

Man as Agent

On Stuart Hampshire's Recent Work — By BERNARD WILLIAMS

THE chief and persistent influence on British philosophical thought about the human mind has been Descartes. To say this may seem a paradox, since there is no more hallowed contrast in the history of philosophy than that between, on the one hand the rationalism of Descartes, with its far-reaching trust in the powers of pure theoretical reason to discover the ultimate structure of reality, and on the other hand the profound empiricist strain of British thought, which has again and again returned to the view that nothing substantial can be learned about the world save through the laborious, tentative, and always corrigible process of generalising from sense-experience and empirical observation.

Nor is this hallowed contrast confined to abstract philosophical opinions about the nature of science. It is equally a platitude—though a much vaguer one—to contrast a certain abstract and theoretical spirit more generally present in French thought with the more cautious, down-to-earth, and perhaps pedestrian temper of English intellectual activities. These contrasts are of course very rough and ready, and, in their more general form, a great deal of rubbish has been talked about them by both the contrasted parties. For all that, there is something in this platitudinous distinction; how then can it be that the prevailing influence on British philosophy of mind is nevertheless Descartes?

There are three main ways, I think, in which it is so. First, British philosophers have constantly returned to Descartes' fundamental belief, that the mind is in some fundamental sense distinct from the body, and that knowledge of the mind, its contents and activities is more direct than, and is not reached through, our knowledge of the "external" world, where included in the external world are our bodies. This belief, in different forms, is to be found in the three pillars of British empiricism, Locke,

Berkeley, and Hume, and once more in the logical positivism famously expounded in A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*. It is only recently that this belief has been fundamentally challenged, in, for instance, Gilbert Ryle's *Concept of Mind* and the later work of Wittgenstein.

The second point of contact between the British tradition and Descartes is rather different. It lies in their common neglect of, indeed contempt for, *history* as a form of human knowledge, and of historical understanding as a vital part of man's understanding of his world. Although the British tradition differed from Descartes about the nature and methods of natural science, it shared his belief that natural science was the paradigm of human knowledge. Natural science seeks, and seems able to attain, knowledge of universal truths about the world, which hold irrespective of time and place; compared with this, historical study, immersed in the unsystematically particular, may seem a poor thing.

The third point of contact is to be found in a comparable neglect of *aesthetics*. For Descartes, our experience of art could scarcely appear as a form of knowledge or rational activity at all, and he accordingly has nothing to say of it. The poverty of British *aesthetics*, at least among philosophers, is notorious. This point is certainly connected with the last, and it is significant that the two British thinkers who are outstanding exceptions to the prevailing neglect of history—Burke and Collingwood—are exceptional also in having serious views about the nature of art. Of course, there is an important difference between the neglect of these things by Descartes, and their continuing neglect by the British tradition: the latter needs explanation, while the former scarcely does. Descartes, a scientist and mathematician in the 17th century, was almost bound to take such a view; what is odd is that in Britain it should persist so indomitably to

the present day. I suspect that the explanation constitutes a rather engaging paradox of the history of ideas: it is precisely the empirical and cautious temper of British philosophers that has left them in this curious, perhaps not entirely recognised, alliance with the rationalist Descartes. The elevation of historical understanding and æsthetic experience to central places in the picture of man's consciousness took place, after all, amid the deep metaphysical thunder of 19th-century Germany, above all in Hegel. While the influence of Hegel radically changed the rest of European thought, and continues to work in it, the sceptical caution of British philosophy left it, after a brief infection, markedly immune to it.

