

Leavis & Philosophy

an essay by Chris Joyce
a reply by Richard Stotesbury
and subsequent correspondence

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This sequence began with Dr Joyce's essay "Meeting in Meaning", *Modern Age*, Summer, 2005, and is probably not yet complete. "Meeting in Meaning" is reproduced by kind permission of *Modern Age*, to which a link can be found in the Columns file. Mr Stotesbury replied in our website magazine *Words in Edgeways* and from there the correspondence continued in our weekly columns or on our home page. It has been gathered into one easily readable sequence for the sake of anyone who would like to follow a careful discussion about an important matter, the nature of F. R. Leavis's distinction as a literary critic, and another important question that that raises, the relations between literary criticism and philosophy.

Dr Joyce has an essay forthcoming in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Volume 38 No 1, March 2009, and the topic is likely to be resumed at the second F. R. Leavis conference to be held at Downing College, Cambridge, in September 2009, of which details will be posted on our website in due course.

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Meeting in Meaning

Philosophy and Theory
in the Work of F. R. Leavis

Chris Joyce

William Wilkins's buildings of Downing College, Cambridge, in his Attic style, are mainly of a warm Ketton stone, from Lincolnshire. Spare of ornament, and enclosing three sides of expansive lawn and broad gravelled pathways, they mark the whole design with "a mixture of vitality and asceticism". This apt phrase comes from an obituary in *The Times* of 18th April 1978, characterizing not Downing itself but one of its most remarkable former fellows: the literary teacher and critic, F. R. Leavis (1895–1978). Leavis was in many ways the academic glory of Downing in the twentieth century, although the severance of relations between them in 1964 hardly suggests this. The college provided an appropriate setting for his "lived, serious and intransigent project".¹ It was—like the university of which it forms part—the outward and visible presence of an ideal.²

¹ Raymond Williams, "Seeing a Man Running", in *The Leavises*, ed. Denys Thompson (Cambridge, 1984), 121; re-printed in Raymond Williams, *What I Came to Say* (London, 1989), 22

² Leavis adverted to this idea in lectures given late in his career at Bristol and York: "Looking round at this beautiful university city, I have said to myself: 'Surely here the creative battle to maintain our living cultural heritage—a continuity of profoundly human creative life—must seem worth fighting; must be seen as a battle that *shall* not be lost.'" (*Nor Shall My Sword*, London, 1972, 160) "Here, bearing the name of the historic city, ancient second capital of England, is this convincing evidence of modern skill, modern and humane architectural intelligence, and modern resources, seeming, on its beautifully landscaped site, to grow in its modernity out of the old Hall, the old lakeside lawns and gardens and the old timbered grounds. It is easy to see that the architects have been guided by an idea that kept them in touch with true and highly conscious academic foresight, and that the idea of the university as I have been insisting on it isn't merely mine." (*Op. cit.*, 193) The mention of "pride in being allowed to feel still associated," words with which he concluded the York lecture, recalls for us his "deep piety towards Cambridge" of which he spoke to Michael Black (*The Leavises*, 93), and of the memories of him, such as the late Brian Redhead's (BBC radio), teaching in the Fellows' garden at Downing. It surely

This paper tries to indicate the Leavisian gravitational field—or the field of association in which I want to “situate” him. I shall argue that his thought was profound and penetrating and very far indeed from exhibiting any kind of pre-theoretical innocence. I also suggest—the argument is related—that his work resists classification and that to call him a “moral formalist” or even (without qualification) a “liberal humanist” is to misunderstand him. I am not suggesting that “by a devout study of [his] symbolism a key can be found that will open to us a supreme . . . wisdom” (his disparaging words of the Blake “industry”).¹ But some essential clues seem to me not to have been widely taken up. Testimony bearing on this comes from a surprising source—Raymond Williams:

At the surface level there was a very strange mixture of the deliberate and the reckless, but below that again there was a condition I have only ever seen in one or two other men: a true sense of mystery, and of very painful exposure to mystery, which was even harder to understand because this was the man of so many confident and well-known beliefs and opinions.²

A former pupil, William Walsh, offers a similar “take”:

One always had the feeling that one wasn’t simply discussing what was there on the page. This was taking place, of course, but the discussion was deeply rooted and far-reaching, dealing with all that one felt was really important in life. . . . Leavis’s teaching always seemed to engage both these facets: one’s personal life, and the life of the mind—the search for the significance of life itself.³

underlies too his remark that it was “advisedly that I particularize ‘ancient English university’: the preoccupation is not with the generalities of philosophical and moral theory and doctrine, but with picking up a continuity; carrying on and fostering the essential life of a time-honoured and powerful institution, in this concrete historical England.” (*Education and the University*, London, 1943, new edition, 1948, 19)

1 “Justifying One’s Valuation of Blake”, in *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher* (posth.), ed. G. Singh (Cambridge, Eng., 1982), 18; originally published in *The Human World*, No. 7 (May 1972), 58

2 Raymond Williams, *op. cit.*, in the two editions 115, 17

3 “Dr Leavis and the drift of civilization,” in *Three Honest Men: Edmund Wilson, F. R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling*, ed. Philip French (Manchester, Eng., 1980), 47

I associate these two recollections and, in doing so, think of Leavis's own observation in *The Living Principle* about the nature of a language as taking "the individual being, the particularizing actuality of life, back to the dawn of human consciousness, and beyond."¹ The use of the word *beyond* is particularly striking here ("In the beginning was the Word").² His long engagement with the work of T. S. Eliot was, I suggest, the main testing ground for the condition identified (rightly, I think) by Williams.

"Painful exposure to mystery": the mystery immanent in the evolution of organic matter which can think and talk about itself, about its life and imminent death, but can do so, of its nature, only within insurmountable limitations. For, where ontology is concerned, the knowing consciousness is its own putative object ("the brain is alive"³). Whether Leavis would have acknowledged this way of putting it, one cannot know. He ploughed a furrow of his own making, developing original thought out of long pondering on the nature of literary creation.

Was Leavis religious? The answer, I believe, has *the closest bearing* on the nature of his thought. His father—influential in his formative years—was a Victorian radical. "There was," Leavis said, "a fierce, Protestant conscience there, but it was divorced from any religious outlet."⁴ There is an evident sympathy in him

1 *The Living Principle: "English" as a Discipline of Thought* (London, 1976), 44. Paul Dean in his Introduction to the American edition (Chicago, 1998), footnote, p. 4, has made a shrewd guess as to the origin of Leavis's title, which, he suggests, "may derive from Newman's *Idea of a University*, Discourse III." Here, by reference to the active, volitional "living principle" in human life Newman invokes analogically the presence in the universe of an intelligent creator. Although Newman's theology cannot have been congenial to Leavis, there are indications that he had a high regard for his intellect, and an interesting likeness is suggested by Newman's emphasis on the primacy of concrete experience in, for example, his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870).

2 See John Marsh, *The Gospel of St John* (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1968): "The Word thus conceived is really life itself . . . the creative Logos." (97) And "In spite of the somewhat vague sense of the translation *Wōrd*, it is wiser not to replace it with a more definite meaning, for any more restricted significance would fail to do justice to the rich allusiveness of John's language. Nowhere is it more creatively at work than here." (102–3)

3 In "Thought, meaning and sensibility: the problem of value judgement", *Valuation in Criticism* (posth.), ed. G. Singh (Cambridge, Eng., 1986), 293

4 Quoted in Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (London, 1995), 29. A valuable discussion of Leavis's conception of the relations between poetry and morality occurs in Vincent Buckley's book of that title, *Poetry and Morality* (London, 1959). It is greatly extended by R.P. Bilan in the first sustained examination of the religious dimension in

for the English tradition of religious nonconformism—and nonconformism more generally. It is easy to see why Eric Warmington made the mistake of thinking he was a Quaker¹ (not so wide of the mark as Pound's thinking him a Jew²). But he remained firmly and radically agnostic. It was a necessary part of his effort to transcend (or get beneath) doctrinal and ideological constraints.³

Early pointers appear in the original introduction to *Towards Standards of Criticism* (1933):

Literary criticism provides the test for *life and concreteness*; where it degenerates the instruments of thought degenerate too, and thinking, released from the testing and energizing contact with the full living consciousness, is debilitated, and betrayed to the academic, *the abstract and the verbal*. It is of little use to discuss values if the sense for value—the experience and perception of value—is absent.⁴

This passage is notable for its precision and lucidity. Here already are the themes, overt or implicit, that would preoccupy him in his later years: the concrete and uniquely specific character of human experience, the necessarily incorporated nature of life,

Leavis's work, in *The Literary Criticism of F. R. Leavis* (Cambridge, Eng., 1979). I am conscious of covering some of the same ground as Bilan though quite independently. I have attempted to push the discussion further by relating it more intricately to Leavis's original thinking as an "anti-philosophical" philosopher of language. See p. 8n1 and 17 and p. 11n1, below.

