

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

