What is Wrong with Our Thoughts? A

Neo-Positivist Credo,

Chapter 7 of David Stove, *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (Blackwell, 1991).

Early in the fourth century Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, and at once had reason to regret his having done so; for now not only the Church but the state was convulsed by controversies about the Holy Trinity. These controversies raged for over two hundred years, after which the bishops found new intellectual outlets, if not more rational ones, for their animosities. But Trinitarian trouble was not dead, only sleeping. The Great Schism of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which split the Western from the Eastern Church, took place, on its theological side, over a question concerning the Trinity. This was, of course, that most famous of all theological questions, the question of the procession of the Holy Ghost, or of the *filioque*. The Orthodox theory was that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father alone. The Western bishops, however, were equally adamant that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father *filioque* - '*and the Son*'.

It is obvious enough that these two opinions could not both be right, though both could be wrong. It is equally obvious that both opinions *are* wrong, or at least, that they each have got something dreadfully wrong with them, and the same thing. They both have some fatal congenital defect, whatever the exact nature of this defect may be. And it is equally obvious too, that this defect will also be shared by any other answer to the question, what or whom the Holy Ghost proceeds from. It does not matter much how you answer this question: something has already gone fatally wrong with your thoughts, once you find yourself so much as asking it.

If we go back again to the age of Constantine, and enquire what the pagan philosophers of that time were thinking about, we expect to hear of something more rational, at least, than questions about the Trinity. And so we do, at any rate among those philosophers who are among the intellectual descendants of Plato. Here is a typical example from the writings of Plotinus, which date from around 260.

> When we affirm the reality of the Real Beings and their individual identity of being and declare that these Real Beings exist in the Intellectual Realm, we do not mean merely that they remain unchangeably self-identical by their very essence, as contrasted with the fluidity and instability of the sense-realm; the sense-realm itself may contain the enduring. No; we mean rather that these principles possess, as by their own virtue, the consummate fulness of being. The Essence described as the primally existent cannot be a shadow cast by Being, but must possess Being entire; and Being is entire when it holds the form and idea of intellection and of life. In a Being, then, the existence, the intellection, the life are present as an aggregate. When a thing is a Being, it is also an Intellectual-Principle, when it is an Intellectual-Principle it is a Being; intellection and Being are co-existents. Therefore intellection is a multiple not a unitary and that

which does not belong to this order can have no Intellection. And if we turn to the partial and particular, there is the Intellectual form of man, and there is man, there is the Intellectual form of horse and there is horse, the Intellectual form of Justice, and Justice.1

This sort of thing really is, I believe, better than thinking about the procession of the Holy Ghost; although I do not deny that it takes a sharp man to tell the difference. But everyone can tell that, with these thoughts too, as with thoughts about the *filioque, something* has gone appallingly wrong; or more likely, several things. Thinking like this is a perfect example of how you ought not to think.

It will be a relief, therefore, to turn for comparison to a typical passage from one of the very greatest of modern philosophers. It will also help to give us true ideas of the reality of progress in human thought, and of the speed of it, if we compare Plotinus with Hegel, writing sixteen hundred years later.

> This is a light that breaks forth on spiritual substance, and shows absolute content and absolute form to be identical; - substance is in itself identical with knowledge. Self-consciousness thus, in the third place, recognizes its positive relation as its negative, and its negative as its positive, - or, in other words, recognizes these opposite activities as the same i.e. it recognizes pure Thought or Being as self-identity, and this again as separation. This is intellectual perception; but it is requisite in order that it should be in truth intellectual, that it should not be that merely immediate perception of the eternal and the divine which we hear of, but should be absolute knowledge. This intuitive perception which does not recognize itself is taken as starting-point as if it were absolutely presupposed; it has in itself intuitive perception only as immediate knowledge, and what it perceives it does not really know, - for, taken at its best, it consists of beautiful thoughts, but not knowledge.2

No more cheap jokes, I promise. They are silly anyway, because it would be silly to deny that the long night of ignorance, superstition, and religious or metaphysical delirium, really has by now come to an end. You can see that it has, by comparing the foregoing Hegel passage, the Plotinus passage, and the dispute about the *filioque,* with a representative passage from the writings of a great thinker of the present day: Michel Foucault,

> An intrinsic archaeological contradiction is not a fact, purely and simply, that it is enough to state as a principle or explain as an effect. It is a complex phenomenon that is distributed over different levels of the discursive formation. Thus, for systematic Natural History and methodical Natural History, which were in constant opposition for a good part of the eighteenth century, one can recognize: an *inadequation* of the objects (in the one case one describes the general appearance of the plant; in the other certain predetermined variables; in the one case, one describes the totality of the plant, or at least its most important parts, in the other one describes a number of elements chosen arbitrarily for their taxonomic convenience; sometimes one takes account of the plant's different states. of growth and maturity, at others one confines one's attention to a single moment, a stage of optimum visibility); a *divergence* of enunciative modalities (in the case of the systematic analysis of plants, one applies a rigorous perceptual and linguistic code, and in accordance with a constant scale; for methodical description, the codes are relatively free, and the scales of mapping may oscillate); an incompatibility of concepts (in the 'systems', the concept of generic character *is* an arbitrary, though misleading mark to designate the genera; in the methods this same concept must include the real definition of the genus); lastly, an *exclusion* of theoretical options (systematic taxonomy makes 'fixism' possible, even if it *is* rectified by the idea of a continuous creation in time, gradually unfolding the elements of the tables, or by

the idea of natural catastrophes having disturbed by our present gaze the linear order of natural proximities, but excludes the possibility of a transformation that the method accepts without absolutely implying it).3

Enough. We now have before us four cases in which human thought has gone wrong, not in some superficial or curable way, but in some way which is evidently deep and beyond hope of cure. My question is, what is it that has gone wrong in such cases?