IT IS necessary, I think, to bear in mind these continuing Cartesian characteristics of the British philosophy of mind to appreciate fully the originality of Stuart Hampshire's book.* It is not just that he adopts an anti-Cartesian view of mind and body: this has been seen recently, in the work of Wittgenstein and elsewhere (although Hampshire's own views take an importantly different direction from most of what has appeared). More immediately remarkable, at least, is the way in which his book runs against the other two traditions. Throughout the book Hampshire shows that he regards historical understanding as essential to grasping all but the absolutely basic characteristics of the human mind. There are some features of human thought that are basic and essential, those that follow from man's nature as a bodily creature in a world of solid objects, who can move and act in this world, and communicate with others of his kind with whom he lives in society. Beyond this minimum, however (and one of Hampshire's chief concerns is to determine what this minimum is), the forms that human thought takes, the structure of language, the content of morality, the styles of art, are to be understood historically. All our ways of thinking about the world are conditioned by a given historical context of conventions, manners, and interests; hence also they inevitably change. Thus in anything that concerns human thought and achievement, there are, if any, very few final truths. Hampshire is prepared, indeed, to take the step, not common with philosophers, of applying this conclusion to his own theories: all "determinations of the powers of the mind," any theoretical picture of the nature and interdependence of human capabilities and characteristics, must be provisional, his own not excepted.

* *Thought and Action*. By STUART HAMPSHIRE. Chatto & Windus. 25s.

This concern for the historical dimension runs, though not always obviously, all through the book. His concern for æsthetics is equally deep, but shows itself only towards the end of the book, where he makes it clear that in his view no philosophical theory of mind can be complete unless it gives some account of the universal human desire to produce and appreciate works of art.

Thought and Action covers a large range of topics, from the nature of language and linguistic reference, via the nature of intention and intentional action, to the freedom of the will and morality. In this, too, it is distinguished from much contemporary British work. Hampshire writes in his introduction:

It has been the discipline of this time to answer separable questions separately, to analyse complex difficulties into elementary difficulties. The rewards of this discipline have been very great: accuracy, clarity, and sometimes even conclusiveness. But it is possible that there are purposes and interests which require that accurate and step-by-step analysis should not always be preferred to a more general survey and more tentative opinions, even in philosophy.

Such a general survey he attempts, and the result is a book of extraordinary sweep, often sketchy and tentative in the connections of its argument, but rich in the variety and novelty of the considerations it assembles.

THE free and diverse moment of its thought makes this an exciting and stimulating book; it does not, however, make a book notably easy to digest or summarise. Nor is it made any easier in these respects by the way in which the exposition is put together. The style is extremely graceful, but its literary merits go with a refusal to use the more ponderous devices of footnote and reference which, like metal spikes in mountain-climbing, may be inelegant but do help one over the steep places. In the first chapter, for instance, a number of pages are devoted to arguments which are, in fact, objections to views held about perception by the logical positivists and similar thinkers, but there is nothing in the text to tell one this. It would also have been helpful, I think, to get us to see the direction of his views, had Hampshire made references to writers whose opinions on various topics he either shares or has been interestingly influenced by. Some of what he says about action and self-knowledge, for instance, bears important relations to some French writing which has not previously had much effect in this country: to Sartre and, in particular, Merleau-Ponty, among contemporaries, and to an earlier tradition going back to Maine de Biran.

Hampshire's austerity in such matters extends

also to the devices of cross-reference, sub-heading, and so on; the book is a painting rather than a blue-print, a plant and not an engine. The argument grows, winds, doubles back; and, like a tendril, it tends to proceed spirally, returning to a side of the question it has visited before, but now a little further on. Its direction is not always easily followed, but it has a direction.

THE GENERAL DIRECTION is, very roughly put, something like this. Hampshire starts from the question of what it is for us to be able to talk about the world, and finds as necessary for this our ability to pick out and refer to enduring objects in our environment. What sorts of distinctions we make, and what sorts of similarities we perceive between features of the environment, will to a great extent be a product of society, convention, and history; but that we do identify and refer to enduring objects is a necessary part of our having a language at all. In all these opening sections in particular, Hampshire's argument can be seen as revolving round the old distinction between what is "natural" and what is "conventional;" the possibility of language has a natural basis in the activity of *pointing*, but so long as this basic pointing function is preserved, the forms of a particular language will be conventional.