1 *New Universities Quarterly*, Volume 30, Number 1 (Winter 1975), 34. Leavis served on the Western Front, mainly as a nursing orderly, in the ambulance trains of the Friends' Ambulance Unit, between 1915 and 1918, including during the Somme offensive.

2 ". . . [T]he intimate letters between Pound and Eliot of the early 1930s reveal a shared anti-semitism directed at the critic F. R. Leavis ('Leavis louse') who, wrote Pound, dumped his 'anglo-yittisch and other diseased putrid secretions/notably a mess . . . spewing his Whitechapel spittle upon Sitwell,' his 'Leavis jew ooze,' etc." (Carole Seymour-Jones, *Painted Shadow: A Life of Vivienne Eliot*, 2001, 485) It should be said that although there is little evidence of a collaborative spirit in Eliot's dealings with Leavis, there is no evidence that he directed anti-semitism towards him, unless he is assumed to have been unconsciously influenced by Pound. Leavis's wife, Queenie, was of Jewish background but neither Eliot nor Pound are likely to have known this unless *via* her Ph.D. supervisor, I. A. Richards.

3 See "Restatements for Critics," *Scrutiny*, Volume I, Number 4, March, 1933, 315–323; re-printed in *Valuation in Criticism*, 46–53. See also note p. 7n3, below.

4 *Towards Standards of Criticism* (London, 1933); new edition with additional introduction by F.R. Leavis (London, 1976), 9, emphases added. Important precursor statements appear in "T. S. Eliot: a reply to the condescending", *Cambridge Review*, 8 February, 1929, 254–6, reprinted in *Valuation in Criticism*, 11–16.

which has no abstractable form, the relationship (for which “relationship” is a necessary but misleading term) between life and language (“or let us rather say *a* language . . . for there is no such thing as language in general”¹). To these he would add (from Polanyi) the idea of “tacit knowing” and (*via* Marjorie Grene) the crucial insight that *all* conceptual knowledge, *however abstract*, exists only “within the fundamental evaluation” of human society.²

Ten years later, with corresponding clarity of thought, he enunciated his conception of literary education in *Education and the University*:

. . . it is the preoccupation with cultural values as human and separable from any particular religious frame or basis . . . that prompts the description “humanist.” Literary criticism, in this sense, must always be humanist . . . in so far as it is literary criticism and not something else. It seems to me obvious that the approach needed in education must be in the same way humanist. . . . The point is that, whatever else may be necessary, there must in any case be . . . a liberal education that doesn’t start with a doctrinal frame and is not directed at inculcating one.³

The style of writing in this chapter (“The Idea of a University”) is quintessentially characteristic in a much more important sense than the term “style” would normally suggest: very precise and intensive, and continually referring back to its own assumptions woven into a complex nexus. The key terms include “civilization” and “culture,” the latter appearing, with “tradition,” in various permutations: “humane culture,” “cultural tradition,” “living tradition,” “humane tradition,” “maintaining continuity,” and “cultural sensibility in which tradition has its effective continuance.” It may be argued that Leavis is defining his key terms or first principles by reference to themselves in numerous variant forms. And this is in fact the case. But this is entirely consistent with his perception of the “relationship” between meaning and language. It explains his rejection of theoretical approaches in the sense of first seeking to define one’s underlying principles in general or

1 *The Living Principle*, 58 2 *Op. cit.*, 34

3 *Education and the University* (London, 1943), 19–20

abstract terms and then superimposing the resultant “diagram” on to the experience of reading a given work.

Roger Poole has given us an absorbing account of a meeting with Leavis in the summer of 1971 at which the issues at stake were discussed:

He mentioned Michael Polanyi as being significant. He said that he had not yet absorbed his “big book” (*Personal Knowledge*) but had been given access to the main ideas through reading Marjorie Grene’s *The Knower and the Known*. . . . He reacted with surprise and even a little displeasure to the question that I had brought along. . . . it seemed to me that there was . . . some form of ethical norm to which his work insistently pointed, some ethical constant . . . implied but never stated? No, he said, there is no such ethical reality; it is Life itself; one’s work is a stance; one’s stance is known, and people interpret it as they can.¹

Here is Leavis, in a pivotal passage, exemplifying this stance:

No one would question that when Blake testified to his consciousness that life in him was dependent on something other than himself—that in acting on his *ahnung* of what that something required of him he assumed a responsibility that must rest on him—the apprehension and belief he spoke out of and acted on were religious. But Collingwood and Polanyi are philosophers, and philosophers on whose outlook and approach modern science has had a decisive influence. “Religious” is not the word that would inevitably present itself first to anyone faced with describing either’s unmistakable

1 *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Volume XXV, Number 4, 1996, 393. The published essay is an abbreviated text. The context is a discussion of parallels between Leavis’s ideas and those of Husserl in his *The Crisis of European Sciences* (1936). The reader is recommended to explore the territory covered by Bilan (see p. 5n4 above) with reference to Roger Poole’s essay. Also see chapter 4 (“Language, Truth and Literature”) of Michael Bell’s *F. R. Leavis* (London, 1988) and his chapter on Leavis in Volume VII of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (2000), in which he explores parallels between Leavis and Heidegger (he has gone on to undertake similar comparative work in relation to Leavis and Dilthey), thus aligning Leavis’s thinking in part with branches of phenomenology, but also, by inference, related modes—including philosophy of biology—which question the applicability of Cartesian models to humanistic enquiry. See also p. 16n2, below. The reader is referred also to Barry Cullen’s perceptive discussion, “‘I thought I had provided something better’—F. R. Leavis, *Literary Criticism and Anti-Philosophy*”, in *The British Critical Tradition: A Re-evaluation*, ed. Gary Day, Macmillan, 1993.

sense of human responsibility. Yet I don't think that Polanyi—I confine myself now to him, because he is still alive, and has still, it seems to me, to get due recognition as the great potential liberating and impelling force he is—would disapprove of the application of the word “religious” to his own basic apprehension. And unless it has a religious quality the sense of human responsibility can't be adequate to the plight of the world that so desperately needs it. . . . The comparison between Eliot and Blake much facilitates the making of this point; in what other way, indeed, could one evoke the force of “religious” as it needs to be evoked for my purpose? The purpose in question *can* be served only by a literary critic and only by a critic who is adequately aware that a major creative writer is concerned with heuristic thought. The critic as I conceive him—this follows—addresses a non-specialist educated public, and, if it is weak, can't separate his critical preoccupations from the problem of strengthening it and making it capable of decisive influence. That is, writing—as a critic must who aspires to matter—out of the civilization I live in, I judge those preoccupations to be inseparable from a concern for the university as society's essential organ for the regenerating and maintaining of an educated public.¹

It is an extraordinary piece of writing, without likeness elsewhere in English literary criticism. The prose itself *enacts* (a Leavisian term) the kind of knitting together of linguistico-religious ideas which is intrinsic to their understanding. We move from Blake's sense of a God-given responsibility for the life which is “in” him, and in which he participates, to an affirmation about the university in the modern world as the essential organ for regenerating an educated public. The steps in this process transcend what would ordinarily be called logic; they are not readily separable as “steps” but constitute collectively a process of conceptual binding together analogous to the formation of a complex genetic structure.

