

CORRESPONDENCE

'The Sceptical Feminist'

Dear Radical Philosophy,

I should like to comment on Janet Radcliffe Richards' reply to my review of her book, *The Sceptical Feminist*, which appeared in RP30.

Richards says that I have seriously misrepresented her position, and that most of the quotations I use to support my view of her book were taken seriously out of context. I should like to discuss a little further one of these misrepresentations she thinks I have made.

In my review, I quoted the following statement from her book:

Of course, if feminism really did depend on beliefs about matters of fact, and these turned out to be mistaken, we would simply have to accept that feminism should be abandoned (p.42). The context of this statement is a discussion of the idea of male and female natures, in which Richards argues that feminism does not depend on the truth or falsity of, for example, ideas about male superiority. I interpreted her as meaning that feminism does *not* depend on beliefs about matters of fact.

In her reply, however, she says that the view that feminism does not depend on matters of fact 'would be a priori absurd for anyone to think'. So where did I make my mistake? Richards says: '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.' Well, yes. It's true she believes this. It's also true that she defines feminism in Chapter 1 as follows:

There are excellent reasons for thinking that women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex; and that is the proposition which will be regarded throughout the book as constituting the essence of feminism, with anyone who accepts it counting as a feminist. (p.1)

But it now appears that feminism depends on *some* matters of fact, but not others. So it might be important to ask which. Here is what Richards says in her reply:

What I *do* say is that the fundamental feminist case can be demonstrated without entering into any debate about *controversial* questions of fact. But this is surely problematic? What do we mean by 'controversial'? Controversial to whom and why? Where and among whom is the consensus that seems to be implied here about which things are or are not controversial? I would have thought that the belief that women are oppressed or suffer systematic social injustice because of their sex is *itself* controversial - if by that is simply meant that there are plenty of people who would not agree with it. Richards does not however explain. What I think is interesting, however, is this idea of a 'fundamental feminist case' (an essence of feminism) which can be demonstrated *without* entering into 'controversy' about matters of fact. It is this what I particularly criticised in my review, and I would like to explain again why, by discussing something that Richards says about my discussion of her chapter on sex and sensuality.

Again, she says that I have mistaken her intention, and missed 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 (determinables).

Now what sorts of questions about sensuality would be *logical* ones? Presumably there are questions about what the concept of 'sensuality' does and does not entail, what its relationships are with other concepts, etc. (Similarly, logical questions about justice would be questions about what the concept of justice does or does not entail.) Implied however in what Richards says, and in the distinction between determinates and determinables, is the idea that one can identify logical questions about sensuality (or justice) and *settle them*, agree about conceptual relationships, and then discuss particular or determinate ideals of sensuality (or justice), well equipped to sort them out and perhaps clear them of confusion. This implies that the 'logical space', if you like, that is occupied by concepts such as sensuality is somehow given, and can be settled by conceptual discussion which will tell us what 'sensuality' or 'justice' *really* mean; what the relationships between these and other concepts *really* are.

It is this idea that I think underlies Richards' programme of identifying a 'fundamental' feminist case, without entering into controversy about matters of fact. And it is this that I am chiefly taking issue with. The reason is that I do not think there can be such a programme of identifying the *real* or *essential* logical relationships of a concept such as sensuality which can be isolated or abstracted from looking at particular ideals of sensuality.

Of course there *are* logical relationships between concepts as currently used (and sometimes contradictions and confusions in the way they are used). Richards talks in her reply of an opposition between my view that justice cannot be discussed in the abstract, and hers that in the first instance it must be. I think she takes me to mean that one should *not* ask questions such as 'What does "justice" mean?' or 'What are the criteria for counting something as just?'. But here *she* is misrepresenting *me*. Of course it is important to map out the logical or conceptual relationships between 'sensuality' and other concepts. But it is equally important to understand what such an investigation can achieve. It can tell us a great deal about current notions and the implications that they have. What it cannot do is tell us what, in some timeless or universal sense, concepts like sensuality or justice *really* mean, what relationships they *really* have, what 'logical space' they *really* occupy. And the reason is that there is no such thing as the 'real' meaning of sensuality or justice.

