Dear Editor,

A Reply to Mr Stotesbury’s Reply

[written before the publication of last week’s column]

You cannot allow the correspondence between Mr Stotesbury and myself to run on indefinitely (or can you?). Given, however, that Mr Stotesbury writes with notable and unusual clarity (not unusual of course in your columns) and yet still leaves room for a rejoinder (not to mention your own interest in the subject), I rejoin. The fact that, as a result of Mr Stotesbury’s stimulus (and, of course, Leavis’s), one finds oneself needing to say more is an index of the importance of the discussion.

Once again, I find myself much in agreement with Mr Stotesbury. A first difficulty, however, arises from his remark that Leavis was not writing “philosophically, in the strict sense of the term”. Mr Stotesbury defines this “strict sense” by reference to a number of philosophers from the Greeks onwards. They include Descartes, Locke, Hume, Frege—and Wittgenstein. Leavis’s thinking, Mr Stotesbury argues, differs in kind from theirs because it is not marked as theirs is by the “sceptical questioning” which, he says, is the essence of philosophy. I am not entirely convinced by this distinction. For one thing, it seems to me that Leavis is, in some respects at least, a sceptical questioner—about certain claims of philosophy, for instance. But even if this were not so, it is surely not the case that his mode of thought and its expression are necessarily excluded from the domain of philosophy because they do not belong (if they do not) to the tradition which Mr Stotesbury identifies. True, Leavis himself insisted (as both Mr Stotesbury and I have emphasised) that he was not a philosopher and we have a duty, in view of the precision of his writing, to attend closely to what he says about this. But, as Mr Stotesbury notes, “we are not obliged to take his word for it” (although he later says—my italics—that “Leavis rightly denied that his work can be regarded as philosophy”).

Let me now also pick up the point implied by my dash before Wittgenstein’s name in the list of philosophers above. Mr Stotesbury himself seems to recognise that, although he includes him among the pantheon of those who are “strictly” philosophers, Wittgenstein doesn’t sit easily in this company (and might not the same be said of Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty or Gadamer?), when he sends us to his later work for “a philosophical treatment of the issue” of “the philosopher’s inclination to claim a special authority in his dealings with other disciplines”. As Mr Stotesbury implies, Wittgenstein—though a philosopher—didn’t share this inclination. Indeed—a point Mr Stotesbury doesn’t make—Wittgenstein seems largely to have disregarded the work of most previous philosophers. What he does say, however, is of the most intense interest in the present context:


(These [philosophical problems] are, of course, not empirical problems; they will be solved, rather, by looking into the way our language works, and in such a way as to make us recognise how it works, despite an urge to misunderstand it. The problems will be solved, not by adducing new experience, but by rearranging what has been known all along. Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by means of our language.)

Anthony Kenny, commenting on Wittgenstein’s contention that philosophy is not a branch of knowledge, not perhaps (as Leavis argued for literary criticism) a specific discipline at all, puts it this way: “the aim of

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1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations, 3rd edition. Blackwell, 2001, I, 109. Wittgenstein’s German in the closing line is ambiguous, a point not glossed in Peter Hacker’s commentary, as he has recognised in correspondence with myself. “… durch die Mittel unserer Sprache”—through the medium (or means) of our language: is it the bewitchment that takes effect through this medium, or the struggle against it—or both? [See Wittgenstein: Mind and Will: Volume 4 of an Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations, Blackwell, 2000; and (with G. P. Baker) Wittgenstein: Meaning and Understanding: Essays on the Philosophical Investigations, Volume 1, Blackwell, 1992]
philosophy is a therapeutic one, to cure us from talking nonsense and being tormented by problems for which there is no solution.”

It may seem paradoxical that Wittgenstein should see the task of philosophy as to struggle against a naturally occurring urge, but essentially, Leavis concludes likewise: “Philosophers are always weak on language,” he wrote, because they fail to appreciate the significance of their having to use language to do philosophy. But ‘philosophers’ here must be only a sharpened instance of a generally occurring human problem: language, as Wittgenstein says, bewitches our understanding of itself. Surprisingly, Wittgenstein, though having a wider literary culture than Leavis supposed, does not seem to have recognised the significance of literary study in the effort to achieve a truer understanding of how language ‘works’.

