The philosophers that Sophie skipped

"In a world without ideology, people's appetite for philosophy is growing. But the English-language variety is attacked for being scholastic, over-technical and abstruse. Is it?"

'SOPHIE'S WORLD', a history of philosophy written in the form of a novel, has sold at least 9m copies in 36 languages by offering philosophy without tears. What its Norwegian author, Jostein Gaarder, also offers is philosophy without the 20th century. His tour begins 2,600 years ago, and ends, in effect, in the late 1800s. The past century is reduced to a few cups of cafe-philosophy distilled from Jean-Paul Sartre, a dose of pop physics and one passing reference to a remark by Bertrand Russell about a doomed chicken. Perhaps this was wise. There is, after all, a widespread belief that today's philosophy is bunk. Many people say that 'analytical' philosophy-which dominates English-speaking universities, and which has become the main philosophical movement in the West-is a mixture of trifling semantics and impenetrable mathematical squiggles.

Yet here is a funny thing. Who was it who complained about 'the over-refined linguistic quibbling of some philosophers' And who whinged that 'mathematics has come to be the whole of philosophy for modern thinkers' The first complaint is from Galen, a doctor who wrote long before the fall of the Roman Empire. The second is even older: it comes from Aristotle. The fact is that such criticisms are as ancient as philosophy itself. They are the sort of thing which thinkers in every century have tended to say about the philosophers of their own times. Maybe the 20th century is not so very different from what came before. Philosophy is always liable to look trivial and misguided until it is old and seen through spectacles fogged by nostalgia for some past age of intellectual greatness.

But an even larger obstacle to any proper appraisal of present-day thinking in the English-speaking world is often sheer unfamiliarity. Today's philosophy is much abused but little understood. For a fairer view, it may help to take a closer look at the thinkers with whom 20th-century philosophy began. The story opens as a tale of two cities: Cambridge and Vienna. In 1898, a Cambridge mathematician, Bertrand Russell, fell under the sway of a classicist, GE Moore. Both men had turned to philosophy, and Moore was aghast at what he found. He could barely believe that the Hegelians who then dominated the British scene meant what they said. Like the honest boy in Hans Christian Andersen's tale, Moore came to the conclusion that the emperor had no clothes. 'What on earth do you mean by that ', he would gasp incredulously in discussions. He wrote that the disagreements which had dogged philosophy 'are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer.' What philosophy needed, according to Moore, was more careful analysis and fewer ridiculous statements.

Russell agreed that philosophy required a firmer footing, and when he went to a mathematical conference in Paris in 1900, he thought he had found it. There he met an Italian, Giuseppe Peano, whose work set new standards of logical rigour. Russell thought that Peano had uncovered the true nature of mathematics and had thus answered a puzzle which had baffled philosophers for centuries. This gave Russell an idea. It seemed to him that 19th-century mathematicians had resolved 'many of the topics which used to be placed among the great mysteries-for example, the natures of infinity, of continuity, of space, time and motion.' Perhaps philosophy could borrow their methods of analysis and finally start to make progress.

This idea was worked up in a vast tome, 'The Principles of Mathematics' (1903). While writing it, Russell discovered the work of Gottlob Frege, a German mathematician, who had taken Peano's sort of work even farther. Frege tried to show that part of mathematics was really a branch of logic (and in doing so developed the mathematical logic from which today's computer languages come). Though Frege had no interest in applying his methods outside mathematics, Russell thought they could be the model for a revolution in philosophy as a whole. The 'logical-analytical method', he said, amounted to 'the same kind of advance as was introduced into physics by Galileo: the substitution of piecemeal, detailed and verifiable results for large untested generalities recommended only by a certain appeal to imagination.' Here at last was the sort of philosophy that would not arouse Moore's incredulous gasps.

'The Principles of Mathematics' unveiled key methods and tools that shaped 20th-century philosophy. One was the 'theory of descriptions', which purported to solve a problem that Plato had wrestled with, namely how one can think and speak of non-existent things. The theory showed how various tricky propositions could be translated into something more perspicuous and less puzzling; it soon came to be seen as a model of how to philosophise. Even more important was the 'doctrine of types', which was designed by Russell to deal with some mathematical paradoxes. It proposed a 'definite set of rules for deciding whether a given series of words was or was not significant.' By specifying a technical criterion of meaningfulness which mathematics had to satisfy, it eliminated the paradoxes. To some philosophers it also suggested the possibility of something broader. Perhaps there could be a general criterion of meaningfulness, which would eliminate not only mathematical paradoxes but a whole host of philosophical problems. This idea was enthusiastically taken up in Vienna.

Logical negativism

In the 19th century there was a tradition in the German-speaking world of mixing physics and philosophy. Ernst Mach, one of the main influences on Einstein, was an early example. This tradition was the foreign soil in which Russell's 'logical-analytical method' grew most impressively; and it was one of the later occupants of Mach's chair in Vienna, Moritz Schlick, who did the most to tend the seedlings. Schlick earned his PhD in physics under Max Planck, one of the founders of quantum theory; then he turned to more philosophical matters. In 1918 he published a study of knowledge which aimed at 'correctly interpreting the achievements of the sciences'. It sought not only to analyse

scientific results, but also to philosophise in accordance with a scientific method. This was philosophy in Russell's style, and with many references to Russell.