First, however, I need to emphasize what sort of thoughts it is, or rather, what grade of thoughts it is, that I am asking about. I am not interested here (or anywhere else, much) in thoughts of primitive people, or of ignorant or stupid people, or of people of no importance for the history of thought, or of people who are, even by ordinary standards, mad. My specimens above were not drawn from the voodoo religion, for example, or from the medicine of Paracelsus, or from the 'philosophy' of William Blake, or from the 'psychotherapy' of Wilhelm Reich. Indeed, in this essay, I will hardly stray at all 'below the belt', that is, to the rank under-parts of human thought: numerology, magic, lives of the gods, lives of the saints, lives of the demons, necromancy or lives of the dead, astrology, spiritualism, Freudianism, etc., etc. Together, of course, such things as these make up in fact the great bulk of past and present human thought, and there is more than enough that is wrong with them. But my question does not mainly concern them, and would be much less important if it did.

No, my question mainly concerns the thoughts of the world's great thinkers. The examples above are drawn from historically important sources, in the main stream of human thought, and in some of its highest reaches. The disagreement about the procession of the Holy Ghost has occupied profound thinkers and scholars on either side for a thousand years; it has had momentous social, political, and military consequences for the same length of time; and it remains a stumbling- block, at the present hour, to all attempts to reunite Western with Eastern Christianity. The philosophy of Plotinus is, by the unanimous voice of the learned, the fine fruit of Platonism, after it had had the benefit of ripening over the longest period of freedom of thought in all human history: seven hundred years. Hegel is, in the opinion of many philosophers even now, the greatest of all philosophers, and was certainly, at any rate, the most influential philosopher of the nineteenth century. And the writings of Foucault have recently profoundly influenced the intelligentsia, not only of that European nation which prides itself most on thought and learning, but of the entire Western world.

Yet it is also perfectly obvious, when we consider the above examples, that in all of them thought is labouring under some fatal affliction or other. And neither of the conventional evasions will do much good here: that my four examples are so terrible because they have been 'taken out of context', or because they depend on defective translations. In Plotinus, or Hegel, or Foucault, or in Trinitarian disputes, the context of any given passage hardly ever throws any light on it; the simple reason being, that the context just consists of more of the same sort of thing. And when every reasonable allowance has been made for the real difficulty of translating Plotinus, say, or Hegel, into English, this will scarcely even begin to explain what is wrong with the passages above. We cannot understand, indeed, how anyone would come to say the things that Plotinus or Hegel says. But that they *were* saying, in Greek or in German, the same baffling things as they are found saying in good modern English translations, cannot rationally be questioned. (It is a very striking fact, however, that *I had* to go to translations for my three quotations above. Nothing which was ever expressed originally in the English language resembles, except in the most distant way, the thought of Plotinus, or Hegel, or Foucault. I take this to be enormously to the credit of our language.)

My four examples above are, then, sufficiently representative, respectively, of Christian theology, of neo-Platonist metaphysics, of German idealism, and of whatever it is that Foucault represents. Those four things, in their turn, are sufficiently representative of what human thought, in its highest reaches, has been. My four examples, however, are also examples of thought gone hopelessly wrong. A damning verdict therefore follows, on past human thought: a verdict essentially the same as the one which was pronounced on it by the eighteenth century Enlightenment, and repeated, with even greater vehemence, by the Logical Positivists in the twentieth century.

Of course it is a verdict against most past thought, not against all of it. Exempted from it are, for example, Greek mathematics in antiquity, and most importantly of course, natural science in the period since Copernicus: this being the ground on which the Enlightenment in general, and Logical Positivism in particular, took its stand. But both Greek mathematics and modern science are, in the overall historical scene, mere points of light in a boundless and impenetrable darkness. Most of even the highest human thought is what David Hume said religion is: 'sick men's dreams.'4 By contrast, rational thought - what Hume called the 'calm sunshine of the mind'5 - is historically rare, local, and ephemeral.

From an Enlightenment or Positivist point of view, which is Hume's point of view, and mine, there is simply no avoiding the conclusion that the human race is mad. There are scarcely any human beings who do not have some lunatic beliefs or other to which they attach great importance. People are mostly sane enough, of course, in the affairs of common life: the getting of food, shelter, and so on. But the moment they attempt any depth or generality of thought, they go mad almost infallibly. The vast majority, of course, adopt the local religious madness, as naturally as they adopt the local dress. But the more powerful minds will, equally infallibly, fall into the worship of some intelligent and dangerous lunatic, such as Plato, or Augustine, or Comte, or Hegel, or Marx.

Plato was born of a virgin, after Apollo had appeared to his reputed father in a dream, according to a story which was widely current soon after Plato's death and possibly even before it.6 And since he was a lifelong enthusiast for creating popular beliefs which he knew to be false, and beliefs, at that, with rather less to recommend them to him than this one had, who can say with confidence that Plato himself did not encourage belief in this stupid story? Plato - that scourge of the human mind, whom we have to thank for persuading philosophers for 2400 years, and more years to come, that it is a *problem,* how something can be a certain way and something else be the same way! Then, entrust yourself to Augustine's mighty intellect, and you too must agonize, as he does, over the 'problem', for example, whether Jesus is *still* bleeding from hands and feet? Or has he lost by now all trace of the scars of the crucifixion? Or, does he retain some scars but only faint and not-unattractive ones? It is this third alternative, Augustine concludes, which will recommend itself to every rational mind.7 Auguste Comte simply appointed himself Supreme Pontiff of his new, but final and worldwide religion, the Religion of Humanity. George Hegel thought that his thought not merely discloses, but is, the final coming-to-consciousness of the *Absolute Thought*. Marx, too, saw himself as the prophet and architect of a fundamental transformation of the entire human race, and ... But no! Let us, for pity's sake, as well as for horror's sake, draw a veil... But let us never forget, either, as *all conventional history of philosophy conspires to make us forget,* what the 'great thinkers' *really* are: proper objects, indeed, of pity, but even more, of horror.

Now what I would like to know, and what every philosopher ought to want to know, is: what is it that is wrong with the thoughts I have been speaking about: for example, with the quotations I gave above? And here I find myself at a loss. The Logical Positivists tell me, of course, that what is wrong with such things is that they are all 'meaningless.' This is not even true, as we will see a little later, but even if it were true, it would be hardly any help. It is hardly more helpful than saying, *à l'Australien,* that what is wrong with the passages in question is that they are 'all bullshit;' or that the authors of them are all mad.

