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31/12/03

Kirril,

There's a fellow called John McCumber who published a book, *Time in the Ditch*, arguing for the idiotic thesis that the triumph of the unduly disengaged school of analytic philosophy in the USA was somehow due to McCarthyism. (It is a moot point whether analytic philosophy IS unduly disengaged, and, whether it is or not, McCarthyism can't be the explanation since analytic philosophy also triumphed in other Anglophone countries where McCarthyism was either muted or non-existent.) Anyway, *Philosophical Studies* 108, 2002 includes a number of essays on this book, one by David Hollinger, who recounts the story of Frankena and Copilowish on p. 179. (I'm not sure whether the story is also included in McCumber's book.) May I suggest that you first check out the Hollinger article and then, if you have any more questions, email him directly (he's at Berkeley).

Charles

McCumber's Book

1/1/03

I haven't read the book so I can't say for sure - I'm only going by the review essays in *Phil Studies*. But it seems that McCumber regards logical positivism a safely non-political school of philosophy to which philosophers retreated in the face of the McCarthyite threat. Modern-day analytical philosophy - at least in the USA - is stigmatized as a post-positivist and therefore irresponsibly apolitical affair. Of course it's kind of dopey to suggest that logical positivism did not have a political dimension to it but that is what McCumber appears to believe. However, I have not read the book so perhaps I should say no more.

Maybe someone less snowed under and better acquainted with US philosophy (and US history) than I should read it and present a report to the list?

[Having recently read the book, I stand by my original comments. The fundamental thesis of the book is a piece Amercano-centric idiocy, completely silly considered as an historical claim]

Reisch the Philosophy of Science and the Cold War

15/9/2007

Reisch has several big theses:

- 1) The Unity of Science movement was an attempt to push the scientific conception of the world with the aid of a positivistic epistemology in which the verification principle played a major part.
- 2) This was associated with a set of red-to-pink political agendas on the part of the leading philosophers of science, particularly the positivists. *One* reason they wanted to push the scientific conception of the world was that they thought it would advance the causes of liberty, democracy and socialism [variously conceived].
- 3) Because of Cold War pressures the lefty political agendas were gradually downplayed until they virtually disappeared. The leading positivists - those that survived into the post-war era in the USA - either shifted to the right or began to present themselves and their work as fundamentally apolitical (though some, such as Carnap, continued to stand up for left-wing causes in their off-duty hours).
- 4) The philosophy of science in the positivist tradition became more 'scholastic' retreating in Neurath's phrase to the 'icy slopes of logic'.
- 5) This [phenomenon 4)] was a) a consequence of 3) and b) a Bad Thing.
- 6) Horace Kallen (the pragmatist) suggested that there was something fundamentally authoritarian about the Unity of Science Program as represented by Neurath. In particular the idea, inspired by verificationism of making the world safe for the scientific world conception by encouraging people to speak a language in which metaphysical ideas cannot be expressed smacked of totalitarianism.
- 7) Kallen was wrong.
- 8) Furthermore his attack was one of the pressures that caused the political agenda(s) of the Unity of Science movement to wither on the vine.

OK now for what an 18th century philosopher would have described as 'cursory strictures' .

1) & 2) are relatively uncontroversial though (as I think John Ongley said) it comes as some surprise how very 'red' so many of the leading philosophers of science were. Not many KGB-related facts are intrinsically amusing but if *Philosophy of Science* really was founded with the aid of KGB gold that is quite hilarious. Egg-on-face for any *Philosophy of Science* contributors who denounced those who wrote for *Encounter* for taking the CIA shilling!

