

Oxford Moral Philosophy.

R. M. Hare and P. H. Nowell-Smith.

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Category:Letter to the editor

Letters to the Editor

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Oxford Moral Philosophy

Sir,—Owing to the lubricity of her style, few listeners will have understood what Miss Anscombe was driving at in her broadcast about Oxford moral philosophers, printed in THE LISTENER of February 14. I am therefore sending you some of the fruits of my attempt to unravel her meaning from the tortuous sarcasms under which she concealed it. If I have misinterpreted her, I ask her to forgive me and to express herself more openly.

It appears that (a) she thinks that if someone seems to be in earnest about a moral question, the obvious explanation is that this is 'an important piece of equipment' for corrupting people (I am flattered to be bracketed with William Temple among those who have practised this hypocrisy); (b) she does not approve of what she calls 'the highest and best ideals' of the country at large; these include the desire to prevent suffering, especially that of children; (c) she thinks it wrong to judge acts by the foreseen consequences of committing them; for example, she thinks it a sin to tell a lie in order to shield a friend. I understand from this that I need not consider what the Gestapo will do to my friend when I have told them where he is; and—to take another example—that the person who ordered the atom bomb to be dropped on Hiroshima had no duty to consider whether anybody would be killed by the explosion. Yet in a pamphlet which she recently circulated Miss Anscombe accused Mr. Truman of being a murderer.

I have also heard (and if I have heard wrong, she will no doubt correct me) that she believes that the sin of lying can be committed only by making a plain false statement; *suggestiones falsi*, however effective, may escape hell fire. A person of this persuasion who wishes to misrepresent a colleague will naturally not do so by direct attack, and will refrain from giving even fabricated evidence that the views attacked are actually held by the victim. The appropriate method for such a person is that which she has in fact followed; she alludes to some philosophical views which might pass with an ill-informed listener for caricatures of the victim's views; then, by means of such phrases as 'Isn't this very much in line with . . .?', 'A frequent occurrence that is very much in the same spirit is . . .' and 'With this too goes the idea that . . .', these views are associated with opinions and practices which Miss Anscombe dislikes and which she hopes the listener will condemn. Thus the Oxford moralist finds himself encouraging the chucking of widows out of their houses. But what is the connection between the various objects of Miss Anscombe's hate, other than that she hates them all?

My main purpose in writing to you is to remove an impression which may have been created that the youth, when it gets to Oxford, will meet many philosophers who talk like her. If this were so, the youth might be well-advised to go elsewhere and avoid corruption. But in fact she is unique, and those who come here are much more likely to meet plain, ordinary enquirers into the nature of morality, whose hope is to teach them by example and precept to think and speak about it clearly.

Oxford
Yours, etc.,
R. M. HARE

Sir,—I have some reason to believe that when Miss Anscombe delivered her talk, 'Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?', the ironical nature of her defence may have escaped her audience. It seemed therefore unnecessary to make any reply. But the publication of her text alters the case. No intelligent reader can now be in any doubt as to her intentions and there is a small chance that readers who know nothing about Oxford philosophy may get a false impression.

The defence Miss Anscombe submits is that a charge of corrupting the youth can only lie against moral philosophers if it can be shown that their influence makes young people worse than they would otherwise be; but this cannot be shown since 'Oxford moral philosophy is perfectly in tune with the highest and best ideals of the country at large'. The irony is only made obvious when we learn that these 'highest and best ideals' are. Among them we find: disregard of natural justice, approval of the view that certain proceedings of local authorities are not challengeable on grounds of fraud, and the rejection of the principle of parental authority. Miss Anscombe's defence therefore implies that the philosophers concerned subscribe to these 'ideals'. Yet I know of no work of any Oxford philosopher in which subscription to such principles is either expressed or implied. Would she please say where such views are to be found?

The general burden of her criticism of the morality of the country at large is that people tend to judge all acts by their consequences rather than by their 'nature and quality' and she implies that Oxford philosophers share this attitude. But she does not say which philosophers share it or where it is to be found in their works, and she omits to mention the fact that, in my book on *Ethics*, I expressly condemn it. Miss Anscombe seems to be (though I can scarcely believe that she is) ignorant of the difficulties involved in drawing a distinction between an act and its consequences. For example, was Mr. Truman's 'act' the signing of an order, the killing of a number of Japanese, or the saving of a number of Japanese and other lives? If it was the first only, Miss Anscombe has, on her own principles, as little right to condemn it as Mr. Truman's supporters have to defend it, since both judgements turn on its consequences. But if the killing is to be included in the nature and quality of Mr. Truman's act, why not the saving of lives? I do not suggest that no distinction could be drawn here, only that it is not an easy matter to say where and how it is to be drawn. It is with the elucidation of just such difficulties that moral philosophy is concerned.

Similarly it is not easy to say just what would and what would not justify intervention to prevent cruelty to children. Would Miss Anscombe carry the principle of parental authority so far as to deny, in all circumstances and with whatever safeguards, the right of the police or of an inspector of the N.S.P.C.C. or even of a private citizen to save a child from a parent who has not yet contravened the law? If she is prepared to admit that this might in some circumstances and with some safeguards be allowed, she will find herself asking the questions 'In what circumstances, with what safeguards?' And then she might find herself driven to asking some more general questions about the principles she

uses when thinking about the particular questions.

In short, she might find herself doing some moral philosophy and discovering, perhaps, that the answers are not always so easy to give as her references to natural justice and the nature and quality of an act imply.

Oxford
Yours, etc.,
P. H. NOWELL-SMITH

The Future of World Population

Sir,—I would entirely agree with Mr. Cowan (THE LISTENER, February 14) that sexuality cannot be equated with physiological fecundity, but rather the contrary. The point was that differential emigration from Ireland seems to have increased the proportion of people left behind who are 'not the marrying kind'. These are psychologically, but not necessarily physiologically, infecund since they marry late or not at all and have few children.

In my talk (THE LISTENER, February 7) it was the rate of increase of world population rather than total numbers that I suggested might fall off in the future. That should give rise to no complacency but only to the hope that if population and production problems are vigorously attacked there is some prospect of success, since we will be working with and not against natural processes. The danger is not complacency, but the fatalistic feeling that whatever can be done will never prevail against the Malthusian law of the geometrical increase of population and so why try to do anything, with any luck we won't live to see the worst.

Cambridge
Yours, etc.,
C. B. GOODHART

Minds and Machines

Sir,—Before this discussion is concluded, may I comment briefly on Dr. George's reply to my letter (THE LISTENER, January 31).

In criticising his identification of brain with mind, I was not in fact reviving the traditional body-mind problem. Rather, I was making a plea for the right use of terms in scientific description. While rejecting the Cartesian dichotomy, I think it neither 'stupid' nor 'trivial' to recognise both cerebral processes and mental events. Both of these phenomena can be studied by the scientist, but neither can provide a sufficient account of the other. I would argue, therefore, that physiological terms are inappropriate at the level of psychological description.

Finally, Dr. George in his talk stated categorically that ideas are created in the brain. This may be a useful assumption for a limited field of enquiry, but it lacks the verification which could make it a statement of fact.

London, W.C.1.
Yours, etc.,
S. P. W. CHAVE

Sir,—I agree with Dr. George; the implications of the subject matter of our correspondence are too complicated to deal with briefly. For instance, the word 'science' needs definition; it is clearly used in many different senses—Dr. George, for example, seems to use it in a slightly different sense from Dr. Baldwin, in the talk reported in THE LISTENER (February 14) a few pages before Dr. George's letter. That Dr. George believes science can help in all the more important crises of life clearly means he uses

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