The conceptual life of the passage is necessarily grounded in language but subtends a dimension in which lexical definition has little purchase. What is an “adequate” sense of human responsibility? It is one that has a “religious quality”; but adequate

1 *The Living Principle*, 236

to what? Adequate to “the plight of the world that so desperately needs it.” What is the force of “religious” in “religious quality”? It is a force that cannot be defined but only evoked, as it needs to be evoked for the purpose involved. The evoking can be done only through a comparison (such as has been offered) between Eliot and Blake in regard to their respective attitudes towards responsibility (or similar kinds of comparisons that will conduce to such evoking). What is the purpose involved to which a sense of the term “religious” (as evoked) is essential? It is a purpose of a kind which only a literary critic can serve and a literary critic “who is adequately aware that a major creative writer is concerned with heuristic thought” (such as the passage itself essays). A religious quality will be intrinsic to such a critic’s inseparably combined preoccupations with the heuristic nature of the kinds of thought characterizing major literary writing and with the essential university function of sustaining at least a vestigial “non-specialist educated public”—the meaning of “educated” here being “defined” by the whole foregoing account.

The comparison between Eliot and Blake returns me to my suggestion that Eliot’s work provides a testing ground for Leavis: a means “to determine and verify [his] own ultimate beliefs.”¹ Eliot’s affirmation in “The Dry Salvages” (resumed in “Little Gidding”) is wilful; that is, it associates with a failure of responsibility. So passionate is Leavis’s intensity about this—“fiercely rebutting”²—by the time of the analytical commentary in *The Living Principle* (a book which Paul Dean has described, rightly, I think, as Leavis’s *Summa*³) that D. W. Harding’s interpretation of the humanist ghost in “Little Gidding”—part of an approach to Eliot that Leavis had once found “intensely interesting”⁴—has become a “falsifying paraphrase”:⁵ not falsifying of Eliot’s

1 *Op. cit.*, 178 and 202 2 *Op. cit.*, 214

3 Introduction to the American edition of *The Living Principle*, 8

4 Leavis used this expression—“intensely interesting”—in *Education and the University* (p. 104) of D. W. Harding’s review of “Little Gidding”, in *Scrutiny*, Volume XI, Number 3, Spring 1943. The review was reprinted in Harding’s *Experience into Words* (London, [1963] 1974).

5 “Mutually Necessary,” in *New Universities Quarterly*, Volume 30, Number 2 (Spring 1976), 141; re-printed in *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, 198

intention but falsifying in its endorsement of the poet's wrongness.

Michael Tanner wrote "intensely interestingly" on this subject in exchanges with Leavis in the mid-seventies.¹ Regrettably, Leavis did not live long enough to extend the debate himself. I see him as going beyond the argument which Tanner ascribes to him when he (Tanner) says: "The trouble with 'Little Gidding' is that when belief finally comes, it is too easy, and the nature of achieved belief bears too little relationship to the processes that have led up to it." Yes, Leavis is saying this, but it seems to me he is saying also that Eliot's religious position is unacceptable and essentially *untenable* (even though Eliot does in a sense actually hold this position), because the poet, in discrediting creativity, commits a spiritual affront, involving himself in self-refutation and contradiction; a diagnosis which occasions in Leavis the utmost forensic rigour:

Harding's account of the long narrative passage in unrimed *terza rima* is in fact, in a fundamentally disastrous way, a misreading, and his use of the term "humanist" an indefensible misdirection. "Section II", he writes ". . . can be regarded as the *logical* starting point of the whole poem." Well, in so far as it stresses the fear of death...as the essential impulsion that determines the nature of Eliot's religious poetry, one can endorse this critical observation. But we are pulled up . . . when Harding goes on: "It deals with the desolation of death and the futility of life for those who have

1 In "Mutually necessary: a rejoinder," *New Universities Quarterly*, Volume 30, Number 3 (Summer 1976), 313-23. Also see Michael Black's essay in *New Universities Quarterly*, Volume 30, Number 1 (Winter 1975), where he observes that "Eliot's really real is shown to be something which is not anything we know or can speak of: either directly or analogically. It is a matter of being taken subtly and often with moving intensity to a gulf, across which Eliot points. And suddenly he is found to be on the other side." A further valuable discussion by Black in the context of Leavis's work on Lawrence (Eliot's "necessary opposite" for Leavis) appears in *F. R. Leavis: Essays and Documents*, ed. Ian MacKillop & Richard Storer (Sheffield, 1995). A revised and extended version of Black's essay is available as a privately published re-print, 2003. Leavis uses the term "necessary opposite" in his *English Literature in Our Time & The University* (London, 1969), 135. Much stimulus on the moral nature of his work is to be found in George A. Panichas's chapter on Leavis ("Creative Questioner"), in his *The Courage of Judgment: Essays in Criticism, Culture, and Society*, with a Foreword by Austin Warren (Knoxville, 1982)—and nowhere more so than in his reflections on the critique of *Four Quartets*, where Leavis's powers are exercised on the boundary with theology.

had no conviction of spiritual values in their life's work." For we don't suspect him of having any thought of a meaning that might be imputed to this ambiguous sentence—the meaning represented by the question: "What conviction of spiritual values as intrinsically *in* his life's work had Eliot himself?"

It is impossible to suppose that Harding is offering so radical a criticism of Eliot, whose assumption regarding spiritual reality and its utter otherness in relation to "human kind" the poetry conveys persistently and unambiguously. I have not disguised my own conviction that the assumption in a religious poet . . . entails a fundamental contradiction, making him incapable of cogent or coherent thought. So little does Harding agree with me that he continues: "The tone having been set by these stanzas, there opens a passage describing the dreary bitterness in which a life of literary culture can end if it has brought no sense of spiritual values." How can any life that it is not deplorably and reprehensibly a misdirection to call a life of literary culture *not*, one exclaims, bring a sense—bring, by what it essentially is and must be—a cultivated and heightened sense—of spiritual values? Harding's use of "literary" seems to give the word the meaning, or no-meaning, it has when a pornographic work is defended . . . by virtue of its "literary value."¹

Harding had written:

What the humanist's ghost sees in his life are futility, isolation and guilt on account of his self-assertive prowess—"which once you took for exercise of virtue."²

Leavis asks:

Was Blake a humanist? He certainly had "no sense of spiritual values" as Eliot conceived them. Yet I should have said that he pre-eminently stood for the spirit.³

No work of criticism is unassailable: Leavis, more than anyone, knew this ("Yes, but"); the commentary should be considered in the context of the whole body of his work on Eliot, which has something of the character of a quest. But he is brought to an

¹ *The Living Principle*, 257 ² *Experience into Words*, 123 ³ *The Living Principle*, 258

unusual explicativeness: “there is no acceptable religious position that is not a reinforcement of human responsibility.”¹ It is conceivable that someone might contest this, or its application to the poetry. Some may feel that Leavis’s target is at bottom “those doctrines, theological and religious, in which human nullity has been made a basic postulate”² (or even the underlying nature of Christian doctrine itself). But the critique is searching. Even if a persuasive argument could be brought to bear against its general diagnostic approach, it is hard to see how its central idea could be refuted: “How could ‘spiritual reality,’ for the apprehending of which Eliot (thus involuntarily conceding the point) uses the word ‘conscious,’ be a reality for us...unless apprehended out of life . . . ?”³ But it was for Leavis the central paradox of Eliot that he remained in *Four Quartets* a poet—and a poet of the first importance. Leavis’s commentary constitutes one of the most cogent and illuminating philosophical enquiries of the twentieth century.