In fact what I think Richards' chapter on sex and sensuality does is to map out rather *well* aspects of current views about sensuality etc, including some of the incoherences in them. But I think she wrongly presents it as if it were an analysis of logical relationships between concepts which have some sort of timeless validity.

I believe that concepts such as sensuality or justice are essentially changing and historical, and have no identifiable or universally valid *core* of meaning which can be abstracted out of their historical manifestations and presented as their *real* meaning. My view entails that concepts such as sensuality and justice are radically contestable; and that differing conceptions of them may well be to a considerable extent incommensurable. Richards suspects that my view will lead to a quagmire of contradiction and confusion. To show, however, that there *are* contradictions and confusions is not to *be* contradictory and confused. Richards herself locates a

number of contradictions and confusions in her book. I have simply suggested that the contradictions and confusions go deeper than she suggests and that they cannot be resolved by trying to sort out what it *really* means to be just, sensual, or whatever. To suppose that there are such real meanings, and to present an analysis of current notions as if it were able to tell us such real meanings is almost inevitably to suggest that the ways in which we think now, the concepts we use, have some sort of universal validity.

As to the quagmire - maybe what underlies Richards' worry is this. If there is no real meaning of sensuality or justice, no logical implications between concepts that hold for ever, how can we talk sense at all? To borrow from Yeats, if the centre does not hold, will not mere anarchy be loosed upon the philosophical world? But I think that to worry about this is to misunderstand the nature of language (and it is interesting that nowhere in her book does Richards specifically discuss language). *All* concepts shift and change in meaning and this is often because human beings make *proposals* about meaning; they propose shifts of meaning, propose that words be used in certain ways and not others, and so on. Plato *proposed* things about what we should take as the meaning of justice; Freud and others *proposed* things about the meaning of the term 'sexuality'. Meanings are not just *given*; they are produced, in response to many things such as scientific discoveries, social and political purposes etc. When feminists criticise the use of 'man' as a generic term to mean 'human beings', they are not to be understood primarily as making claims about what the word 'man' *really* means (though they may well point to ambiguities and confusions about its current use). They are proposing to reject certain usages, to use words differently; and the reasons underlying this proposal involve both things like historical understanding of the emergence of the generic use of 'man', political beliefs about it being damaging to women, as well as beliefs about the confusions it causes.

So we can look at current conceptions of sensuality or justice, see how they are used and what they imply, and where they are themselves confused and contradictory. But we can also trace their historical emergence, and we can ask whether they are oppressive, and if so, of whom. And we can then make proposals as to ways in which we perhaps want to *change* meanings, use words differently. Do we, for example, want to go on talking about beauty, standards of beauty, attractiveness in women, in exactly the same sorts of ways that Richards does in her chapter? To ask this, and to ask *why* we might want to change meanings, does not turn us into Humpty Dumpties who naively suppose that words can mean what we want them to in any individual sense. Of course we start from where we are. And we are in as much danger of confusion, contradiction and unclarity as those who see nothing wrong with any current concepts, since current concepts are themselves often confused and contradictory. But if we do *not* ask whether and where we want to propose changes or shifts in meaning we are in danger of simply reproducing current concepts; if we *do* ask this we cannot avoid the 'controversial' questions of fact that Richards would like us to see as inessential to the fundamental feminist case.

Jean Grimshaw

A Lacanian Psychoanalyst's Comment on John Bird

Dear Radical Philosophy,

John Bird's article on Lacan (RP30) stands in need of criticism and - indeed - correction. Bird's ideas concerning Lacan himself, his role as a theoretician of psychoanalysis, and the movement in modern psychoanalysis created by him, in all its originality, its new reading of Freud and its consequences in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, all this calls for comment.

