

CORRESPONDENCE

Philosophy and Feminism

Dear Radical Philosophy,

In her article on *The Sceptical Feminist*, Jean Grimshaw describes my position as an enfeebled and unviable thing, scarcely worth the name of feminism. In one sense I hardly blame her. The position she describes seems to me all that and more: I should even call it senseless. But it is not mine, nor anything like it.

She thinks, for instance, that as well as wanting to count as feminists all people who think that women are unjustly treated, irrespective of the details of the views they hold, I also want to say that individual feminists can get on perfectly well without *any* theory of what is wrong and what should be done about it. I don't see that the quotations by which she supports this idea would make her case even if they were not seriously out of context, which most of them are. *Obviously* it is impossible to set about putting anything to rights without a clear view of what is wrong and what is causing it - which is why I spend most of the book developing the foundations of just such a theory.

She says I think feminism does not depend on matters of fact. This is another thing which it would be *a priori* absurd for anyone to think (though I see that is quite compatible with Grimshaw's thinking that I do think it). The proposition that women are oppressed is not analytic - true in all possible worlds - and so must depend on facts about the world as it is. I also say quite explicitly that feminists must be committed to an unending, unprejudiced investigation of them - and I certainly would include historical investigation in this. What I *do* say is that the fundamental feminist case can be demonstrated without entering into any debate about *controversial* questions of fact. I still take this to be very important, not just as a debating tool, but as a clearer of clutter and confusion in much feminist debate. If Grimshaw had caught my point, for instance, she would not have been able to accuse me of ignoring the idea that male dominance is an inescapable fact of nature.

Then there is her attack on the notorious chapter on sex and sensuality. Here she mistakes my intention in just about every possible respect. One small example is the way she takes me to be saying that pleasures come in higher and lower versions, with sensual ones decidedly lower, when what I was doing (I thought obviously) was showing what would follow even *if* anyone took this view. But more fundamentally, she misses the point of the chapter. It is concerned not with current or any other ideals of sensuality (determinates), but with logical questions about sensuality and such things in general (determin-

ables). The omissions she thinks so significant occur only because they are not relevant to my purpose, and not because I regard the matters in question as unimportant or superficial. She is not entitled to infer, therefore, that I do not want to question current standards of femininity (I should have thought it quite clear from other contexts that I did), let alone - in perhaps the most astonishing flight of fancy in the whole piece - that I think men's sexual exploitation of women a rather superficial thing, to be cured by lecturing men until they behave properly.

In fact I suspect that a good many of Grimshaw's misunderstandings come of her not seeing how deliberately limited the scope of my enquiry is, and presuming in consequence that whatever I do not discuss I regard as unimportant, or that I see as sufficient for feminism what I really claim only as necessary.

It should be said that embedded in this vast extent of *ignoratio elenchi* there are one or two genuine disagreements between Grimshaw and myself: the opposition between her view that justice cannot be discussed in abstract and mine that in the first instance it must be, for example, is substantial and interesting. However, on the whole her disagreements with positions I do hold are not much more illuminating than her disagreements with all the ones I do not. I know she thinks my theory of justice is too much like cake sharing, that my wish for a change in society's moral standards is moralizing, and that my analysis of relationships turns people into commodities, but although her disapproval is manifest in every epithet she does not say what she thinks is *wrong* with what I argue, and I (seriously) have no idea. (The 'commodity' language, by the way, which Grimshaw leaps on as though she has caught some unguarded manifestation of an extremely disreputable unconscious, was a deliberate device to try to shock the reader out of *common sense categories*. It has clearly failed.)

Grimshaw's article, in other words, has given me as little reason to rethink any of my ideas about feminism as my book gave her to reconsider hers. However, in some ways it is extremely interesting. Apart from revealing an interpretation of my book which I otherwise should not have believed possible, it does raise all kinds of higher order questions about such things as open texture, incommensurability, and interpretation in the light of theory. I don't think I am an obscure writer, and although I suspect that Grimshaw decided early on that the author of the book was a pretty uncongenial character and afterwards tended to be on the lookout for things to disapprove of, I certainly do not think that she or her review can be dismissed as silly or careless: far from it. So the question of why we missed each other so completely is worth some thinking about.

Still, it is not at all clear what conclusions to draw: whether what is needed is more work on the higher order questions so that we can then go on to a discussion of feminism and politics with more common ground, or whether people of such radically different intuitions should just push on with their own equivalents of Kuhnian normal science, and find out in the long run whether (as I suspect) a Grimshaw-like view will find itself stuck in a quagmire of confusion and contradiction, or whether (as I suspect she suspects), a Richards-like view will wither through abstraction and dessication.

My suspicion is that we may have to carry on in our separate ways for quite a while. When an investigation which left me convinced as never before of the extraordinary power of philosophical enquiry can appear to Grimshaw as a demonstration of the barrenness of that kind of approach, there is clearly a great gulf fixed. But it would be a pity to abandon all hope of bridging it.

