

Diversity in the University

1. The London School of Economics in the late-1960s: a tale of two departments

In 1966, I went to the London School of Economics – part of the University of London – to study as an undergraduate. I had applied to go there on the advice of the careers master at my school. At school, I had specialized in history, chemistry and mathematics,¹ and economics as a subject for study at university was a reasonable enough suggestion on his part. But when I got there, I found economics intellectually uninteresting. It was taught not by telling us about economic problems, the different, competing theories that had been advanced to try to resolve them, and how they had fared when attempts had been made to evaluate them. Instead, the subject was taught after the manner of what Thomas Kuhn, in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, described as a 'normal science'. In this, an approach is introduced to students by way of giving examples of how problems are solved – and one has to do exercises, in which one applies this approach to examples, until – in effect – one could do them in one's sleep. (This was a good idea, as the exercises were so intellectually tedious that they were liable to send people to sleep!)

I was, however, lucky, because the structure of the degree to which I was admitted allowed people to choose five different subjects for study in their first year. I took economics, history, and politics (looking at issues in British government). I also took courses in the foundations of mathematics, and logic. It was the last course that – oddly – proved really interesting. (I write 'oddly' as the way in which logic is typically taught makes introductory economics look intellectually exciting.) At the L.S.E., however, introductory logic was taught in a manner that was influenced by the approach to philosophy of Karl Popper. What this meant was that, rather than just doing tedious exercises through which one learned various basic skills about proof and so on, the teaching of techniques was embedded within a fascinating historical approach to the subject. Intellectual problems in the philosophy of mathematics and of logic were introduced to us, and the ideas that people had had in grappling with them were introduced, in the course of which we were

taught (albeit in modern terms²) ways in which those ideas could be used as tools (in the use of which we were given a basic training).

All this was the most intellectually interesting work that I undertook, and in my second and third years, I specialized – within the economics degree – in philosophy. What that in fact involved me in, I only fully appreciated later. I ended up taking a wide range of courses in philosophy. But these were taught from a distinctive perspective, influenced by the approach of Karl Popper. In addition, it was possible – as an undergraduate – to apply for admission to his research seminar. At this a variety of visiting speakers gave papers, which were critically discussed, often in a no-holds-barred way, by members of the philosophy department.

What all this meant, was that students like myself received an introduction to philosophy,³ which was strongly focussed around a 'Popperian' approach. This, however, was not taught dogmatically. We were introduced not just to Popper's views in philosophy, and how all kinds of sub-disciplines in philosophy looked, if one took such an approach, but also to criticisms of it, and the diverse ideas that people were advancing to try to overcome these problems. What this meant, was that a distinctive perspective on things lay at the centre of one's work, and philosophy was seen as a matter of ongoing argument between this, and other perspectives. The key alternatives were the approaches taken by logical empiricists, and also by Thomas Kuhn – and later by Paul Feyerabend. In addition, it being the late 1960s, Marxism – often in the Hegelian-influenced readings which had then become popular among British students – was also on the agenda. There was also work by people influenced by British 'ordinary language' philosophy (itself influenced by the later work of Wittgenstein). In addition, it was possible, as a student in the University of London, to attend teaching elsewhere. I went to seminars at University College, given by the philosopher of science Larry Laudan, and was also able to make enquiries about attending a seminar on Freud given by Richard Wollheim.⁴

I was also, within the structure of my degree, able to study political science. I particularly enjoyed political theory. At that point, an interesting figure in the study of the history of political thought was Michael Oakeshott. And he was a Professor in the L.S.E. Department of Political Science. Oakeshott was a distinctive figure. He was well-known for erudite and well-written reflective defences of conservative ideas. (This was all the more striking, because he succeeded, at the L.S.E., the explicitly socialist Harold Laski.) But what was perhaps most striking about Oakeshott's views, is that he was the last representative of a British strand of Hegelian idealism. Oakeshott wrote a book, **Experience and Its Modes**, which was in this tradition.⁵ And his work, more generally, exhibited a strong Hegelian influence – e.g. in his ideas about the relationship between reflective political theory, and political practise. Oakeshott gained a strong reputation for his lectures on the history of political theory (and his introduction to an edition of Hobbes' **Leviathan**). But what was particularly striking – and I am delighted that I was allowed to attend – was his seminar for graduate students wishing to work on the history of political thought.

