

non-white personnel and for those on furlough or otherwise held back from contributing.

The revised scheme was initiated late in Michaelmas Term 2020. By the end of January payments had been made to some 900 persons. For the University to be served

by exceptional and exemplary staff in such profusion is noteworthy—similar perhaps to the 40 percent or so of Oxford undergraduates who are nowadays casually awarded First-Class degrees.

The Passing of an Era

—Reflections on Philosophy in Oxford in the 20th Century

ANITA AVRAMIDES

It is often thought that an attachment to history leads to a conservative outlook, but what can be overlooked is the way a knowledge of history can help us to move on and be more radical in our thought. The latter momentum can be the result of learning about the way in which institutions and ways of organizing things within them came into existence; to learn of the forces that argued against what may have come to be a cherished institution or way of organizing things—in short, to learn how what is now a well-established way of proceeding was once considered radical and innovative. I want to look at a little (recent) history that has to do with philosophy at Oxford. I do this neither in order to urge a return, nor to propel us to a radical change. Rather I want to provide a moment of reflection upon an era of Oxford philosophy. The era I want to reflect upon is the 20th century. There is no doubt that this was an all-important time for Oxford philosophy. And, if one notes the obituaries of philosophers since the turn of the 21st century, one cannot help but note that a rather remarkable generation of Oxford philosophers has passed away. What will replace them is a matter for a rather different sort of reflection.

I want to begin, not by reflecting on people, but on their actions. In particular, I want to consider how the actions of a handful of dons affected the study of philosophy over the course of the 20th century. At the end of the 19th century, one studied Philosophy as part of *Literae Humaniores* (Lit Hum), a well-established and flourishing degree in Oxford both then and (to a somewhat lesser extent) now. This course takes as its model the study of the ancient, classical, worlds of Greece and Rome. What was deemed important to a contribution to what was then the modern world, was the study of the ancient world—its history, languages, and philosophy. But at the beginning of the 20th century things were beginning to change. In Oxford there was much talk of the study of political science, with its interest in the social and economic problems that were seen to be important to the development of a newly emerging world.¹

According to Norman Chester, 1902 marks a time of considerable discussion in Oxford (and Cambridge) of the need “to make provision for Political Economy, or Economics and associated subjects”.² In his book Chester takes us through the birth-pains of PPE, a degree we today take for granted as one of Oxford’s pre-eminent degrees. But in 1902, PPE was but a glint in the eyes of some economists, and a few philosophers. It is interesting to record

what propelled these men (for they were all men, at this time). According to a few economists at the time (Alfred Marshall in Cambridge and Francis Edgeworth and L.L. Price in Oxford) what was needed in the curriculum at these two Universities was the study of economics. For the philosophers, it seems that what propelled them was a desire to move away from the emphasis on the study of the ancient world and a thought that what a student of philosophy needed was a grounding in the study of *modern* philosophical thought, that is the study of the history of philosophy from Descartes onwards. Things were, thus, different for these two subjects: economics was struggling to enter the curriculum; philosophy was looking for a way to evolve after a long, and strong, association with the ancient world.³

Just over one hundred years ago, in June 1920, the then Hebdomadal Council agreed a Statute for the establishment of an Honour School devoted to the promotion of the “study of the structure, and philosophical, political and economic principles, of Modern Society”;⁴ this Statute came before Congregation and was passed on the 20th October 1920.⁵

There were now two routes into philosophy. For many years, however, those who led in the profession continued to study Lit Hum. I have in mind such figures as Gilbert Ryle, J.L. Austin, H. H. Price, H.P. Grice, R.M. Hare, Elizabeth Anscombe, and Bernard Williams. Even the Antipodean J.L. Mackie, when he came to Oxford to study philosophy, studied Lit Hum. It wasn’t until after the mid-20th century—almost 50 years after its establishment—that philosophy could boast a holder of an Established Chair in Philosophy who had studied PPE and not Lit Hum.: the first was Peter Strawson, Waynflete Professor of Metaphysics, 1968-1987, and the second was Michael Dummett, Wykeham Professor of Logic, 1979-1992. That Dummett’s route into philosophy was through PPE and not Lit Hum may be thought to be in keeping with a feature of his philosophy—that it was somewhat at odds with the dominant school of philosophy at the time that he was entering the profession.⁶ That dominant school has come to be known, in some circles, simply as “Oxford Philosophy”.