Yet Schlick and his colleagues soon added a twist of their own. In 1924 Schlick founded 'the Vienna Circle for the Dissemination of the Scientific Outlook', a discussion group whose members were mainly scientists and mathematicians. By the early 1930s, the group had formed alliances with like-minded thinkers in Berlin, Poland, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. They called their approach to knowledge 'logical positivism', though in fact it was rather negative as far as philosophy was concerned. 'All real problems are scientific ones,' wrote Schlick, 'there are no others'. What used to be called 'philosophical problems' were fated to disappear. Some of them would be 'shown to be mistakes and misunderstandings of our language and the others will be found to be ordinary scientific questions in disguise.'

According to the positivists, there was to be a strict division between all-conquering science and the dwindling ancillary discipline of philosophy. Philosophy could talk about the meanings of statements, but it was up to science to decide if these statements were true. The most useful thing philosophers could do was pack up awkward bits of intellectual furniture so that the scientific removal-men could come and take them away.

Russell disagreed. Philosophy was 'more critical and more general' than science, but not radically different from it. He wanted to apply scientific methods of analysis to some of the ancient problems of philosophy, not to abolish that venerable discipline. As we shall see, Russell's approach won out in the end. But several other things happened first.

Inspired partly by the success of Russell's 'doctrine of types' in mathematics, the positivists tried to wield a mighty axe called the Verification Principle. This was supposed to provide a general criterion of meaningfulness for all statements of fact, and any which did not meet it were condemned as nonsense. Whatever was empirically unverifiable had to go, so it was farewell to most of traditional philosophy-and much else. This negative aspect of the Vienna Circle's doctrine owed much to their reading of the 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus', which had been published by Ludwig Wittgenstein, a former pupil of Russell's, in 1921.

Bewitched-genstein

In fact, Wittgenstein had less in common with the positivists than they thought. Russell, too, interpreted Wittgenstein's work in his own slanted way. Everyone had his own version of Wittgenstein in those days, and the only point of agreement was that Wittgenstein was a genius.

Wittgenstein was the offspring of one of Europe's mightiest industrial barons. In 1908 he left his native Austria to fly kites in Derbyshire, for aeronautical research, and then went to Manchester to study engineering. He became interested in the work of Frege and Russell and came to Cambridge to study under Russell in 1911. After a short period during which he thought that Wittgenstein was mad, Russell soon came to the conclusion

that he would shortly be eclipsed by his pupil. Wittgenstein's criticisms of some of Russell's work on mathematical logic were brilliantly penetrating; his views on logic were powerfully original. Russell and Moore thought that the next breakthroughs in philosophy would come from Wittgenstein.

Neither of them realised just how unusual Wittgenstein's agenda was. Russell and Moore held that the job of philosophy was to analyse the world, but Wittgenstein believed that its job was to analyse language. Most philosophy, he maintained, is fuelled by a dangerous temptation to transgress the limits of language and say the unsayable. Proper philosophy should instead offer a 'critique of language', which would reveal these limits and then maintain a dignified silence.

Moreover, Wittgenstein was vehemently opposed to the optimism and scientific spirit of Russell. 'I have no sympathy for the current of European civilisation and do not understand its goals,' he later wrote. It was a delusion, Wittgenstein believed, to think that science and industry could solve man's problems. To philosophise in a scientific spirit-as Russell and the positivists did in their various ways-was a symptom of this delusion.

Wittgenstein left Cambridge in 1913 and returned 16 years later. In between, he fought in the first world war, wrote his 'Tractatus', gave away his fortune, spent six years as a village school-teacher, designed a house for his sister and met a few members of the Vienna Circle. By the time he came back to Cambridge in 1929, he was evolving a new, therapeutic conception of his 'critique of language'. The Oxford movement that came to be called 'ordinary-language philosophy', and had its heyday from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, was influenced by this new approach.

According to Wittgenstein's revised outlook, philosophical problems are to be solved 'by looking into the workings of our language . . . not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence . . .' The main cause of this alleged bewitchment was language, though it was not the only cause. Another was people's 'craving for generality'. A third was scientism-that is, a misplaced confidence in purely scientific ways of thinking.

The new therapy was supposed to work by examining what people say and thereby revealing the rich diversity of linguistic behaviour. Appreciating this diversity would prevent us from falsely assimilating one 'language-game' to another. Wittgenstein had read very little of the philosophy of previous centuries, but he was convinced that this sort of thing was relevant to it. For example, his linguistic therapy showed (or so he thought) that it was a mistake to look for some sort of proof of the existence of physical objects, as many philosophers since Descartes had done. To try and provide such a proof revealed a misunderstanding of how we use words such as 'know'. We cannot meaningfully question the existence of physical objects, so we should not speak of 'demonstrating' their existence either. The language-game of 'proof' could not be played in this context.