Oakeshott, for this, was joined by graduate students, former graduate students, and several of his colleagues. (In retrospect, it suggested to me a secular version of pictures of Jesus in heaven surrounded by Saints and angels of different degrees.) When I attended the seminar, it consisted of a gentlemanly tour through a number of different approaches to the historiography of ideas. These included Lovejoy's **Great Chain of Being**, Collingwood's **The Idea of History**, and Hempel's ideas about the structure of explanation in history. Had I been more literate, I would have recognised the pattern of argument in the seminar as being a bit like that in Hegel's **Phenomenology**, in which there is a path – through the consideration of different views and their limitations – towards a view of (supposedly) greater adequacy: Oakeshott's own.

The style of discussion was interesting, and it contrasted strikingly with that in Popper's seminar. Popper's seminar was characterized by a relentless pursuit of the truth – such that it was a matter for

congratulation if a visiting speaker ever reached the end of their paper, and in which it has been asked if some speakers ever got to the end of their first sentence before being interrupted.⁶ By contrast with this, the style of Oakeshott's seminar was gentlemanly. Indeed, after a brief discussion of Hempel, I – as a very junior visitor – indicated that (as Popper had argued) the structure of explanation being referred to could be used both for scientific explanation involving scientific laws, and also for 'rationality principle' explanations of meaningful individual action in history and the social sciences. Not only did the members of the seminar listen politely, but I was invited back to say a little more about the topic, the next week.

There was, however, another difference between the two seminars. It seemed to me that Oakeshott's seminar, while the approach that underpinned it went back to his British Idealist **Experience and Its Modes**, was not sustained, across the seminar, by any exposition of, or argument about, the systematic views about philosophy that he had set out there. Oakeshott's distinctions between 'politics' and 'ideology' were shared – and thus a distaste for the idea that philosophy or other theoretical approaches had any legitimate leading role to play in politics. But the notion that political philosophy or political ideology, say, was kind of second-order effluvium from politics, seemed to me to be sustained not by a strongly shared, but hotly debated, concern with Oakeshott's earlier arguments,⁷ so much as being a matter, in part, of an attraction to vaguely Hegelian ideas, and on the other, a matter of temperament. I am not good at picking such things up. But it seemed to me that it was thought almost ungentlemanly⁸ to press, as I had done, the kind of Popper-inspired questioning of such ideas, to which I was inclined as a product of my training in the Popperian-influenced philosophy department!

2. Some Wider issues

Both Popper and Oakeshott had students who went on to teach elsewhere. However, with the possible exception of David Manning's MA programme at Durham⁹ (where, however, Henry Tudor also taught Marxism), it was not clear that there was anywhere which offered the

kind of introduction to an Oakeshottian perspective, at a graduate level, to the historiography of political thought that was offered in the Department of Government at the L.S.E. I am not aware of a 'Popperian' school anywhere outside the L.S.E. (with the possible exception of some of the students of the talented Iranian philosopher, Ali Paya, who was, himself, influenced by David Miller, and who seems, in turn, to have influenced several scholars in Iran).¹⁰ There are, certainly, some very distinguished former students of Popper's who have had long and successful careers in university teaching and research – a few obvious names are Alan Musgrave, Ian Jarvie, and David Miller. But, as far as I know, none of them have had other students, who have had any clear personal commitment to critical rationalism. This has also been my own experience – I have taught undergraduates, and have also supervised a number of Ph.D. dissertations. But none of these people have shown any interest in critical rationalism, as such.

Critics might say: but there are obvious flaws in both Popperian 'critical rationalism' and Oakeshottian approaches. Suppose that one were to grant this. In each case, there seems to me a lot of interest in the viewpoints, and much that stands in need of critical exploration. But both approaches are distinctive and not, on the face of it, something that people will come to understand easily. In each case, it seems to me, what is needed is a programme of education in which students are introduced to such an approach, and into argument about it. But this is something that will only happen in a way that is appropriate, if there is a body of instruction involved. What, I think, does not work, is if there is, in a specific academic department, simply a scatter of people taking different perspectives on things. It is certainly possible that an individual may attract a following for their particular approach. But the problem is, that they are likely to do so only by way of being a charismatic figure – which may well mean that while they attract a following, it will typically be uncritical. In addition, if, within a discipline, a specific training is needed, then approaches which can flourish will only be those which are compatible with this. And in terms of philosophy, it would seem to me that neither Popperian 'critical rationalism', nor Oakeshott's approach, fit into what is commonly accepted as the 'standard' model of analytical philosophy.