I turn briefly to consider this school of philosophy which, according to Geoffrey Warnock, dominated philosophy not just in Oxford, but around the world and spanned the period from 1945 until the mid-1960’s. This was a time when, in the minds of some, Oxford was con-

sidered to be ‘the centre of the philosophical universe’. This was a time when what has come to be known as analytic philosophy may be thought to have come of age, and a time before philosophy in the United States became a dominant force. ‘Oxford philosophy’ is sometimes also known as ‘ordinary language philosophy’, and it has strong associations with the work of Oxford philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle, J.L. Austin and Peter Strawson. It also has close connections to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, although he worked largely in Cambridge.⁷

At the heart of philosophy lies the question how we are to understand the business of philosophy: what is its method and how should it proceed? These questions received a very particular definition around the early-to-mid twentieth century: the business of philosophy should be the study of language. This study is something that has come to be seen as central to what is now called ‘analytic philosophy’.⁸ Michael Dummett has suggested that Gottlob Frege, because of his insistence on the importance of the study of language to philosophy, should be considered to be “the grandfather of analytic philosophy”.⁹ But, while analytic philosophers at this time may have been united in accepting their work to be the study of language, there were deep divisions concerning which language they should concentrate on. There were those, like Frege, who believed that the study should be of ideal or formal languages, ones that prescind from the vagaries and imprecisions of language as it used in everyday transactions. On the other hand, there were those who believed that imprecision and ambiguity are of the essence of the expressive power of language and who insisted that language cannot be studied in abstraction from its daily use. These latter philosophers emphasized a more humanistic attitude, central to which was a deep respect for ordinary language. It is the work of these philosophers that came to be known as ordinary language philosophy; some of the most revered defenders of this way of doing philosophy were to be found in Oxford.

John Austin once wrote that language is a long-evolved, complex, and subtle instrument and that philosophers should afford it careful scrutiny. He points out that language has evolved over many generations and that the distinctions made within it and the connections marked by it “have stood up to the long test of time of the survival of the fittest” and are “more subtle [...] than any you or I are likely to think up in our armchairs of an afternoon” (Austin, *A Plea for Excuses*, p. 182). Austin acknowledges that ordinary language has no claim to be the last word in philosophy, but he insists that it would be prudent to at least allow it the *first* word (*Ibid*, p. 185). It is hard not to see the influence of a Classical education in Austin’s work. And this influence is evident not just in that work, but in so much of what was being written in Oxford – and beyond – during that period. For so many years philosophers were content to give language that first word.

Towards the end of the 20th century the influence of both language and a Greats education had begun to wane in philosophy.¹⁰ In its place one began to see a greater affinity with science. However, this affinity was rather slow to develop. If one returns to the early years of the 20th century one finds the beginning of a concern with the place of science in the curriculum. While the economists were pushing for the study of political economy, the philosophers were also busy trying to establish links between philosophy and the natural sciences.¹¹ Discussions

to this effect began in 1912, and a scheme to establish a School that brought philosophy together with a science subject was submitted to Hebdomadal Council in December 1914. While this scheme mentioned the desirability of aligning a more modern approach to philosophy with such subjects as mathematics, natural science or psychology, it is interesting to note that there was no mention of either economics or politics.¹² The First World War brought all discussion of change to the curriculum to a halt, but as early as May 1919 discussion resumed. The idea that was put forward at that time was for an Honour School that covered Science, Economics, Politics and Philosophy – an Honour School that was to be called “Science Greats”. But in February 1920 a small sub-committee of Council (which records tells us had H.A. Prichard and A.D. Lindsay as members) met to consider the proposal for a Science Greats, which sub-committee recommended that an Honours School consisting of modern philosophy and science should be postponed and that what should be taken forward was a School that combined philosophy “with modern political, economic and social development” – in short, PPE. In relation to a School of Philosophy and Natural Science, an account of the debate on General Board of the University was published in the *Oxford Magazine* for 15th February 1923, and it reports that it was “clear that the majority felt that the time was not yet ripe for such a scheme”.¹³

It took until 1947 before a joint school involving philosophy and a science subject – Philosophy, Psychology and Physiology (PPP) – was established.¹⁴ It should be noted that a) until that time, Experimental Psychology was not a subject that could be studied on its own at the undergraduate level in Oxford,¹⁵ and b) that many at that time would have considered psychology a social science.¹⁶ It was to be another twenty years or so before the establishment of any more joint schools between philosophy and the natural sciences.

