PAUL ZIFF, 1958–1960: A REMINISCENCE

The following remarks have a personal character that I hope will be forgiven; its justification will lie in any light they might shed on Paul Ziff – and also in some small measure, in the tribute (and gratitude) that they are meant to express. Although presented from a single perspective – the one from which I see best – they give, I think, an objective account of certain important but under-appreciated aspects of a complex man. In this regard, I know that I speak for many.

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I met Paul Ziff in Princeton in the Spring of 1958. I was a fifth-year graduate student and Paul, then an Assistant Professor at Harvard, was visiting at Princeton for the semester, teaching an undergraduate course in the Philosophy of Art and a graduate seminar in the Philosophy of Language. I did not attend more than a couple of his classes in the Philosophy of Art (although I shall say a word about them presently); but, with Hilary Putnam, then in his fifth year as Assistant Professor at Princeton, I did attend the whole of his graduate seminar.

Ziff was impressive, both as a teacher and as a philosopher. His graduate seminar that year remains one of the most intense and exciting philosophical experiences that I have had. He used it to present the then current draft of what was soon to be published as Semantic Analysis, a work, as infuriating as it was inspiring, that revealed Ziff as a philosopher of acute perception, uncompromising honesty, and a passionate determination, bordering on obsession, to “speak only the truth”.

Devoted to John Austin and strongly influenced by Wittgenstein, Ziff found in the Princeton of that year an atmosphere deeply hostile to the prevailing winds that were blowing from Oxbridge, and much friendlier to the offshoots of the Vienna Circle that had taken root in the United States in the persons of Carnap, Reichenbach, Hempel, Feigl and their students (Putnam was a Reichenbach PhD and, with Hempel, a dominant force in Princeton’s philosophical life, while Carnap had recently spent some years at the nearby Institute for Advanced Study). Ziff’s philosophical allegiances cast him, at least superficially and at first glance, among the enemy – an enemy that the
local mafia caricatured as purporting to solve (or dissolve) philosophical problems by appeals to the way we used words, but without the appropriate "scientific" understanding of such complex facts, and certainly with no credible account of our alleged access to them.

It is hard to recapture that atmosphere in the telling. It was a heady time, one that engaged the passions and injected a level of excitement into seminar discussions that has seldom been seen since. I belonged to that mafia (as a lowly soldier, to be sure) and Hilary Putnam was its local capo and most vocal ideologue.1 "We" had no use for a view that (in its anti-metaphysical stance) claimed roots in the empiricism of Hume, but betrayed them in practice by pretending to knowledge that, on its own terms, it could not substantiate with appropriate evidence. So we delighted in Russell's acerbic review of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*2 as well as in his more general methodological diatribes.3 The local sport was shameless "ordinary language" bashing of the sort that Russell performed with such verve.

Enter Paul Ziff. Because the attention in *Semantic Analysis* to what it was to speak "ordinary" was clearly philosophically driven – by motives that transcended interest in the theory of meaning for its own sake – we saw in Paul a natural bashee. Like his English cousins, he seemed (at least implicitly) to claim to know what it was to speak with the vulgar ("I speak ordinary; what do you speak?" still rings in my ears); and – like the Wittgenstein who had started the epidemic – he felt that philosophical error often had its roots in the bewitching spell cast by philosophers' extraordinary talk.4 Accordingly, Paul's doctrine was that deviations from "ordinary" engendered false doctrine, and hence were the natural enemy of philosophy.

But extraordinary talk was a salient hallmark of the work of the philosophers whose "logical analysis" found the concepts of ordinary language far too imprecise for serious "scientific" work – which they saw as philosophy's only hope for a respectable future. An immediate doctrinal clash seemed inevitable.

It never really came off. Better still, it started but soon fizzled as it became clear that Ziff was perhaps unique [among the enemy, to be sure] in his sensitivity to the theoretical issues surrounding claims about meaning (or use), which in turn were closer to our own hearts than were any metaphilosophical consequences that might flow from settling them one way or another. *Semantic Analysis* was an ingenious and elaborate defense of the view that the determination of what a word (or other linguistic unit) meant was an empirical matter, claims about which were subject to confirmation and disconfirmation through the presentation of appropriate evidence. It set out a