

In praise of the breadth of British philosophers

According to Malcolm Bradbury (News, last week), 'Britain is no great shakes in philosophy.' What about John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Francis Bacon, John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin?

Gottlob Frege, the greatest German philosopher of the late nineteenth century, who made the greatest advance in logic and the philosophy of language since Aristotle, owes his reputation entirely to British philosophers such as Russell, Austin, Geach and Dummett. Ludwig Wittgenstein, arguably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, spent virtually the whole of his career as a philosopher in this country. It is a record of philosophical achievement that is not surpassed by that of any other country.

It may be true that there are no British philosophers



Regarding the Greeks: Philosopher Bertrand Russell

of comparable stature around today. But British philosophy has had similar periods of quiescence in the past when it was fashionable to look abroad for philosophical inspiration, only to bounce back a few years later. One must suppose that for Bradbury clarity and common sense, the hallmarks of British philosophy down the centuries, count for nothing. It seems that to be any 'great shakes in philosophy' you

need to be grandiose and obscure.

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The trouble with Mr Bradbury's reasoning is that nobody would do anything creative if they were constantly reflecting on the fact that they probably were not going to reach the top in the biblical 'eyes of men'.

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