

## Philosophy and *Weltanschauung*

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I want to consider the relation between philosophy and *Weltanschauung*. I begin by attending to a discussion on that topic between four well-known Oxford philosophers held during the heyday of so-called Oxford Philosophy or ordinary language philosophy (1955).<sup>1</sup> One of them, Anthony Quinton, put forth the bold thesis (a thesis rejected by the other three discussants) that the real object of attack by analytic philosophy (logical empiricism, Oxford Philosophy – all of linguistic philosophy) was not, as was then widely supposed, metaphysics but *Weltanschauung*. By “*Weltanschauung*” Quinton meant “recommendations of a moral, political and religious order” (p. 417). By this, as becomes clear from his later remarks, Quinton is speaking of “the presentation of attitudes to life” (p. 496). Some but not all of the great philosophers of the past showed concern for *Weltanschauung*-considerations, but that, claims Quinton, was always and necessarily logically independent of their theoretical doctrines as philosophers. Quinton’s claim is “that there is no *logical*” connection between philosophical doctrines and moral or political attitudes (p. 500, italics mine).

He further claims, “there is a practical gap between the two things as well” (p. 500). This “lack of any uniform connection between a given philosophical standpoint and a given *Weltanschauung* has always been evident if the examples taken are not too close together in time. Over short periods of time the mere fact of their being all held by one forceful and admired person will lead people to accept or reject as a group a set of opinions which are, logically, quite heterogeneous” (p. 500). The charisma of such powerful intellectual and philosophical figures as Bertrand Russell in England, Axel Hägerström in Scandinavia, John Dewey in the United States, and John Anderson in Australia are cases in point. But the personal influence of Russell, for example, even more than his technical philosophical influence, has waned, and we find among Cambridge and Oxford philosophers an array of conflicting political and social beliefs as well as religious or nonreligious orientations. Similar things obtain for the other

three philosophers. We get, Quinon has it, psychological connections but no logical or otherwise rational connections that would at all justify a given *Weltanschauung* by reference to a genuinely philosophical doctrine (p. 501). The philosophical revolution brought about by analytic philosophy was, Quinon avers, a real revolution though it was a technical revolution in how the great metaphysical issues of the philosophical tradition were to be formulated and argued for, and not, as popularly believed, a revolution against metaphysics. Logical empiricists and other linguistic philosophers “failed to distinguish *Weltanschauung* from metaphysics” (p. 500). They wanted to conceive of their philosophical work scientifically as logical or linguistic analysis, and, in so conceptualizing their work, they demarcated philosophy so as to exclude *Weltanschauung*. The more polemical among them called this the elimination of metaphysics, but as a matter of fact they continued “to concern themselves with the traditional problems of philosophy” (p. 502).<sup>2</sup>

Philosophers of the tradition, and analytical philosophers as well, maintains Quinon, continue to discuss the same traditional problems: “substance, universals, truth, the nature of logical and mathematical truths, our knowledge of the external world, the nature of mind, and the logical character of moral thinking” (p. 496). What has changed is not the problems but the way they get discussed. They are “treated in a more linguistic fashion,” and more care is given to the use of logical techniques. We can see at work here the rather different influences of John Austin and Gottlob Frege, neither of whom were anti-metaphysical philosophers. Analytical philosophers expelled (or tried to expel) moralizing and politicizing from philosophy, in short, *Weltanschauung*, but not, as some thought, metaphysics. Some – A.J. Ayer for example – have in name, but only in name, dropped metaphysics, while others, Michael Dummett and Donald Davidson being the prime examples, have developed an analytical metaphysics rooted extensively in the work of Frege.

The other disputants in the discussion with Quinon – Iris Murdoch, Isaiah Berlin, and Stuart Hampshire – all resisted this excluding of *Weltanschauung*-considerations from philosophy, including analytic philosophy. I will resist this as well, but Quinon’s thesis needs careful examination. He states polemically, and perhaps too crudely, a rationale for what many systematic analytical philosophers today practice. Namely, they do *analytical metaphysics*; they discuss the old problems Quinon mentions, and others like them, using logical and semantical techniques. They discuss these issues as logical (conceptual) points, setting aside issues of religious, political, or moral commitment as something outside philosophy. In such a way of doing metaphysics they break firmly with the logical empiricists, Wittgenstein, and Gilbert Ryle.