Leavis makes a strong case for viewing literary study as a distinctive discipline with methods and approaches proper to itself and different from those generally familiar to philosophers. However, it is clear that this view is based on a perception of major literary works—long established in his thinking—as works of thought—thought that should be thought of as thought as much as (perhaps even more so than) expository works (mathematical, scientific, etc); and that this forms his dominant concern. It seems likely also that, in denying that he was a philosopher, Leavis understood the term ‘philosophy’ in the “strict sense” that Mr Stotesbury invokes, whether legitimately or not. It is surely therefore open to us to argue that literary criticism as Leavis practised it (which is also how he defined it) and philosophy are often cognate in their concerns; and that sometimes, as when Leavis writes discursively, without reference to any particular literary text (such as in the first section of The Living Principle), the two disciplines overlap. It is surely in this sense that we may question the idea of philosophy as necessarily ‘specialised’, not in the sense adduced by Mr Stotesbury’s reference to Diogenes.

I believe that Mr Stotesbury and I are travelling very much in the same direction. I certainly share with him a strong sense that Leavis’s importance is bound up with his recognition of the human significances embodied in literature, a manifestation of the distinctively human world whose prior achievement has made science possible. And, to adopt Mr Stotesbury’s words, nothing I have said places an embargo on his rejoinders to my (all too inarticulate) efforts to explore Leavis’s “profoundly interesting reflections on language, meaning and value.”

By way of emphasising our concurrence—and with Wittgenstein’s remark above closely in view—I hope Mr Stotesbury will not mind my mentioning that he sent me a post-script to his piece. A pupil, he recalled hearing, had asked Leavis how we can know that one poet is better than another. “I should have thought you’d got past that at school,” Leavis replied.

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Richard Stotesbury Replies

Mr Robinson presents Leavis as a philosopher who wrongly denied that he was one, and censures me for compounding his mistake. The plausibility of Mr Robinson’s case is dependent on the indeterminacy of his use of “philosophy” and its cognates. If they are construed narrowly, his claim that Leavis “was doing philosophy” is false: if widely, it is irrelevant to Leavis’s position and mine.

In Mr Robinson’s indeterminate usage, merely “reflecting about what you are doing” or “characterising it”, as opposed to just getting on with it, is “philosophical”. Accordingly, he avers that Leavis “was doing philosophy” when describing his critical practice; and by way of clinching the classification, rhetorically asks “what else it should be called?” The right response to this is that, firstly, it is impossible to decide whether a description of anything is philosophical without a context that allows it to be taken as such; and, secondly, in Leavis’s case the conspicuous absence of one means that, whatever we choose to call it (if we must have a

2 Wittgenstein, Allen Lane, 1973, p. 18. [Hacker writes: “Philosophical problems . . . can be neither solved nor advanced by new information or scientific discoveries . . . Philosophy is a contribution not to human knowledge but to human understanding.” (P. M. S. Hacker, Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies, pp. 30–1)]

ready-made label no doubt one could be devised—say, “critical method”), it is not philosophy proper, and no shuffling of verbal counters will change that.

“Philosophy”, in the strict sense—the only one relevant to my argument—denotes a form of intellectual enquiry that starts from the sceptical questioning of the presuppositions of established modes of discourse. Behind this questioning is an urge to explain and justify what is taken for granted in human speech. The explanations and justifications it seeks have the character of hypotheses. Hence the relevance of theory for philosophy. The goal of philosophical enquiry is to come to terms with the demands of the sceptic, and its reward a recognition of the deep confusions that underlie the impulse to find theoretical foundations for language. This means taking those demands seriously and investigating them, no matter how paradoxical or repugnant to common sense, they appear.

In contrast to the philosophical attitude towards scepticism, Leavis’s is marked by a resolute refusal to entertain its claims or investigate them—”to take the plunge into epistemology”, as he once put it. His response to sceptical challenges is limited to setting out the presuppositions on which critical discourse proceeds and affirming his trust in them. Pace Mr Robinson, what he does not do is account for the distrust of them the sceptic expresses or show why it is misplaced. Thus, from the standpoint of the sceptic, his insistence that criticism needs no theoretical foundations simply begs the question, however right and proper it is as a statement of critical faith. And when Mr Robinson compares “Leavis’s discussions of poetic language as essentially not the eighteenth-century ‘dress of thought’ ” to Wittgenstein’s effort to show the sceptic “the way out of the fly bottle”, one can only conclude that he has not understood the distinctive character of sceptical doubt.

