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'A Kind of Philosophical Kindergarten'

*The Story of the Philosophical Society of England
1913-1999
(and the story continues...)*

The last few years have witnessed a dramatic growth of interest in philosophy within the higher education sector. Academic philosophy both retains its prestige and has acted as an important focus for serious thought within the empirical and human sciences. There has also occurred a major expansion in the number of courses devoted to applied philosophy for those without an undergraduate background in philosophy, particularly in the fields of medicine and law. Yet, despite such opportunities, philosophy departments have shut and opportunities for graduate philosophers wishing to teach philosophy have become few and far between.

At the same time there has been an increased interest in philosophy by the general public, along with a healthy proliferation of books, magazines and programmes devoted to philosophy. Most notable has been the development of philosophy in cafés and pubs and the emergence of organisations concerned with the practical applications of philosophy such as the Society for Applied Philosophy, the Society of Consultant Philosophers and 'Philosophy for All'. There has also occurred the introduction of philosophy for school-aged children, an innovation for which our Society can claim some credit.

It is in this relatively buoyant context that we have written this history of The Philosophical Society. of which this is an edited version. The Society was formed in 1913 'to bring philosophy to the layman' and was described by one of its members, Dr Albert Belden, as a philosophical kindergarten. This seemed a fitting title for the story of our Society, not least because it has always been quite clear about its aim of interesting the beginner and the amateur in philosophy. While this goal judged by the standards of today is not that unusual, it is important to note that for much of our Society's history, access to philosophy tended to be both exclusive and elitist.

From the very beginning the Philosophical Society (of England) had a number of clear objectives and these were outlined in the Constitution and Objects of the Society published in 1915:

This Society was established in 1913 with the object of furthering the study of Philosophy. This the Council hopes to carry out as the opportunity and other circumstances allow:

- (a) By directing and arranging for study, research and teaching.
- (b) By delivering Lectures and holding Meetings, etc.
- (c) By the Provision of Lecturers to give expositions on the subject when required
- (d) By publishing Papers and Periodicals
- (e) By awarding Prizes, Scholarships, Grants of Honour, or by taking other suitable measures for furthering the objects of the Society
- (f) By co-operating with other Societies for carrying out the above objects

(The Philosophical Society (of England) Constitution and Objects 1915.)

While there have at times been difficulties in attaining these specific aims, the general goal of the Society has remained clear: to offer men and women the opportunity to discuss and study questions of philosophical interest through 'the encouragement and promotion of philosophical studies and the furtherance of philosophical investigation and research in connection with the sciences, literature, the fine arts, and theology' (Memorandum of Association, 1948).

All of those involved have held positions within the Society over a period of approximately forty years. Alan Holloway, as Director of Studies, Journal Editor and Chairman of Council; Robert Hill as General Secretary and Archivist, Justin Woods as Council member and Australasia Editor, and Martin Cohen as Editor, to mention just some of the contributors. Proximity to the Society has probably affected our views. This 'Philosopher' history has been particularly hard fought over, by those with different perceptions of the realities. However we feel that we have been critical where criticism seems justified and supportive where we believe this to be warranted. In some sections we have focused on the personalities of key members of the Society and at other times written about the Society in terms of its public face (its journal, its lecture programme and Annual General Meetings). Much of the material is based on extant records and journals of the Society and where we have been able to talk to individuals associated with the Society we have done that. That relating to the Society prior to 1953 has been gleaned almost exclusively from the pages of *The Philosopher* as the Society was unfortunately twice 'bombed out' during the Second World War and its books and papers burnt.

This *Philosopher* issue includes, in addition to the bulk of the edited text of the official history, several 'personal views' from key members recalling their views of

and hopes for, the Society, and 'three of the best' articles from *The Philosopher's* extensive archive, as revealed in the Index at the back.

In Chapter One: 'Wisdom to Direct, Knowledge to Govern' Robert Hill traces out the beginning of the Society, established in December 1913 by The Rev. Elphinstone Rivers, to 1936. This was a period in which the Society was establishing its objectives, primarily through its lecture programme and later through its journal. It was also a time when the fortunes of the Society were riding high, particularly the years 1934-36. We include two articles from this heady period, by John Dewey and Moritz Schlick, although there are many others we might have chosen.

1936 was however also a watershed for the Society and for reasons not always in the Society's control the years that were to follow were to see mixed fortunes. Chapter Two examines the period up to 1948. At this time the Society not only lost key personnel, but was also in serious financial difficulties. but, although the war years created challenges for everyone, the Society through the work of its officers not only kept publication of *The Philosopher* going, but continued to attract new Fellows and members. In the immediate post-war period, the Society faced concern expressed by the Executive Council over the nature of the Fellowship award, and it was this that led directly to its reconstitution in December 1948.

Chapter Three focuses on the period from the Society's reconstitution to its Silver Jubilee in 1963. The reader will note that it was during this period that many of the controversies that bedevilled the Society emerged. Noteworthy were the attacks by Gilbert Ryle in 1952 which resulted in a question being raised about the Society in the House of Commons. Four years later there followed an anonymous attack in the Times Educational Supplement concerning the level of scholarship needed for the Society's examinations and theses. However, this was also a period when the Society was outwardly extremely strong with a large and active membership and Bertrand Russell as Patron.

In Chapter Four, Alan Holloway examines the years 1963-1988, a time in which he was very much at the centre of the Society and a period in which the Society did a great deal of work to salvage its reputation. Chapter Five continues the history up to the present day and was written by Justin Woods, who successfully re-established the London group after a short period of demise, with additional material from Martin Cohen.

While we have endeavoured to write as complete an overview as possible, we acknowledge that there are gaps, particularly for the early years. Correspondence with readers having additional details would be most welcome, as would notification of any inaccuracies that may have entered into the text.

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The letters by Albert Belden and Gilbert Ryle are reproduced courtesy of The Spectator magazine. Finally, we would like to dedicate this history to Mrs. Betty Judge, Treasurer and supporter of the Society for many years. Publication is aided by the kind bequest of the late Rupert Judge.