From the 1960s onwards, with striking originality and preemptive effect, Leavis ploughed up the field of contemporary theory without, apparently, being aware of the existence of its principal expositors. This originality stemmed from his literary-critical practice—that is to say, the reports of a sensitive responsiveness to poetic use of language, the reciprocal application of thought and directly experienced apprehension, noumenal and concrete, not systemic. It affirms *the idea of reality* (but with un- or anti-Eliotic intention) as “there . . . but we cannot say where.” “What and where,” he asks, “are the life and reality of English literature?”⁴ Such elusive questions—*Where is English literature?*—he answered by reference to the reader’s re-creative response to the notation on the page: a response which though

1 *Op. cit.*, 236 2 *Op. cit.*, 214 3 *Op. cit.*, 181

4 Original (broadcast) version of his lecture “T. S. Eliot and the Life of English Literature,” given at the 1968 Cheltenham Festival of Literature (BBC Sound Archive). In *Valuation in Criticism*, the variant text refers to: “those who today are troubled over the questions: What *is* English literature? where is it and how is it there? how does it have its life—which must be in the present or not at all (and I indicate here how urgent and troubling the questions are)?” (129) Leavis later extended these questions to the nature of a language (*Living Principle*, 37) and of words themselves—“what *is* a word?” (*Op. cit.*, 57)

personal (you cannot directly experience another person's response) is unavoidably extra-personal too, dependent on the continuous collaboration of the language community.

. . . words "mean" because individual human beings have meant the meaning, [but]...there is no meaning unless individual beings can meet in it. Individual human beings *can* meet in a meaning because language—or let us rather say *a* language...(for there is no such thing as language in general)—is for them in any present a living actuality that is organically one with the "human world" they, in growing up into it, have naturally taken for granted. There is in the language a central core in which for generations individual speakers have met, so that the meeting takes place as something inevitable and immediate in relation to which it would seem gratuitous to think of "meeting" as being involved.... At the other extreme there is the specialist intellectual's successful attempt...to attach a definite and limiting force to a term for its use in the given field. But both this simple kind of convention-fixing and the achieved linguistic originalities entailed in the thinking of profound philosophers depend on the central core¹

In the preceding paragraph, he had observed: "The protest, ' . . . that isn't what I mean by the word', might very well have issued as, ' . . . that isn't what I meant the word to mean', or 'What I meant to mean was . . .'." Taking his hint, we can be forgiven for rephrasing him: *it is not words that mean but **human beings** who do so*. It is the gift and practice of articulate utterance which marks us.

We all recall from childhood the experience of "looking up" a word in a "dictionary" to "see what it means" only to find ourselves moving in a lexical circle: the dictionary points us to another word which we do not know; we "look it up" to find its "meaning"; and so on, until we arrive where we started (though not necessarily to find that we "know the place for the first time"). Nor, by definition, can what "means" means be explained ostensively. If words "signify," it is not in any semiotic sense. Even by reference to a full linguistic context, to the "completed" unit—

¹ *The Living Principle*, 58

clause, sentence or language—of which words are in some sense the disaggregated parts, meanings cannot be made co-terminously explicit. But nor are they purely “subjective” and private. Their “meaning” is “*in me but outward bound*”¹ and “there is no meaning unless individual beings can meet in it.”

The child’s discovery, and construction, of the world [Leavis quotes Marjorie Grene as saying] already takes place with and through others, through question and answer, through social play, through the older child’s or the adult’s interpretation. . . . *All knowledge, even the most abstract, exists only within the fundamental evaluation, first of the total community, which permits and respects such knowledge, and second, within this totality, of the special community whose consensus makes possible the existence of . . . special discipline[s].*²

And he adds “an insistent explicitness”: “‘The child’s discovery, and construction, of the world’ is possible because the reality he was born into was already the Human World, the world created and renewed in day-by-day human collaboration through the ages.”³

In linking Grene’s perception of the way we discover ourselves in relation to our fellow human beings with the practice of “meeting” in meaning, Leavis illuminates the nature of value-judgement and of the “standards” it tacitly involves. His “exorcism of the Cartesian ghost”⁴ (that pervasive scientism which has invaded almost every branch of modern thought) generated in him a deeply humane counter-affirmation:

Mankind is incurably . . . anthropocentric. Pure reality *an sich*—reality not humanly created—is beyond our experience. . . . in “meeting” [in meaning] we g[e]t beyond paradox, which is a word that belongs to the linguistic mode of *la raison* and the testable commonsense for which there are respectable criteria. The relation between life and the living individual (if it is properly called a relation, for it means that only in the individual can life be pointed to) is *sui generis*, and the importance of art-speech is that it establishes a recognized expressive relation—a relation belonging to a mode of

1 *Op. cit.*, 37 2 *Op. cit.*, 34, emphases added 3 *Ibid.* 4 *Op. cit.*, 35 and 229

articulate thought—between what can't be stated directly and language.¹

The key perception here concerns the common human gift and practice of articulate meaning. It is this which *necessitates* our engagement in the common pursuit of true judgement (*pace* the “decentring” of deconstruction). In adopting the principle of “truth” as the object of our pursuit, and making his implicit appeal to this, Leavis has made it possible to see that “meeting” in meaning is a continuous characterizing activity of humankind.² (Eliot may not have appreciated the full implications of his felicitous expression.³) We *meet* spiritually (or “are met together” might be a better phrase since the activity while personal is simultaneously collective) though not generally recognizing ourselves as

1 In “Thought, meaning and sensibility: the problem of value judgment,” *Valuation in Criticism*, 296. This passage should be read with reference to Leavis’s penetrating insights at the beginning of that essay: “‘objectivity’ in an immediately recognizable sense is a product of human creativity” and “In creating language human beings create the world they live in.” (285)

2 I am aware that this idea may appear to be in contradiction to Wittgenstein’s view (as interpreted by Peter Hacker) that “*Meaning is not an act, activity or event.*” (P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein, Mind and Will: Volume 4 of an Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations, Part I, Essays* (London, 2000), 276. But see also his observation that “‘Words,’ Wittgenstein emphasized, ‘are deeds,’” in *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies* (Oxford, Eng., 2001), 58. Other aspects of the *Investigations*, including Wittgenstein’s perception of the ‘bewitching’ nature of language, seem to resemble Leavis’s own thinking. Leavis was much absorbed in his later years with Wittgenstein and those interpreters whom he referred to as “the Wittgensteinians.” This significant interest remains largely unexplored. “I am not...a philosopher, and I have found most philosophers, in the pejorative sense, academic. Wittgenstein, who was my friend forty years ago, wasn’t to be dismissed as that...though I had a basic antipathy to what he stood for. ...I am faced with having to state and justify—marginally to a work centred in literary-critical thought—that antipathy. I must do it, dauntingly to philosophers, without the impossible expenditure of time and energy that would be incurred in attempting to do it in a ‘philosophical’ way. I must do it ‘finally’ but not thoroughly. ...[T]he Wittgensteinians...call the philosophy they are interested in ‘linguistic’. Actually they are naively fatuous about language: no exceptions to my offensive generalization, ‘philosophers are always weak on language.’” (Letter to Eugenio Montale quoted in G. Singh, *F. R. Leavis: A Literary Biography* [London, 1995], 212.) See p. 17n3, below. (I do not think my discussion is materially affected by the issues raised in the debate between Norman Malcolm and Baker and Hacker on the distinction between shared/shareable language rules [the “Robinson Crusoe” debate].)

3 “The common pursuit of true judgment”—Eliot’s phrase for the task of the critic, in “The Function of Criticism,” *Selected Essays* (London, 1932 [enlarged editions, 1934 and 1951]). Leavis borrowed from it (“one of those essays of Mr. Eliot’s which I most admire”) for the title of his collection, *The Common Pursuit* (London, 1952; Peregrine Books edition, 1962), Preface, v.

doing so, the experience being continuous with the spontaneous and unmediated immediacy of living. And how much subtler and more sensitive is Leavis's way with language in the difficult effort to suggest its own nature—"the upshot or precipitate of immemorial human living", it "embodies values, distinctions, identifications, conclusions, promptings, carto-graphical hints and tested potentialities"¹—than anything linguistic science can offer.

Exploring the nature of Eliot's "hints and guesses" in "The Dry Salvages," with a fine nose for self-refutation in the poet, he notes how

They suggest that "being" . . . means something positively other than the unlivingness of death. But they do that . . . by being essentially of the life that Eliot lives—*lives purposefully* and creatively *in the way his undertaking commits him to, as he works* at the poem, *corrects his proofs*, and remembers childhood in Missouri and holidays on the Massachusetts coast.²

For "Eliot" here read "Derrida," *mutatis mutandis*.