In his unpublished notes for a lecture given to the 2019 British Logic Colloquium Annual Meeting, Daniel Issacson reports that in the early 1960’s W.F.R. Hardie published a ‘review’ of the *Oxford University Examination Decrees and Regulations* (The Grey Book) in *The Oxford Magazine*, in which he complained that Oxford undergraduates were, unlike those in Cambridge (with its Tripos system), rarely able to combine the study of Arts and Science subjects. In response, in 1964, the General Board set up a committee chaired by William Kneale to look into the matter. The Kneale Report recommended that “new joint schools linking the natural sciences and humanities should be instituted”. A committee was subsequently set up to explore the possibility of a joint Honour School of Mathematics and Philosophy, the philosophical membership of which included A.J. Ayer, Michael Dummett, and Brian McGuinness.¹⁷ At the same time a corresponding committee was set up to consider yet another joint school of philosophy with physics, the philosophical membership of which included Rom Harré, John Lucas, and again Brian McGuinness.¹⁸ Statutes governing the two new Joint Schools of Mathematics & Philosophy and Physics & Philosophy were accepted at a meeting of Congregation on 21st May 1968.

While the ordinary language approach ruled the roost (one might say) in Oxford in the mid-to-late 20th century, there were also those who followed a different path. Even before the setting up of the Joint School of Philosophy

and Physics, there was a course on offer to students devoted to the study of the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence on space and time, a paper which came to be foundational to the first year of the Physics and Philosophy degree. This course was taught jointly by John Lucas and Rom Harré. Rom Harré was a philosopher of science and a New Zealander, who came to Oxford and did the BPhil under the direction of J.L. Austin (even here there is a thread connecting to the old Lit Hum). John Lucas was an Oxford man who studied Greats and was a pupil of R.M. Hare, another Greats man.

Even in Oxford, John Lucas stood out for his eccentricity. Lucas also stood out somewhat from the philosophical mainstream with his interests. While it is true that he was a student of Greats, Lucas had (like his contemporary Michael Dummett) a strong interest in mathematics and logic—both of which he studied at Princeton in the late 1950's. Perhaps this sojourn in the U.S. is what led to his marching to a different drum when back in Oxford. Harvey Brown (the first holder in 1984 of a newly established University Lectureship in the Philosophy of Physics) reports in his contribution to the 7th edition of the *Oxford Philosophy Magazine* that Lucas once said to him that he, Lucas, was grateful to Oxford for allowing him to research on topics “off the beaten philosophical track”. There is little doubt that the track that Lucas referred to was one devoted to the study of ordinary language; the off-piste track followed by Lucas included the philosophy of science and the philosophy of mathematics. As was the case with so many of the Oxford philosophy dons at this time, Lucas' interests and knowledge in philosophy ranged widely. As well as being involved in the setting up of the Joint School of Physics and Philosophy, Lucas was involved in the establishment of yet another joint school with philosophy.

Towards the close of the 20th century two further Joint Schools were established. The first of these Joint Schools was Philosophy and Theology, which was introduced in the early 1970's ('73 or '74 according to the Oxford philosopher David Leal). The idea for this Joint School was conceived and navigated through the Philosophy Sub-Faculty by Basil Mitchell, holder of the Nolloth Chair of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion from 1968-1984. According to Leal, Mitchell was ably supported by his friend John Lucas in his efforts to get this new Joint School passed by the Sub-Faculty of Philosophy. Modern Languages and Philosophy was the last of the Joint Schools to be established in the 20th century.¹⁹ Leal believes that this Joint School was also established in the early 1970's.²⁰

