PHILOSOPHY IN THE ACADEMY

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The following polemic began life as a reaction to the frustrations of various discussions with professional philosophers of issues that are central to the radical transformation of social relationships from alienated and oppressive ones to free, equal-socialist-social relations. It is addressed primarily to people in or near to the movement, and is not meant to convince straight academics: for that, I know, a different sort of work is needed. Much of it may be treated more as an expression of feeling than a 'rigorous' series of arguments. But if we can't communicate publicly about our reactions to our work in Radical Philosophy, where can we do so, and what is it for? I don't think that doing so is a separate enterprise from producing the philosophical work we need. Unless we recognise the nature of what it is that oppresses us about our situation - and this can be done best, or only by communicating about it - we will not be able to spot clearly enough the directions in which to move to combat it. At least, part of me thinks so.

A central contention of Warnock's book 'The Object of Morality' is that morality is an instrument for 'ameliorating the human predicament', which he sees as characterised by the fact that people have limited sympathies, limited rationality, etc., Like Hart, and other bourgeois thinkers who, following Hart, repeat these phrases, he does not inquire seriously to what extent these alleged features of 'human nature' are the products of contingent and changeable historical circumstance. But to have a serious interest in this question, even to take it seriously as a question, is not easy for someone who does not see the need for a radical transformation of social life, and who has little perception of the way people's lives are screwed up in capitalist society.

The 'human predicament' is supposed to be ameliorated by the abstract principles which Warnock takes to be the core of morality: principles of non-malificence, fairness, beneficence and non-deception. But it is obvious that the extent to which these 'principles' will be applied is largely determined by the social and economic conditions under which people live. And of course these principles may characterise not only individuals and their actions but a whole social structure, which may incorporate unfairness, deception, indifference to other person's interests and needs in its very structure. A serious examination of what would 'alleviate the human condition' would involve an inquiry into which social forces and tendencies are progressive and which are reactionary, an analysis of specific forms of oppression and of the nature of oppression, and some account of what institutional forms and modes of social relationships would reduce or overcome these forms of oppression. But then one would need some understanding of the role of institutions and of specific social forces in perpetuating oppressive relations, whereas Warnock's conception is entirely individualistic and thus historical. 'The human predicament' is characterised by individual failings, such as limited rationality or limited sympathy - (but is it clear what unlimited sympathy would be?) There is no sense of the role of particular ways of life or modes of social organisation in limiting or developing human sympathy and human rationality. Both the problem and the remedy (living up to principles) are due to individual failings or individual excellences.

But we should not expect any deep understanding of social oppression from a straight philosopher. To engage in this inquiry in a serious way involves having a political perspective of a radical kind, for only radicals can be expected to take seriously, in their lives and in their thinking the need for, and possibility of, a radical and liberating transformation of social relations. Whereas it is a feature of a conservative mentality that you have no sense of the need for such a transformation, that you don't see what people are at when they work at developing notions of non-oppressive forms of social relationships, in which for example, the imposition of sanctions is not seen as the necessary cement binding society together, or standing behind the possibility of social existence: If you don't see how screwed-up capitalist society is, if your politics are conservative (whatever political party you support), and you are complacent about current forms of social life, this will mean nothing to you, as it will if you ascribe whatever is wrong to individual viciousness or insensitivity, rather than to features of the social system. But then what is the point of discussing these questions, which must be central to the way we think of ourselves as radicals, with a straight academic? (This seems to me especially relevant to our practise as radical philosophers within the academy.)

