

PREFACE

It was with great pleasure that I received an invitation to attend the first annual *Rerum Causae* Conference on 12 February 2010. I had been a graduate student of LSE, doing a PhD under the supervision of Imre Lakatos in the years 1966-1970. I naturally wondered what the intellectual scene would be like now, of course expecting that it would be very different from when I was a student so many years ago.

The period 1966-1970 was a dramatic one for students. These were the years of the student revolution which, in Britain, was centred on the LSE. The first student occupation of a British university took place in LSE during this time. The Department of Philosophy was also a very lively place. Karl Popper was still in post, but his philosophy was being challenged by Lakatos. Paul Feyerabend, though not a member of staff, was a frequent visitor, and even gave a course of lectures. One of the strange features of the department was its almost exclusive focus on history and philosophy of science, where science here included the natural sciences (mainly physics) and mathematics, but did not include economics and the social sciences. There were virtually no discussions of political philosophy or of ethics. This was certainly an unusual agenda for a department in a school of economics and political science.

I have to say that this did not disturb me as much as it might have done. My training and interests at that time were in mathematics and physics. I knew almost nothing about economics and the social sciences, and had little interest in politics. However, even I had heard of Popper's book on the Open Society, and I was expecting that he would discuss some of the themes of this book in his lectures and seminars. To my

surprise he never did so.

Turning now to the present situation, it is obvious that the peculiar distortion of the late 1960s has been corrected. Of the six papers at the conference, half were concerned with themes of political philosophy and ethics which would never have been discussed in my day. Susanne Burri gives a critical analysis of the Nudge theory. The idea of this theory is to nudge people into making choices which are good for them without compelling them to make these choices. So, for example, fruit and healthy foods could be put near the tills of supermarkets where customers are more likely to buy them. Burri is however sceptical about this libertarian paternalism—with good reason in my view. Keren Bester takes up the problem of how we can justify democracy. This can be done instrumentally by arguing that democracy produces better outcomes, or procedurally by arguing for the fairness of democracy. Bester argues that for a justification of democracy we need some account of procedural fairness. James Matharu's paper is on ethics. He takes the morally difficult 2001 case of the conjoined twins Jodie and Mary. If they were separated, Jodie would live a normal life, but Mary would die. If they were not separated, both would die after a short time. Should one separate or not? Matharu gives a careful analysis of the problem, in which he comes down in favour of separation.

The remaining three papers do have some links with the agenda of the LSE's Department of Philosophy in the late 1960s, but there are differences as well. Matthew Pines' paper is concerned with the status of scientific laws. He gives a subtle analysis of different logical positions on this issue. This makes his paper very much in the tradition of analytic philosophy of science, whereas, in the late 1960s, the historical approach (history and philosophy of science) was the one adopted. Remco Heesen's paper is concerned with probability, and this creates an immediate link with LSE philosophy in the 1960s where probability was a big topic—Popper would often discuss it. However, there is a difference again. Heesen concerns himself with a problem in Bayesian belief updating, but subjective Bayesianism was one of Popper's particular aversions, and a good percentage of his talks about probability would consist of polemics against it! The last paper presented at the conference was

Tom Holaday's one on historical change and interpretation, in which he argues that history (historical narration) is itself subject to historical change.¹ This paper is in many ways the closest to LSE philosophy in the 1960s. Because the historical approach to philosophy was dominant at that time, questions about the nature of history itself would naturally arise. Indeed Popper wrote a piece discussing Collingwood's philosophy of history which is to be found in his 1972 *Objective Knowledge* (Chapter 4, pp. 186-190).

So what overall impression did I take away from this interesting conference? There is certainly a lively intellectual atmosphere as there was in my time, and the content of the investigations fits much better with the other activities in the LSE than it did in my day. However, it might still be worthwhile for the present generation to read over the philosophical works produced in LSE in the 1960s and early 1970s—those of Popper, Lakatos, and maybe even Feyerabend. These works are clearly and often amusingly written, and perhaps have something to offer, even in the context of a considerably different intellectual agenda.

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¹The paper is not included in this issue.