The reason why all such answers are unhelpful is a very simple and obvious, but important and neglected, fact. Namely, that what is wrong with the Hegel passage, say, is quite *different* from what is wrong with the Plotinus passage; that both of those passages are quite different again, in what is wrong with them, from the Foucault passage; and that all three passages are quite different, yet again, from all answers to the question, whom or what the Holy Ghost proceeds from. My four specimens are all profoundly pathological, no doubt; but each of them is pathological in a different way. What we need to know is, what these various ways are. But that is what no Logical Positivist, and still less anyone else, can tell us.

And this is how we are placed in relation to the entire history of philosophy. Whatever it was that went so dreadfully wrong with Berkeley's thoughts about the possibility of things existing `without the mind', it certainly cannot have been what went wrong with Meinong's thoughts on the same topic. What went wrong with Parmenides' thoughts about how many things there are, must have been very different from whatever went wrong in Leibniz's *Monadology*. The way that Moore's thoughts went wrong about ethics cannot possibly have been the same way as Kant's thoughts about ethics went wrong. How Ryle went wrong about the mind, and how Plotinus went wrong about the mind, must have been very different things. Spinoza's way of getting the relation between the actual and the possible wrong, cannot possibly be the same as David Lewis's way. And so it goes on, right down the line; and we do not know what *any* of those ways of going wrong are.

Our situation is actually a good deal worse than I have just implied. For even in a single paragraph of Hegel, say, there is, presumably, not just one thing that has gone wrong, but half a dozen things which have all gone wrong together; while we are not able to identify a single one of them. And this is after how many centuries of philosophical discipline, books of logic, guides to the perplexed, arts of thinking, rules for the conduct of the intellect, essays concerning human understanding, critiques of reason... ?

It is the same story even beyond the pale. For example, no one actually knows, even, what is wrong with numerology. Philosophers, of course, use numerology as a stock example of thought gone hopelessly wrong, and they are right to do so; still, they cannot tell you what it is that is wrong with it. If you ask a philosopher this, the best he will be able to come up with is a bit of Positivism about unverifiability, or a bit of Popperism about unfalsifiability: answers which the philosopher himself will know to be unsatisfactory on various grounds, but which have in addition this defect, that they put numerology in the same boat as, for example, astrology. But numerology is actually quite as different from astrology as astrology is from astronomy. Philosophers do not know this, because, while they often look at the astrological parts of newspapers for fun, they never read a book of numerology. If they did, they would soon find out that the peculiar awfulness of numerology, while clearly quite different from that of astrology, is utterly elusive in itself.

So painfully far are we, from being able to answer the question which is the title of this essay. What is needed in order to answer it, but what we have as yet scarcely the faintest glimmerings of, is a *nosology* of human thought. (A nosology is a classification of diseases.) We will know what is wrong with our thoughts when, and only when, we have identified (for example) all the five different things (or however many there are) which go wrong in a paragraph of Berkeley intended to prove that physical things cannot exist 'without the mind'. Or, when we can write a computer programme which, by combining (perhaps) eleven different nonsense-producing ingredients in just the right ways, will enable us to print out at command a page of pseudo-Hegel which is absolutely indistinguishable from the real thing.

Whatever is wrong with philosophers' thoughts, it is, at any rate, *not* ordinary falsity, or ignorance of empirical truths. Quine argued, with enough plausibility to satisfy some unexacting folk, that philosophy is continuous with empirical science;8 and Popper once tried to show that philosophical problems regularly have `their roots in science'.9 Such a belief can make for better philosophy, (as I remarked in Essay 4 above). The only trouble with it is, it is not true. You need only try it out in particular cases, rather than in general terms, in order to see this. Take any paradigm philosopher: Parmenides, say, or Plato, or Aquinas, or Berkeley, or Meinong. That the thoughts for which they are so famous had gone enormously wrong, is not in dispute. But was their trouble that they were ignorant of, or that they denied, some empirical facts or other, of which we are apprised? To ask this question is to answer it. Or take British idealism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Did the idealism of Bosanquet and Bradley depend on ignorance of, or require denial of, anything in Lyell's geology, say, or in Darwin's biology, or in Einstein's physics? Only someone very ignorant of their philosophy could suppose that it did.

Defects of empirical knowledge have less to do with the ways we go wrong in philosophy than defects of *character* do: such things as the simple inability to shut up; determination to be thought deep; hunger for power; fear, especially the fear of an indifferent universe. These are among the obvious emotional sources of bad philosophy. Epicurus was one of the few great philosophers whom anyone but their mothers could love, and he enjoined us to avoid public notice of every kind, and 'live retired;' but Plutarch pointed out that the author of this injunction hoped to be, and was, famous for it.10 Plutarch was no giant brain, yet if we had twenty contributions to the nosology of philosophy, as good as this little one of his to the nosology of philosophical *character,* we would be a lot further advanced than we are. Still it is, of course, an understanding of bad thoughts that we are after, rather than of bad hearts: of public intellectual effects, rather than of private emotional causes. My question is not, 'What is wrong with us?' (though that is a good question too). When Stephano bawls out in *The Tempest, 'I* am not Stephano, but a cramp,'11 we know what it is that is wrong with *him:* he is drunk. But it is a different matter, and we do not know, what is wrong with a man's *thought,* when he thinks that he is a cramp; whether he thinks this because he is drunk, or from some other cause.

What is wrong with our thoughts is hardly ever *logical* falsity either, or ignorance of logical truth, or failure to live up to the logical knowledge that we have. This is so, at least, if the word 'logical' is used in its usual sense. Take the controversy about the *filioque*. I have not read any of this literature, but since philosophy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was, if anything, over-attentive to logic, it is safe to assume that on both sides of this controversy the logic was impeccable. You would search the controversialists' writings in vain for invalid inferences, or concealed contradictions. And the reason is obvious. Logic is concerned only with the relations *between* propositions, but everything that has gone wrong in the *filioque* dispute has gone wrong *inside* propositions: in the terms which are common to both sides, such as 'Holy Ghost,' 'Father,' and 'proceeds.' And this state of affairs is typical. The logicians' net is too coarse-meshed to catch the fish that matter.