Again and again I have found that there was little or no understanding of what these problems were, let alone of their importance, on the part of such academics. This is not surprising in view of their elitist formation, which is maintained daily in the practise of ridding their students of 'muddles' and 'confusions', of ridding them of what they see as problems and replacing these perhaps inchoate intuitions with professional jargon and clever puzzles. Such academics are not in the best position, to say the least, to develop an unalienated conception of human powers and relationships, even if they cared to do so. They tend to be more concerned with the jealous preservation of the little space they have managed to eke out for themselves from the sciences, and do so in part by turning their work into a narrow specialism removed from any systematic attempt to understand the nature of human reality. They come to be dominated by the mystique of teaching 'philosophy', with the question of whether or not a student is good at 'philosophy', with students having a wide coverage of 'philosophy': the fetishism of 'philosophy' renders nearly impossible any idea of working with students to develop their own ideas and problems, possibly in relation to some philosopher (or psychologist, or sociologist, or whatever) but going where the ideas and interests may lead rather than forcing everyone's thought into the pattern imposed by syllabus and exams, a syllabus which often frustrates not only the students. The answers they might give to these criticisms are: that teachers are hired to teach philosophy, that anyway they have to work within the system approved by the bureaucracy, or that philosophy <u>just is</u> a specialised field with its own set of techniques and <u>its own</u> set of problems which students must learn before they can do serious work of their own.

The first two replies merely require us to point out in turn that it is just this that is the complaint, that we ought to question the idea of 'departments of philosophy', or that we must simply accept the current structures of academic institutions. But the third requires more of a response. One problem with it is that most students will not go on to do further work in philosophy, and for them the whole idea of their undergraduate education as a preparation for further work in philosophy is irrelevant. They will have wasted time in which they could have developed a deeper sense of at least some issues of importance to them, they might come to understand certain features of their society and lives more fully. But even for those who do go on the argument is weak. For what happens in practise is that what gets transmitted is a certain jargon, a carping sensibility, typically a lack of much sense of cooperative work, and little sense of the way philosophical questions are raised in all sorts of disciplines: philosophy cannot be defined in terms of a certain set of techniques, whatever those are. Philosophers use very different 'techniques', thinkers who do not use 'techniques' typical of analytic philosophy raise questions of philosophical importance, have insights and discuss questions which touch on the most general and basic features of reality and of human experience. If anything is to be taken as indicative of the philosophical character of a thinker it is this latter feature rather than the use of any specifiable set of 'techniques'. And it is quite absurd to say that without knowing these 'techniques' it is impossible to see what is philosophical and valuable in these questions or writers. For those who produced them ex hypothesis did not employ such 'techniques', people have criticised and responded to them without employing reduction ad absurdum, or the analytic/synthetic distinction, or what have you. But even if there were something in the idea that philosophy has to be seen as at least in part involving a set of techniques, this would settle nothing about what should be done: for there is no point having these techniques unless they are going to be employed to illuminate and become clear about such central features of human life, and there is no guarantee that it is those who satisfy the narrow definition of philosophy who will have the best insights here. It is hard to think of a single academic philosopher in the 20th century from whom one can learn as much about human beings as one can from the Freudian or Marxian traditions. But more strongly, the complacency, intellectual elitism and escapism that the practise of philosophers encourages makes it difficult for them to apply such 'technique' in any but an external and reductive way to whatever they touch. (This goes with their conceptual and political conservatism, evidenced in Warnock's discussion referred to above, but which is a pervasive feature of such discussions).

The student who is admired and who goes on tends to be the one who is adept at picking up the jargon and manner of

the professional philosopher, always on the scent of the slight mistake in what someone has said, abstracting from the idea or general conception it contains, who picks up the minute, carping put-down, and gets his/her problems and ideas from the latest professional book or article. It is characteristic of this type that they come to think they can dismiss a complex theoretical system such as marxism or psychoanalysis in a few deft 'moves' or with a few clever points, and to distrust whatever is not put in the professional patois of 'claims', unpacking, entailment, and which does not have the sleek professionalism and glibness that usually passes for brilliance and rigor. These academics deserve the students they breed; but the students do not always deserve such academics: caveat emptor.

What are some other features of the professional?

- Competitiveness, and the resulting difficulty of having a serious cooperative discussion with him (especially one that is not formulated in the terms of the trade);he has to assert himself, and is so absorbed by his professionalism that he is rarely concerned to see where an idea which may sound strange to him comes from in a person's life or thought. If he does relate it to anything it is likely to be some academic source, often quite alien to, and distorting of, the original impetus.