In response to Quinton, Berlin and Hampshire argue forcefully that *Weltanschauung* – general beliefs expressive of attitudes toward life especially in the domain of morals, politics, and religion – is integral to philosophy and should remain so. It is not something that analytical philosophy does or even should revolutionize away. *Contra* Quinton, Ayer, Carnap, and Stevenson, both Berlin and Hampshire argue that philosophers, *qua* philosophers, should not only make meta-moral arguments about the logic of morals but moral arguments of a general nature as well. The connections between philosophical views and normative ethical or political views is not just contingent and fortuitous. Berlin gives the following example: “The belief that there exist personal natural rights – sacred and inviolate – is philosophical enough; but it is not compatible with extreme outlooks like fascism or communism; nor with specific views of what “existence” is – or how the word “exists” is, or should be, used” (p. 517). It is a positivist dogma, as well as a dogma of the more naive Wittgensteinian fideists (though not of Wittgenstein himself), that “religious beliefs, moral and political attitudes ... and philosophical opinions should each fall tidily into their own compartment, each supported by their own kind of reasons, with no interconnection between them” (p. 520). But persons cannot divide themselves, Berlin argues, and they must find some standard of rationality and honesty somewhere; “they will want to connect, to fit together, what they believe, and to test their beliefs in *every* sphere. The evidence of history shows that they will always knock down barriers and compartments; from mere self-respect; or mere respect of reason and honesty” (p. 520). Hampshire, following up Berlin’s assertion, remarks: “If we say “there is philosophy on the one side: my attitudes on the other,” we make philosophy a private game, or part of the syllabus, and at the same time we trivialize our beliefs by calling them ‘attitudes’” (p. 520). To this Quinton responds, as Russell, Stevenson, and Hägerström would as well,

Oh, but I must make it clear that it’s quite wrong to think that analytic philosophers mean to suggest that attitudes or beliefs are unimportant when they separate them off from philosophy. I’d better say at once that for my own part, my moral and political views are much more important to me than my philosophical ones. To change the former would involve a much greater disturbance than to change the latter (pp. 520–521).

Murdoch, Hampshire, and Berlin respond:

**Murdoch:** So do you hold that all political differences are merely empirical or concrete?

**Hampshire:** Just differences about actual measures of policy?

**Berlin:** And do you really believe that all differences of what you call *Weltanschauung* are merely differences of character, temperament, disposition to act or feel in this or that way;

that they involve no beliefs and assumptions which can be, and have been, for centuries, analyzed by philosophers? (p. 521).

To that cluster of questions Quinton responds with the final statement of the discussion:

I believe, at any rate, that what sort of philosopher a man is does not tell you much about what he is like as a man. The differences between Mill and T. H. Green were philosophical rather than political; while the differences between Green and Bradley were political rather than philosophical. Yet, though Green and Mill were very different as philosophers, they were much more like each other, as men, than were Green, with his public spirit and his nobility of character, and Bradley, with his invalid's savagery and his ornate arrogance. And the Oxford philosopher today is no more one type of man, with one set of attitudes to the world, than he was in the late nineteenth century. There is not much more common to the analytic philosophers of Oxford beyond their living in Oxford and practicing analytic philosophy (p. 521).

Quinton is right about the divergent political and religious beliefs among philosophers, even ordinary language philosophers at Oxford, though at a deeper, more abstract level, as Murdoch claims, all of them, even the Tories among them, may have held almost liberal attitudes. He is also right about the link between the sort of person one is and the philosophical views that person holds. But this does not establish what Murdoch, Berlin, and Hampshire mean to deny, that all political, moral, religious views – *Weltanschauung*-views, for short – go equally well with all philosophical views, or, so as not to beg questions about the nature of “philosophy,” technical philosophical views.

