

The Moral Sciences Club (A Short History)

Arif Ahmed

The Cambridge University Moral Sciences Club is devoted to the publication and discussion of philosophical papers. But such a bare description does not suffice. If as Wittgenstein believed philosophy is a vice or disease of the mind, then Cambridge University Moral Sciences Club is a high-class brothel or leper colony, where the degenerate or afflicted may fraternise in a tasteful and secluded environment. Or it is a greenhouse or other horticultural receptacle in which was nurtured the intellectual flower of the early twentieth-century East Anglia: among others, Keynes, Russell, Ramsey, Wittgenstein and Moore. In short, this ancient institution has played a major role in the history of analytical philosophy, and continues to do so today. What were its origins?

There are records of a Moral Sciences Club having been founded in 1874. But that Club lapsed within two years, and the first meeting of the modern Club took place on Saturday 19 October 1878. On that day Alfred Caldecott, a third year Moral Sciences undergraduate at St John's, presided over and hosted a meeting in which the Club's constitution was agreed. Present at the meeting were Caldecott, seven other undergraduates of St John's and two of Trinity. Among them were Joseph Jacobs, a friend of George Eliot's, and Alfred Mummery, soon to be appointed Professor of Logic and Metaphysics at King's College London—a post in which he was succeeded by Caldecott. It was decided at this meeting that the Club would be open only to those who were reading for or had taken a degree in Moral Sciences.

The first meeting of the Club at which a paper was given, took place in the rooms of T.E. Scrutton, Trinity, at 9pm on Saturday 26 October. The paper, by Caldecott, was "Development Theories of Conscience". About thirty students attended. The attendance is pretty much the same today as is the tone of the Club's minutes. For example, in 1880 we find the following minute (by G.E. Humphreys, Caius) :

After the minutes of the last meeting had been read (by Mr Frost in the absence of the Secretary) and approved, there was a long and unusual break in the continuity of the proceedings from the fact that the reader of the paper did not make his appearance until 5 minutes to 10 o'clock. The excuse given was that having retired to the Gog hills to meditate upon some unusually obscure Hegelianisms he had become so lost in thought that it was only when curfew broke in upon the current of his reflections that he remembered he was still a being belonging to this world, to Cambridge and to the Moral Science Club. With this preface Mr Rees proceeded to read his paper on "The Philosophy of History."

It is a measure of the decline in Hegel's influence at Cambridge that speakers nowadays are almost never late. (I am indebted to J. Pitt's article in *Russell*, Winter 1982).

So much for the Club's origins. What about its importance? The emergence of analytical philosophy marked a break with post-Kantian metaphysics as the latter had evolved both in England and in Continental Europe. It offered a new conception of philosophical problems and suggested new ways to solve them. If Bolzano was the St John the Baptist of this movement and Frege its Jesus Christ, then Russell was its St Paul, Cambridge his Damascus, and what is now the M11 his road thereto. In this typology the Moral Sciences Club corresponds to an early

church, say that of Antioch, instrumental in the introduction and dissemination of the new doctrines. This was manifested in two ways.

The concentration of great philosophers at Cambridge made the Club the forum at which a number of seminal papers received their first airing. One of the founding documents of analytical philosophy, Moore's "Nature of Judgment", was given on 21 October 1898. "Knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description" appeared in 1911 and what became Ramsey's "Truth and Probability" in 1926. Russell's "Limits of Empiricism" was given in Michaelmas 1935; Moore's Paradox appeared in Michaelmas 1944.

The Club also disseminates as well as introduces new ideas. The publication of papers does not render a discussion group redundant in this process even if it can only involve a small number of people and only for the course of an evening. We must not overlook the importance of personal intercourse in the spread of ideas. Regrettably often a doctrine is widely accepted less because of its truth than because of the personality of its author. For if a philosopher writes a book he may gain followers; if he gives a talk he is liable to find evangelists.