As my colleague at St Hilda's, Kathy Wilkes (also a student of Greats), once said, “Philosophy is like chips, it is served with everything”.²¹ Of course, philosophy is not served—or studied—with *all* subjects, but the range of subjects with which it is studied expanded over the course of the 20th century. Prior to 1920 philosophy was studied only as part of *Literae Humaniores*; by the end of the 20th century it could be studied with a wide range of other subjects. The study of philosophy was changing, and so was its practice. As the 20th century drew to a close, the study of ordinary language was no longer of central concern to philosophers working and studying in Oxford. Not many today would mark analytic philosophy as the study of language—especially not if that study is taken as a route to the study of thought. Nor is it clear that one can find one guiding thread as dominant in philosophy

today. And philosophy in Oxford, while still flourishing, stands shoulder to shoulder with a range of departments and faculties throughout Britain and the rest of the world where philosophy of all kinds flourish. At the start of the 21st century one finds philosophers interested in a wide range of issues, only a small proportion of which is related to language.

As an interest in language has waned, the place of science in relation to philosophy has grown. Philosophers can be found in important dialogue with neuroscientists, computer scientists, and biologists, in addition to psychologists and physicists. In many ways, the very practice and writing of philosophy has followed some of the ways of the sciences (with its high concentration of specialization, a style of journal writing not unfamiliar from the sciences, and even some jointly authored publications). One may wonder how some of the great figures of philosophy—most of whom came to philosophy through the study of *Literae Humaniores*—would respond to the philosophy of today. We do have a few hints. In his paper “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline”, Bernard Williams suggests that philosophy has a closer affinity to history (“the central case of a humanistic discipline”) than to the sciences, and he voices suspicions about attempts to “assimilate philosophy to the aims, or at least the manners, of the sciences”.²² Philosophy, according to Williams, is “part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves”.²³ And in a contribution to the *Oxford Magazine* in 1992, John Lucas laments, among other things, the tendency towards overspecialization in philosophy, writing: “we do not flourish if we are left to confine ourselves to our own specialities”.

It is a shame that we can no longer enter into conversation with these philosophers. With the exception of Dan Isaacson, Harvey Brown and David Leal whose work contributed to the writing of this article, every philosopher mentioned has died—many in the last few years. The *Oxford Philosophy Magazine* for 2019-20* announced the passing of John Lucas, Brian McGuinness and Rom Harré, as well as of David Bostock, Myles Burnyeat and Jim Griffin. Bernard Williams, Peter Strawson, and Michael Dummett died in 2003, 2006 and 2011, respectively. Many will see these deaths, added to so many others, as the passing of an era. Indeed, it was that very thought that prompted the writing of this article.

¹ There was also the consideration that many of the new Universities being established at the time were offering courses in Political Economy and a worry that Oxford and Cambridge would fall behind (*vide*, N. Chester, *Economics, Politics and Social Studies in Oxford: 1900-85*, p. 3-4).

² *Ibid.*

³ Up until that time there were a few courses in political economy, but they were offered in the History Faculty. And while the study of the philosophy of the ancient world might have dominated, it should be noted that the study of such figures as Kant, Mill, Bentham and Hegel also figured on the curriculum at that time (*vide* Chester, p. 1).

⁴ Chester reports that on route to the establishment of PPE, there had been a Diploma first examined in 1905 for the study of Economics, but this faded away not long after the establishment of PPE which attracted students in great numbers almost from its inception.

⁵ There was to be a celebration of 100 Years of PPE to take place at Balliol College in September 2020, but this had to be postponed due to the current pandemic.

⁶ In contrast to Dummett's work, Strawson's was much closer to the heart of what I am calling "the dominant school" of philosophy in Oxford at this time. What may explain the divergence here are different underlying interests: while Dummett's interests were in logic and mathematics, Strawson's were in English literature. Indeed, Strawson was accepted to study English at Oxford, and requested to change course to PPE upon arrival.

⁷ While Wittgenstein held a post in Cambridge, his work (especially the later work) was arguably more influential at that time in Oxford than in his own university.

⁸ Analytic philosophy is way of doing philosophy associated largely with Britain and the United States (especially during this period), and it is often contrasted with Phenomenology and Existential philosophy which was (and to some extent still is) largely practised on the Continent (hence also, 'Continental Philosophy').