If you think otherwise: if you think that it is only, or usually, or even often, by way of *illogicality* that philosophers' thoughts go wrong, then by all means try your skill on the quotations which I gave above. Please display for us Hegel's fallacious inferences, or Plotinus' inconsistencies. What a perfectly farcical idea! Of course the detection of fallacy is sometimes possible, and even important, in philosophy. So it sometimes is in science too. But it is not often possible in philosophy, and even where it is both possible and important, it throws no light whatever on the peculiarly philosophical ways of going wrong.

If what is wrong with our thoughts is not bad science, or bad character, or bad logic, is it perhaps (as some have implied that it is) bad grammar? Obviously not, if the word 'grammar' retains its usual acceptation. The nosology of thought has next to nothing to do with people saying, for example, 'between you and F, or 'I've did that job.' Certain Logical Positivists, in their early days, actually had the cheek to imply that metaphysical statements

are defective in the same way as the string of words 'Lenin or coffee how.' What can one say in response to such silliness, except that it is silly? More generally, the Positivists were often justly criticized for calling statements meaningless - 'The Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father alone,' for example - which, quite obviously, you first have to understand, that is, know the meaning of, *before you can tell* that they *have* got something unspeakably wrong with them. Expressed in Turkish, say, the proposition that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father alone, would indeed be meaningless to me, and probably to you. But that kind of meaninglessness has clearly nothing to do with the nosology of thought. It is only the proposition, or the thought, that (say) the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father alone, which is pathological. There is nothing whatever wrong with the English *sentence,* 'The Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father alone,' or with its Turkish counterpart.

That philosophers' errors are usually most intimately connected with their abuses of *language,* I not only do not deny but am most anxious to affirm. Far more often than not, their intellectual crimes and their literary ones are inextricably interwoven.(Foucault's sentence of twenty-three lines of print, above, is a minor example). The exposure of philosophers' errors, consequently, is likewise often literary as much as it is intellectual. Hume, in his justly famous paragraph about 'is' and 'ought,' brought a fundamental logical truth to light, by complaining of a certain common literary sleight-of-hand.12 Or, to compare that great thing with a small one, I have shown elsewhere that Popper's philosophical absurdities about science arose entirely from a certain abuse which he regularly practised on words like 'discovery', 'knowledge' and 'irrefutable.'13 It cannot be an accident, any more than it is an accident that our mental and our bodily powers are extinguished together at death, that thought and language arrive *together,* in Hegel, at the highest degree of corruption of which either is capable. But it is merely ridiculous to try to condense the whole cloud of ways in which language can be abused, into the single drop of bad grammar. Hegel's *grammar* is all right. Why try to convict him on the one charge of which he is innocent?

I have been saying that we need a nosology of thought, and that it would not be - various things. What it *would* be, I have admitted I do not know. My main object, however, is to convince you that no one knows: that the nosology which we need has not yet even begun to exist: that thoughts - as distinct from sentences, or inferences, or character, or information - can go wrong in a multiplicity of ways, none of which anyone yet understands.

It would be impracticable, obviously, to try to convince you of this, by going through the entire history of thought giving longish quotations, as I began by doing. The best thing I could think of to do instead, and what I have done, is to compile a list of propositions which might pass muster both as a kind of epitome of the history of human thought, and as a museum of the pathology of thought - all on a dolls'-house scale, of course. All the thoughts on my list will be ones which have gone fatally wrong, and which you will agree have gone fatally wrong, though each in a different way. But after the first two specimens, you will not know, any more than I do, *in what way* they have gone wrong.

Some of the entries are things which some philosopher has actually believed. Others are caricatures, but very recognizable caricatures, of actual opinions of philosophers. Some are thoughts which probably no one has ever seriously thought; but you can never be sure of that, and if some of my specimens are of that kind, I absolutely defy you to tell where those end and the others begin. The specimens are in some cases so grotesque as to make one feel rather ill; but then a museum of pathology can never be a pleasant place. In case anyone should be so good-hearted, or so ignorant, as to consider my list a libel on the human race, I will give, at the end of this essay, a couple of actual specimens, quotations from one of the greatest of 'great thinkers', which are far more revolting than anything on my list.

The entries are in no particular order, historical or other. But it would be preferable, I decided, if they were given some common thread of subject-matter, however slight; and better still, if that subject-matter were something so homely that no one would think it likely of *itself* to make our thoughts go wrong. I decided on *the number three* for this common thread of subject-matter; but nearly anything else would have done just as well. Here, then, are examples of forty different ways in which thought can go irretrievably wrong, of which we can identify *only the first two*.

1 Between 1960 and 1970 there were three US presidents named Johnson.

2 Between 1960 and 1970 there were three US presidents named Johnson, and it is not the case that between 1960 and 1970 there were three US presidents named Johnson.

3 God is three persons in one substance, and one of these persons is Jesus, which is the lamb that was slain even from the foundations of the world.

4 Three lies between two and four only by a particular act of the Divine Will.

5 Three lies between two and four by a moral and spiritual necessity inherent in the nature of numbers.

6 Three lies between two and four by a natural and physical necessity inherent in the nature of numbers.

7 Three lies between two and four only by a convention which mathematicians have adopted.

8 There *is* an integer between two and four, but it is not three, and its true name and nature are not to be revealed.

9 There is no number three.

10 Three is the only number.

11 Three is the highest number.

12 Three is a large number.

13 Three is a lucky number.

14 The sum of three and two is a little greater than eight.

15 Three is a real object all right: you are not thinking of nothing when you think of three.

16 Three is a real material object.

17 Three is a real spiritual object.

18 Three is an incomplete object, only now coming into existence.

19 Three is not an object at all, but an essence; not a thing, but a thought; not a particular, but a universal.

20 Three is a universal all right, but it exists only, and it exists fully, in each actual triple.

21 Actual triples possess threeness only contingently, approximately, and changeably, but three itself possesses threeness necessarily, exactly, and immutably.