John Bird's effort to give an account of Lacan's theory(ies), based only upon some of his writings (although fundamental ones) suffers, in spite of its value, from a very partial reading [1], and from the preconception that Freudian is only what Freud himself said. I shall return to this point later. Another of Bird's charges against Lacan is his 'unclarity'. Lacan is difficult to read, especially in another language. But one has to remember that concepts and theoretical elaborations in psychoanalysis can hardly be understood separated from the practice and the general experience of them. This is equally true of Freud's rather clearer style. Lacan adds to this the difficulty of his own style - which, it has to be made clear, is not the same in a written work like the *Ecrits* as in the orally developed seminars, which are far more 'easy' to understand. In both cases, of course, one has to become familiar with the style and the ideas and to refer to many other texts (exegetic texts such as Anika Lemaire's thesis, or philosophical, linguistic, psychoanalytical texts, etc.), and this makes for a lot of work. Moreover, concepts obtain materiality and evidence through personal experience, so that sometimes they appear under a new light some years after one first meets them.

Equally, Bird seems not to consider the fact that Lacan's work was in a state of continuous development and that it appears, in spite of its intellectual rigour, more as a carefully embroidered piece of handcraft than as a *system* of thought [2].

But I should like to return to the conception of what is Freudian and what is not, i.e. the question of the orthodoxy which is still very 'hot' today in psychoanalytical circles. If 'Freud had already said *all* that is important in Lacan in a far more accessible form and, *by implication*, what is new in Lacan is radically non-Freudian' (Bird, p.7 - emphasis added), then every subsequent thinker becomes either a repetitious epigone or a heretic! This is not the way in which science or thought progresses.

Lacan makes new formulations of Freudian concepts, or pushes Freud's ideas towards new critiques and concepts. For example, Freud did not have the concept of the 'signifier' which according to Lacan's formula 'represents the subject for another signifier'. In Freud's scheme of the psychic system, conceived on the basis of a neuro-biological model (this was Freud's scientific point of reference), he uses the term 'perception-signs', which are 'unconscious inscriptions arranged according to simultaneous associations' and - what follows - 'the *unconscious*, a second recording arranged according to the other associations - possibly following a causality relationship' [3]. Those unconscious inscriptions are considered as the equivalent of the Lacanian 'signifier' which is certainly a loan from linguistics but which is not by any means simply a different word for Freud's idea.

That the unconscious in Freud has more reference

to neuro-biological or physical schemes and that in Lacan the model, the reference, has been mainly *linguistic* (or more recently *topological*) does not affect the radical particularity and separate existence of the fundamental psychoanalytical concepts which refer to a specific experience and are created in order to designate this experience. That this experience is articulated and articulable - that it is structured and can be expressed through language - 'in those figures which have a fixity of symptoms and can be resolved if correctly deciphered' as Lacan says, is at the heart of the Freudian inauguration of psychoanalysis as the 'talking cure'.

But at this point there is a complete misunderstanding in Bird's reading of Lacan [4]. So much so that the accusation of a 'linguistic reading of Freud' in Lacan's work (Bird, p.11) applies rather to the way Bird himself is understanding Lacan. Consider, for example, the symbolic as 'formed of the set of conventional symbols of social systems which is assimilated to a linguistic model, etc.' (Bird, p.10). This does not correspond to the psychoanalytical dimension of the symbolic which we find in Lacan's elaboration. The symbolic is no more nor less than *the order of the signifier(s)* - which is not just words or any words - and therefore it must not be confused either with the system of the language itself or merely with social symbols. Lacan says that the determination of the symbolic order over the imaginary exists in Freud and is recalled by him every time the mechanism of forgetting or in the structure of the fetishism is at issue (Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.464).

The idea of Lacan ignoring 'the natural and physical aspects of man - his drives and instincts' or reducing them to symbols which will never reach 'the real hard concrete aspects of life' (Bird, p.12) has nothing to do with the Lacanian conception of the symbolic which has enough materiality to mark real existence. As to the drives 'they have always been expressing their effects into language' (*Ecrits*, p.466).