- An unwillingness to distinguish between what is a serious position or problem and what is not. Ideas are treated at the level of 'what someone might say', or 'a position that could be maintained': a position that is absurd, that no one would seriously maintain, is treated on the same level as something that is a serious live option, that makes a difference to people's lives. Perhaps this is especially true in what is called moral and political philosophy, where an ideology (and fantasy) of neutrality reigns, understandable in view of the typical philosopher's isolation from any political movement. Neutrality is, however, a fantasy: to treat with equal seriousness and respect a view which comes to terms with the oppressiveness of bourgeois society and one which does not, without taking a stand, is already to take a stand, if only that of the philosophical voyeur. Some academics seem to see themselves as above or outside political struggle, claiming to see themselves as committed to the pursuit of knowledge. But they do not see that some political movements and ways of life are more favourable to the development of knowledge and understanding than other, obscurantist, ones and that withdrawal is itself a bad form of politics.

One thing that can help in such situations is to force the person to say what he thinks, where he stands, to confront him as a person with a definite political practise, and to destroy the attempt at the escapism of 'I'm a philosopher' or 'this is not an entirely implausible thing to say'.

- Verbal athleticism and glibness, apparently designed to stun students and others into a baffled silence. This often goes with the pretence of knowing the answer to all questions. Such a teacher can only be bluffing, and it is the aura of having a position (an office), and people's hang-ups about authority (themselves engendered and reinforced by the authoritarian structure of philosophy and other academic departments, that enable them to get away with it. Since many students come expecting that there are certain people who know the right answers, or who don't care too much because they want the degree, and know they are going to be examined by people who include these teachers and others who think roughly like them, it is difficult for a student to get outside the definition of the subject , the mode of work and the general views which are presented by such teachers. Besides, it is so easy for teachers in a position of authority and with sometimes considerable verbal dexterity to put a student down, to confuse him without trying to see by further questioning what he is trying to say, or with what else in his thinking it connects, that students have to struggle not to become submissive and browbeaten. Some philosophers seem to see their ability for the quick kill, the lightening put-down as proof of their professional skills. In a way it is, but this is indicative of the kind of skill they have (and their oppressive function) rather than of any philosophical understanding. You might as well look on the ability of a uniformed man with a machinegun to terrorise unarmed civilians as proof of his rightness.

Rather than trying to help a student get clear about and develop his thought, it will often be labelled as being a view of a Humean, etc. kind (the student may never have read Hume): this thought is forced into a mould which it is often distorted by. The professional is so concerned to parade his skills that he is rarely attentive to what is behind a student's question or remark, and this is made especially difficult by the authoritarian structure of the classroom situation, (and of British society), which forces upon people the idea that the teacher is someone who knows the answers, not someone who may be engaged in working with his 'students' on difficult questions. The elitism of the professional is linked with this: he is the person who knows what the important questions are, and can spot 'muddles' with a vengeance. Typically he does not think he has anything to learn from his students. But without being able to learn from them, at the very least what their problems and concerns are, can he ever be an instrument in the liberation of their thought? (one wonders more and more whether this is possible within the framework of the academy, whether it is only by good fortune that this ever happens, and that it happens when it does despite the academic structure.)

- It is necessary always to penetrate to the social and political core of any position, or way of working in philosophy. These can be democratic or authoritarian, foster critical and independent thought or aim at inducing a sense of inadequacy and dependence, encourage cooperative work, or heighten competitiveness and privatisation, be precious and escapist or engaged and serious. Philosophers think they are being paradigmatically rational and objective when they are being detached and artificial, parading as paradigmatically rational a particular mode of relating to the world which treats withdrawal, escapism, indifference, sarcasm, and disengagement as the appropriate response to human and political problems. These attitudes are strengthened by their highly privatised way of working and their frequent careerism. It is superficial to treat these features as just 'sociological facts' irrelevant to understanding the kind of work they produce, or to the emphasis on the need to master certain professional 'techniques' as what is centrally involved in the formation of a philosopher. (Note the emphasis on being 'a good philosopher' or 'good at philosophy'; there is relatively little talk of the development of philosophical understanding.)

