Oxford Moral Philosophy.
R. M. Hare and P. H. Nowell-Smith.

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Category:Letter to the editor
The Editor welcomes letters on broadcasting subjects or topics arising out of articles or talks printed in THE LISTENER but reserves the right to shorten letters for reasons of space.

Oxford Moral Philosophy

Sir,—I have some reason to believe that when Miss Ancombe delivered her talk, 'Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?’, the irreducible nature of her defence may have escaped her audience. It seemed therefore unnecessary to make any reply: But the publication of her text alters the case. No intelligent reader can now be in any doubt as to her intentions and there is a small chance that readers who know nothing about Oxford philosophy may get a false impression.

The defence Miss Ancombe submits is that a charge of corrupting the youth can only lie against moral philosophers if it can be shown that their influence makes young people worse than they would otherwise be; but this cannot be the measure of a moral philosopher's work. The irony is perfectly in tune with the highest and best ideals of the country at large. The irony is only made more profound when we consider the highest and best ideals of the country at large. Among them we find: disregard of natural instincts; the view that certain proceedings of local authorities are not challengeable on grounds of fraud, and the rejection of the principle of parental authority. Miss Ancombe's defence therefore implies that the philosophers concerned subscribe to these ideals. Yet I know of no work of any Oxford philosopher in which subscription to such principles is either expressed or implied. Would she please say where such views are to be found?

The general burden of her criticism is on the morality of the country at large that people tend to judge all acts by their consequences rather than by their 'nature and quality' and she implies that Oxford Philosophers share this attitude. But she does not say which philosophers share it or where it is to be found in their works, and she flings out the fact that, in my book on Ethics, I expressly condemn it. Miss Ancombe seems to be (I think) a tacitly believe that she is ignorant of the difficulties involved in drawing a distinction between an act and its consequences. For example, was Mr. Truman's 'act the signing of an order, the killing of a number of Japanese, or the saving of a number of Japanese and other lives?

If it was the first only, Miss Ancombe has, on her own principles, as little right to condemn it as Mr. Truman's supporters have to defend it, since both judgements turn on its consequences. But I also think it is to be included in the nature and quality of Mr. Truman's act, why not the saving of lives? I do not suggest that no distinction could be drawn here, only that it is not an easy matter to say when and how it is to be drawn. It is with a question of just such difficulties that moral philosophy is concerned.

Similarly it is not easy to say just what would and what would not justify intervention to prevent cruelty to children. Would Miss Ancombe carry the principle of parental authority so far as to deny, in all circumstances and with whatever safeguards, the right of the police or of an inspector of the NSPCC or of a private citizen to save a child from a parent who has not yet contravened the law? If she is prepared to admit that this might in some circumstances and with some safeguards be allowed, she will find herself in contradiction. Is in what circumstances, with what safeguards? And then she might find herself being asked some more general questions about the principles she uses when thinking about the particular questions.

In short, she might find herself doing some moral philosophy and discovering, perhaps, that the answers are not always so easy to give as her references to natural justice and the nature and quality of an act imply.

Yours, etc.,
Oxford
P. H. NOWELL-SMITH

The Future of World Population

Sir,—I would entirely agree with Mr. Cowan (THE LISTENER, February 7) in his statement that the rate of increase of world population rather than total numbers that I suggested might fall off in the future. That should give rise to no complacency but only to the hope that if population and production problems are vigorously attacked there is some prospect of success, since we will be working with and not against natural processes. The danger is not complacency, but the fatalistic feeling that whatever can be done will never prevail against the Malthusian law of the geometrical increase of population and so why try to do anything, with any luck we won't live to see the worst.

Yours, etc.,
Cambridge
C. B. GOODHART

Minds and Machines

Sir,—Before this discussion is concluded, may I comment briefly on Dr. George's reply to my letter (THE LISTENER, January 31)?

In criticising his identification of brain with mind, I was not in fact reviewing the traditional body-mind problem. Rather, I was making a plea for the right use of terms in scientific description. While rejecting Cartesian dicytology, I think neither 'spurious' nor 'trivial' to recognise both cerebral processes and mental events. Both of these phenomena can be studied by the scientist, but neither can provide a sufficient account of the other. I would agree that the mental events are a result of the physiological processes, but I suggest that this is not the same as saying that the mind is a product of the brain. Finally, Dr. George in his talk stated categorically that ideas are created in the brain. This is too useful a definition for a limited field of inquiry, but it lacks the verification which could make it a statement of fact.

Yours, etc.,
London, W.C.1
S. P. W. CHAVE

S. I agree with Dr. George; the implications of the subject matter of our correspondence are too complicated to deal with briefly. For instance, the word 'science' needs definition; it is clearly used in many different senses. Dr. George, for example, seems to use it in a slightly different sense from Dr. Baldwin, in the talk reported in THE LISTENER (February 14) a few pages before Dr. George's letter. That Dr. George believes science can help in all the important crises of life clearly means he uses