Mr Robinson’s comments elsewhere are similarly off-target. Not only does his failure to recognise the role of theory in philosophy lead him to complain that I “join” the two terms. He even appears to think that theory is a monopoly of science, and absurdly objects to my use of the phrase “science and philosophy”—taken from Leavis’s discussion of the relation between criticism and the general intellectual life of a period in Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture, to which I expressly refer!—on the ground that “not all philosophers are themselves scientists or theorists”. Later, he protests that my “list of philosophers leaps from Aristotle to Descartes and then becomes predominantly a list of the most famous empiricists [sic]”, and speculates “whether the point is just that Leavis was not an empiricist”. One can only wonder what profit he imagines there might be in crawling through the whole catalogue of post-Aristotelian thought down to the Renaissance, and rub one’s eyes in disbelief at the idea that a list that includes Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel and Schopenhauer, to say nothing of Wittgenstein, is biased in favour of the empiricist tradition. His own touchstone of philosophical thought, Collingwood, (though Simone Weil also gets a mention) evinces a disabling inability to distinguish the peripheral and minor from the central and paradigmatic. An analogous tendency to disregard relative differences is apparent when he counters my suggestion that philosophy has not characteristically addressed itself to “the vulgar” by observing that “the Socratic dialogues were a sort of literary genre” without comparing them as a form of popular literature with Homer and the dramatists. Likewise, when he cites H. O. Mounce to the effect “that in the nineteenth century philosophical essays were often published in the ordinary magazines”, he does not pause to consider how far their readership coincides with that of a Victorian novelist such as Dickens.

What Mr Robinson offers is a hopelessly diluted conception of philosophy as the real thing. His uncertainty about the facile classifications this enables him to make shows itself in the qualifications—“in some sense a philosopher”, “in his own way engaging in epistemological argument”—with which he hedges them; and the incoherence it encourages is exemplified by his readiness to take credit for being “amongst the first (well before Michael Tanner) to call Leavis ‘a considerable philosopher of language’ ” while asserting that “as a philosopher Leavis was an amateur”. This last phrase of Mr Robinson’s is another symptom of confusion, since it is in general unhelpful and misleading to talk of amateurs and professionals in philosophy. The correct distinction is between seriousness and dilettantism, which Mr Robinson’s free and easy way with “philosophy” blurs.

Mr Robinson’s hankering for a popular philosophy is the natural counterpart of his watered-down idea of philosophical thought. What the realisation of his wish would mean in practice is not the cultural renaissance he envisages, but the proliferation of the dilettantism of the likes of Jeans, Eddington and Joad. In this connection, it is worth quoting a former colleague of Mr Mounce: “. . . the day when philosophy becomes a popular subject is the day for the philosopher to consider where he took the wrong turning.”

I should like to conclude by expressing my gratitude to Mr Robinson for what Leavis called “a many-sided exchange”.

Richard Stotesbury
What reason has Mr Stotesbury to declare one item on the empiricist agenda philosophy and everything else a watering down? If he signs on for a philosophy degree at any university in the world he will find a number of other matters on the syllabus. My contention that in several of his later works Leavis was willy nilly doing “philosophy of language” uses the phrase, as it happens precisely, in NED sense 7, “the study of the general principles of some particular branch of knowledge”: my difference from Mr Stotesbury is that I think Leavis was considering general principles, not just stating his methods and procedures. He was situating literary criticism in the life of mind. The question what a book subtitled “ 'English' as a discipline of thought” can be if not philosophy is not rhetorical and Mr Stotesbury has not answered it.

Taking as read the polite statements of substantial agreement in which this correspondence has abounded, I think Dr Joyce puts too strong an emphasis on what Kenny calls the “therapeutic” nature of philosophical thought. This is not as new with Wittgenstein as Dr Joyce supposes. The terminology is different, but warnings about being misled by words are characteristic of the empiricists from Locke downwards. There are more things in philosophy.

I think we are all doing philosophy ourselves (however, pace Mr Stotesbury, amateurishly), by asking what kind of thinking Leavis was pursuing, but as he does so Mr Stotesbury is neither practising radical scepticism nor showing any flies the way out of any bottle.

