' (p. 182). This simplification has a certain point; but in ignoring all Descartes's more standard uses of 'substance' it suppresses—among much else—the following difficulty which dogged him all through his metaphysics. Although he assumed that extended things must be divisible, and took substantiality to entail indestructibility, Descartes had reasons for wanting the extended world to consist of finitely extended substances and not just of unindividuated substantial stuff. This inconsistent triad accounts for his flighty relations with atomism. It also points to one way of relating the three great modern rationalists to one another. Spinoza and Leibniz also wanted an ontology with countable substances, and they shared Descartes's assumption about divisibility and something like his indestructibility criterion. Each, therefore, denied that that a middle-sized thing can be *a* substance: Spinoza because its extent is only finite, Leibniz because it has extent at all. This, unlike the usual dualist/monist/pluralist story, presents the three rationalists in a coherent contrast, and it is one which is easily grasped yet fundamental to their thought. These *elementary* aspects of the rationalist picture, which are excluded by the claim that for Descartes a substance is a kind, also receives scant attention in the Leibniz chapter. As for the chapter on Spinoza—this mentions Leibniz never, and Descartes just once: 'Unlike Descartes, for example, [Spinoza] did not suffer from abnormal doubts' (p. 197). The philistinism of this is matched by the presentation of Spinoza's substance-monism—that most considered, hard-headed and technical of doctrines—as 'his fundamental speculative image. . . of the all as one' (p. 191).

The disunity in the text sometimes takes the form of simple contradiction–or contrariety. In the Descartes chapter: 'Both empiricists [Locke has been named] and rationalists often expressed themselves by saying that words stood for ideas, but whereas, when they were speaking strictly, the empiricists meant "image", the rationalists meant "concept".' (p. 174). In the chapter on Locke: 'What does Locke mean by "ideas" when he says that words are signs of ideas?. . . He can hardly mean "sense datum" or "image", and if he means "concept', what is a concept?' (p. 216). I think that 'undergraduate students of philosophy and. . . the intelligent general reader', for whom this book is intended, would be radically misled by either one of these passages; but pity the poor reader who succeeds, although no index entry covers both, in considering them together! This flat inconsistency on a fundamental point is not an isolated one. That there should be others is, given the fact of human frailty, an inevitable outcome of the editorial policy: the twenty-five contributors 'represent many different points of view, and they have been asked to treat their different subjects just as they please '. This 'stimulus to the reader' completes the editor's abdication.

I stress unity, partly because any organic tradition deserves a shaped and integrated history, but also because to grasp the thought of any philosopher one must know something of its ancestry. That this is so is implied in our reasons for studying the history of philosophy—not as history with a special subject-matter but as philosophy with a special technique. We study philosophy's past because it may lead us straight to philosophical truths; also because it can provide us with the peculiarly instructive object-lesson of a fine intellect in demonstrable error; and crucially because it can give us bearings—it can enlarge our worm's-eye-view of what our problems are. Just as we must study our past if we are to get the measure of our own problems, so to understand any philosopher's problems we must relate them to his past. That is why a disjointed history of philosophy cannot be

accurate—except by stenographers' standards—even in its separate parts. Nearly every great modern philosopher, from Descartes to Wittgenstein, has seen himself as a philosophical orphan, related to the past only in his rejection of it. This is natural in an ambitious man who feels his own power: 'The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight and feeling its resistance, might imagine that her flight would be still easier in empty space.' A great philosopher may even be helped by the delusion that he can re-found philosophy through bringing a *tabula rasa* to its problems. But one who really was as 'unprejudiced' as that—the only one who could be studied in isolation—would not be worth studying at all.

In philosophy, understanding is intimately related to knowing; and so the historical studies which help us to appreciate the nature and scope of a problem can also help us to solve it. Conversely, philosophical insights can help historical studies: as well as such questions as whether X's argument rebuts Y's theory or whether Y's distinction solves X's problem, philosophical issues may be raised by the initial exegesis of X and Y. The question 'What was he up to?' involves the question 'What could he validly, or at least reasonably, have been up to?'