I'm not sure about 3). Was it really political pressure that caused the philosophers of science to downplay the connection between science and socialism or the realization that these two things don't have a lot to do with one another? You can be a devotee of the scientific worldview without being a socialist and a socialist without believing in scientism. BR himself made a similar point in connection with Hume. He agreed with much of Hume's technical philosophy whilst rejecting what he saw as Hume's Tory politics. (I don't think Hume was quite the Tory that Russell made him out to be but he would naturally seem so to the grandson of a left-wing Whig politician like Lord John Russell.) To choose a contemporary example, David Armstrong is a notorious right-winger whose politics I deplore, yet a lefty like me can admire his philosophy which is about as scientific as it is possible to be. People might just have come to realize that there was a disconnect between their political and philosophical agendas. [Of course, I don't want to say that there are *no* connections between the philosophy of science and politics. Popper used his demarcation criterion between science and non-science to discredit the scientific pretensions of orthodox Marxism. So it would be difficult to be both an orthodox Marxist and a Popperian in the philosophy of science. But it is not particularly difficult to be a Popperian and a socialist since Popper himself was a socialist for much of his career including the times when he was writing the *Open Society*.]

Secondly *some* of the downplaying of the socialist agenda was perhaps due to an unpressured loss of faith in certain kinds of socialism, or at least a loss of faith that might have occurred absent the pressure. (After all, many intellectuals broke with Marxism in Britain at about the same time and McCarthyism in Britain, in so far as it existed, was a very much milder affair.) You did not have to be bullied to be appalled by Stalinism and once you have rejected Stalinism it is a natural next step to call Leninism and Marxism

into question. Of course, there are non-Marxist variants of socialism and social democracy but there is a particular problem for non-Marxist socialists operating in America - the absence of a home-grown mass socialist party. Middle-aged scholars, often immigrants without contacts in the American working class, would not have relished the the hard slog of trying to create a mass socialist party in America. Yet without such a party socialist convictions are liable to degenerate into a sectarian fad or a personal peculiarity. The trouble with socialism (as Oscar Wilde said and as I can confirm from personal experience) is that it takes up too many evenings. How much more fun it is (especially if you are beginning to be aware of time's winged chariot changing gear) to devote yourself to abstract questions rather than the bread and butter boredom of a responsible socialist politics - especially if there is little prospect that your ideals will actually be realized. Skiing on the icy slopes of logic is much more enjoyable.

What about 4) Was the philosophy of science in America (especially post-positivist Philosophy of Science) *more* 'scholastic' during and immediately after the Cold War than either Austrian or American philosophy of science had been in the pre-war period? Well I am not as widely read as Reisch and I stand to be corrected, but I am inclined to think is that in one sense it was and in another it was not. Let's begin with the sense in which it was not. The pre-war papers of the leading positivists seem to be just as abstract and technical as the papers that they published after the war (if they had the good luck to survive into the post-war period). A glance at Benson's bibliography of Carnap in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* certainly tends to confirm this. If being abstract and technical is the chief criterion for scholasticism I don't see a major difference.

But there is another sense in which the work of the leading positivist philosophers was perhaps more scholastic in the post-war period than it had been before. Let me explain.

Logical positivism (or logical empiricism) suffers from a major defect. Most of its key doctrines are false. And by the early 1950s this was beginning to become apparent.

- i) It is difficult if not impossible to give a clear formulation of the verification principle that neither includes too much nor excludes too little. Such arguments for the principle as there are support a variant that had long been abandoned by the 1950s (conclusive verifiability). It is no good as a demarcation criterion between science and non-science or between sense and nonsense. Thus the

positivists principle weapon in the war against metaphysics had broken in their hands.

ii) Inductive logic was not managing to produce anything that looked remotely like real scientific reasoning.

iii) Logicism is false as is the linguistic conception of logical truth, both points that were gradually coming to the consciousness of philosophers. This meant that the big problem for empiricism - how to make sense of mathematical truth - had become unsolved. Another problem - how to make sense of logical truth given that the linguistic conception of analytic truth is mistaken - was beginning to rear its ugly head. Quine was beginning to emphasize the ontological commitments of mathematics. Thus both Platonism and the synthetic a priori were threatening to make a come back.

iv) Under the impact of Quine's criticisms, the analytic/synthetic distinction was beginning to disintegrate. (Perhaps a good thing since anyone who adhered to it might be driven to the conclusion that mathematics was synthetic a priori.)