Janet Radcliffe Richards

Dear Radical Philosophy,

I am an OU student having done the Arts and the Social Science Foundation Courses and second-level Sociology. I bought my first *Radical Philosophy* magazine in Dillons Bookshop, London, in the summer of 1980. I was attracted to it by an article on Tory Ideology, which I enjoyed, and I became a subscriber. I am a housewife, aged 45, with three children in their late teens, have not been to university and bear no O or A Levels - a typical OU student in my third year of study.

I enjoy *Radical Philosophy* and I found No.30 particularly interesting as it covers some of the areas in Marxism that I am studying at the moment. I do find some of the articles a little difficult, but with the knowledge that I am acquiring, it is very informative to me. My interests are in politics, philosophy, arts, sociology.

As for the content of the magazine, it might be more helpful if some more of the articles were of a political and ideological nature relating to British politics of the 1980s, with an Editorial (related to the themes of the articles), News, Comment, and/or correspondence columns for discussion of some of the theoretical concepts of the articles. There should be no need for journalistic criteria to be used; rather philosophical criteria must be used. I believe that your main aim should be to become more accessible, informal and 'open' in the magazine and in the conferences. The less confident outsider or student who has not got enough intellectual experience to be able to speak or write easily should be given encouragement to write on different or related topics. I think that the breaking down of barriers referred to in your goals and objectives on the inside front cover of the magazine must always be borne in mind by the professional academics of the *RP* Collective. John Krige's letter in *RP28* and Seumas Caimbeul and Iaian Grannd's letter in *RP31* have made similar points. Those views and mine ought to be considered more.

Please continue to knock down the barriers between academic, elitist isolationism and the outside world in which we all live. Marxism is a living and highly practical theory, as can be seen in the New Left of the Labour Party and in the principles of socialism.

Yours sincerely,

Felicity Gardner

Dear Radical Philosophy,

Although a fairly recent reader of *RP*, and therefore not witness to the early debates on the role of the journal, I would like to take up 's request to readers and make a few comments that seem to me relevant to the course it might take.

Firstly, I would like to express agreement with Martin John and Phil Murphy (*RP22*) that *RP* should not limit itself to a readership that comprises only students and academics. It seems that so often those who get paid to teach or study philosophy forget that there exists a vast population who make decisions, voice opinions, and engage in disputes of practical import, who, while not being possessors of whatever counts as a philosophical language, do experience in those activities something that could be vaguely classed as 'philosophical'. So great is this lapse of memory that on occasion academics and students alike have been apt to forget the motives that drew them towards 'its' study in the first place; this is most evident when philosophy is discussed as a 'discipline' and not as a particular way of articulating the problems and experiences that are, at some point, common to most of society.

Now I wouldn't wish to caricature or mis-represent *RP*'s position(s) on this, for there does seem to be genuine confusion over the matter. Take for instance the editorial in *RP22*. It firstly, and quite rightly, takes to task the usual content of philosophy as written about and taught; as positing certain 'problems of philosophy', without considering why they should be problems worthy of attention; as being mere formulae handed down. Yet on the opposite page, in the same editorial, it says 'We are committed to the work of philosophy ... we have always opposed the isolation of philosophy from *other disciplines*...'

Two points issue from this. Firstly, that a discipline, as opposed to a history, appeals to a certain insular account of the past. In this case what we are likely to get is precisely the invocation of certain traditional philosophical problems. Now I wouldn't want to suggest that the motive for the repetition of 'problems' is the same for traditional and left philosophy alike. The reason for the left's repetition should be that the problems have a continued relevance to the wider social context. This however shouldn't make philosophy of a radical kind a discipline, but on the contrary should encourage its dissolution as a discipline and its re-emergence as a way of discussing issues relevant to all. In other words, philosophy should be intuitively grasped as a way of examining issues rather than something embodied in particular people and institutions.

The second point is that in so far as concern to break down institutional barriers is expressed such aims remain within the 'citadels of expertise' rather than between institutions of education and the rest of society. We have perhaps become aware in recent years of the danger of taking at face value the dramas acted out between two philosophical camps in dispute.

So often the points of disagreement are deliberately exaggerated, and conceal the far more significant areas of agreement. To the extent that this is true of the content of philosophy, I think that it's also true of the relationship *RP* has to its readers (and non-readers) compared to less radical publications. Of course the content is radical, but is the relationship?

What I wish to suggest by this is that, instead of seeking an identity purely in terms of the *process* of philosophy, *RP* tries to identify its audience by reference to the *subjects* of its discussion as well. The 'process' becomes highlighted whenever philosopher speaks to philosopher; yet there is potential for a much wider readership given the issues recently cov-

ered by *RP*: racism; social work; nuclear disarmament. Would it not be possible to encourage reaction from those working in such areas (not just those teaching or studying) and so open *RP* to a readership, however temporary, which otherwise has no interest in matters philosophical? To this end it might be worthwhile advertising the existence of certain *RP* articles in other relevant magazines and newsletters. I'm sure that social workers, for instance, would have been interested in the article by D.J. Clifford (*RP*31) and may well have had something to say about it. Why not encourage them?

