

“Theory”, Philosophy and F. R. Leavis

May I have a little space in which to reply to Mr Stotesbury’s friendly and characteristically well informed criticisms of my essay on F. R. Leavis and philosophy in *Modern Age* (*Words in Edgeways* 18 & 19)?

I confess to a difficulty in doing so for I find (I think) that we are very largely in agreement. Leavis stated unequivocally that he was not a philosopher. Indeed, he was prompted in particular to the insistence by a philosopher who had told him he did himself less than justice in the disclaimer.¹ He went further: he thought of himself, he said, as an “anti-philosopher”, “which is what a literary critic ought to be.”² More than this, he identified a “desperate need for anti-philosophers” as an affliction of modern civilisation.³

This wouldn’t seem to leave much room for manoeuvre. However, my effort in the modest piece on which Mr Stotesbury comments was to explore whether any kind of reconciliation might be possible between the apparently opposed views, and to do so without detriment to a correct understanding of Leavis’s meaning. He certainly saw possibilities of fruitful “liaison” between the two disciplines: English and philosophy, and he aimed, as he put it (no doubt mischievously) at “enlarging [his] beach-head in the philosophical domain.”⁴ I am something like a completely sympathetic admirer of Leavis’s work (as I think Mr Stotesbury is too) and I have argued that (contrary to popular misconception) his writing is marked by clarity and precision. We must therefore fully respect what he has written as an exact expression of his meaning. This does not preclude us, however—as I hope Mr Stotesbury will agree—from exploring its implications in the collaborative spirit that the author himself enjoins on us.

Recalling Leavis’s observation that “nothing important can really be said simply”,⁵ I recognise that much depends on one’s definition of “philosophy”—I think Leavis had a particular conception of it in his sights, and one widely entertained in the academic world—and that (as I see it) he confronts us with a paradox (albeit a clear-sighted one). To address this, I coined the term “anti-philosophical philosophy”, consciously acknowledging the “conceptual strain” Mr Stotesbury identifies. I sought—in a highly preliminary way—to start to draw out the implications of this for our understanding of language (or—as Leavis says—“let us rather say *a* language . . . for there is no such thing as language in general”⁶).

As I have implied, there is a good deal more to be said about all this, and I have made a further very imperfect attempt in a paper to be published soon in the *Cambridge Quarterly*. The time, indeed, is overdue, in my view, for an attentive and thorough-going re-reading of Leavis, one of the subtlest thinkers of his time. The *Words in Edgeways* team (so still to call you) don’t need me to tell them this; but if other readers, not so far engaged, are persuaded likewise, this exchange will have served an important purpose. I am therefore very grateful to Mr Stotesbury for helping me to continue the discussion.

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References

¹ *The Living Principle: English as a Discipline of Thought*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1976, p. 16

² *Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1976, p. 34

³ *Valuation in Criticism* (posth), ed. G. Singh, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 292

⁴ G. Singh, *F. R. Leavis: A Literary Biography*, London, Duckworth, 1995, p. 286

⁵ *Thought, Words and Creativity*, p. 122

⁶ *The Living Principle*, p. 58