A Reply to My Critics

Like Mr Robinson, Dr Joyce believes that Leavis was wrong to deny that he was a philosopher and that my defence of his denial is misconceived. He argues “that Leavis is, in some respects at least, a sceptical questioner—about certain claims of philosophy, for instance”, and that “even if this were not so, it is surely not the case that his mode of thought and its expression are necessarily excluded from the domain of philosophy because they do not belong (if they do not) to the tradition which Mr Stotesbury identifies.” I shall take these points in reverse order.

For Dr Joyce, Leavis is not “excluded” because sceptical questioning is a feature of a particular philosophical school rather than philosophy per se. He thinks that what I am talking about is a, not the, philosophical tradition. Accordingly, he tries to produce an alternative one by detaching Wittgenstein from my list of paradigmatic philosophical thinkers via the suggestion that he “doesn’t sit easily in this company”, and offering three other names, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer, of whom, he believes, the same might be said. In the latter case, I can only wonder why Dr Joyce imagines that his trio of phenomenologists do not “sit easily” in a company that includes Hegel or are distinguished in any relevant way by their relation to scepticism. With regard to Wittgenstein, it is certainly true that he differs from his predecessors in respect of his profound recognition that sceptical problems are not solved by constructing theories but, rather, dissolved by uncovering the confusions on which they trade. However, it is fallacious to conclude from this that he is outside the philosophical community they constitute, since the sceptical problems that exercise them are his as well. And when Dr Joyce says that he “largely . . . disregarded the work of most previous philosophers” by way of insisting that he is not one of them, it is clear that something has gone badly wrong if this means that his thinking has no material relation to theirs. How can it be seriously maintained that the philosopher of the Investigations took no account of the work of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley Hume and Kant? The manifest truth is that Wittgenstein’s thought is everywhere marked by what one commentator happily describes as his “grasp of what . . . [the] others were trying to do . . . his sharply focussed intellectual sympathy for the position which was to be destroyed”. There is no more justification for treating him as a counter-example to my account of philosophical enquiry than there is in the case of Dr Joyce’s phenomenologists.

As to Dr Joyce’s suggestion that Leavis is entitled to be regarded as a philosopher because he is “sceptical . . . about certain claims of philosophy, for instance”, what this signally fails to take account of is the special character of philosophical scepticism, to which I point. The only sceptical questioning relevant to philosophy is the kind that demands explanations and justifications of the presuppositions of established modes of speech and thought. Wittgenstein is a philosopher because of his readiness to engage with it and investigate its claims, and the same is true of the others on my list. Leavis is not because he refuses to entertain it at all. That is the point of the anecdote that Dr Joyce concludes by mentioning.

One of Leavis’s singular achievements is to clearly recognize that his own work is not philosophy, and to warn of “the muddled misdirection of attention” that the failure to appreciate this encourages. It would be ironic if this fine insight were subverted by the well intentioned, but mistaken, efforts of a sincere admirer of his such as Dr Joyce.

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I. R.
I thought it would have been obvious from the philosophers I mention why scepticism is not just “an item on the empiricist [Mr Robinson’s private buzz-word] agenda” but an essential feature of philosophy itself. If it is not to Mr Robinson, I don’t know what more I can say to him.

Scepticism is not the whole of philosophy but it is its essential background, as anyone can establish by consulting the work of the great philosophers, from Plato to Wittgenstein (childish references to philosophy courses can be disregarded). If a “study of the general principles of some particular branch of knowledge” is philosophical it is because it starts from the sceptical questioning of their logical credentials. Leavis’s dealings with “general principles” are not of this kind, but a literary critic’s account of his aims and methods. Calling it “philosophy” will not make it the sort of “study of general principles” that we find in the philosophers I mention, who, between them, are representative of the subject, philosophy. That is all the reply Mr Robinson’s question needs (I don’t need to say what the animal in front of me is to know that it isn’t an elephant or to produce a description of it that makes it clear why it isn’t one). If he doesn’t understand that it is an answer, then, again, there is nothing more to be said.

I am happy to conclude by expressing my agreement with Mr Robinson when he says that I am neither “practising radical scepticism nor showing any flies the way out of any bottle” in this discussion. What I take myself to be doing is explaining in terms that should be readily intelligible to anyone why I do not believe it is helpful for literary people—or anyone else for that matter—to call Leavis “a philosopher”. I do not take myself to be engaging in philosophical discussion, for reasons which I have evidently failed to put across to Mr Robinson, though I hope other readers (if there are any) may get the point.

Richard Stotesbury