22 The number three is only a mental construct after all, a convenience of thought.

23 The proposition that 3 is the fifth root of 243 is a tautology, just like 'An oculist is an eye-doctor.'

24 The number three is that whole of which the parts are all and only the actual inscriptions of the numerals, 'three' or `3'.

25 Five is of the same substance as three, co-eternal with three, very three of three: it is only in their *attributes* that three and five are different.

26 The tie which unites the number three to its properties (such as primeness) is inexplicable.

27 The number three is nothing more than the sum of its properties and relations.

28 The number three is neither an idle Platonic universal, nor a blank Lockean substratum; it is a concrete and specific energy in things, and can be detected at work in such observable processes as combustion.

29 Three is a positive integer, and the probability of a positive integer being even is ½, so the probability of three being even is ½.

30 In some previous state of our existence we knew the number three face-to-face, as it is in itself, and by some kind of union with it.

31 How can I be absolutely sure that I am not the number three?

32 Since the properties of three are intelligible, and intelligibles can exist only in the intellect, the properties of three exist only in the intellect.

33 How is the addition of numbers possible? Nothing can *make* the number three into four, for example.

34 What the number three is in itself, as distinct from the phenomena which it produces in our minds, we can, of course, never know.

35 We get the concept of three only through the transcendental unity of our intuitions as being successive in time.

36 One is identity; two is difference; three is the identity of, and difference between, identity and difference.

37 The number three is not an ideal object of intellectual contemplation, but a concrete product of human *praxis*.

38 The unconscious significance of the number three is invariably phallic, nasal, and patriarchal.

39 The three members of any triple, being distinct from and merely related to one another, would fall helplessly asunder, if there were not some deeper non-relational unity of which their being three is only an appearance.

40 It may be - though I don't really believe in modalities - that in some other galaxies the sum of three and two is not five, or indeed is neither five nor not five. (Don't laugh! They laughed at Christopher Columbus, you know, and at Copernicus; and even the logical law of excluded middle is being questioned nowadays by some of the sharper young physicists.)

Despite what I said earlier, about the pathology of thought not being the pathology of inference, I have included a few inferences in this list, and some bad ones among them. I did so just for the sake of a bit of verisimilitude. But I have made sure that, in those cases, at least one of the thoughts is bad too, and not just the inference between them. The list is of tiresome length, but I could very easily have made it more than twice as long. With only a little more trouble, I could have made it deeper too; and anyone with a moderate acquaintance with the history of thought could do the same. But a hundred specimens, while they would have made my point, would have left us all more or less suicidal; while ten would not have been enough to suggest anything like the variety of pathological forms which thought can take. Forty specimens are, perhaps, enough to make the point, without inducing too much depression at the same time.

And now, what does the existing nosology of thought tell us about these forty specimens? Well, we know what it is that is wrong with proposition (1): contingent falsity. And we know what is wrong with proposition (2): that it is self-contradictory, and hence necessarily false. With this, however, our existing nosology falls silent, as far as the above list is concerned. Here, then, are thirty-eight ways for thought to come absolutely to grief, other than by contingent falsity or self-contradiction, and we know absolutely nothing about any of them. We are like physicians who can recognize only two diseases of the human body.

The Logical Positivists, to their credit, at least *tried* to frame a nosology of thought less pitifully inadequate than the common one. They acknowledged *three* ways in which thought can go wrong: contingent falsity, self-contradiction, and meaninglessness. A proposition is meaningless, they said, if it is not a tautology and not verifiable either. Propositions about the precession of the equinoxes, for example, are verifiable, while propositions about the procession of the Holy Ghost are not. And verifiability, they said, consists in standing in a certain logical relation to observation-statements.

But, of course, they never did succeed in making out just *what* logical relation that is, and the story of their successive attempts to do so forms a justly famous episode of black comedy in twentieth-century philosophy. But even if they had succeeded in this, or even if anyone else had succeeded in it since (as no one has), it would help with few, if any, of the propositions listed above. It *might* help with proposition (3), for example, and was, of course, at least *intended* to deal with thinks like (3). But it would not help at all with the grotesque (8), for example; or even with the sordid (13) (which is one of the few slum-dwellers that I have let in). According to Positivism, the only way a proposition about *numbers* could go wrong, apart from being contingently false like (1), is by being self-contradictory. But there is nothing self-contradictory about (8), or (13), or about any item on my list, except (2).

There is no getting away from it: the Logical Positivist nosology too is pitifully inadequate. Hegel just is *different* from Plotinus, and again from Foucault, and so on. Likewise, every specimen from (3) to (40) on my list is different from every other, as well as from the first two. Of course I cannot *prove* that all those things are different from one another, or even that any two of them are different. So if a Logical Positivist chose to dig in his heels, and insist that the ways in which thought can go wrong are all of them comprehended in the three categories of contingent falsity, self-contradiction, and unverifiability - well, I could not prove him wrong. But it is obvious enough that he is wrong. There are just more things in hell and earth than are dreamed of in his philosophy; thirty-odd more, at the least.

And yet there are philosophers, and beneficiaries of Logical Positivism at that, who actually propose, not to enlarge the Positivist nosology, but to contract it, to the point where it contains only *one* category! Now I ask you: what ought to be thought of a doctor, even in the most primitive state of

medicine, who acknowledges the existence of only one disease? I am referring, of course, to Quine, who wants us to make do just with the category of contingent falsity:14 an excess of Positivist pedestrianism which deserves (though it will not receive in this book) an essay to itself.

A nosology of human thought, then, like a nosology of the human body, will be hopelessly inadequate if it contains only one or two or three categories. At the same time, adequacy or completeness is not the only desideratum in a nosology. There is also the desideratum of *surveyability,* which must be met if a nosology is to be useful. A nosology *could* be completely adequate *and* completely useless: for example, by containing *too many* categories - a billion, say. In that case the nosology itself would be as unsurveyable as the vast mass of raw facts which it exists to digest for us.