The conception of value-judgement embedded in Leavis's work is much more than an ideal model. It has, I think, what could properly be called a religious basis. His deference to the principle of collaborative creativity, which must depend for its existence on something other than itself, and the repudiation of modern humanism which this entails, enables us to reconcile the search for the significance of life itself with the rejection of formal theology. It offers us too a new, "anti-philosophical",³ way of doing philo-

¹ *The Living Principle*, 44 ² *Op. cit.*, 247, emphases added

³ "I think of myself as an anti-philosopher, which is what a literary critic ought to be..." (*Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence* (London, 1976), 34; "The title ['Thought, meaning and sensibility: the problem of value judgment'] sums up the preoccupations that have led me . . . to present myself as an anti-philosopher." (*Valuation in Criticism*, 285); "I state the essential and desperate need for anti-philosophers that afflicts the civilization we live in." (*Op. cit.*, 292); "It's anti-philosopher—merely more explicitly so than my work of the last 40 + years. . . ." (of *The Living Principle* to Michael Black, *The Leavises*, 95); "[Tanner] thinks highly of my treatment of language, meaning and the 'third realm,' and regards it as philosophical. No doubt that use of the adjective can be justified. But the account, direct and implicit, I give leads in a central way into concerns that seem to me most decidedly *not* philosophical." (*The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, 192) But: "I should like to think that in my work's becoming the subject of discussion by philosophers . . . I might in a modest way have promoted the development in a few universities of relations between the two disciplines." (*Op. cit.*, 193)

sophy which affirms literary art as a supreme mode of *thought*. It establishes the reality of reality (that something does in reality answer to the idea of reality) without recourse to theory. The reality thus affirmed includes, and is itself the product and coordinate of, human perception. It incorporates all human ideas, including those—like “pure reality”—to which there is no corresponding human experience.

Leavis many times observed that the word “life,” so essential to discourse, cannot be readily defined (it can, of course, be defined only by reference to variants of itself, “state of being alive,” etc.).¹ It also presents a paradox. Life is unquestionably “there”² but only in (or as) unique individual lives. It cannot be abstracted. But we transcend our uniqueness through meeting in meaning.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: This article is an expanded version of a paper given at a conference held at Downing College, Cambridge, “Re-Reading Leavis”. The conference, held in September 2003, took its title—with the author’s kind permission—from Gary Day’s book, *Re-Reading Leavis: “Culture” and Literary Criticism* (London, 1996).

1 “‘Life’ is a necessary word, but what it denotes is ‘there’ only in the individual.” (Introduction to *Nor Shall my Sword* (London, 1972), 17; “. . . genius is intensity of aliveness. Its creations make it impossible for us not to see that ‘life’ is a necessary word—and at the same time that life itself is not on all fours with electricity, which doesn’t need to be incorporated to be ‘there.’” (*Valuation in Criticism*, 289.) And *passim*. (See the reference to Lawrence at note 2 below.)

2 “There”/ “being there”—a concept frequently invoked by Leavis for those forms of reality of which a language (most obviously in its creative usage) is paradigmatic, which have no visible or spatial presence: see p.13n4, and n1 above. Focal instances occur at page 42 of *The Living Principle* and in the introduction to *Thought, Words and Creativity*, where it is closely related to Lawrence’s discussion of life as unique individuality (having no general form) in his essays on the unconscious.

“Theory”, Philosophy and F. R. Leavis

A Caveat

Richard Stotesbury

Dr Chris Joyce’s article, “Meeting in Meaning: Philosophy and Theory in the work of F. R. Leavis”, 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.”¹

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.² 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

¹ Above, p. 3

² 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?” recognises its essentially public character, and the “criteriological” connection between intersubjective agreement and objectivity.

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”,¹ 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 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”.² Michael Tanner suggested that Leavis should be regarded a philosopher on the basis of his treatment of language.³ Dr Joyce’s paradoxical “‘anti-philosophical’ way of doing philosophy”⁴ 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”.⁵ 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 nonspecialised, 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

1 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford (1953) 1963 §309, p. 103e

2 F. R. Leavis “Literary Criticism and Philosophy”, *The Common Pursuit*, 1952, p. 213

3 M. Tanner, “Literature and Philosophy”, *New Universities Quarterly* (Winter 1975) Vol. 30, no. 1 4 Above, p. 17

5 Cf. G. Singh, *F. R. Leavis: A Literary Biography*, 1995, p. 212

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 boundaries.¹ 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.

EDITOR'S [of *Words in Edgeways*] NOTE: W. A. Hart has 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

6, Greencroft Avenue, Corbridge, Northumberland NE45 5DW.

¹ 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".

Reply by Chris Joyce

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*?

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

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

really be said simply,”¹ 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”²).

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.

Reply by Richard Stotesbury

I should like to thank Dr Joyce for his courteous response to my comments on his essay, and to offer a few further remarks by way of explanation.

Dr Joyce rightly observes that “much depends on one’s definition of ‘philosophy’.” The term is often used loosely, and it is therefore important to be clear about how exactly it is being employed in connection with Leavis’s work.

As I understand it, to say that Leavis’s remarks about language, meaning and value are not philosophical, in the strict sense of the

¹ *Thought, Words and Creativity*, p. 122 ² *The Living Principle*, p. 58

term, is to deny that they belong to the tradition of intellectual enquiry that descends from the Greeks through Plato and Aristotle and includes such thinkers as Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Frege and Wittgenstein. It is not simply that Leavis himself insisted that they are not philosophy in this sense. We are not obliged to take his word for it any more than we are bound to accept the modest disclaimer of genius he makes elsewhere. If we agree with him in this case, it is because his reflections on such topics conspicuously lack the context of sceptical questioning which is the essence of the form of thought that the writings of these men exemplify. The paradox or conceptual strain in calling him "a philosopher" comes from the suggestion that his work can be bracketed with theirs in the absence of such a context.

What Leavis meant when he spoke of "a desperate need for anti-philosophers" in contemporary civilisation, and described himself as one, is a pertinent question. If his remarks are interpreted as an attack on philosophy *per se*, they will appear to be an expression of unreasonable bias or prejudice. However, their target is not the legitimate activity of philosophising, but the illegitimate extension of its operations into areas where they have no proper business. This tendency of philosophy to overstep its own limits is brought out by Stanley Cavell, in his fine essay on Wittgenstein, when he speaks of "the ancient recognition that a philosophical thesis may, or may seem to, conflict with a 'belief' which we take to be the common possession of common men, together with the equally ancient claim on the part of philosophers that in this conflict philosophy's position is superior to that common possession". Understanding and overcoming it is a key problem for philosophy, and a central concern of Wittgenstein's. While this aspect of philosophical enquiry has no significant impact on the attitudes and presuppositions of common sense that constitute the foundations of human experience, such as our trust in the general reliability of our perceptions and memories, its effect on the higher intellectual and imaginative activities is more insidious. In particular, the historical fascination of philosophers

with mathematical and scientific models of rationality has helped to undermine the traditional culture by relegating what Leavis calls the collaborative-creative mode of language, through which its values are transmitted, to the margins of thought and speech. Against this, Leavis insists that critical discourse, his paradigm of the collaborative-creative, is a “discipline of intelligence”, although “at the other extreme from mathematics”; one “with its own field” and “approach”; an autonomous activity that requires no external sanction or theoretical underpinning, and with regard to which the philosopher, to borrow a phrase of Cavell’s, “has no position at all”, however much he may be tempted to believe otherwise. While such a response is fully justified from a critic, it is not a piece of philosophy in that it makes no attempt to account for the philosopher’s inclination to claim a special authority in his dealings with other disciplines, and, *a fortiori*, does nothing to dispel it. For a philosophical treatment of the issue we must look to the work of the later Wittgenstein.