Hampshire then goes on to argue, in a number of interestingly different ways, that the possibility of language, and so of any conscious thought, presupposes that the beings who use the language should be able to move and act in the world. Here he rejects an important Cartesian idea, that we could imagine a conscious being whose experience was purely passive, who was a mere recipient of experiences. Such a being, for Hampshire, could not think about or have any concept of his experiences, for mere experiences could not satisfy the conditions of reference and identification necessary for conscious thought. (Here it is that Hampshire argues against the logical positivists; some of his arguments are similar to later views of Wittgenstein.*) In order to be able to identify and refer, we must be able to perceive enduring objects distinct from ourselves; the notion of perceiving presupposes that of being able to perceive things from different points of view—for it is precisely this that distinguishes genuine perception from illusion. The notion of perceiving things from different points of view presupposes, in turn, the idea that I can move about in the world, and orientate myself, as a bodily object, in relation to other objects.

* Cf. "Ludwig Wittgenstein," by Eric Heller, *ENCOUNTER*, Sept. 1959.

The idea of moving myself is then taken up and connected with the notions of action and intention. These notions are, in Hampshire's view—here again a radical departure from Cartesianism—connected with my ability to have direct knowledge of what I am doing or trying to do: "it is essential to the idea of an action," he writes, "that a person's knowledge that an action of his is his own action is not the conclusion of an inference." This knowledge that I have of what I am doing, though in certain cases it may indeed be minimal, is always with me when I am conscious. If someone is conscious, then there is always an answer to the question "what is he doing?"; and a man's own knowledge of what he is doing, not merely in some instantaneous sense, but in the sense of a project in which he is engaged which reaches out beyond the present moment, is the foundation of a man's consciousness of his own identity. (Here Hampshire comes particularly close to phenomenological thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty.)

FROM THIS POINT, two lines of thought in particular are taken up. First, some connections are explored between the idea of action and that of thinking or more generally having conscious psychological experiences. So far from the latter being contrasted with action, as it always has been in the Cartesian tradition, Hampshire finds the two to be intimately connected. So far from an emotion, for instance, being a merely passive experience which may, as a matter of fact, lead to or cause overt action, it is rather, according to Hampshire, a kind of inhibited action; the emotion of anger, for instance, is to be understood as a by-product of the activity, itself rather sophisticated, of stopping myself lashing out or something similar. Similarly, the "psychological state" of belief is to be understood as a kind of inhibited assertion. (These somewhat paradoxical statements may be an oversimplification of Hampshire's view. I suspect, however, that the view as it stands is in any case rather paradoxical.)

The second line of thought pursued from here is an exploration of the notion of "practical knowledge" and its connections with intention. Hampshire holds, if I understand him, that there are two sorts of such knowledge. One is a certain "non-propositional" knowledge, which a man has when he knows what he is going to do or, more particularly, how he is going to do something, but has no words in which he could describe this. Thus an actor, for instance, may know how he means to play his part in the sense that he can show you how he does it, and can recognise if it has failed to come off, but could not *describe* how he was going to do it. The

other sort is propositional: a man can tell you what he is going to do, in the form of a definite statement of intention.

Statements of intention are contrasted with predictions of what a man will do, and it is argued that there is a sense in which the two cannot be combined: a man cannot *intend* to do a certain thing if he knows on independent grounds, say some considerations of psychology, that he is going to do the thing anyway. This consideration introduces a doctrine of freedom. I am free, roughly speaking, in so far as my actual actions match my genuine intentions and projects. In particular, the neurotic is not free, since he is constantly frustrated in what he is consciously trying to bring about. In his case, this is because there is something else which in a rather different, subconscious sense, he is trying to do; the way to liberation is through an increased self-consciousness which it is the aim of psycho-analysis to bring about. Here Hampshire (like Spinoza, on whom he earlier wrote a book*) connects the idea of freedom with that of self-knowledge, and, by connecting this notion with the doctrines of Freud, tries to give an interpretation of free and responsible action which will avoid the difficulties and obscurities of the bare notion of the freedom of the *will*, as it has been inherited from Kant and the Christian tradition.