The general designation “analytic philosopher” by now is so broad and amorphous that it does cover many different *Weltanschauungen*. We have analytical Marxists (G. A. Cohen, Jon Elster, and William Shaw), analytical Christian philosophers (William Alston, Terence Penelhum, Alvin Plantinga) and one day we might have, as far as I can see, analytical fascists. That we have none is because, as Quinton is probably right in claiming, in present political circumstances they would be hounded out of the university. But if we get more specific about the type of analytical philosophy and philosophy more generally, not everything (*contra* Quinton) can *reasonably* go together. Some logical empiricists are orthodox Christians or orthodox Jews, while some Marxists are thorough relativists, but both of these combinations are not reasonable combinations of views. Berlin's example of the French materialists also shows how some philosophical beliefs and some moral beliefs cannot reasonably go together. These materialists (Baron d'Holbach is a good example) believed “that men are nothing but

material objects in space, determined wholly by fixed natural laws” (p. 501). Believing that, your notions of value, indeed some of your actual values, will be different from philosophers who are not materialists and determinists. As Berlin puts it,

your notions of value, of, say, what is good or bad, which you may trace entirely to, and even define in terms of, physical appetites of an unavoidable kind, will be very different (and properly so) from those who identify such values with the commandments of a revealed deity, or of one’s own immaterial soul: commandments which may be disobeyed; or alternatively which you regard as unalterable in principle by education and environment (p. 501).

Similarly, if you are a Christian theist and believer in God and God’s providence (crucial *Weltanschauung*-beliefs for such a person), you will also believe that God is an immaterial supernatural being transcendent to the world who providentially orders the world and that you have an immortal soul. But, if you believe those things, you cannot believe that the natural order (the physical world) is all that exists and that to be religious (if you are also being reasonable) is simply to adopt a certain attitude toward the world and to associate that attitude with certain stories which you may or may not believe.<sup>3</sup>

Hampshire and Berlin are right in maintaining that the great philosophers (such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, and Hegel) “were concerned in their philosophies with questions of *Weltanschauung*,” and that they believed that their metaphysical and logical analyses were “essentially connected with *Weltanschauung*” (p. 496). That these thinkers, unlike other philosophers, such as Montaigne, Pascal, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, spent more time with metaphysical and logical issues than with *Weltanschauung*-issues does not (*contra* Quinton) show the *Weltanschauung*-issues were ancillary or of an incidental concern, but that they believed that to properly ground their *Weltanschauung*-beliefs they needed such a logical or metaphysical underpinning. So as philosophers they naturally attended more to the supposed rational underpinnings.

If Hume, Wittgenstein, or Richard Rorty are near to the mark, the great philosophers of the tradition were mistaken in thinking that, but that is not the point *here*. The great philosophers (*contra* Quinton) were centrally concerned with *Weltanschauung* issues, and, as philosophers, they thought (perhaps mistakenly) their *Weltanschauung*-beliefs needed a metaphysical basis. As Hampshire puts it, those whom we “now recognize as the great philosophers, in our sense of “philosophy,” make their attitudes to life, their moral attitudes in the widest sense, rest on a groundwork of logical doctrine” (p. 497). For Kant, for Spinoza, or for Hobbes, Berlin adds, their “moral and political views directly follow from their beliefs about the

world. For if the latter are false, the former are affected directly: are logically undermined to some degree” (p. 498). Berlin adds, “the analytical philosopher’s claim – *if they make it* – to have divorced philosophy and *Weltanschauung* is a false one” (p. 520, italics mine). “One of the tasks of philosophers is, precisely, to examine compatibilities of a given logical or metaphysical or scientific doctrine with ethical or political ones” (p. 502).

I think Berlin and Hampshire are right in their claims about the intentions and practices of the great philosophers of the past and, as well, about the unreasonability of connecting some *Weltanschauung*-beliefs with some metaphysical views. Such “connectionism” also fits well with a rather uncontentious view of philosophy as the attempt to see how things fit together in the widest sense of the term. To be reasonable is, if we can, to have some thought-out picture of how our beliefs hang together. And this in turn fits well with William James’s famous claim that we philosophize “to attain a conception of the frame of things, which shall on the whole be more rational than the somewhat chaotic view which everyone by nature carries about with him under his hat.”<sup>4</sup>

With the direction taken by Berlin and Hampshire, we get a connection, though not a terribly robust one, with the ancient conception of philosophy as a quest for wisdom. If philosophy is inextricably connected with *Weltanschauung*-concerns and with the attempt to see how things fit together, to see our life and the world we live in a little more as a piece, then we are asking (among other things) what sort of life (to the extent that it is under our control) should we live, what sort of person should we try to become, what sort of world should we seek. These are questions about “the truth about life” (if such a thing exists) and so there we have the link with the quest for wisdom.