In all this the important thing is not to 'blame' anyone, not to point the finger at particular people, for their roles are largely determined for them by the structure of the institutions within which they work and the forces which maintain that structure which have an interest in the fragmentation and compartmentalisation of knowledge. It is important to see also that this is to a great extent a defensive posture; note the way lines of thought or questions get ruled out as not being 'philosophical' this is indicative of escapism and fear, as well as, or together with, professional specialisation.Identifying yourself as 'a philosopher' is supposed to free you from the need to be acquainted with facts and theories being developed in the relevant sciences. This tendency is perhaps especially marked and especially disastrous in the philosophy of mind, moral and political philosophy. Thus psychoanalytic theory gets treated as an afterthought, as a special case, which can be discussed after we have already worked out what intentions, motives, freedom,conscience etc, are. Freud is generally not seen as having a philosophy which has widespread ramifications throughout the 'fields' I have mentioned. The same tends to be true of the treatment of Marxism which, when it is studied, is treated as a special subject, not as a philosophy which involves a whole approach to questions about e.g., knowledge,morality, politics, law, and the 'mind'. Into which academic pigeonhole are we to fit problems like the relationship between social being and consciousness? Thus it is rendered harmless by being fenced off as a 'special interest'. The stakes here are the autonomy of 'philosophy' challenged by these among other systems of thought (though I am aware of the inadequacy of this description, and the suggestion that what we have to do with here are finished or completed bodies of propositions which are simply to be adopted or rejected, in part or in whole; this is an alienated way of relating to a way of thought). But the problem does not just concern the autonomy of philosophy (and philosophers) and their independence or lack of it from the sciences; nor is it just that the same sort of problem arises in other 'fields'. There is a general problem about the institutionalisation of philosophy and other forms of knowledge, the drawing of their critical and political sting by being made into academic specialisms within a context of overall social and political oppression.

One question we have to come to terms with is: is it possible for us, trapped within these institutions, to relate ourselves in a non-elitist and non-alienated way (e.g. at a purely intellectual level) to the continuing struggles against oppression and for the creation of liberated forms of life? One form such a contribution might take, is to develop ways of working together and ways of communicating, in addition to the Journal, that threaten the hold of the philosophical establishment on the manner and content of theoretical production: circulating manuscripts, reduplicating them, incorporating various comments within the circulated manuscript; holding weekend or weeklong study and discussion sessions, possibly with small numbers in a single house; encouraging reflection on and within the concepts that have been developed within the movement in the last years, notions of liberation, of the control of one's life, of oppression, authoritarianism, and so on. Serious liberating work on these problems is not likely to come from anywhere else (don't leave it to the bureaucratised academics). We must avoid being constrained by the academically sanctioned boundaries between philosophy and sociology, psychology, etc. and rid ourselves of the hang-ups about being 'philosophers': we must aim at a comprehensive view of reality, especially of human reality, and for this the sources that can be drawn on are much wider than what normally appears on the reading lists in philosophy departments.

I am aware of the schematic and sketchy character of the

positive suggestions I have made: but I think it symptomatic of our state that we don't have lots of ideas - and activities - going about this. Maybe not everyone in sympathy with the general idea of radical philosophy feels these needs. When I talk about new modes of communicating, this must include more or less regular meetings, preferably, though not only in small groups, where the separation between our lives as persons and as radicals, and our lives as academic philosophers can be overcome, at least to an extent. Lastly, a suggestion that one of the most important areas in which we can intervene philosophically and politically at this point is that of education and the philosophy of education, at present, despite recent good work by Dave Adelstein and Keith Paton (The Great Brain Robbery), dominated by a reactionary ideology emanating largely from the London Institute of Education.

ADDENDUM: A Note about "the Theory of Knowledge"

1. Philosophy departments customarily allot separate courses to epistemology and to moral philosophy. This seems to enshrine a fact value distinction into the very structure of the degree. (In one course we discuss knowledge, in another values.)

