

“Theory”, Philosophy and F. R. Leavis: A Caveat

Dr Chris Joyce’s article, “Meeting in Meaning: Philosophy and Theory in the work of F. R. Leavis”,¹ based on his paper to the Leavis Conference at Downing in 2003 is generally an admirable discussion, lucid and wide ranging, of Leavis’s views on language and value. However, his treatment of the question of how these aspects of Leavis are related to “theory” and philosophy provides an opportunity for clearing up an important misconception. This is implicit in his claim that “(Leavis’s) thought was ... very far ... from exhibiting any kind of pre-theoretical innocence”.²

Leavis himself, rightly, disclaimed any “theoretical” or philosophical interest in language. It is certainly true that his view of language as “collaborative creativity” is very like that of the later Wittgenstein.³ However, if both men arrive at the same point, it is from opposite directions; and whether we call the end result “philosophy” or not depends on the route by which it is reached. Leavis’s distinction is to make explicit—to articulate in exceptionally powerful and illuminating terms—truths about meaning and objectivity that we implicitly know and take for granted in our ordinary “pre-theoretical” use of language, and, *a fortiori*, the evaluative vocabulary. Wittgenstein’s is to battle against “the bewitchment of the intelligence” by the insidious confusions that arise from theoretical reflection on language and lead to scepticism about the possibility of objective truth. By exposing these *deep* mistakes, he is able to dispel the anxieties that lead us to question our ordinary “pre-theoretical” trust in language and so restore to us our human-created world. The philosophical understanding his work offers is bound up with the search for, and discovery of, an exit from the maze of sceptical doubt—“the way out of the fly bottle”,⁴ as he calls it. Leavis’s treatment of language has no such dimension. Nevertheless, it is not diminished by that. As a critic, he is not called upon to answer the philosophical sceptic who casts doubt on the objectivity of values, but to treat the whole line of enquiry that leads to scepticism as a distraction from “the common pursuit of true judgement”. What he has to say about language is determined by critical rather than

¹ *Modern Age*, (Summer 2005) Vol. 47, No. 3

² *Modern Age*, p. 240

³ In this connection, it may be noted that Leavis’s account of critical judgement as implicitly of the form “This is so, isn’t it?” recognizes its essentially public character, and the “criteriological” connection between intersubjective agreement and objectivity.

⁴ L. Wittgenstein, (1968) *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Blackwells, 1: 308

philosophical aims, and the upshot is an exceptionally clear and perspicuous view of its workings, free from any theoretical preoccupations or “muddled misdirection of attention”.⁵ Michael Tanner suggested that Leavis should be regarded a philosopher on the basis of his treatment of language.⁶ Dr Joyce’s paradoxical “‘anti-philosophical’ way of doing philosophy”⁷ reflects, I think, the conceptual strain in this way of seeing Leavis’s observations about meaning, objectivity and value.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly comment on Leavis’s attitude towards “the Wittgensteinians”.⁸ He is justified, for (*inter alia*) the reasons noted above, in his conviction that their distinctive concerns lie outside his own discipline of literary criticism. His failure to see them, from a non-specialised, lay point of view, as a complementary line of thought in the humanities is, arguably, a “blind spot”, though forgivable in a critic. And of course any tendency on his part to denigrate the philosophical value of their work—though this is a moot point—is misplaced. Leavis was simply not entitled to sit in judgement on the philosophy as such—a right he would have had to *earn* by being a philosopher and thinking through the philosophical problems, going “the bloody *hard* way”—as he, of all people, would have always known deep down. His actual position vis-à-vis philosophy is best summed up by his stance in the superb early essay, “Literary Criticism and Philosophy”, which exhibits a fine sense of limitations and boundaries⁹. Whether they had become less clear by the time of his references to “the Wittgensteinians” and his sponsorship of Polyani and Grene remains, in the absence of further discussion, an open question.

Richard Stotesbury

⁵ F. R. Leavis (1966) “Literary Criticism and Philosophy”, *The Common Pursuit*, London, Peregrine Books, p. 213

⁶ M. Tanner, “Literature and Philosophy”, *New Universities Quarterly* (Winter 1975) Vol. 30, No. 1

⁷ *Modern Age*, p. 246

⁸ Cf. G. Singh, *F. R. Leavis: A Literary Biography* (London 1995), p. 212

⁹ Leavis’s reply to Tanner, “Mutually Necessary”, in *New Universities Quarterly* (Spring 1976) Vol. 30, No. 2, is a lucid and powerful reaffirmation of his position in “Literary Criticism and Philosophy”.

Editor’s note:

W. A. Hart had a good essay on “Dr Leavis, ‘English’ and Philosophy” in a forerunner of *Words in Edgeways*, *The Haltwhistle Quarterly* (no. 6, winter 1977). That issue (which includes poems by Ronald Bottrall and Paul St. Vincent/E. A. Markham, an attack on socialism by the Canadian political scientist H. S. Ferns and an essay on Isherwood as a homosexual novelist by D. S. Savage) is available for the price of p&p (say 50p in stamps?) from the *Words in Edgeways* editorial address.