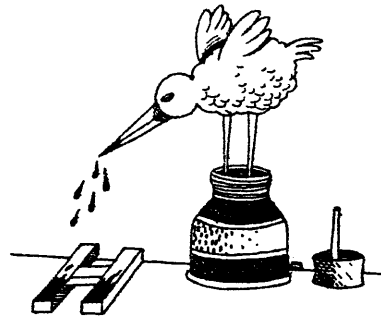


LETTERS



'A' LEVEL PHILOSOPHY

Dear *RP*,

Steve Brigley (*RP* 35) was pessimistic about the 'A' level Philosophy syllabus proposed by the AEB. His main concern was its failure to provide opportunities for the development of students' own ideas and arguments, suggesting that the syllabus was likely to reproduce the elitism and obscurity which graces the subject in higher education. The comments below – the result of a collaboration between students and the tutor of the course at South Trafford College of Further Education and interspersed with individual views – suggest that this has more to do with the problems of 'A' levels in general than Philosophy itself.

As a result of the enthusiasm of the late Dr. Don Henry, a course was established at the college in 1985 which has been successful both in terms of the enthusiasm of the students and their academic results. Moreover, early fears about the constraining nature of the syllabus have proved unfounded at this college, where the main problems are the results of poor resources – the course runs for one year, one evening (3 hours) a week, and the library facilities offer little of relevance. The philosophy class is therefore sustained by wads of photocopied notes and articles and the interest and determination of its members, most of whom juggle jobs, children, babysitters or other part-time studies to make room for their philosophical interests. Students are of mixed ages and abilities; some already have or are studying other 'A' levels, and the occasional graduate turns up, but backgrounds are generally more varied. The present group includes a nurse, an artist, a businessman and the mystical author of a slimming book. Their willingness to share experiences and particular interests, unselfconsciously testing new ideas with colleagues ('Existentialism is really useless, but it does contain motives to a future where all people will be judged solely by their actions') and encouraging each others' understanding, is a refreshing change from the responses of many undergraduates to the subject, and their commitment to both written work and the debates which invariably erupt in the classroom is remarkable. More to the point, people *enjoy* the subject. Visitors to the class have been impressed by the high levels of knowledge and understanding gained by the students in a remarkably short time.

Of course there are problems with the syllabus. It is predictably akin to many introductory undergraduate courses, and the subject is unnecessarily compartmentalised. At South

Trafford, however, time permits the study of only the barest essentials of the syllabus if the subject is to be a pleasure as well as an academic commitment, and this provides an even greater imperative to broad discussion. For example, Aristotle, Plato, Russell and Sartre complete our official romp through Western Philosophy, but the Presocratics, Feyereabend, and Foucault are amongst those who provide a critical perspective from which they are considered. In the course of a year, and in a tolerant atmosphere conducive to debate, students will raise issues which can be used to introduce and develop a wealth of philosophical ideas ('as the tutor, I can testify to the extraordinary breadth of interests, questions, and responses students bring to the class – only a sage could be truly prepared'), and there are few difficulties in relating the texts and issues to everyday experience ('I can annoy people more and irritate them with a finer degree of precision – and I've got the names to back me up!'). Indeed, the popularity of the subject is undoubtedly due to its applicability to every area of life. ('I was struck by the comparison between a fundamentalist Christian, who could show a brave, positive attitude because he felt the comforting arms of his God around him, and the atheistic existentialist who stands alone. Secure in the knowledge that there is no grand design, and no prescribed slot in which to drop, he chooses to create a meaningful existence for himself which reflects his aspirations for our species as one family.')

At South Trafford where, as is the case with the majority of institutions of further education, courses must be defined as vocational before they can be staged, the introduction of the 'A' level has facilitated the discussion of issues and ideas which were formerly marginalised or ignored. The failings of the syllabus are irrelevant to students' appreciation of the subject itself, and we doubt that they are peculiar to 'A' level Philosophy. Taken literally, the syllabus could put someone off a subject for life, and many 'A' levels seem to have this effect. But, like any framework, the 'A' level Philosophy syllabus can be used to provide the incentive, opportunity, and official backing for the study of a subject hitherto inaccessible to the majority ('Think for yourself – balls to media indoctrination!').