Since Leavis strenuously, and rightly, denied that his work can be regarded as philosophy, it would be perverse to take his remarks about a “beach-head in the philosophical domain” as an inexplicable offer to re-invent himself as a philosopher. Dr Joyce provides a clue to their interpretation when he associates them with Leavis’s conception of literature as a humane “liaison-centre” where specialisms can meet.¹ What this involves can be brought out by noting that the specialisms are not isolated areas of discourse but part of a form of human life, the quality of which is measured by the cultural values embodied in unspecialised language of literature. If science and philosophy matter to literature, it is because they have the power to affect the quality of life for better or worse—or, as Leavis puts it in *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, “our sense of the human situation”. Conversely, literature is relevant for the scientist and the philosopher, not because it

1 I am aware that my classification of philosophy as a “specialism” (with which Leavis would, I believe, have agreed) may be considered objectionable. However, there is, I think, a legitimate sense in which philosophy can be called a specialised interest in contrast to literature. In this connection, it may be noted that philosophy from the earliest times (cf. Diogenes Laertius xi, 5 on Heraclitus’s supposed work *On Nature*) has not characteristically addressed itself to “the vulgar”—i.e. the common reader.

further their distinctive aims, but because the values it transmits are a measure of the human significance of their achievements. The role of literature as a civilising and humanising check on the professional activities of the specialist is well illustrated by Dickens's treatment of the influence of Bentham's philosophy on the spirit of Victorian industrial civilisation in *Hard Times*. Leavis's interest in philosophy is bound up with his effort to obtain recognition for this key cultural function of literature in a field where literary activity has been characteristically seen as a form of play or instrument of irrational persuasion, with no relevance for the specialisms.

It need hardly be added that nothing I have said places an embargo on attempts to explore the implications of Leavis's profoundly interesting reflections on language, meaning and value, or calls in question the general value of Dr Joyce's work in this regard. My only aim has been to make sure that Leavis's achievement in these areas is clearly recognised for what it is: a critical enterprise rather than a contribution to theory and philosophy.

A Reply

to Mr Stotesbury's Reply

Chris Joyce

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:

Diese [philosophische Probleme] sind freilich keine empirischen, sondern sie werden durch eine Einsicht in das Arbeiten unserer Sprache gelöst, und zwar so, daß dieses erkannt wird: *entgegen* einem Trieb, es mißzuverstehen. Die Probleme werden gelöst, nicht durch Beibringen neuer Erfahrung, sondern durch Zusammenstellung des längst Bekannten. Die Philosophie ist ein Kampf gegen die Verhexung unseres Verstandes durch die Mittel unserer Sprache.¹

(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

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition. Blackwell, 2001, I, 109, emphasis added. 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]

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 philosophy is a therapeutic one, to cure us from talking nonsense and being tormented by problems for which there is no solution."¹ (I should prefer to say "problems" which are without reality, being lexical in character only.) This is a very different conception of philosophy from that entertained by any of the other philosophers in Mr Stotesbury's list. The passage quoted is remarkable especially in its striking expression of what I believe to be a unique insight (unique had not Leavis arrived at a not dissimilar position though formulating it in a very different way): that we have a strong natural inclination or even a need (an urge, as Wittgenstein puts it) to misunderstand the nature of language.

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"², 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.

1 *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)]

2 Letter to Eugenio Montale, 1973, quoted in G. Singh, *F. R. Leavis: A Literary Biography*, Duckworth, 1995, p. 212

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.

Leavis and Philosophy

a comment on recent correspondence
Ian Robinson

The advantage of the editorial seat is that nobody can stop me chipping in if I wish, and my credentials are that the *Human World* editorial team were amongst the first (well before Michael Tanner) to call Leavis “a considerable philosopher of language”¹ which, of course, Leavis repudiated. So I make a few suggestions.

Literary criticism is not itself philosophy, but when as critic you start reflecting about what you are doing, what else should it be called? When Leavis, as Mr Stotesbury reports, “insists that critical discourse, his paradigm of the collaborative-creative, is . . . ‘at the other extreme from mathematics’ with ‘its own field’,” he is not doing literary criticism but characterising it and asking where literary criticism comes in the life of mind. That seems to me philosophy of criticism, whatever Leavis called it—just the kind of situating a discipline within the whole world of mind that Collingwood did more systematically. Leavis’s hostility to theorising in literary criticism did not take the form of just brushing theory aside; he worked out why “theory” is a concept inappropriate to this form of thought. That too is thought about the kind of thinking literary criticism may be. Again, when Mr Stotesbury contrasts Leavis with Wittgenstein because Leavis’s “treatment of language” has no such element of showing the fly “the way out of the fly-bottle” as Wittgenstein’s, I wonder what else to call Leavis’s discussions of poetic language as essentially *not* the eighteenth-century “dress of thought”. Mr Stotesbury’s well-chosen example, Dickens at the beginning of *Hard Times*, is a “civilising and humanising check on the professional activities of

¹ *The Human World* 3, 1971, p. 81

the specialist”, but by way of being definitely philosophical. The point about the hard-facts school is that they are *wrong* in their epistemology (as later demonstrated by the inadequacy of Bitzer’s knowledge compared with Sleary’s), and that the style of being wrong has effects that Dickens calls “The Slaughter of the Innocents”. Dickens is in his own way engaging in an epistemological argument, one that can be continued more formally.

If Leavis was doing philosophy he was in some sense a philosopher, when working out, for instance, his notion of the “third realm” which is (amongst other things) a kind of epistemology, a series of comments on human consciousness and the conditions necessary for the creation of meaning. Leavis’s consistent and frequent defence of “art-speech” as a form of thinking similarly brings his work within the range of philosophy, for what could be more purely philosophical than reflections on the nature of thinking? What but philosophy could something called “Thought, Language and Objectivity” be, chapter one of *The Living Principle*?

Mr Stotesbury’s phrasing in the *Words in Edgeways* comment and his reply to Dr Joyce several times joins “‘theoretical’ or philosophical”, “science and philosophy”, “theory and philosophy”. But not all philosophers are either themselves scientists or theorists, or friendly to the idea that scientific theorising is a sort of model for thinking in general. Mr Stotesbury’s list of philosophers leaps from Aristotle to Descartes and then becomes predominantly a list of the most famous empiricists. I wonder whether the point is just that Leavis was not an empiricist. If so he was in good company.¹ What is the audience for philosophy? Mr Stotesbury cites Diogenes Laertius in support of the view that philosophy has “not characteristically addressed itself to ‘the vulgar’.” But the Socratic dialogues were a sort of literary *genre*, and the interlocutors of Socrates were not often professional philosophers. (When they were, he gave them a bad name, *sophists*.)

¹ See, for instance, a book reviewed in Column 7, 18 April 2008, Howard Mounce’s *Metaphysics and the End of Philosophy*. ² *Apology* 20A–C

The sophists had the primal mark of the professional: they took fees.²) Perhaps a subject can be a discipline without being a specialism? Aristotle offered his life work, of finding out the place in the world of all the disciplines, to people willing to take philosophy seriously but not as a specialism. As recently as last century Collingwood's *Speculum Mentis* was not meant, surely, only for philosophers?

If philosophy has become a specialism that is not necessarily a good thing either for common culture or philosophy. Mounce remarks that in the nineteenth century philosophical essays were often published in the ordinary magazines, and that the development of specialist philosophical journals may not be an improvement.

As a philosopher Leavis was an amateur, and sometimes amateurish, as when he forgot his own first principle that judgement is always first hand, and published remarks on "the Wittgensteinians" whom he had not read.¹ Leavis could have done his work better if he had been well enough read in philosophy to see that not all philosophers are creators of theoretical systems. As it is, the kind of thinking in the later works of Leavis might actually improve the academic subject Philosophy or be a light to some philosophers. Wittgenstein himself notoriously published nothing but the *Tractatus* and one review, and it was left to the executors to collect the contents of *Culture and Value*, which Wittgenstein could not recognise as philosophy. But for instance Simone Weil was a philosopher, wasn't she?