This is the rock that threatens to sink us, if, having realized the inadequacy of the Logical Positivist nosology, we embark on the neo-Positivist project of completing it. Will there not turn out to be just too many ways in which thought can go wrong? Tolstoy said that all happy families are the same, while every unhappy family is unhappy in a different way.15 This is an exaggeration entirely characteristic of its foolish author. You could say with equal plausibility that everyone who goes wrong in philosophy goes wrong in a way all his own: an exaggeration of the originality of philosophers, too ludicrous to require rebuttal. But it is true that there are so many ways in which a thing as complicated as a human family can go wrong, and so many human families, that a nosology of the family is indeed doomed in advance to being either inadequate or useless. Long before it was even half-complete, it would be quite as unsurveyable as the combined histories of all the unhappy families. Now the question is, is my neo-Positivist project, of an adequate nosology of thought, doomed in the same way? Must a nosology of thought be either far too short to be adequate, or far too long to be useful?

If the answer is 'yes,' then we must sadly relinquish the project of a complete nosology of thought; if it is 'no,' then, since that nosology certainly does not exist yet, we should cheerfully set about constructing it.

I do not know which answer is right.

But I incline to the sad answer, for two reasons. One is the alarming ease with which a list like the one above can be compiled. At first, indeed, it is not easy at all, quite the reverse: the pathological thoughts will not come to mind. Of course they won't, because you have strong barriers in your mind to prevent them coming. All your life, if you are of the positivistic temperament, or at least all your waking life, you have been trying to think, and talk and write, rationally; but now you are having to try to think either like most people, or like 'great thinkers'. Then, however, you consult your library, refresh your acquaintance with the history of human thought, and at once all those barriers burst. It is like experiencing instant release from the earth's gravity, or from all moral restraints. Now the monstrous forms not only come, but come from everywhere. They come in inexhaustible numbers, like the waves coming to the shore, or patients to a socialist medical service - except that these are sick all right. Thus I easily filled my chamber of forty horrors above. And then, remember that I chose my exhibits mainly from the better class of horrors, and for the most part shielded you from the really rough and more numerous element.

The other thing which inclines me to the sad view, that the nosology of human thought would be infinitely or at least unsurveyably long, is an experience less specific, but more extensive. It is the experience of thirty-five years' marking of undergraduate essays in philosophy. Here again I am excluding the worst ones; I am thinking of all *except* the worst and the very best. I do not know whether other people's experience of marking so many of these essays has been the same as mine, but my impressions are these. First, that if I were to write down everything that has gone wrong in a *single typical sentence* of one of these essays, I would finish up writing a book. Second, that if I were to write down everything that is wrong with the *next* sentence, this too would yield a book, but a different book. Third, that, apart from essays submitted by such characteristic products of the contemporary faculty of arts as 'collectives' and plagiarists, no two bad essays are bad to exactly the same degree.

Those are the two things which make me think that an adequate nosology of thought would be unsurveyably long. But as against them, we know of other cases in which phenomena have *appeared* to be inexhaustibly various, and.yet this appearance has been proved delusive at last. The history of science furnishes many triumphant examples of this kind, but I will remind you only of the most wonderful one of them all. Nothing could seem more inexhaustibly various than the chemical composition of things; and yet we have the periodic table of the elements. With such an example as that one before him, the neo-Positivist should be, of all people, the last to despair over the *apparently* infinite number of ways in which thought can go wrong.

Accordingly, I do not despair of the idea of an adequate and surveyable nosology of thought. Nevertheless, I do incline on balance to the conclusion that such a thing is not possible. Now, suppose that this pessimistic view is right. What I wish to point out is that, even then, the neo-Positivist is not doomed to ineffectiveness. He might still be able to produce results of the utmost value, and results which no one else could produce.

The reason is simply this, that it might still be possible to carry out the neo-Positivist project with complete success in *particular cases*. Even if the general question, 'What is wrong with our thoughts,' does not admit of an exhaustive answer, still a particular question, such as 'What is wrong with Berkeley's thoughts in such-and-such a key paragraph?,' *might* admit of an exhaustive answer. Someone really might get to the bottom of what is wrong with Berkeley's thought, for example, that the perceptible qualities of physical objects are ideas; *and* get to the bottom of everything else, too, that is wrong with that key paragraph. I am not saying that even this sort of local success would be easy: only that it is still possible, even after we have agreed to abandon the idea of a *complete* nosology of thought. If it were to be achieved, even in a single major case, such as Berkeley's, it would be of great intellectual value. And the only person who could possibly achieve such a thing would be someone fired by the neo-Positivist ambition to understand in detail how human thought goes wrong.

Of course, even if you did achieve such a local success, the chances are discouragingly high that it would be *purely* local. It is better than even money that the next 'great thinker' you turned your attention to would have other ways of going wrong in thought, which all your hard-earned understanding of Berkeley would throw no light whatever on. There is no getting away from this.

There is one factor working in your favour, though. This is the tendency of philosophers to form schools, and of their schools to form sequences. How extremely strong this 'clumping' tendency is in philosophy, is very well known; but the tendency is often strongly at work even in cases where it is not recognized, even by the very people concerned. For example, Kant, and the 'Absolute Idealists' of the nineteenth century, all had a particular detestation of the 'subjective idealism' (as they called it) of Berkeley, and could not emphasize enough their disagreement with it; the reason being,

that they owed almost everything to it. (This was an instance, then, of what might be called the Astor effect, after the millionaire John Jacob Astor, who once had occasion to ask, 'Why does that man hate me? I never lent him money'). So, if we ever *did* get Berkeley's idealism exactly right, the benefit would in fact *not* be purely local, but would extend at least to our understanding of nineteenth-century idealism as well.

This kind of thing - finding out everything that had gone wrong in the idealism of Berkeley, say, or every element which has gone into the making of such a typical pseudo-problem as induction, say, or 'the external world', or universals - this kind of thing is the very most, in my opinion, that any philosopher could ever .achieve. This will remind you of a saying of G. E. Moore, which disgusted many people, that he was led to philosophize only by the maddening things that other philosophers said; and it may strike you as a shamefully small and negative idea of philosophy's highest possible achievement. But let it be as small and negative as you like: it is still more than any philosopher ever *has* achieved.

