

REPORTS

CAMBRIDGE

Opening Moves

This term has seen, hopefully, the beginnings of a new era in Cambridge philosophy. The event which sparked off this new beginning was the sit-in of February 3rd to 5th, when university premises were occupied in protest against the university's handling of the proposals for exam reform put forward by the Economics faculty. This mass action by the students, and its continuation in the form of other political activities throughout the term, was crucial to specific developments in the faculty of Philosophy. It introduced a new critical awareness into students' minds, and, above all, led individual students to the realisation that their own dissatisfactions were shared by many others. 'Solidarity' may be a rather over-used term, but it is certain that without the solidarity generated by mass action in the past weeks, the determination and confidence required to initiate change in the philosophy faculty would not have been possible.

Following the sit-in, groups of students and research students who had taken part called an open meeting of the philosophy faculty in order to discuss course content and exam structure. About 50 people turned up (nearly half the faculty), many of whom joined groups formed to work on proposals for exam reform and alternative seminars. At a second open meeting, these proposals were debated by over forty people, who voted overwhelmingly in favour of the suggested changes in exam structure. These were:

1. Changes in assessment: A student can elect for any part of the Tripos either to sit a series of exams or to submit a portfolio containing a selection of his year's work. There will be no restriction on the form or content of the portfolio. The suggested lengths would be: Part IA, 10,000 - 15,000 words; 1B, 12,500 - 20,000 words; Part II, 15,000 - 25,000 words.

2. Classing: Classing would be abolished in all parts of the Tripos and be replaced by a pass-fail system. The Part II examiners will produce a written report on the examination or portfolio, to be made available at the request of the student.

A date for the first alternative seminar was also agreed at this meeting, and for this seminar, Ian McFetridge and John Paley produced "Theseson Philosophy" which initiated intense and lively discussion.

It was during this period that the first issue of Radical Philosophy appeared. Besides the articles it contained, the very fact of its existence made it a timely arrival. It was decided to make contact with the Radical Philosophy Group, and to organise a one-day philosophy festival at the end of term as a way of consolidating our gains at both political and theoretical levels: theoretically, by encouraging more people to think about, and discuss, areas untouched by analytic philosophy, and politically, by a show of strength, a demonstration of dissatisfaction with the academic subject and of determination to go beyond it.

Before discussing the successes and failures of the term, and the lessons to be learned from our experiences, it is interesting to note the reactions of the Faculty Board both to the demands for reform and to radical philosophy in general.

The Williams Gambit (Accepted)

The exam reform proposals went through the staff-student committee (a token body of ill-defined status) to the Faculty Board, which then reported back to the committee. Apparently, the Chairman would like to be able to do away with assessment altogether; but, given the practical difficulties, the extra work, the responsibility of the Board not only to define the subject through examination sanctions but also to provide objective standards of assessment, and, finally, the exhaustion of faculty members after a recent round of reforms (including an extra paper and the re-naming of Prelims. as 'Part IA'), it was felt that the proposals were unacceptable. This reply is to be put to a further open meeting of students at the beginning of the Summer term.

Meanwhile, Professor Williams devoted his final lecture of the term to a discussion of Radical Philosophy. Over 100 people

turned up (approximately 80 more than had attended his previous lecture), and it was hoped that a forum would be provided in which the themes of the sterility of analytic philosophy and the possibility of a radical new start could be taken up. This was evidently too naive a hope: nothing of the kind emerged - and for two reasons. The first was that Professor Williams introduced the discussion with some preliminary remarks that so confused the issues as to make it extremely difficult for the left to state their position adequately, within the terms of reference laid down. The second was the failure of the left to see that this is what had happened, so that they only managed to get bogged down in a discussion the limits of which had already been set. As this kind of limitation is quite liable to be repeated at other universities, it is worth looking more closely at Professor Williams' strategy, how it camouflaged and distorted the tenets of radical philosophy.

Professor Williams began by saying that as far as he could see there were two possible motives behind the radical assault. One was dissatisfaction with the present state of academic philosophy, and the other scepticism about academic thought in general. Having divorced himself from Oxford generally and Hare in particular, he dropped the first possibility and concentrated on the second, making an attempt to define a class of people not interested in academic thought at all, but in favour of "Life as against Theory". By use of this strange and unjustified model, he managed to transform the radical demand for academic studies which will enable us to understand our social situation, and to see our thought in terms of it, into the bourgeois liberal and romantic plea for less academics and more self-understanding. While he was all for self-understanding, and for philosophy leading to self-understanding, he could not see how thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, who, he claimed, placed themselves so positively on one side of the dichotomy between "Life and Theory", could be institutionalised; and he found it ironic that those who were so much in favour of "Life" wanted to study that most academic and theoretical of philosophers, Hegel. And so it went on. It may be useful to know that this strategy has been adopted; for it may be again.

Analysis

The first thing to say is that the term was a success: demands for exam reform had wide backing, response to the alternative seminars was encouraging, and the philosophy festival attracted well over 100 people for a whole day of philosophy. The rejuvenation of philosophy in Cambridge depended on two things: first, mass action in the university, creating a context in which could grow both the realisation of the need for change and a determination to bring it about; second, the presence of a few people who could immediately articulate, or try to articulate, theoretical discontent and begin to make suggestions about alternatives to the non-philosophy practised in Cambridge. The second need was met, to some extent, by a group of research students who had been meeting for about three years in an attempt gradually to find an intellectual route out of analytic philosophy into a more fertile area beyond it. The appearance of Radical Philosophy, at just the right time, also helped to disseminate ideas similar to those that this group had been formulating.

Considerable problems remain, however. One is that almost all the work so far has been produced by the one group of research students. There would be grave dangers in allowing this to continue: we do not want simply to reduplicate existing teaching structures, a minority talking while the rest just listen and make notes. One possible way of avoiding this situation is to take, as the focal point of seminars, not individual papers but a common text. In this way, we could all learn together, and perhaps, undermine the Faculty conviction that a precondition of assimilating certain ideas and authors into the course is having someone who knows enough about them to be able to give lectures.

Even so, it is difficult to see how activities such as these can take place on anything but a small scale within the current tripos-determined arrangements. Which leads to the other major problem: the Faculty Board. Mass action of the sit-in variety is a useful weapon for raising consciousness and ensuring change, but it has to be used as an exception rather than the rule. In our present situation, a series of sit-ins would simply end with no students participating in them. Do we, therefore, adopt a reformist perspective, always remembering what we ultimately want, but fighting, in the meantime for piecemeal changes? Questions such as these will hopefully find a response within the pages of Radical Philosophy.