The case of Wittgenstein illustrates this point. It also illustrates the influence of the Club itself. Wittgenstein gave his first paper to the Club in Michaelmas 1912. He and Moore had persuaded the Club to appoint a Chairman to prevent futile discussions and to change the rules so as to limit the duration of talks to seven minutes. Wittgenstein's contribution came on 29 November (the Club's meetings had moved to Fridays to avoid clashing with the Apostles); the minutes are as follows:

Mr Wittgenstein read a paper entitled "What is Philosophy?" The paper lasted only about 4 minutes, thus cutting the previous record established by Mr Tye by nearly two minutes. Philosophy was defined as all those primitive propositions which are assumed as true without proof by the various sciences. This defn. was much discussed, but there was no general disposition to adopt it. The discussion kept very much to the point, and the Chairman did not find it necessary to intervene much.

As far as I know Wittgenstein's record still stands, and it is unlikely that it will ever be beaten, now that the 7-minute restriction has been replaced by a 30-minute one – which many speakers moreover treat more as a minimum than a maximum. Perhaps the Club should institute a Prize for the shortest talk of the year.

Wittgenstein's return to Cambridge in 1929 inaugurated his domination of Cambridge philosophy and in particular of the Moral Sciences Club. For example Broad once remarked, in explanation of his non-attendance, that "he was not prepared to spend hours every week in a thick atmosphere of cigarette-smoke, while Wittgenstein punctually went through his hoops and the faithful as punctually 'wondered with a foolish look of praise.'" It was in response to this that Broad introduced the rule-which still exists though its principal target has been dead for fifty years-that a speaker may request the 'starring' of a meeting (meaning that only junior Members are permitted to attend it).

After Moore resigned the Chairmanship in 1944 on grounds of ill-health, Wittgenstein took over. By this time, I conjecture, the Club had become his conduit in two ways. First, it was obviously a medium for his own philosophical ideas. But secondly, public debate gave him the opportunity to air-and to infect others with-his contempt for other living philosophers, to their face. And Ryle said that at meetings of the Club, "veneration for Wittgenstein was so incontinent that mentions,

for example, my mentions, of any other philosopher were greeted with jeers... Wittgenstein gave the impression, first that he himself was proud not to have studied other philosophers... and second, that he thought that people who did study them were academic and therefore unauthentic philosophers."

No account of the Club would be complete without a brief description of the most notorious meeting of all (possibly excepting I Hacking's lively 1998 summary of knitwear production techniques in British Columbia). This was the poker-involving confrontation between Wittgenstein and Popper at a meeting of the Club on 26 October 1946 at which Popper read a paper entitled "Are there Philosophical Problems?".

Opinion is divided over exactly what happened at that meeting. Some say that Popper and Wittgenstein, having lashed one another into a philosophical frenzy, came to blows, each armed with a poker. Popper himself states in his autobiography that Wittgenstein brandished a poker at Popper, demanding an example of a moral rule, to which Popper replied: "Not to threaten visiting speakers with pokers", whereupon Wittgenstein is said to have thrown down the poker and stormed out of the room. Others say that it was *Russell* who made this amusing remark. Consistent with all of these views was the opinion of the Secretary, W. Hijab (Trinity), who says in his minute that the meeting "was charged to an unusual degree with the spirit of controversy". (The occasion is the subject of a best-selling book by Edmonds and Eidenow, *Wittgenstein's Poker*, Faber, 2001)

The Club has flourished from that day to this. Practically every major philosopher since the War has spoken here at one time or another. Recent years have seen a number of famous visitors (e.g. A. Gibbard, F. Jackson, D. Lewis, C. Wright, T. Williamson) and a broad range of subjects. On one occasion in the present writer's memory, a speaker continued delivering his paper over a fire alarm. It indicates the dedication of both him and his audience that one and all scorned to leave the room, prepared to risk incineration rather than miss the speaker's insights into possible worlds. On another occasion, the meeting ended early because the speaker gave up in the middle of the question period after somebody had made a decisive point against him. Would that all philosophers were so honest!

The Club has moved around Cambridge too. For many years until 1998 it was installed in Clare under the amiable guidance of Professor Smiley. After that it moved to Darwin and then to St John's. Every year there the Club changes its Secretary. As has been customary ever since its foundation, the Secretary is drawn from the student body. A number of previous secretaries have gone on to careers in philosophy.

Hijab spoke of the "spirit of controversy". The visitor to the Club will find that spirit alive and well; as there is no fireplace in the Dirac Room, he may in addition be assured that the risk of physical injury is nowadays fairly low.