FINALLY, these notions of freedom and responsibility are applied, rather briefly, to an account of morality and the relations of morality and art. In Hampshire's view, the central notion of morality is not, for instance, that of obligation or duty, but that of a good man. He shares with Aristotle the idea that to say of a man that he is good is to say that he is perfect, fully-developed, as a man; almost, that he is an excellent specimen of the type "man." Every morality, accordingly, must contain as its central notion an idea of what a man should be, some doctrine of what is essentially human excellence. Such a notion Hampshire himself seeks to develop in outline from what he has said about the nature of man; in particular, the perfect man must be one who is to the fullest extent free, whose projects are based on a rational understanding of his own dispositions and capabilities, and which accordingly are not destroyed or frustrated by features of himself for which he has not allowed.

MERELY from this summary (and I have left a lot out) it will be seen that the book contains a multitude of ideas variously and suggestively connected together. There is a good deal in the book that will certainly provoke doubt and disagreement. In particular, it is un-

clear that Hampshire has made his case about pointing as the natural foundation of linguistic reference; it may well be that pointing itself, in the sense that is required, is something that presupposes a linguistic context. On the relation between different sorts of intention, again, Hampshire's thesis is obscure, both in respect of the "non-propositional" sort of knowledge of my intentions, and in the relations between the doctrine that to act intentionally involves having a certain sort of knowledge of what I am doing, and the assertion, which Hampshire thinks appropriate to neurotic behaviour, that a man may act in ignorance of his real intentions. The account of morality, further, is markedly schematic and incomplete, and some well-known difficulties in the Aristotelian notion that to be a good man is, roughly, to be good at being a man, are not really answered. More general criticism of the chapter on morality will also occur to the reader; whether, for instance, the rough picture of the good life (remarkably like Spinoza's in its tone of anti-romantic heroism) could serve for other than a rather special sort of life attainable only in favourable circumstances, and whether allowance has been made for the somewhat unsympathetic consequences of this; and whether Hampshire has not incorporated into the notion of morality itself considerations that unduly narrow the concept, so that certain sorts of morality—religious morality, for instance—become on his view well-nigh incomprehensible.

It will be a long and fruitful task for anyone interested in human thought and morality to discuss the difficulties of Hampshire's book. I should like to end by raising just one, more general, sort of criticism. It is my impression that Hampshire's account pays insufficient attention to the applications of natural science to human behaviour, and that some of his distinctions and conclusions may well be called in question when one considers the possible advances in these sciences or even, in some cases, their present state. Now Hampshire certainly denies this, and part of his purpose, like that of Spinoza, is indeed to give an account of human action and freedom compatible with scientific enquiry into the mind. His success in this purpose, however, seems much less striking when the scientific advances for which his position is prepared turn out to be those of psycho-analysis—"the new positive science of human conduct," as he optimistically terms it. To say that a view of human freedom is compatible with scientific advance because it is compatible with developments in psycho-analysis is much like saying

* *Spinoza*. By STUART HAMPSHIRE. Penguin, 1951; Faber & Faber, 1956.

that a material is unflammable because it doesn't burst into flames when one shines an electric torch light on it. This is all the more so in Hampshire's case because he takes a markedly non-deterministic interpretation of psycho-analysis, considering it in effect as a theory of freedom. This is certainly a possible interpretation of psycho-analysis, and it may well be the most illuminating. However, it is only dubiously compatible with a good deal of what Freud, at least, says, and perhaps makes it even less clear than before, if this is possible, in what sense psycho-analysis is a positive science at all.

THE really effective enemy against which theories of freedom should be prepared is not psycho-analysis but the neuro-physiology of the brain, and of this Hampshire has nothing to say. It may well be that a good number of his reflections on freedom would withstand any advance in this science as well; I think it is so. But the real enemy should be faced. It may be that Hampshire in fact thinks that neuro-physiology could not possibly advance to the point where it could yield substantial predictions of human behaviour. If so, arguments should be produced—it is a risky sort of claim.