In getting to grips with this kind of diversity, I would suggest that we need to think in terms of issues which Popper discussed as 'metaphysical research programmes' and Alasdair MacIntyre in some of his later writings, as 'research traditions'. There is an issue, here, about the structure of intellectual endeavours. But it also seems to me to have ramifications for how we should organize universities.

3. On Popper and MacIntyre

Popper, while he did his earliest work in Vienna and shared many interests with the 'Vienna Circle', had a number of important disagreements with them in philosophy. One of these related to metaphysics. The Vienna Circle – under the influence of Wittgenstein - became associated with the idea that metaphysics is meaningless. Popper strongly disagreed. He did not, at the time at which he was involved in discussions in Vienna about these issues, have to hand a theory in terms of which he could argue as to why some of these ideas could be preferred, rationally, to others. But he was well aware that he was a realist – in the sense of believing in the reality and objectivity of the world independently of human experiences of it. He also thought that science should take as its aim the development of explanatory theories which tried to discover truths about the world. (This view led him, as it had Einstein, to be dissatisfied with empirically successful versions of quantum mechanics, which, however, could not be given a realist interpretation.) Popper was also impressed by the way in which some metaphysical theories had played an important role in the historical development of scientific knowledge.

Later on, Popper developed ideas about how metaphysical theories could be rationally assessed, in terms of their fruitfulness in addressing the problems which they were attempting to resolve. He also discussed what he called 'metaphysical research programmes' – ideas about the way in which competing cosmological ideas in metaphysics have served both to inspire science, but also to be things about the merits of which, over time, there could be rational argument. Indeed, Popper even offered such an approach himself, in terms of spelling out some ideas about how a metaphysics of probabilistic dispositions might have a role

in the future development of science, and in understanding otherwise puzzling features of human life.¹¹

Alasdair MacIntyre has been one of the most interesting British philosophers. While he was trained as an analytical philosopher, he also had attachments to both Christianity and Marxism, and he produced, over the years, interesting critical work which brought together all three perspectives. In more recent years, he became interested in virtue ethics. In his **After Virtue**, he set out a striking approach in which he tried to revive an Aristotelian-cum-Thomistic approach in such a way that it did not depend on Aristotle's biologically-influenced metaphysical ideas. In subsequent books, notably **Whose Justice, Which Rationality, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry**, and **Dependent Rational Animals**, MacIntyre set out an approach which was more explicitly Thomistic, but which also recognised the importance of different 'research traditions'.

MacIntyre's ideas about these, seem to me to be close to Popper's ideas about 'metaphysical research programmes'. But MacIntyre also explicitly discusses the need for these traditions to be given institutional exemplification. (Popper, while his views would in my judgement obviously call for this,¹² was never happy about discussing epistemology in social terms. MacIntyre made various references to Popper's work, but typically just by reference to his criticisms of Marxism and his fallibilism.¹³) Their views seem to me important, but also to stand in need of further development.

First, it seems to me implicit in Popper's approach that one needs to envisage different competing research programmes as operating within shared, but revisable, ideas about what a good explanation should look like. Different specific research programmes would, in addition, have their own ideas about what would be desirable, which might include views about how these shared standards should be revised. But if one is concerned with genuinely different traditions, this would need to take place on a consensual basis, across the different competing traditions.¹⁴ There can also, obviously, be fruitful critical interchange across different traditions. Those who are attracted to one tradition may find that those who take different views from them, are able to point to problems and lacunae about their own tradition, to which they will need to give critical attention. In addition, as Imre Lakatos argued, we may well find that

specific pieces of science – or more broadly, explanations offered from one particular perspective – are incredibly successful on the basis of many of our existing shared criteria for the evaluation of scientific achievements, while at the same time not complying with others.¹⁵ This may lead us to have to think about how our ideas about what we are aiming at, might need to be revised.