**Angela Bowden, Alex Connell,
Shelley May, Alan McCaffrey, Sadie Plant, Andy
Ryan, John Ryder, and others.**

THE CHURCH IS IN DANGER

Dear *RP*,

In the Victorian era the cry was 'the church is in danger'. Later, particularly amongst Stalinists, this was transformed to 'the Party is in danger'. I am loathe to suggest that we might murmur 'Radical Philosophy is in danger' but that is the response provoked by Peter Dews' editorial in No. 53.

The response is provoked by the question of postmodernism. Dews is quite obviously critical of the trend. But not critical enough to make, as it were, a difference. I would suggest that Radical Philosophers need to go somewhat further than talking in terms of 'the one reliably persistent theme is diversity itself ... the problems which this attitude and this mood generates'.

Some of these problems, as Dews suggests, are brought up in Margareta Halberg's 'Feminist Epistemology' and Peter Middleton's 'Socialism, Feminism and Men'. Halberg provides a defence of some kind of objective knowledge against the diversities and relativities suggested by some feminists. Fine. But the link is not made to a class standpoint. Marx argued that really objective knowledge was only knowable by the proletariat. If we do not go on to make this point, however qualified, then we can quite easily end up defending a radical version of the status quo on objectivity. Equally, Halberg provides a most effective debunking of the raising of 'experience' to a key philosophical marker. Experience and the knowledge it may provide can vary from person to person. Once again though there is something missing. Edward Thompson, in *The Poverty of Theory*, has drawn a distinction between Experience 1 and Experience 2. The first is our lived everyday reality. The second is how we make sense of it. Somewhere between the two some people still actually decide that the world might need changing! The solution to variable experience is, and yes that old stuff will have to be brought up again, the workers' party. The memory of the class, remember?

Dews seems uncertain if postmodernism can be attributed to the political left or the political right. I would suggest that whatever the design the political effect of postmodernism is always on the right. In fact diversity is a code word for the retreat from class. As Dews writes: 'there is a recurrent emphasis on epistemological and social fragmentation and pluralism and a suspicion of any universal horizon of emancipation'. Of course the failure of Stalinism has led to pessimism in some sections of the left. But then the idea that socialism could flow from the barrel of a T54 Tank never did seem particularly optimistic.

Much of the above suggests the fundamental question 'What can we know?' Can we understand the world enough to change it? Radical Philosophy does not seem to be taking up this kind of challenge, posed by postmodernism, in an effective manner. It is one thing to discuss the problems of postmodernism. But what is really required is an effective riposte!

And the riposte should be radical. To return to the point about Halberg's article, there is an effective debunking of some postmodernist ideas. But what is posed against them? Nothing very radical it would appear. That, of course, begs

another question. What, as we enter the 1990s, is radical?

Turning to Middleton's article, once again it appears as if we have jumped right into discussing the problems raised by postmodernism and diversity on the left without considering wider and more fundamental questions first. For example, what is the class basis of modern feminism? Is there any necessary connection between feminism and socialism? Is there a difference between women's liberation and feminist ideas of change? Is there a class difference between middle class and working class women's views of what liberation might mean? Additionally there is a lack of an historical understanding of what the ideas of feminism have meant, politically, and in practice in the last ten years. Again there has been no necessary connection to the political left.

Middleton's emphasis on oppression is fine if we just want to describe the world, in the age old tradition of bourgeois philosophy! But if we actually want to change matters we'll need to concentrate on questions of how things change and why. Middleton might have done better to examine the factors



behind women, and men, fighting to change things for the better. The whole question is discussed at length in a recent debate between June Purvis, Meg Gomersall and myself in a recent issue of *History of Education Journal*.

Raphael Samuel in the recent volume on the history of the new left, *Out of Apathy*, notes that he sometimes took solace in reversing Marx's dictum that 'philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point however is to change it'. Indeed, I'd refer readers back to my letter in *RP* 50. Interpreting the world is valuable but only if we then go on to try and change it.

Keith Flett