Because of this two-way traffic, wrong historical judgments are often accompanied by philosophical mistakes. The volume under review, like everything I have read or written on the history of philosophy, is rich with examples. One writer says that it is 'possible and of some interest. . . to characterize Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* as Russellian and his later *Philosophical Investigations* as Moorean (p. 464), while another describes Austin's discipline as 'an immensely sophisticated refinement of the technique of G. E. Moore' (p. 548). Perhaps these remarkable judgments do not have any considered underlay of philosophical or even exegetical error. They may merely be casual attempts to get Moore into the mainstream, such as are often made by admirers who on their own premisses ought to think that his work is a dead end. I doubt, though, whether such a lenient view can be taken of this: 'However much Moore's view of what the meaning of a word is may be rejected by contemporary analysts, they accept as a commonplace his distinction between knowing the meaning of a word in the sense of being able to understand it and knowing its meaning in the sense of being able to give an analysis of that meaning' (p. 472). The suggestion seems to be that even those who reject Moore's account of what the meaning of a word is agree with his account of the difference between two sorts of knowledge about meanings; like someone who, though mistaken about what it is for something to be an organism, is very sound on the distinction between physiology and natural history. This is impossible. To understand the difference between **(a)** everyday ignorance of the meaning of a word and **(b)** the failure of grasp which creates a philosophical difficulty, one must hold approximately correct views about **(a)** and **(b)** severally; and many 'contemporary analysts' think that Moore's views on them are thoroughly false. Here is Moore distinguishing them in a particular case:

> There is. . . a sense in which the question I do want to discuss is the question: What is the meaning of the word 'real'? I do want to discuss the question: What is this notion or property, which we *mean* by the word real? But you see, the question, in this sense, is an entirely different question from that which would be expressed in the same words, if a Polynesian, who knew no English, asked: 'What is the meaning of the word "real"?' So far as I can see, the Polynesian's question would be simply equivalent to saying: Please, call up before my mind the notion which Englishmen express by the word 'real'. So soon as you had

> done this, you would have completely answered his question. Whereas this is by no means all that I want to do when I ask: What is the meaning of the word 'real'? What I want to do is to raise questions about the nature of this notion, which is called up by the word 'real', not merely to call it up. [*Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, pp. 218–219]

What is there here that contemporary analysts can be said to 'accept as a commonplace'? Certainly, Moore did say that lexicography is distinct from philosophical analysis. That modest thesis is no doubt accepted as a commonplace, but it is not Moore's property: no earlier philosopher would have dreamed of identifying the two. It may be replied: 'Although no earlier philosopher identified them, none asserted their distinctness either. Moore's achievement was to see that their distinctness from one another was worth stating explicitly; for it was he who saw that philosophical analysis, like lexicography, has something to do with meanings.' That defence cannot be offered on behalf of a majority of 'contemporary analysts'. Many of them would concede: 'Moore saw that analysis has to do with meanings' only if they were allowed to add: 'but he did not see what this implies for philosophical method, because he had a wholly wrong theory of meaning'. This is also true of Locke and Berkeley and others; it cannot support an originality claim. Perhaps Moore was the first to use the word 'meaning' extensively in discussing philosophical analysis; but one who rejects Moore's theory of meaning could not regard that as a noteworthy part of his legacy. So the statement: 'Contemporary analysts accept as a commonplace his distinction. . . etc.' is baseless. The historical parts of the case against it are so obvious that the statement must surely be nourished by a philosophical mistake about what it is to make a distinction.

A striking symbiosis of historical and philosophical error occurs in the Berkeley chapter. 'According to Locke. . . our ideas are of sensible qualities. But qualities must be of something; there must be something that has them, and this something cannot itself be a quality. Locke thinks that "matter" and "material substance" are names that we give to this something' (p. 240). This is false. When Locke deploys the 'substratum' analysis of substance which is sketched here, the word 'substance' has work to do, but not the word 'matter'. As for the singular phrase 'material substance': that brain-child of Berkeley's hardly occurs in Locke's pages. A defence has been prepared: 'We need not here be concerned to enquire exactly what Locke said. The following account will be sufficient for our purpose; we can certainly suppose that Berkeley thought that Locke and others had proposed something like it' (p. 239). Does this concede that possibly Locke did not even propose *something like* it? If Berkeley's shots have fallen as wide of the mark as that, he has probably made a philosophical mistake which a writer on him should look into. Perhaps no such concession was intended. 'Then so much the worse; for some of Berke1ey's central beliefs about Locke's position are indeed wholly false, and are symptoms of philosophical confusions on Berkeley's part—confusions of which this Berkeley chapter is not free. Locke's 'substratum' theory is an account of what it is for a property to be instantiated by a particular; the part of his representative theory of perception against which Berkeley brought his idealism is an analysis of the inner/outer distinction; and his theory about primary and secondary qualities is something else again, and has no clear connection with the other two. The word 'substance' belongs with the first of these theories, while the word 'matter' is tied loosely to the second and tightly to the third. Berkeley, combining 'matter' with 'substance'