By now, however, some people's indignation will be boiling. 'So that is all that Berkeley, or any great philosopher, is good for, according to you: to fill a show-case in a future museum of the pathology of thought! You say it would be an achievement of great value, to know everything about how Berkeley went wrong: but if he never went right, as you seem to think, where is the value, or the point? No, you would be more consistent if you advised us simply to forget all about Berkeley, and about later idealism too, and about all the rest of it. What your neo-Positivism really tends to, is the *extinction* of philosophy.'

I reply that there is another reason for reading Berkeley, apart from the possibility of finding out how he went wrong. It is that he was unusually good at finding out how *other* philosophers had gone wrong: Locke in particular. And this state of affairs is typical, because it takes a philosopher to catch a philosopher. This fact, if neo-Positivism does indeed tend to the extinction of the philosophical profession, will make that profession at least a little harder to extinguish than, say, a priesthood is. Governments and would-be governments will always have a few career-openings for philosophers. Plato, for example, was the ideas-man behind a military attempt to overthrow the government of Dionysius II at Syracuse; but Dionysius also had his own ideas-department, headed by one Philistus, a very distinguished Sicilian don indeed, and dedicated to the intellectual defence of his government.16

I must admit, though, that in other respects the case of Berkeley is not typical: he is an unusually favourable specimen of a great philosopher. It seems, by contrast, entirely out of the question that anyone should ever get to the bottom of what is wrong with *Hegel's* thoughts, say. He, then, will never even fill a show-case in a museum of pathology, and there is no *other* conceivable reason for reading him. Hegel could no more tell you where others went wrong, than he could go right himself. And while he is, no doubt, an unusually unfavourable specimen of a great philosopher, he is at any rate closer to the norm than Berkeley is.

What I have just said will only serve to confirm my critic's prognosis. 'It is perfectly clear,' he will say, 'where you are headed. Your neo-Positivism will do to philosophy what a cruder Positivism has already done to religion, in such nightmare states as Sweden and Russia. Think of the Swedish education system, or the Soviet 'Halls of Atheism.' There the docile citizens, purged of all religion, and *en route* to suicide or its vodka equivalent, pause to gaze with mingled horror and envy at some relics of the Christian centuries, and to marvel at a body of thoughts so preposterous that they even possessed the power of reconciling human beings to life. In your museums of the pathology of thought, likewise, they will gaze on some relics of philosophy, and its glorious history. Man, by the time you Positivists have finished re-educating him, will be no more than that trivial bundle of infirmities which at present queues for its food in Russia, and in Sweden has its pornographic videos home-delivered.'

I think that this Muggeridgean critic of mine is essentially right about the social consequences of neo-Positivism. He is wrong only in being too optimistic, because there are in fact two nightmares, not one. One is the present and visible short-term future; the other is the entire past. For that 'glorious history' of philosophy to which he refers, what is that? Why, it is that vast repository of sick men's dreams which I began by giving four typical specimens of. It is that never-failing spring of monstrosities which I drew from, in order to prove to you how easily philosophy can create nearly forty different kinds of madness, even out of a theme as small and barren in itself as the number three.

Muggeridge: 'Positivism will deprive man, not only of all objects of religious reverence, but of all objects of the reverence which great philosophers have always, and rightly, received.' True, Malcolm, except for the 'and rightly' part. In fact the reverence which has been and is accorded, by pre-Positivist man, to such two-legged plagues as Plato, Kant, and Hegel, *is* merely insane.

Muggeridge: 'Positivist man will be brutish, incurious, untouched by any thought not directed to his comfort, or his control over nature.' True again, Malcolm, or near enough. But then, you know, the alternative is even worse. For when common humanity *does* venture in thought beyond the concerns of common life, it is a thousand to one that atrocity, and not just absurdity, will result. Do the scenes of Tehran, Kabul, Beirut in 1986 disgust and appall you? Then learn to see in them the scenes of Alexandria in 415, of Toulouse in 1218, of Munster in 1535, and all the other famous beauty-spots of your beloved Christian centuries.

Muggeridge: 'Positivist man will be, and will have to live with the unbearable knowledge that he is, trivial.' Most true, Malcolm; but there is another side to the coin. Your 'great thinkers', Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, flattered and deluded man that he will live for ever; or that he is not really even a part of the physical universe at all; or that he is the whole point of the existence of the physical universe; or even that the physical universe depends upon, indeed is constituted by, man's thought of it! Philosophy, take it by and large, has in fact been simply the anthropocentrism of the educated and intelligent, as religion is the anthropocentrism of the others. But, to some of us, farcical flattery is even more disgusting than trivial truth.

For these reasons, I remain an unrepentant neo-Positivist, or an only-slightly-repentant one. I cannot help feeling that rational thought, 'the calm sunshine of the mind', has a right to exist, as well as madness; and even that it has some right to be heard (though I admit that that is more debatable). It is, in any case, a necessity of life for some people. But I agree with Malcolm Muggeridge, that for most people it is not only not necessary, but is an environment as lethal as the inside of a vacuum-tube

.

Unlike Muggeridge, however, I do not believe that rational thought is a danger to humanity, in the long or even in the medium run. Whether a society of atheists could endure, was a question often discussed during the Enlightenment, though never decided. If the question is generalized a little, however, from 'atheists' to 'Positivists,' then it seems obvious enough that the answer to it is 'no.' Genetic engineering aside, given a large aggregation of human beings, and a long time, you cannot reasonably expect rational thought to *win*. *You* could as reasonably expect a thousand unbiased dice, all tossed at once, all to come down 'five,' say. There are simply far too many ways, and easy ways, in which human thought can go wrong. Or, put it the other way round: anthropocentrism cannot lose. The jungle will reclaim the clearing (even without heavy infestations of conservationists), darkness will beat the light, not quite always on the local scale, but absolutely always on the large scale.