Again, the distinction in Bird between *inner* (unconscious, drives) and *outer* (society, rules) world with the language as *intermediary* and the opposition between the individual needs and the social rules constitute a scheme very different from Lacan's categories of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. For Lacan, these three fundamental dimensions of the human experience can be tied in the way of a borromean knot [5].

The question of the 'metaphor of the Name of the Father', a *signifier* central for the understanding of the problem of psychosis in Lacan's theory, has also been investigated in this later period through the borromean knot.

A last misunderstanding in Bird's article concerns the training of the psychoanalyst in the Lacanian theoretical perspective. Personal analysis *is* the centre of this training. It should go as far as possible, ideally to the point where the individual signifiers are analysed and they resist any further signification; where the analysand can ideally say that he realises Freud's wish concerning the aim of psychoanalysis: 'Wo es war soll Ich werden', knowledge of the unconscious desire.

At the end of this analysis, or even before, in the course of the process, some of the analysands may experience the desire to continue the analytical experience from the point of view of the object they are leaving, i.e. the analyst. The possibility of giving an account of this moment has constituted the Lacanian proposition of 'la passe' which could provide new formulations of the question 'how one becomes an analyst'.

As to the 'absence' of analysis in training, here is a passage from what Lacan said in a conference 'On the experience of "la passe" and its transmission' (Lacan, 3 November 1973, *Ornicar*, No.12/13).

So here it is, what I obtain after having proposed this experience. I obtain something which is absolutely not of the order of the discourse of the magister. You ought to know how to notice the things I am not talking about - I have never talked about analytical training ['formation analytique'], I have talked about training of the unconscious ['formations de l'inconscient']. There is no analytical training. From the analysis an experience is drawn, which is quite wrongly qualified as didactic. Experience is not didactic. Why do you believe that I have tried to efface completely this term 'didactic' and talked of pure psychoanalysis?

Hara Pepeli

Footnotes

- 1 Limited to the *Ecrits* (1966), and the only English-translated seminar (1964-65) on 'The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis', it ignores the rest, and especially the later work of Lacan where new elaborations appear. The *Ecrits* is a rather particular case by comparison with Lacan's other works, because it is his first and only book and constitutes a concise account of his ideas where the preoccupation with style is pre-eminent.
- 2 Lacan, being a psychoanalyst, developed his work as a series of questions emerging from his own experience, which he tried to answer through his reading of Freud, his own ideas and the critical reading of the work of other psychoanalysts.
- 3 S. Freud, Letter 52 to Fliess, dated 6 December 1896.
- 4 He is not the only one. There is always the danger in a work of isolating certain views and making them the key explanation of the whole. This is also the danger of a very limited reading. Lacan himself had another idea of his own progression: 'I began with the imaginary, I consequently chewed the story of the symbolic with this linguistic reference in which I did not find all that could help me and I reached my goal by extracting for you this famous real under the very form of the knot.' (Lacan, Seminar 14 January 1975, *RSI Ornicar* No.3).
- 5 The topological model of the borromean knot and the possibilities which it offers to the exploration of these three dimensions has become, after 1975, Lacan's main theoretical preoccupation. The elementary borromean knot is constituted by three rings of string which are tied in such a way that if you cut any one of them the remaining two are free (see diagram). The three rings correspond to the three dimensions, the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Lacan says that Freud had some idea of them but not the concept. With time and patience, he affirms, he extracted them from Freud's discourse (Lacan Seminar 14 January 1975, *RSI Ornicar*, No.3).

NEWS

Women's Studies at the Open University

In 1976, some members of the women's group on campus suggested that the Open University should put on a women's studies course for undergraduates. In February this year, the first students taking *The Changing Experience of Women* came to an introductory meeting. In between came two lengthy processes; first, persuading the university that this would be a coherent (that's to say, an academically respectable) subject to study, even though we acknowledged that women's studies courses got their political impetus from the women's movement. Secondly, trying to write the course so that, while we acknowledged that the course is an 'academic' one, it remains relevant to women's lives, experiences, and to the debates through which feminism has articulated political discontent about these, especially over the past decade.