

Editorial: Wisdom and the Woolsack

The judgment of a Lord Chancellor may be expected to be solemn and severe:

The professional philosophers have failed us. For all their sophistication and subtlety, they have ceased to speak in language intelligible to the people or intelligible to those skilled in other intellectual disciplines. Instead they seem to take refuge in the arid wastes of intellectual disputation, remote from every day experience and even from law, science, or history. Unlike science, but like politics, and like religion, philosophy requires to be couched in language which ordinary people can understand. The meeting place of disciplines cannot afford to speak in a language of its own.

Lord Hailsham's strictures are quoted from *Law, Ethics and Authority*, the Edwin Stevens Lecture for the Laity, 1980, delivered before the Royal Society of Medicine and published by the Society at £1.50. The series consists of lectures 'on subjects of common and commanding interest to doctors and lay people'. On another page of the lecture we are told of 'the poverty of Western philosophy at the present time, its inability to come to terms with the value of judgments concerning beauty, justice, goodness, and ultimately truth and reality themselves, its failure to appeal to the heart and to the understanding of the ordinary man'. Lord Hailsham's cry on behalf of the laity is that 'when we seek from the professional philosophers the bread for our daily journey they seem to offer us nothing better than a diet of small pebbles'.

The authors and readers of this journal, and the members of this Institute, scarcely need such a sermon. We are the converted. Our founders and benefactors over 55 years have sung the same tune. Lord Samuel and Lord Russell and Sir David Ross offered bread for stones, fishes for scorpions. We can accordingly agree with the Lord Chancellor's objectives and with some of his specific complaints and prescriptions. 'There is', as he says, 'a kind of Gresham's law in popular philosophy by which the bad and the extreme seems often to drive out the subtle, the moderate and the good.' He rightly adds that philosophy, like religion, may often need to be subtle but can and must be subtle without being esoteric. He is effective, too, in his opposition to some ever-current confusions about values, and in particular to the idea that explicit and unexceptionable universal principles are necessary if morality is to make good its claim to have a rational basis. Here, speaking on a medical occasion, he would have done well to use

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Aristotle's parallel between medical and moral prescription: the fact that there are no unbreakable rules for administering pills and potions does not mean that there is no method in medical practice. There may be an appropriate response to every medical or moral predicament even if there is not in either sphere a set of rules from which the right answer can be derived by calculation.

But in his comments on the poverty of contemporary philosophy Lord Hailsham deserts the respect for complexity that he shows in other parts of his lecture. He recognizes that 'All design, all policy, all that is worthwhile in human inventiveness, is based as much on dialogue—even dialectic—as on agreement'. In recent philosophy, as in every age of philosophy, this truth has been known to most philosophers, and for every thinker who deserves the Lord Chancellor's reprimand it would be easy to find another who would endorse it. *Latet dolus in generalibus*.