I also think we participants in this exchange are at least trying to do philosophy ourselves: in an amateurish way, in my case, but not something else. Asking what philosophy is, itself belongs to philosophy? Would any certified philosophers like to join in?

Perhaps we should all go away and read the chapter "Can you be a Professional Philosopher" in my *Holding the Centre*—beginning with myself, as I am curious to see whether I think I got it right.

¹ E. g. *The Living Principle*, p. 13—which, however, defines the topic as "intelligent thought about the nature of thought". Not a bad definition of at least one important part of philosophy?

And by the way, Dr Joyce remarks it as “conceivable” that someone might contest Leavis’s account of *Four Quartets*, where, Leavis thinks, the utter otherness of the posited spiritual reality, transcending human experience altogether, leaves us only with emptiness and nullity, “the unqualified discrediting of experience, life and effort” in the “pattern” of “East Coker”. An answer to Leavis is more than conceivable. I made one some years ago, at some length, in *The English Prophets*. Perhaps Dr Joyce and Mr Stotesbury should have a go at that too—or anybody else: free for all.

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 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".

* * *

Comment

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. I. R.

A Reply to My Critics

Richard Stotesbury

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.

* * *

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.

A Reply

to Mr Stotesbury's "Reply to his Critics"

Chris Joyce

Dear Editor,

Despite your denials, I do not believe you can give much further space to our now three-way exchange of views: I am mindful in particular of Mr Stotesbury's hint that the contributors to the exchange may be its only readers. Nevertheless, to adopt Leavis's words, the matters are of great moment, so I venture a brief reply to Mr Stotesbury's reply, at least insofar as my own contribution is concerned.

Mr Stotesbury brings a rather hefty cudgel—and not a few quotation marks—to the rebutting of my modest claim. I do not argue that Leavis latterly sought to recreate himself as a philosopher (while at the same time denying that he did so) or that I believe such an effort should be essayed on his behalf. I *did* point out that Leavis—especially in his later work—sometimes wrote discursively, without reference to any particular author or text (though certain names are repeatedly implicit or are adduced in the wider context of his discussion: Blake, Eliot, Lawrence, most prominently). I am thinking of his telling us, for example, that “there is no such thing as language in general”¹—a salutary observation, and the more so when coupled with his frequent drawings on Lawrence's perception that there is no such thing as life in general, only unique individual lives²: salutary because (as I see it) a misconceived view of language (derived from Peirce, Saussure and their successors) forms the basis of much modern

¹ *The Living Principle: "English" as a Discipline of Thought*, Chatto & Windus, 1975, 58

² D. H. Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious*, ed. Bruce Steele, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 15

theory which ostensibly supersedes Leavis's work. Leavis, thus displaced, is represented as a naïve "liberal humanist" or "moral formalist". My own view is that Leavis very largely pre-empted modern theory. He resolves the difficulty presented by "life" ("a necessary word") and "lives", and its reflection in language, through two crucial and linked insights: that the human world, including the creation of language, is a continuous collaborative achievement, and that it is so because, of our nature, we "meet" in meaning.³

These perceptions—the product, it is true, of thought about the nature of literature—seem to me reasonably to be described as philosophical in character and to constitute a contribution to philosophy (or even to constitute a philosophy—Leavis referred to his "anti-philosophical" stance as a philosophy). It seems to me—and this was the point of my quotation from the *Investigations*—that Wittgenstein also came to understand that the widely prevalent conception of language—it had been his own earlier conception—was fundamentally mistaken, although he had arrived at this position by a very different route from Leavis's.

Perhaps at this point I may pick up the discussion about philosophical traditions and my reason for saying that Wittgenstein (in particular) seemed to me to present a challenge to Mr Stotesbury's offer of a "strict" definition of philosophy. I was not seeking to *liken* Wittgenstein's mode of thought to Leavis's. They are plainly immensely different. I had in mind rather, among other matters, those remarks of Wittgenstein's in which he distinguishes himself from other philosophers—or even from philosophers as such: "In philosophy one feels forced to look at a *concept* in a particular way. What I do is to suggest, or even invent, other ways of looking at it."⁴ In von Wright's *Biographical Sketch*, we find: "Wittgenstein had done no systematic reading in the classics of philosophy" and "Wittgenstein received deeper

³ "Life' is a necessary word"—see *Nor Shall my Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope*, Chatto & Windus, 1972, 17; *Valuation in Criticism and other essays*, (posth.), ed. G. Singh, Cambridge University Press, 1986, 289, & *passim*. For "meeting in meaning", see Singh, *ibid.*, and *The Living Principle*, 34, & *passim*.

⁴ Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: a Memoir*, Oxford University Press, 1958, 50

impressions from some writers in the borderland between philosophy, religion and poetry than from the philosophers, *in the restricted sense of the word.*"¹ (my italics) It seems to me that some of Leavis's reflections belong to such a "borderland"—and that a lifetime's reflective habit underlies all his work. It is also notable that while, in the course of attacking those whom he termed (rather indeterminately) the "Wittgensteinians", and enunciating his contrasting "anti-philosophical" position, he repeatedly calls to his aid certain philosophers: Collingwood, Polanyi and Marjorie Grene. He described this use as "tactical".² Whatever he meant precisely by this, there can surely be no doubt that the passages of theirs which he reproduces were congenial to him and that—for him—they formed part of a conceptual alliance (mutually necessary).³ According to MacKillop, Leavis "wanted to show Wittgenstein was humanly subtle and that in his presence there may be a clue as to liaison between 'poetic' and conceptual thinking."⁴ By way of a footnote, it is interesting to find in Singh QDL's recollection that among the books in Leavis's library were numbers on "philosophy of science, history of philosophy, individual philosophers (like Collingwood and Wittgenstein) and—a subject that particularly interested him [this comes as something of a surprise]—the theory of value, on which he possessed psychological, philosophical and aesthetic works in several languages" Singh also reports the finding among Leavis's last jottings of the following "headings or aspects": "Language and Anti-Philosophic Thought", "Thought and Art-Speech", "Art-Speech as Thought", "Rightness, Precision and Belief: Thought and Impersonality", "Discrepant Thought-Modes and Dual Word-Values", "Individuality as Transcendent There-ness of Life".⁵

1 Georg Henrik von Wright, published in conjunction with Malcolm's *Memoir* (above), 20–1; my emphasis

2 "I don't derive from philosophers. I merely *use* them tactically." To David Holbrook, quoted in Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, Allen Lane, 1995, 391–2

3 "Mutually necessary"—the title of a late essay on literature and philosophy which Leavis contributed to *The New Universities Quarterly* (Spring 1976), subsequently re-printed in *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, (posth.), ed. G. Singh, Chatto & Windus, 1982

4 *Op. cit.*, 394

5 G. Singh, *F. R. Leavis: a Literary Biography*, Duckworth, 1995, 27 and 225

Where I believe Mr Stotesbury may have misconceived me is in relation to Leavis's literary criticism itself. I do not take this to be *in general* philosophical in character, however "philosophical" is to be understood. At its heart, rightly in my view, is an insistence on the concrete and uniquely specific character of human experience and, as it passes down, of the experience communicated in works of literature, which it is for the reader (who may or may not be also a literary critic in the more specialised sense) to assess. No abstract account of the assumptions which may be thought to underlie the work (the poem, say) or our response to it, or defining of first principles, can supersede this specificity of response. The supposition to the contrary, where theory addresses particular texts—which it does infrequently—results in the substitution of the theorist's extra-literary persuasions (usually political) for what is actually "there". Like all intelligent critics, Leavis fully understood that the readers who meet (literally or figuratively) in the discussion of a poem bring to it differing ways of looking at the world, but the poem as continually created and re-created through meeting in meaning is unquestionably "there" for them to meet in—"there", a complex totality, in what is in some sense a common world. (True, Leavis is occasionally compelled to a "No"—compelled, for example, in more than one sense, by Eliot: "There is no acceptable religious position which is not a reinforcement of human responsibility."¹)

All this is obvious. I go over the ground merely by way of underscoring the extent of my agreement with Mr Stotesbury. I am grateful to him for helping me to clarify my ideas (at least for myself) and to you, Sir, for permitting the exchange to continue at some length—as well as for your own intervention. I very readily concur in Mr Stotesbury's description of me as "well-intentioned" in my argument (as, indeed, I am in all things), but I cannot find that I am "mistaken". "Collaboration, a matter of differences as well as agreements . . .".²

¹ *The Living Principle*, 236

² Leavis's dedication, "To W.L.C." [Bill Cuttle, Fellow in Classics, Downing College, Cambridge], of his *Education and the University*, Chatto & Windus, 1943

Richard Stotesbury Replies

to Chris Joyce's last letter

I am sorry that Dr Joyce feels that I was bringing "a rather hefty cudgel" to him, and trust that he will accept that this was not my intention or see my remarks as prompted by anything other than a spirit of friendly collaboration. Without wishing to prolong the discussion indefinitely, perhaps I may be permitted a few more words on the issue in the hope of reaching the agreement which an exchange of this kind should ideally aim at—even if it ultimately fails to achieve it in practice.