⁹ Dummett has suggested that analytic philosophy began with the work of the German philosophers such as Husserl, Bolzano, Brentano, Meinong and Frege at the end of the 19th century, although it did not come of age until the early 20th century with the work of English philosophers such as G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell (see M. Dummett, *The Seas of Language*, ix & p. 171).

¹⁰ This waning of philosophy's connection with Greats is mourned by John Lucas in his article "Lament for Philosophy", published in the *Oxford Magazine*, No. 83, 4th week, Trinity Term, 1992.

¹¹ It is interesting in this connection to note that some economists (in particular Marshall at Cambridge) insisted on setting up the study of economics with "as high standards of scientific accuracy as the physical or biological sciences" (this comes from a description of Marshall's attitude towards economics by Maynard Keynes, referred to in Chester, p. 6.). Here we see an emphasis on the science in social science.

¹² Chester tells us that history and anthropology were also mentioned in this detailed scheme that was submitted to Hebdomadal Council in 1914.

¹³ In this connection, one may recall that it wasn't until 1959 that C.P. Snow gave the Rede Lectures in Cambridge, which lectures drew attention to the existence, in Britain, of what Snow called "two cultures": the arts and the sciences. The rejection of a Science Greats took place 39 years before these highly influential lectures. It is interesting to note the increase in the number Science students in relation to Arts students over the course of the 20th Century. According to the Franks Report on Oxford University, published in May 1966, in 1928-9 there were 714 Science Undergraduates compared to 3,402 Arts Undergraduates; by the early 1980's there were 3,250-3,750 Science Undergraduates compared to 5,000-5,500 Arts Undergraduates.

¹⁴ PPP flourished at Oxford until it was replaced, in 2010, by PPL—Philosophy, Psychology and Linguistics.

¹⁵ The Wilde Readership in Mental Philosophy, which is taken to mark the beginning of the official study of psychology in Oxford, was established in 1898. Experimental Psychology was only introduced as part of an undergraduate degree in 1947.

¹⁶ In 2002, and upon the setting up of a Divisional structure in Oxford, Psychology became part of the Medical Sciences Division.

¹⁷ A.J. Ayer, perhaps the British philosopher best known outside of philosophical circles, was also a student of Lit Hum. Ayer was Wykeham Professor of Logic from 1959 until 1978 (and was succeeded in the post by Michael Dummett). Brian McGuinness was a Fellow of The Queen's College; he is well-known for his publications on Wittgenstein and on the Vienna Circle.

¹⁸ McGuinness served *ex officio* on both committees, as Secretary of the Sub-Faculty of Philosophy at the time.

¹⁹ If we jump to the 21st century, we find a Joint School of Computer Science and Philosophy being established in 2012.

²⁰ Unfortunately, it has proved impossible to find any information that relates to the setting up of the Joint School of Modern Languages and Philosophy.

²¹ Dan Isaacson reports John Lucas as once writing that "Philosophy is the most promiscuous subject in the University". Wilkes and Lucas were great friends, and it is possible they came up with this way of thinking of philosophy together.

²² This paper can be found in a collection of papers by B. Williams selected and edited by A.W. Moore, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Princeton and OUP (2009), pp. 180-182. More recently Tim Williamson, the current holder of the Wykeham Chair of Logic, has given voice to quite a different view of philosophy. See Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2007.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 182.

* Short obituaries can be found in this issue.

The Clock

... the clock, always the clock ...
in the black night when no-one is looking
ratchets are clicking, pawls are locking
never turn back, always the clock

always the clock, the clock, the clock
adding the seconds to more in the stack
rack upon rack upon rack upon rack
never look back, ever the clock

tick, tick, always the clock
chipping the rock and the chips from the rock
grit from the granite each strike of the pick
never put back, never put back

always the clock, always the clock
implacable tramp of the boots in the dark
f uttering beat of the blackening heart
shock of the knock and the crack of the lock

... and the clock, always the clock

keith evetts

Keith Evetts: alumnus of Jesus College, Cambridge with boyhood links to Oxford, retired after living in eight countries, gardens and writes poetry in Surrey.