In relation to these points, it was with some concern that I read Noel Parker's definition of the present type of readership as comprised of students, ex-students, and academics. Nowhere could I detect any feeling of dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. Yet any radical socialist journal worth its 'discursive practices' should at least attempt to encourage a broad-based readership rather than contenting itself to speak only to academic elites and their student 'offspring'.

Of course, it may be argued that philosophy is constituted through a specialized language and that of necessity this precludes some people from becoming readers. However, I would suggest that this is less of a problem than might at first be thought. First, the distinction between 'advanced' and 'easy' articles can, to some extent, be by-passed when the subject is especially relevant to the reader's own experience. Second, in cases where a specialized terminology is felt to be unavoidable, the author could include his/her definition of some of the more obscure terms used.

All of the issues so far raised presuppose that we know what consequences we expect to follow from the circulation of radical ideas. When scientists publish their findings they can hope for practical consequences to follow. When the conservative elements in our society put pen to paper they knowingly offer their dotting readership the assurance of a simple worldview. But what have been the consequences of 'socialist ideas' other than to conserve their effects within a narrow group of academics? If we do have hopes for *RP*'s effectiveness then we should surely be aiming for an active readership whose position actually permits them to participate in the negotiation and influence of the social policy and conditions under which we all live and work.

One final matter, still related to the above issues, though this time regarding the scope of the content. The thing that surprises me most is the omission of two particular issues that would seem manna to socialist writers, no matter what 'discipline'.

The first is the matter of unions. How is it that so many editions of *RP* can have appeared without mention of one of the few tools influence available to us? I think that the time is right (it always has been) for a 'philosophical' look at the aims and assumptions of the various unions in this country and abroad. It is incredible that at a time when the very existence of educational resources is being questioned, academics should adopt such a schizoid attitude, seeing themselves as radical philosophers who happen to be union members and supporters.

This brings me to the other issue which is, strangely, educational institutions. The role of the teacher in the classroom has been examined, but there are obviously assumptions made by educationalists concerning what constitutes legitimate experience within colleges, and these must have profound material effects. Does *RP*'s silence on this matter mean that those assumptions/aims are both uniform across the country, and sufficiently well known about not to warrant comment? Surely, if we are to take seriously the claim that the character of something depends on

the context it's placed in, then we should be concerned to understand the background against which the pages of *RP* are being turned.

What I'm pleading for here is an integrated approach to socialist philosophy. Too often questions are asked about the 'role of the intellectual', 'forums for intellectual debate' etc. But do not these kinds of concerns indicate 'our' equivalent of 'their' handed-down formulae? We should abandon the spurious and pernicious category of the 'intellectual' - firstly, because it is an inheritance that aligns not, primarily, as socialist to socialist, but as paid 'thinker' to anyone else (political and social conservatives included) similarly privileged; and secondly, because it amounts to nothing less than the Humanities' equivalent of Technocracy's 'expert'. Both prey off others' experience to provide them with their generalizations. (This is not to deny an 'intellectual' his or her daily ration of 'experience', for they surely cannibalize their own experience as well. They just fail to acknowledge it [intellectual neutrality?].)

When the label 'intellectual' is assigned to members of the left by his/her opposite it is clearly intended as an insult. We need not, of course, concern ourselves with the motive behind the name-calling, but we do need to pay attention to the characteristics that make the label an insult. To be an 'intellectual' is to have signed away any claim to be socially relevant; and, in a socialist context, any claim for intelligence. What is needed is the integration of philosophy with experience, not its separation as a discipline. And, following from this, we must dispel the notion that individuals can be variously, and discretely, described as intellectuals or workers - intellectuals are so by virtue of their insignificance, for they can only be negatively defined against the background of their debased view of what it means to be otherwise. The separation of theory and practice is but a divisory prejudice, and one which *RP* could well do without.

I cannot think that these criticisms are unduly harsh to *RP* for they must surely apply to all journals which have the aim of being a part of the push for socialist change in our society, and hope to be something more than just an arena for an academics' 'talking cure'. In any case, *RP* is streets ahead of its philosophical 'rivals' and at least has the appearance of having had some life breathed into it.

Best wishes,

Stephen Levy

In the coming months the editorial collective will be considering the related questions of how the magazine is distributed and advertised and whom it is intended to reach. We are therefore very pleased to receive comments and criticisms from Stephen Levy, Felicity Gardner or others who wish to contribute to the discussion, and publish what we can of it for our readers.

Noel Parker, Secretary to the Editorial Collective