There is another branch of natural science, too, to which Hampshire might have given more consideration. This is zoology; here the point is not that he should have made room for advances in science, but that consideration of its findings might well have modified the rigidity of some of his distinctions. For Hampshire, human action seems to be radically distinct from any other animal behaviour. Now this is in a sense true, in so far as the human possession of language and self-consciousness (which Hampshire rightly connects together) constitutes an enormous conceptual difference in our views of human and of other animal behaviour. But it does not follow from this that the behaviour of other animals is really mechanical, while ours is not; nor that the interpretation of animal behaviour as purposive consists only in reading into a stimulus-response system a pattern merely analogous to a pattern familiar in human action.

It is unclear how far Hampshire accepts this kind of conclusion, but he seems to me tempted to it. Thus, while admitting that animal behaviour is purposive in some sense or other, he

certainly denies that we can attribute intentions to animals. Here I suspect Hampshire goes wrong in his concept of intention. It is true that we cannot ascribe sensibly to an animal an intention to do something in the future, which it has not yet embarked on. This is because it makes no sense to think of an animal using temporal ideas, save perhaps in the most rudimentary behavioural contexts. It does not follow from this, however, as Hampshire's concept of intention leads him to infer, that it makes no sense to apply to an animal the concept of its intention *in* doing what it is doing. We can distinguish in the case of an animal, as we can with human beings, between what it is really doing, in the sense of what it is primarily up to, and the things that are merely concomitants of what it is doing. Thus what the dog may be really doing is digging for a bone, or digging a hole: not, in the same primary sense, turning over so many stones or making a scratching noise, though it is *also* doing these things. Of course the evidences for this will be different from those available in a comparable case of a human being, whom we can ask what he is doing. But to say that therefore the concept of intention *in doing* such-and-such does not apply to animals suggests to me an excessively anthropocentric concept of intention; we can and must in the case of complex animal behaviour draw the distinction between what is really being done and what is concomitant, and this seems to me one firm ground of the concept of intention.

THIS is a highly complex question, and no simple view can be had on it. Yet I feel that as a matter of attitude, to put it no stronger, that had Hampshire had more vividly in mind the astonishing complexities of animal behaviour, and the marked continuities, not only of reaction, but of patterns of purposive action between the other animals and man, he would have allowed concepts of action and intention not so totally restricted to human activities.

Descartes, it will be remembered, thought that animals were machines; perhaps Hampshire's view of animal behaviour constitutes the last Cartesian element in this profound and original anti-Cartesian book.

BURNS SINGER and JERZY PETERKIEWICZ

Poems from the Polish

On the War we wage against Satan, the World and the Body

Peace would make happy: under the heavens though
We fight our life. He who commands the night
Wages cruel war; and vanities delight
In quickening our corruption with their show.

And there is more, O Lord, that you must know:
Our home, this body, greedy, fleeting, bright,
Heedlessly envious of your supreme might,
Continually covets endless woe.

Weak, careless and divided, what can I,
Engaged in all this combat, gain alone?
O universal King, O peace most high,
Your mercy is my hope, or I have none.

Let me come close, Lord, teach me what to do,
Then I shall fight them and, thus saved, win through.

Mikolaj SEP-SZARZYNSKI (1550?–1581)

Queries

Earth and the whirl of air, the circling sky,
These are my triple texts. They clarify
God's goodness till their living image glows
And I read truth through their three folios.
What spark lights up the sun and makes it burn,
An endless lantern as the years return?
Who drives its flame-maned chargers? And what force
Keeps its bright cart so perfectly on course?
Who costumes night, the youthful prioress
Whose face each evening wears new tenderness?
And why is she not weary with the changes?
Who plants the seeds of dew? And who arranges
For morning to be varnished fresh each day?
Who brightens the extinguished stars which play