

# THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY TO ADULTS

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Even in the least partisan formulation of its objectives, Radical Philosophy believes in a philosophy 'relevant to people's wider lives and interests'. Though many of us may find or hope to find guidance for radical political or social activity in the philosophy we study, the fact remains that most of our success as radicals in philosophy will be through the medium of teaching, persuading and helping the development of the ways of thinking of others. In such an influence contact with adults must be a large part of our brief. So I feel justified in analysing in public my short experience of teaching adults. Many adult students subscribe to an idea of a 'philosophy of life' to which philosophical study pertains, an idea which philosophy schools would deprecate but which we might well aim to refurbish.

Not that adult classes in the London area display any inherent radicalism. Firmly under the intellectual thumb of the university the Workers Educational Association, whose local groups request, publicise and find accommodation for classes, looks quite unlike a 'worker's' education association. The purpose of a 'liberal' education (the WEA's actual brief) has always been clear to the middle class, for whom self-improvement and individualism could always make some sense.

In the rather closed social world of the local association the tutor (sent by the tall Portland-stone powerhouse in Bloomsbury) finds that there is, intellectually, no resistance to whatever line he wants to put. In this respect contact with adults differs only too little from contact with undergraduates. There is a large proportion of students (though this may be diminishing with the influx of graduates - an invaluable catalyst) who have brought with them from their schooldays a very authoritarian attitude to education. Not only do they hope to be lectured to and not have to utter anything, but more subtly they regard Knowledge, Learning, Intellectual technique and Philosophy as substantial structures that may admit them and judge them only as they concede to everything that is asked of them. And the tutor is their prophet. They thus understand only too well the structure of our institutions of education. Authoritarianism, the willingness to bow to authority, expresses itself in certain ideas that the students may put forward concerning the procedures of the class: that there is a total field that is called 'Philosophy' which the class should aim to cover in whatever depth time allows; that the philosophically important is whatever is dubbed such by the officianados of Philosophy; that the method of dealing with the philosophically important is as handed down by the officianados. Of the same type but more directly inherited from school is the fear that not being able to spell or write means not having anything worth saying.

The department recognises that an unresponsive and cowed class is a failure, but responds ambiguously to the fact. Much sound advice is offered on the psychology of encouraging unwilling students to participate and especially to write. And yet the official view of the function of a university in local adult classes mirrors so neatly the conceptions by which students express their pliancy to authority. It is that the university can bring 'high academic standards' to the classes. Now though consultation is definitely encouraged with the non-diploma adult class, the notion of high academic standards denies

the substance while the shadow is offered. For the main force of that notion has always, and with good reason, been aimed against demands for participation in the design and assessment of courses. Its abstractness entails that only those previously recognised as measuring up to the high standard are qualified to judge it. Learning has the structure of what the authoritarian student all too readily feels it to be, a self-perpetuating oligarchy. So long as that notion permeates the teaching of adults, that image will reach the student.

A corollary, for it reflects and covers the vagueness of the idea of high standards, is the assumption that philosophy needs no justification. That view must surely be foreign to a Radical Philosophy that seeks to relate philosophy to other things and cannot therefore eschew comparison. But it is common at least amongst those to be seen at meetings of adult tutors. Dealing with younger students it might be less surprising; but these tutors are teaching not young people who are temporarily fully engaged in study, but adults who have their own lives apart from the few hours a week they spend in a philosophy class. But the tutors too are predominantly middle-class and all too often fasten their eyes upwards, as their students do, away from the proper focus of their attention. Some pretend to 'contribute to Knowledge' with the assistance of 'the good ones' in the class. It could not be otherwise when no criterion but the unhelpful one of high academic standards is acknowledged. That notion manifests and perpetuates the incestuous circularity of the academic world.

In the actual class situation the main focus of these contradictions in the thinking of the adult teaching establishment is the requirement that the students must produce regular written work. The students feel exposed in the written medium, unable to get the 'right' answer to the problem that confronts them, liable to be called to book once their views are on record, floundering in a philosophical technique and a grammar that they have little practice in. The department offers good advice to the tutor on how to soothe these fears. But there is no attack on the conceptions that lie at their root, for they are the conceptions of the institution itself: that there is a right answer, a correct procedure and a proper medium to reach it, and that the academic world is the repository of these things. No encouragement is needed from the tutor for the students to assimilate these views from all their previous contacts with learning. Rather he needs actively to work against them.

Without such an assault many students may get little or nothing from the class. They will give up before the monolith of knowledge, or ape the style and conclusions of the lecturer without properly assimilating anything of meaning. So the concern of the teacher meets the inclination of the radical philosopher: both must commit themselves to ponder the nature of learning and learning philosophy itself in order to substitute something meaningful for the vanity of 'high academic standards'.