*Weltanschauung*-issues matter because human beings generally have wanted to make sense of their lives, to become as clear as they can about what ultimate commitments, if any, or almost ultimate commitments, are worthy of their allegiance. This calls for some understanding of good and evil, justice and injustice, and of what we human beings are and can become. We want to understand what we can know about the world, including ourselves, and to know what we can reasonably do about what we know or plausibly believe. We ask, linking philosophy firmly with *Weltanschauung* and a quest (however skeptical) for wisdom, such fundamental, if you will, hedgehogish questions as: What am I to become? To what (if anything) am I to give my allegiance? In what kind of society do I want to live? What would a through and through good and just society look like, and how can it be, if it can be, attained?

These are key *Weltanschauung*-questions that Berlin and Hampshire, along with many other philosophers, take as key questions to be asked by

any philosophy worth its salt. They seek a view of philosophy which connects these *Weltanschauung*-questions with the classical metaphysical questions – and perhaps with less classical questions as well. A more radical attack on the tradition comes from the pragmatist Dewey and in *practice* from Michel Foucault as well. Dewey goes all the way over the *Weltanschauung*-side. We should set aside metaphysical questions and as philosophers concern ourselves instead with the problems of human beings: problems moral, political, religious, and otherwise social and human. When philosophy does this it reconstitutes itself. This is just the opposite of Quinton's claim that philosophy should exclude *Weltanschauung* and deal exclusively with logical and metaphysical issues.

Another rejection of the Quinton stance is also a rejection of the Berlin-Hampshire stance and of the Dewey pragmatist stance. It is a radical anti-philosophical stance that can be taken as a perhaps one-sided though not implausible reading of Wittgenstein. Metaphysical theses are shown to be houses of cards, incoherent conceptions impossible reasonably to believe. What is left is what I have called *Weltanschauung*-beliefs, but they are beliefs – groundless beliefs – some of which can be reasonably held but can in no way be supported or refuted philosophically. Not everything we reasonably believe we believe for a reason. But the beliefs by themselves are enough. We do not need, and cannot have, philosophy or for that matter science or any kind of rational inquiry, to establish them or support them. Wisdom about life, if it can be had, is a wonderful thing, but it will never be gained from philosophy or any other kind of inquiry or investigation. Such intellectualizing is foolishness.

I have not even insinuated which of these attitudes toward philosophy and *Weltanschauung*, aside from Quinton's attitude, is the more adequate, nor have I suggested how this is to be resolved, if it can be resolved. What I have been concerned to argue, against Quinton and implicitly against many analytical philosophers, is that philosophy is intimately linked with *Weltanschauung* and that a philosophy which sets such matters aside or treats them as marginal impoverishes itself.

## Notes

1. Isaiah Berlin et al., "Philosophy and Beliefs," *The Twentieth Century* (June 1955): 495–521. Future references to this discussion will be given in the text. See also Stuart Hampshire, "The Progress of Philosophy," *Polemic* 5 (1946).
2. Moritz Schlick, "The Turning Point in Philosophy," pp. 53–59; Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language," pp. 60–81; Moritz Schlick, "Positivism and Realism," pp. 82–107; and Carl Hempel, "The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning," pp. 108–129, all from A. J. Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959).

3. Richard B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief" in Malcolm Diamond and Thomas Litzenburg, eds., *The Logic of God* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. 135–149; R. M. Hare, "The Simple Believer" in Gene Outka and John Reeder, eds., *Religion and Morality* (Garden City, N.J.: Anchor Books, 1973); Kai Nielsen, *God, Scepticism, and Modernity* (Ottawa, Ont.: University of Ottawa Press, 1989), pp. 172–189.
4. William James, *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner, 1951), p. 3.