I therefore believe that the future of the human race is safe in the hands of such typical representatives of it as Colonel Gaddafi, the Ayatollah Khomeini, and the African National Congress. Kant and Hegel, or some other equally 'great thinkers', will still be read with reverence by the most intelligent and educated part of mankind, long after modern science is forgotten, or is confined to a few secret departments of the bureaucracy.

Any student of the history of thought is soon able to say, with Macbeth, 'I have supp'd full with horrors.' To read a book of magic, say, or astrology, is horrible, because the spectacle of steady and systematic irrationality induces depression and nausea. Yet the most horrible book, in this way, that I have ever read, does not come from the underworld of thought. On the contrary, it comes from the dizziest heights of contemporary academic respectability.

The book is the second volume of *Hegel's Development,* by H. S. Harris, of York University, Toronto. It is subtitled *Night Thoughts (Jena 1801-1806)*. It was published in 1983, by Oxford University Press at the Clarendon Press; which is to say, by the best. The book is a colossal monument to the scholarly industry of its author. It is over 700 pages long, and the work of which it is only the second volume must inevitably run into many more volumes. In 1806, after all, most of the publications on which Hegel's fame rests still lay in the future. For Professor Harris, however, no manuscript, no scrap of paper, quite literally no *doodle* even, lacks profound significance, as long as it is Hegel's. Indeed, all previous instances of philosopholatry, even the one which had Plato as its object and perhaps as its founder, are thrown entirely into the shade by Professor Harris. He does not actually say that Hegel's philosophy can cure wooden legs, but I do not think he would like to hear it denied.

His book is, naturally, full of quotations from Hegel's early writings. In subject-matter these passages range from the astronomical to the zoological. For the examples which I promised earlier in this essay, I have chosen two of the astronomical ones. First:

> In the indifferences of light, the aether has scattered its absolute indifference into a multiplicity; in the blooms of the solar system it has borne its inner Reason and totality out into expansion. But the individualizations of light are dispersed in multiplicity [i.e. the fixed stars], while those which form the orbiting petals of the solar system must behave towards them with rigid individuality [i.e. they have their fixed orbits]. And so the unity of the stars lacks the form of universality, while that of the solar system lacks pure unity, and neither carries in itself the absolute Concept as such.17

Second:

> In the spirit the absolutely simple aether has returned to itself by way of the infinity of the Earth; in the Earth as such this union of the absolute simplicity of aether and infinity exists; it spreads into the universal fluidity, but its spreading fixates itself as singular things; and the numerical unit of singularity, which is the essential characteristic *(Bestimmtheit)* for the brute becomes itself an ideal factor, a moment. The concept of Spirit, as thus determined, is *Consciousness,* the concept of the union of the simple with infinity;18

I cannot emphasize too strongly that there are in the book *hundreds of* passages like these two, and on the widest variety *of* subjects. Good as he is on astronomy, Hegel is equally good on gravity, magnetism, heat, light and colour, plants, animals, sickness, human anatomy, the family, and many other topics besides.

Such, then, are the textual materials on which Professor Harris gravely and reverently exercises his profound scholarship for over 700 pages. And never was a philosophical biographer more in tune with this subject. For example, he prefaces the first of the two quotations just given with the following sentence of his own (the italics too being his):

> A fairly clear description of the self-positing of the aether as the 'creation of the world' - first the *fixed* stars as singular *intuitions* and then the conceptual displaying of light and gravity in a 'bloom' with 'petals' that move - is given in the *Natural Law* essay:

Clearly, in Professor Harris, the hour, and the subject, have called forth the man.

And now I ask you: is it not true, as I said earlier, that these two real examples of the pathology of thought are far more revolting than any of the invented ones which made up my list of forty pathological propositions? Do you know any example of the corruption of thought which is more extreme than these two? Did you even know, until now, that human thought was capable of this degree of corruption?

Yet Hegel grew out of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, as naturally as Green, Bradley, and all the other later idealists, grew out of him. I mention these historical commonplaces, in case anyone should entertain the groundless hope of writing Hegel off as an isolated freak. But now, remembering those historical facts, while also keeping our eyes firmly on the two passages I have just given, will someone please tell me again that the Logical Positivists were on the wrong track, and that we ought to revere the 'great thinkers', and that the human race is not mad?

Notes

1 Plotinus, *The Six Enneads,* trans. S. Mackenna and B. S. Page (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1952), Fifth Ennead, VI, 6, p. 237.

2 Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 3 vols, 1892-6), vol. 111, p. 550.

3 M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (Tavistock Publications, London, 1972), p. 154.

4 *The Natural History of Religion,* in *David Hume: The Philosophical Works,* ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, Longman's, Green, London, 1882), vol. 4, p. 362.

5 Ibid., p. 360.

6 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers,* trans. R. Hicks (Loeb Classical Library; Heinemann, London, and Harvard University Press, 1959), vol. 1, p. 277.

7 Where I read this discussion in Augustine's works, I cannot now rediscover.

8 W. Van Orman Quine, 'Two dogmas of empiricism,' in his *From a Logical Point of View* (Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1961).

9 K. R. Popper, 'The nature of philosophical problems and their roots in science,' in his *Conjectures and Refutations: the Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1963).

10 W. Goodwin (ed.), *Plutarch's Miscellanies and Essays* (Little, Brown, Boston, 1889), vol. III, p. 2.

11 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* Act V. sc. i.

12 D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739; ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1888; re-ed. P. Nidditch, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978), bk III, pt I, sect. i, last paragraph.

13 David Stove, *Popper and After: Four Modern Irrationalists* (Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1982), chs. I, II.

14 See the essay referred to in n. 8 above.

15 L. N. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina,* the first sentence.

16 See 'Life of Dion', in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives (Tbe Complete Works of Plutarch,* Thomas Y. Cromwell, New York, n.d.), vol. III, pp. 342-83.

17 H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Development: Night Thoughts (Jena 1801-1806)* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983), p. 77. The insertions in square brackets were supplied, I take it, by Professor Harris.

18 Ibid., pp. 299-300. The references for these two passages are given by Professor Harris, but need not be reproduced here.