2. One of the central questions of 'epistemology' concerns the conditions under which it is possible to acquire knowledge (or in Winch's words, how the mind can have contact with reality). But the knowledge about which this question is asked is usually knowledge of facts about the 'material world'. If the question is understood to include knowledge about oneself, about one's society and one's relationships with others, then the Marxist contention that capitalism is intrinsically a mystifying social formation in which people are systematically prevented from seeing the truth about their lives and their society (and its Freudian, etc. analogues) immediately becomes relevant. The question about knowledge has to be dealt with in the context of the question: what kind of society and social relations would enable a non-mystified view of reality, would replace illusion with knowledge? This transfers the focus of the question from the individual mind to the type of society which makes knowledge possible and accessible. It also raises the question of how this knowledge enters the mind, and the relationship between the person and his knowledge; thus it would involve issues about non-oppressive forms of education, an education which liberates people's capacities to discover and to do things for themselves and with others, which enables them to understand their society. It is a feature of the capitalist system that it cannot allow this to happen, that its nature and operation is obscure to those who work and live under it.

3. Thus the structure of philosophy departments reproduces the fragmentation of understanding which seems to be an essential feature of capitalist society. How, while remaining within the academy can we avoid being agents of this and other forms of oppression? How can we ourselves avoid being screwed up by the false positions and compromises we are forced into (exams, lectures, posing as authorities, being subject to authorities)? Can we get our own heads (and lives) straight while we are subject to its domination, to the disruption it imposes on our own thinking? Should we get out, trying to contribute to the building up of radical culture and thought outside the academy, living in a more integrated, revolutionary manner? Perhaps 'radical philosophy' will help to make the academy more liveable, by placing politics where it should be, at the centre of consciousness, not as a special, peripheral subject: but is this enough?

4. Perhaps, in some way, 'the problem of knowledge', and that of political practice, are one.

THE PROBLEMS OF LIVING IN AN INTERPRETED WORLD

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The following paper was read to the Cambridge Philosophy Festival on March 10th, 1972 (see Cambridge Report). It is intended to raise problems rather than to offer final answers. The last section of the paper ("Discussion") was added after the Cambridge meeting and deals with some of the points raised in the discussion there.

Let us begin by trying to define three different attitudes to the world; the mythological, the rational and the fictive. In the mythological world there is no distinction of kind between the experiences of self, the experience of other human beings, and the experience of the external world. Indeed, the world is not even seen as external in this way. All three categories are underpinned by and articulated along methods of explanation in which the governing power is placed outside in a fourth category - that of the gods - which it is impossible to disentangle from the rest but which is their ultimate support. The experience of self in this world is not necessarily seen as an experiential continuum in terms of which the rest of the world is defined but rather the experiences of the self find their discontinuities reconciled in the continuum of the world ratified by the gods. Indeed these discontinuities are not even seen as such in a continuous common world. The world of dreams, the common sense world of ordinary waking life and the world of mystical or drug-induced states require no existential ordering in the life of the self, their ordering is guaranteed in the life of the tribe.

The rationalistic world view (a view which incidentally is, I think, the predominant one for us here and now, and which daily approaches its timely end) changes the focus from the comunally shared world of the tribe to the world individually experiences. That this view can be historically linked with an increasing division of labour is something which should become clear during the course of my argument. Here the emphasis changes from a world which finds its continuity running through itself to a world which finds its continuity in the world of self which perceives the world as out there and which objectifies this world so that it finds its being independently of the perceiving self. This factifying of the world is accompanied by a negation of other areas of experience in which the facticity of the world is not so marked, such as dreams, hallucinations and other similar phenomena. In particular, the area of the world which becomes highly problematic is other people. Experienced both as physical facts of the world and also at another level as beings with direct contact with the conscious perceiving self, other minds become problematic. Thus in the rationalist world we find the world split into two, on the one hand, the world of self, and on the other, the world of fact, and caught uneasily between the two, other minds and those experiences of our own body which we cannot characterize as self or not-self.

Before I attempt to describe the third attitude to the world I would like to make clear what I am doing in offering these descriptions. I do not think I am describing fully the world view of any particular culture at any particular moment in its history. Rather these are theoretical descriptions which will, I hope, prove their usefulness in the inquiry I am