ascribes to Locke a doctrine of 'material substance' which is just an indiscriminate mixture of three largely unrelated doctrines, The latter are kept fairly firmly apart by Locke; but the main point is that they are *in fact* distinct. The tendency to identify or conflate them runs through much contemporary philosophical writing; and to get them apart is to liberate oneself from some serious philosophical mistakes. The best way of getting started on this is to ask the flatly historical question: 'Did Berkeley seriously misrepresent Locke?'

A more general point arises here. Even if Y looms large in X's work, a writer on X may naturally think himself excused from enquiring exactly what Y said; but he runs a risk. Most statements of the form 'Briefly, Locke said something like this:. . . ' are infected with the mischievous falsity of Berkeley's exegesis. Although this is probably an extreme case, we ought generally to be sceptical about epitomes and approximations in philosophy: there are reasons for thinking that one cannot arrive at a useful summary of a philosopher's thought without exploring it deeply and in detail. As applied to any subtle and complex philosopher, this remark is almost a truism. It would be false only of one whose thought was inherently approximate, or was simple enough to be epitomised without loss of content and therefore without risking distortion of structure. The great philosophers of the past—or at least the ones I know anything about—are not like that. That their thought is complex shows in their sensitivity to conceptual pressures more than in their explicit use of theoretical distinctions, qualifications and linkages; and so its structure cannot just be read off from the surface of the pages. Still, it has real complexity; and it is that which has to be sought if the study of the history of philosophy is to have serious philosophical point.

Complex thought may admit of a summary which is adequate for a given purpose. What has to be resisted is the inherited summary, the one which is taken on trust because it is in all the books. Something which is in all the commentaries and histories has a tolerable chance of being true as far as it goes; the danger is that it may be going in the wrong direction. If its emphases are wrong, it can push out of sight just those aspects of a philosopher's work which could make him alive for us either by relating him directly to our philosophical concerns or by relating him to the rest of the tradition in ways which we find coherent and worthy of serious attention.

Some of the contributors to the *Critical History* have with mixed success tried to look freshly at the philosophers of whom they treat, rather than merely filling in the inherited epitomes. Few of them, however, seriously try to relate the particular philosopher to others on the basis of more than a second-hand account of these. Some are ill-equipped even to make the attempt: 'When I look at a lawn, I am directly aware of its greenness. This is more than knowing that it is green. There is a direct and unquestionable visual relationship between me and the green patch I am now seeing' (p. 22). This is not the writing of someone who can help us to see Plato afresh by evaluating him 'in the light of contemporary knowledge'.

Most of the book is at a much higher level than this. Of the chapters I have read, I have found interesting and instructive material in nearly all: I would cite those on Aristotle, Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Schopenhauer and Existentialism. Arthur Danto conducts an invigorating excavation of conceptual points from Nietzsche. In A. G. N. Flew's chapters on Hobbes and Hume, the literary manner and the balance between popular and professional are exactly right; these chapters, together with J. F. Thomson's on Berkeley,

are in my opinion the best contributions to philosophy in the book. Everyone will have his own quarrel with A. M. Quinton's treatment of the recent and contemporary scene, but I am not sure that anyone could have made a better over-all job of that delicate assignment.

G. J. Warnock has given the book one distinction: it is surely the only history of philosophy whose clearest chapter is on Kant. 'The intelligent general reader' cannot digest philosophical tin-tacks; his needs are quite different from those of 'undergraduate students of philosophy'; and Warnock, addressing himself to the former audience, has divested Kant's work of nearly all its bony detail. Warnock's Kant is astonishingly recognizable, but he is presented through the description of his arguments, not their detailed realization; although the chapter is genuinely about a real philosopher, there is virtually no real philosophy in it. Had the book been conceived and written throughout in the spirit of this tour-de-force, it could then not have borne its present title, or offered to 'evaluate and criticize'. It would have had none of the philosophically interesting material which occurs piecemeal throughout the *Critical History*, but, as an avowed miscellany on the history of ideas, it would not have been open to such criticisms as those I have levelled.