Much of Wittgenstein's therapy concerned the way people talk about mental states. It was this topic which produced some of the best-known work of the Oxford school. Gilbert Ryle's 'The Concept of Mind', which sought to exorcise 'Descartes's myth' of 'the ghost in the machine', is one example. It argued that to talk about human intelligence and consciousness was, in effect, to talk about publicly observable behaviour, not ghostly, inner events. The book's contents and approach are broadly Wittgensteinean.

Wittgenstein acknowledged that his way of doing philosophy was a radical departure. But this seemed to him to be entirely appropriate: 'Why', he asked, 'should philosophy in the age of airplanes and automobiles be the same as in the age when people travelled by coach or on foot ' Russell was not convinced. He accused Wittgenstein and the Oxford school of having abandoned serious intellectual work. He was not the only critic to do so.

Although the Oxford men officially denied that the analysis of language provided the last word on any philosophical subject, it did seem to take up much of their time. They sometimes substituted an obsession with language for the much-derided obsession with science. (Most were trained as classicists, so they were simply doing what they knew best.) One pupil recalled handing a draft of his thesis to JL Austin, a leader of the school, whereupon Austin opened the file at the page of contents and 'proceeded to spend the next three hours discussing the differences between 'contents', 'list', 'index', 'table', etc.' The pupil experienced 'a Zen-like illumination'. But it faded in minutes.

The Vienna Circle had broken up just before the second world war, and most of the top positivists from the continent emigrated to America. They had mellowed somewhat; the harsh Verification Principle had been largely abandoned by 1950. But they retained their focus on science and mathematical logic. Their continuing work had an enormous impact on American philosophy, and eventually succeeded in reinstating Russell's original conception of philosophy as a partner of science.

Russell's revenge

From about the mid-1970s, the transatlantic trade in philosophy began to reverse its flow, and America became the great exporter of ideas. British philosophers went as pilgrims to America rather than vice versa. Willard Quine, a Harvard philosopher who had visited the Vienna Circle as a student, and who had worked closely with positivists and ex-positivists ever since, became the most-discussed figure among English-speaking philosophers. Quine propounded a crucial argument that helped to combat the influence of Wittgenstein and to bring philosophy and science closer together. Many people, on both sides of the Atlantic, disagree with the argument, but philosophy is now largely pursued as if it were correct.

Quine argued that the difference between matters of fact and matters of meaning is a difference of degree, not a difference of kind. 'All bachelors are unmarried' is true in virtue of its meaning; 'Bill Clinton is married' is true in virtue of fact. Quine developed a 'holistic' philosophy of language according to which truths of fact blend into truths of meaning, so that there is no absolute distinction between the two. Because Wittgenstein,

the early positivists and the Oxford analysts had all asserted that philosophy was concerned with meanings, whereas science was concerned with facts, the barriers which they erected between philosophy and science began to crumble.

As if to reflect this change, many philosophers have been mingling with psychologists, biologists, computer scientists and theoretical physicists, especially in America. Insofar as their work remains distinctively philosophical, it is so largely in Russell's sense of being 'more critical and more general' than everyday scientific work. It is more likely to look askance at fundamental presuppositions and to try to relate work in different fields.

Still, this is a blurring of the boundaries, not a wholesale merger, and by no means all of today's philosophers specialise in questions that have much connection with any scientific research. Nevertheless, most branches of philosophy now have closer links with other subjects-political theory, economics, jurisprudence, for instance-than they had in Wittgenstein's time. Very few philosophers now think of their subject as entirely cut off from all others.

The other big change in philosophy since Wittgenstein's day is that there is much more of it. This too has affected how it is done, and in ways that Russell would largely have approved of. According to a forthcoming study by Tom Baldwin of York University, there are now about 480 professional philosophers in Britain, compared with 122 in 1947. There are about 8,500 in America, according to the Philosophy Documentation Centre (PDC) in Ohio, and the number of philosophy PhDs granted in America grew from 83 in 1949-50 to 255 in 1988-89. The result is increased specialisation and the division of labour. The replacement of 'large untested generalities' by detailed piecemeal results, which Russell called for, have now been delivered, partly because of changes in academic life.

But are there perhaps now too many detailed piecemeal results The PDC records no fewer than 320 philosophical journals currently published in English, of which 184 are American. Privately, and unsurprisingly, many philosophers confess that not all of these outpourings are worthwhile. Yet something similar is true of all academic disciplines. The 'logical-analytical method' which Russell advocated, and which the majority of English-speaking philosophers still practise in some form, has become a professional tool like any other. This is presumably what Russell would have wanted. If 'analytical' philosophy really is very different from more traditional varieties, it is largely in virtue of being more professional.

Published in *The Economist* on 7th December 1996. **By Anthony Gottlieb**