The adult teacher today, then, finds himself in a sense at the very beginning of philosophy, confronted by the question What is knowledge? This is not a question to be glibly set aside, but the manner in which it arises for the teacher and the formulation

of it here already discloses an invaluable re-orientation of the conventional epistemology, which makes me hopeful of practical success. Whereas epistemology comes to us normally divided into questions What is truth? What is meaning? What is belief? and so on - divisions which predispose it, as Habermas has pointed out, to produce theories of science as theories of knowledge - the starting point of the teacher's enquiry is knowledge in its relation to people pursuing, claiming and using it. For the teacher the problem is not that of describing ideal schema of investigation, but of understanding the place of knowledge within the lives and interests of his students and, by implication, the whole social fabric.

That orientation of the question already makes sense of a new attitude to the 'knowledge' that the adult group produces. If knowledge is seen as part of wider human pursuits, then it is sensible to derive the starting point, the procedures and the criteria of success from the aims and objectives of the people in the class. Against this the abstract notion of high academic standards appears either as meaningless or as the ways of a heady intellectual elite, far away from the attitudes and the lives of the people we are teaching. This is not to say that the techniques and positions of living academic philosophers and of great philosophers of the past do not have their place in the activity of the class; but their value must be *proved* - it is not to be insinuated by words like 'high' or, for that matter, 'great'.

What aims and objectives are there likely to be amongst class-members, for which a philosophy tutor's encouragement and guidance can be of value? The field sounds horribly restricted but in fact embraces all the general fields of philosophy; but with a different attitude to each. Even allowing for the individual character of the class and the area from which it is drawn, it is safe to list a number of questions that are obviously apposite. As they have all joined a study group they must already have some beliefs and attitudes about the very question that I am considering here, the character and role of knowledge. And that question has, of course, been a fundamental problem to any philosopher seriously engaged in the trade of knowledge. As they daily decide what they ought and ought not to do, and frequently suffer from doubts as to whether this moral framework makes any sense, the problem of the nature of moral rightness and moral undertakings is a burning issue - more so that it often seems to the cool analysts of moral language. As their lives are so much planned by the lights of an all-pervasive technical rationality, they readily wonder what is the basis of scientific enquiry and social engineering. As they are bombarded by established assumptions about politics, the validity of these is willingly questioned. As they have and are aware of a place in society, the character of society's groupings puzzles them.

This list is hardly restrictive. But an important general aspect of the adult student's starting point is fundamental. He is a full-time agent of one sort or another, and knowledge as an activity in itself is not something he readily understands. This may be the cause of his greatest difficulties in understanding philosophical language, and a revealing lesson to philosophers. For the much-vaunted clarity of modern British philosophical writing is the technique of saying nothing that might admit of more than one interpretation by other philosophers. That from which the philosopher - with his communal frame of reference - may construe so many meanings, may to the student - with his different frame of reference - mean nothing. The failure of modern British philosophers to achieve clarity in any generally recognisable sense has emerged for me in the intense difficulty that so many students find in reading them as distinct from their allegedly obscure predecessors and continental colleagues.

And what is this new attitude to each of the

fruitful fields that an adult class can go into, which makes it possible to give meaning and purpose to philosophy through the assumptions and points of view of the people in the class? It is simply that the value, meaning and approach of the investigations of philosophers make sense, just as the intellectual endeavours of the class, only against the background of the situation in which they exist, the environment that moves them to philosophise as they do. In this respect philosopher and student are alike, for all the greater effort and skill that the good philosopher brings to the task. The student can seek guidance from the philosopher by virtue of their common enterprise, without simply abandoning everything that he is besides a student. Books will come into the course as aids to an understanding that belongs fundamentally to the students. Writing may be helpful. Success will be the resolution or sharpening of ideas that concern the student. This the study of philosophers and what the jargon calls 'student-centred' enquiry concur.

When I put forward this view of philosophy to academics it is often greeted with thunderstruck incredulity. So it is worth pointing out that far from being original it is in fact the merest commonplace. Where, outside academia and some notions of Liberalism, could one find people to dispute that a man's opinions were related to the kind of man he was, the kind of actions he performed, or the environment in which he lived? It is a view that the students in my classes readily take to, responding more easily to a philosopher who comes across to them as a complete personality or whose confrontation with pressing contemporary problems excites them. Its obviousness has been obscured on the one hand by the abstractness of academic philosophy, and on the other by difficult debates about whether ideas are related to social or individual character, base, superstructure, totality and so on. For my part I take the social character to be important and the history of philosophy to be the medium to reach it. But for the present I am simply emphasising that the point of thinking, investigating and believing is that ideas are related to what we are and what we need to do. This article itself is a case in point. That view of knowledge, which is only the presupposition of Radical Philosophy, is an idea that I have needed to teach; and what Radical Philosophy may do for teaching

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