Dr Joyce is, of course, right to say that Leavis sometimes wrote discursively, without reference to any particular text (as did D. H. Lawrence in his non-fictional writings, and practically every other considerable critic), and that one example of this is his treatment of language. He and I both recognise that Leavis offers important observations about its nature and workings with great clarity and power, which no "theory" could intelligibly claim to "supersede". We are also at one in thinking that his work in this area is, or should be, of great interest to philosophers and linguists as well as critics. What it offers the linguist and the philosopher is not a way of disposing of the problems they address but a challenge and stimulus to further reflection and investigation from the standpoint of their respective disciplines (in the same way as D. H. Lawrence's pregnant remark about art-speech, for example). Thus, I agree with Dr Joyce that we can speak of these disciplines overlapping with criticism, and of possible fertilisation across the borders. However, I cannot accompany him on his excursion into "theory" (as featured in contemporary letters), which, in so far as I understand it, seems to me a bastard activity, despite its current vogue, contrary to the spirit of Leavis's work, and the product of deep conceptual

confusion.¹ I hope that his closer acquaintance with the subject will enable him to authoritatively corroborate my judgement of it.

My only query about Dr Joyce's valuable discussion of Leavis's remarks on language is as to the propriety of calling them "philosophy" in one very common use of the word—especially in academic circles. I am not sure what more I could add to what I have already said in this connection, except perhaps to point out that such a classification offers an inappropriate yardstick for judging Leavis's work. Just as the measure of Blake is (*inter alia*) the poetry of Wordsworth, Pope, Marvell, Donne and Shakespeare, so that of Leavis is the criticism of such men as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Leslie Stephen, Arnold, Coleridge and Johnson. To "place" Leavis by reference to the tradition of Plato, Aristotle and their successors is to apply a false measure—one which inevitably makes him appear naïve and inadequate in his refusal to entertain the distinctive doubts, worries and concerns that philosophy is required to address.²

I welcome Dr Joyce's explicit affirmation that he does not wish to "argue that Leavis latterly sought to recreate himself as a philosopher or . . . believe such an effort should be essayed on his behalf". However, he also says that Leavis's observations can be "reasonably . . . described as philosophical in character and to constitute a contribution to philosophy (or even to constitute a philosophy . . .)". I can only reconcile these remarks by supposing that Dr Joyce is using "philosophy" and its cognates in different senses in the two cases. In disclaiming any intention of recreating Leavis as "a philosopher", he presumably means that Leavis's work does not belong to the discipline practised by Plato and Aristotle and their successors. But when he speaks of it as "philosophical in character" and calls it "a contribution to philosophy", he seems to understand these terms not as descriptions of a particular discipline, but, so far as I can tell from the context, as roughly co-extensive with the category of the discursive. If this is the basis of his "modest claim", I appreciate why he insists it is not "mistaken". All I should want to say in

¹ For a devastating critique of "literary theory", see Duke Maskell, "The Breaker's Yard", *The Gadfly*, vol. 8, no. 3.

² Henry James's famous warning against the "confusion of kinds" might be cited, *mutatis mutandis*, in this connection.

these circumstances is that it would be a pity if the ambiguous usage were to cloud Leavis's clear recognition of the difference between his thought and the discipline of philosophy.

As Dr Joyce reminds us, Leavis did sponsor the work of Polanyi and Grene, albeit while denying that he was recommending them on philosophical grounds. Exactly what he believed himself to be doing in promoting them is not a question that can be answered here. However, what can be said is that his references to their work add nothing to the cogency or credibility of his own position, and are, to my mind, the reverse of helpful, generally tending to be an annoying distraction from his own fine insights.¹ In saying this, I am not, of course, denying Dr Joyce's claim that Leavis found them congenial.

I am also grateful for Dr Joyce's endorsement of my point that the later Wittgenstein "arrived at [his view of language] by a very different route from Leavis's," and his emphasis on the dissimilarity of their respective modes of thought, to which I have attempted to call attention. While I have no wish to start any hares about Wittgenstein in a discussion which ought to focus on Leavis, I would just like to pick up on the comment of von Wright's that Dr Joyce quotes. Faced with von Wright's talk about Wittgenstein's "lack of systematic reading in the classics of philosophy", it is tempting to retort, adapting the words of Leavis's pupil,² that it is a pity more philosophers cannot go so far on such little equipment. However, Wittgenstein's deep understanding of his predecessors has been well documented,³ and can be readily verified by anyone who cares to examine his work. On this too, I hope that Dr Joyce and I can agree.

I would like to conclude by expressing my wholehearted concurrence with Dr Joyce's trenchant assertion of the truth that "No abstract account of the assumptions which may be thought to underlie the work (the poem, say) or our response to it, or

1 Ian Robinson's postscript to Leavis's "Believing in the University", *The Human World*, Nos. 15-16 is *à propos* here.

2 F. R. Leavis, *English Literature in Our Time and the University*, p. 75

3 Cf. the discussion of the Kantian basis of the *Tractatus* in *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (ed. Winch), p. 4. Cavell brings out the continuity of this aspect of Wittgenstein's thought in the later philosophy in *Wittgenstein* (ed. Pitcher), pp. 175-7. For Wittgenstein's engagement with Schopenhauer, see, for example, D. A. Weiner's *Genius and Talent*. These examples could be multiplied.

defining of first principles, can supersede this specificity of response. The supposition to the contrary . . . results in the substitution of the theorist's extra-literary persuasions (usually political) for what is actually 'there'."

* * *

Final Note

Mr Stotesbury answers me with characteristic force and clarity—and with generosity. He reminds me implicitly that this is a difficult region and that those of us who fare forward in it must do so with close attention to the detail of the terrain. I don't altogether agree with his representation of me as using the term "philosophy" in two clearly distinguishable senses, but I note the care with which he makes the distinction itself.

I hope Mr Stotesbury will agree with me that Leavis himself should have the last word. No-one I know of has expressed better than he the problem of using words to talk about words—and (it follows) about meaning:

The mark of a human individual is that he is "I" to himself, which is "ego"; but in "meeting" they [those who "meet" in a poem] attain to a demonstration of the human power to achieve impersonality, which is freedom from egoism and egotism. We recognize "egoism" and "egotism" at once as pejorative terms but the phrase "*le moi haïssable*" intimates that the state of having an individual identity is a state of balance between pejorative possibilities. But we don't dispose of the paradox in saying that by the study of the precisions created by poetic genius we advance our knowledge of ourselves. The paradox remains—remains a problem that defies the attempt to state it explicitly in direct articulate speech."¹

I don't know whether that is philosophy or not, but it is at any rate an impressive display of thinking. In that I am sure Mr Stotesbury and I are at one.

Chris Joyce

¹ From "Thought, meaning and sensibility: the problem of value judgment", in *Valuation in Criticism and other Essays* (posth.), ed. G. Singh, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 296

My compliments to Messrs Stotesbury and Joyce on this teasing-out process, but explanations must somewhere have an end and this correspondence is now closed—Ed.

(But it has broken out again in another file.)

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