It would seem to me that MacIntyre's approach would be compatible with this. But I found a problem about his presentation. For he seemed to me not to have distinguished as clearly as he could have done, between the pluralism that he favoured, and his own championing of a revised form of Thomism as a substantive approach. With regard to the basis on which different competing views should be judged, his Thomism needs to be placed on a par with other substantive approaches (as do, say, Popper's own ideas about a metaphysical research programme based on 'propensities' or probabilistic dispositions). But the (revisable) framework within which different approaches are developed, seems to me to need to stand independently of this – and, in effect, to be negotiated across different research programmes.

4. Institutions

There are, then, two kinds of institutions which seem to me to be needed, to make all this work.¹⁶ (At the same time, there are obvious and complex issues which can't be addressed in a short piece such as this: just what gets recognised; does everything get government funding – and if so on what basis; what does one do with traditions which run out of steam, intellectually, and so on.)

The first, is the acceptance that there exists a genuine but substantive pluralism,¹⁷ together with the idea of accountability to revisable standards (about which there is broad agreement across different traditions), as to what would make for success on the part of a research programme or tradition. This would make for a form of external accountability in respect of any tradition. It would be good, too, if one could institutionalize 'public spheres' within which there could be exchanges, across traditions, to discuss these matters – and in which traditions could hold one another to account in respect of their performance. Of course, people within a particular tradition might wish, subsequently, to respond by saying that from their perspective, the form

of accountability being used was not fair. But what would be crucial would be the requirement for such engagement, and that a telling case for the revision of common standards would need to be made in a public forum, however defective it might currently be.

I should also say, explicitly, that our current academic institutions seem to me to fail badly on this account. Typically, there is a presumption on the part of leading journals that there is a single shared approach – rather than that there are competing research programmes, the proponents of which will be concerned primarily with their own problematic. In philosophy, there tends also to be a presumption that an ‘analytical’ approach, in which people address piecemeal problems in a technical manner, is the appropriate way to go. But this seems to me to amount to the imposition of one particular – and in my view badly flawed – approach, onto everyone else. (And an approach, what is more, the character and defects of which cannot itself be addressed by critics, because such critical discussion is not of the character of technical puzzle-solving, to which analytical journals are committed.)

More generally, one might, for example, suggest that analytical work is prefaced by a brief statement that explains the character of the approach that is being taken, and to where the reader should go for an explicit statement of its character, and for arguments about its desirability. One then needs, as a matter of urgency, non-analytical journals which, on the one hand, would be dedicated to work within different particular research programmes, and, on the other, which would be concerned with argument about the merits or otherwise of – and the progress or lack of progress of – different research programmes.

Second, I think that one needs to take up MacIntyre’s ideas about the need for different centres, within which different specific approaches are investigated, and taught to students. In the account that I gave of the L.S.E. with which I started this piece, I described a situation in which this had come about by chance. My suggestion is that we might learn from this. There is clearly a case, in the education of undergraduates, that there is an appropriate subject-based coverage of the field within which people are being taught, through which, also, appropriate skills are also taught. But this, on the face of it, can be negotiated across different traditions. How subjects are taught, however, can – I would

suggest – usefully be handled in different ways, depending on the research traditions in question.

This would be most intensive at graduate level. And there – if, for example, funding for the support of graduate study was portable, and if there was funding for conferences and for other forms of exchange across traditions – I would expect that the ability to get training in a specific approach, as well as critical interchange with those who take different views, would be a real source of strength in academic life. In this way, we could really hope to learn from one another. We would also, I would have thought, be able to take steps beyond what, it seems to me, happens all too frequently today. That is, that different approaches provide an account of their own ideas in a way that offers a travesty of competing approaches, and in which the actual critical history of the development of different views, which seems to me essential for appraising their progress or lack of progress, disappears from sight.