Thus by the 1950s logical empiricism was a degenerating research program. Work done within such a program is likely to be 'scholastic' in a certain sense - you can solve sub-problems and sub-sub-problems and you can follow up on your personal fads. But the big problems either cannot be solved at all or cannot be solved given the intellectual tools at your disposal. In the 1950s the future for the philosophy of science lay with those who *rejected* key elements in the positivist program, scientific realists like Smart and Putnam who rejected verificationism and the ban on metaphysics and Popper and his (often highly critical) disciples, who also rejected verificationism and sought both a non-verificationist demarcation criterion between science and non-science and a non-verificationist answer to the crucial question 'What's so great about science?' Thus if the term 'scholasticism' is meant to connote a certain futility, then the papers of the post-war positivists were probably a bit scholastic. But this was not because they were disporting themselves on the icy slopes of logic (which is what they had been doing all along) but because they were slowly dying.

This brings me to thesis 5) in my reconstruction of Reisch: that the scholasticism of positivist philosophers during Cold War period was a) largely due to political pressures and b) a Bad Thing.

In so far as 'scholasticism' denotes a *penchant* for the icy slopes, that *penchant* was in evidence BEFORE the Cold War and was therefore due to other causes. In so far as 'scholasticism' denotes the symptoms of a degenerating research program, it was caused by the degeneration of the positivist research program which had nothing much to do with the Cold War.

Was the scholasticism of the Cold War period a Bad Thing? In so far as it denotes a *penchant* for the icy slopes, No. There are some philosophical problems that can't be solved without getting technical. So if the problems are worth solving,, technical we must get. There are a lot of important truths to be discovered way up on the icy slopes. In so far as 'scholasticism' suggests the symptoms of a degenerating research program then it was perhaps Bad Thing but not very bad. Philosophy would have been better off if people had given up on logical empiricism a bit earlier, but this was never very likely to happen and given that it did not, a certain amount of scholastic futility was not only inevitable but also relatively harmless. Indeed some of the work done has subsequently proved to be very useful: witness Carnap on semantics and modal logic.

This brings me to points 6) & 7). It is one of the merits of Reisch's book that he disinters the very interesting Kallen/Neurath debate. It's glaring demerit is that he gets it wrong. Kallen *did* have a good point: there *is* something deeply authoritarian about the positivist tactic of trying to win philosophical battles by dismissing your opponents views as senseless. What Neurath was recommending was that we should adopt a set of conventions which exclude 'metaphysical words (including for him cause', 'truth' and 'explanation!') from our vocabularies. Metaphysics would be consigned to the realm of the unsayable. We can summarize the program thus.

'The purpose of the Universal Jargon was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of logical positivism, but to make other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when the Universal jargon had been adopted for all and the metaphysically infected terminology forgotten, a metaphysical thought - that is a thought diverging from what logical empiricism regarded as genuinely thinkable - should be *literally* unthinkable, at least in so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a logical empiricist could

properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was to be done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox 'metaphysical' meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give an example, the word 'free' would still exist in the Universal jargon but it could only be used in such statements as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds'. It could not be used in the old sense of 'metaphysically free' in which 'freedom' suggests something like the liberty of indifference.'

Does this sound familiar? It should. For it an adaptation with some substitutions of a famous passage from the Appendix to Orwell's 1984 in which Orwell in his authorial persona describes the linguistic policies of the Party.

'The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when the Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and the Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought - that is a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc - should be literally unthinkable, at least in so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party Member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was to be done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give an example, the word 'free' still existed in Newspeak but it could only be used in such statements as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds'. It could not be used in the old sense of 'intellectually free' or 'politically free' since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts ...'

The leading positivists were men of liberal sympathies who stood up for freedom of speech (that's one reason the Nazis did not like them). Nevertheless, there is something deeply authoritarian - and hence morally objectionable - about their preferred polemical

tactic. A strategy which corresponds so closely to the linguistic policies of Orwell's tyrants cannot be freed from the taint of totalitarianism. Kallen was right after all.

Regards

Charles

PS. If anyone is interested I have a draft paper on 'Coercive Theories of Meaning ' that enlarges on some of these themes. I hope to publish it next year. [Actually 2010 in *Logique et Analyse*].