Should the kind of approach that I am suggesting, here, be found attractive, not only would many difficult problems need to be grappled with. But what traditions could be found in different countries, would be likely to be different. In Catholic countries, there would obviously be a substantive representation from Catholic intellectual traditions. But the kind of competitive pluralistic setting that I am suggesting, might serve to make sure that there is a good measure of critical engagement with issues raised by their critics, and assessment of what is seen as their progress, or lack of progress, by other people. But they would surely be happy to do the same for others. One would also expect there to be a good representation of Marxist approaches, and similarly, critical interchange with them. Those who favour post-structuralism, or, say, current ideas about gender identity, would also have their place. But they would need to address critical points made by the proponents of other approaches. While in countries with significant Muslim populations, the intellectual ideas which are informing their traditions would also get proper institutional representation – but, at the same time, would need to engage, critically, with other perspectives, too. All this, I think, would make for more interesting intellectual life – and for

one in which we would also be led to respect and to learn from one another.

¹ Advanced education in secondary schools typically specialization in three subjects in one's last two years at school.

² In retrospect, I would have appreciated more historical authenticity, and less of an approach which simply used historical material as a pathway towards modern views.

³ Around a core of work on the history and philosophy of science.

⁴ There was no problem in principle about attending this, except that it in fact required that one had taken a previous course with Wollheim, which I had not taken

⁵ The tradition lived on in Magdalen College, Oxford. See, on this, James Patrick's *The Magdalen Metaphysicals: Idealism and Orthodoxy at Oxford 1901-1945*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985.

⁶ Compare, for differing accounts which, however, between them convey something of the spirit of Popper's seminar in the early days, W. W. Bartley III, 'A Popperian Harvest', in P. Levinson (ed.) *In Pursuit of Truth*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1982 and Joseph Agassi, *A Philosopher's Apprentice*, second edition, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008.

⁷ Kenneth Minogue, a New Zealander, had been influenced by the Scottish/Australian philosopher John Anderson. Elie Kedourie, the formidable scholar of the Middle East, also had a strong interest in Hegel. While Robert Orr, another New Zealander, seems to have grown closer to Oakeshott's perspective over time.

⁸ I recall, in general discussion with people from the seminar, having suggested that the way in which horses were depicted as galloping in works of art, had been affected by what was discovered as a consequence.

⁹ On which see Andrew Gamble's 'Introduction: An Intellectual Journey', in his *The Western Ideology*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021.

¹⁰ Joseph Agassi, a student of Popper's, has had a significant influence on some other philosophers, such as William Berkson and John Wettersten.

¹¹ These developments are best tracked through Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations*, *Unended Quest*, and his *Postscript*.

¹² See, on this, Ian Jarvie's **The Republic of Science**, Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001. See also my 'Popper, Social Epistemology and Dialogue', <https://social-epistemology.com/2017/08/04/popper-social-epistemology-and-dialogue-jeremy-shearmur/>

¹³ References to Popper's fallibilism can be found across MacIntyre's work. The easiest source for his criticism of Popper on Marxism is in his 'Breaking the Chains of Reason', in E. P. Thompson et al, **Out of Apathy**, London: New Left Books and Stephens & Sons, 1960, pp. 195-240.

¹⁴ I would like to thank Ali Abedi Renani for pointing out to me that, in looking at this issue in MacIntyre, one needs to distinguish between comparisons within broadly the same tradition, and comparisons across traditions.

¹⁵ See Lakatos's 'Newton's Effect on Scientific Standards', in his **The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes**, and also Popper's brief remarks on this topic in 'The Bucket and the Searchlight', in **Objective Knowledge**.

¹⁶ I would add that it seemed to me a failure on his part to identify and address this problem – and to realise that its resolution required institutional approaches, perhaps of the kind suggested here – that made Paul Feyerabend's ideas about social and intellectual pluralism in the end terribly disappointing.

¹⁷ I would favour the idea that we cannot know in advance what might clash with what, and that we should, in consequence, resist the notion that it is obvious that particular ideas, or research programmes, could not be at odds with one another. The idea that an approach addresses some kind of self-contained realm, should be looked at with suspicion just because it can serve as a way of cutting ideas off from pertinent criticism. A striking example of this is what seems to me the thoroughly bogus idea that religious views deal just with ethical matters and are in principle immune to any kind of factual criticism (i.e. empirical, metaphysical or historical).