

News

Swansea

Swansea Radical Philosophy Group has been struggling with the Philosophy Department of University College Swansea for many months. The students have campaigned for various reforms, including the introduction of tutorials, reduction of emphasis on compulsory lectures, and democratic checks on the power of the head of the department.

A pamphlet outlining the story so far has been produced by the Group. Send a large SAE to Mary Routledge, Department of Philosophy, University College, Swansea if you want a copy. We reprint here a statement by final year students at Swansea which is included in the document:

STATEMENT BY FINAL YEAR STUDENTS
JUNE 1973

As students who have just completed three years in the philosophy department, we feel it necessary to outline certain difficulties we have encountered in those years, difficulties which concern the subject matter of the course, the teaching methods favoured in the department, and its attitude towards students.

Many students feel dissatisfied with what they feel to be the excessive emphasis laid on certain very narrow interests in philosophy, particularly in religion and ethics, while little or no attention is paid to some other aspects of the subjects which are of equal, if not greater, importance. This is the result of an undue emphasis on 'maintaining a tradition' in philosophy; an emphasis which is reflected in a staff in which many have worked closely together and where choice of staff appears to be determined by a desire to maintain the continuity of the tradition. The natural outcome of this is that a student's 'interest in philosophy' tends to be gauged by how nearly his views approximate to the orthodox position. Students come to feel that dissenting views are not encouraged and may even be penalised.

This desire for orthodoxy is again reflected in the teaching methods prevalent in the department. There are a large number of lectures and whilst we have at last managed, after several years of effort, to secure weekly tutorials, where students have some opportunity to discuss their own interests in philosophy, this is very inadequate and remains peripheral to the teaching. The assumption behind this seems to be that students are incapable of being inspired by philosophy it-

self and that therefore the teaching of philosophy must overwhelmingly consist in formal instruction. Despite their avowed rejection of the empiricist theory of knowledge certain members of staff persist in regarding the student mind as a *tabula rasa*; the student is an empty vessel passively awaiting knowledge. It is assumed that an enormous body of material needs to be learned before a student is capable of making any worthwhile contributions of his own.

There have been many proposals for change in the system in the department and while these have sometimes been greeted with an initial show of tolerance, it has become increasingly clear that this is little more than a facade. The head of the department is prepared to negotiate only so long as there is no real threat to his own entrenched position, when the demands of students seem likely to jeopardise this, then discussion comes to an end, and we are told of the formal power which resides in the head of the department. The result of this is that virtually all students and, we believe, members of staff also, have come to feel that their ideas are of no account in the life of the department.

In such a situation, where every proposal for change is now greeted with immediate hostility, it is no surprise that feelings have become polarised. The protests recently lodged by the entire student body and the threat of Professor Phillips to expel the whole of the Second Year, indicate the state to which things have come. We believe that this situation must inevitably give rise to head-on conflict between students and the head of department and that sooner or later victimisations are bound to occur, whether of staff or students. When this happens it will be of vital importance that all other students are aware of the situation in the philosophy department and give their active support.

Boston

Jerry M. Cohen writes:

It is good to be able to welcome, and make known, the existence of an American counterpart to Radical Philosophy: produced by a group of 'radical philosophers' in the Boston area, the Radical Philosophers' Newsjournal appeared in August 1973, and has so far had one 56 page issue. This contains only one article of the standard journal type ('The Business of Philosophy' by Richard Schmitt) and is for the most part taken up with

accounts of the nature and aims of the radical philosophy group, the Newsjournal, various groups that have been meeting in the Boston area, the firing of a 'radical unionist philosopher', short reviews of books, and an article on 'Philosophers and Trade Unions' by the person who was fired from the University of Florida, Ken Megill (he was, I believe, reinstated after a successful struggle at the university). Thus the choice of name for the journal seems appropriate, and is consciously intended to get away from the format and role of the standard philosophical journal.

'This Newsjournal is meant to serve as a means of bringing those groups together, informing each of the activities of the others, organizing new groups, pooling articles and references, and providing a forum for discussion of common concerns.' (p1)

Another aspect of this is the emphasis placed on collective work in relation to all the activities of the group: which has succeeded in carrying through three apparently long-lasting and valuable study-groups, of which short but intriguing accounts are carried in the journal (these were on the topics of ideology, human nature and human needs, and human rights, and individualism): I attended meetings of two of these groups last spring: at the very least, they succeeded in avoiding, conflicts of interest and orientation that wrecked many of our groups: but they are very much helped by the enormous concentration of students etc, in the area, and by the previous strength of the student movement, so much greater than it ever became here. This means that there are probably much larger numbers of politicised students and teachers still in need of a context within which to come together to develop a 'radical philosophy' and hopefully a corresponding practice, but it may also mean that the example cannot easily be duplicated elsewhere.

One important difference between the American group and ours is that the former seems far less concerned so far with questioning the incarceration of philosophical inquiry within oppressive and authoritarian institutional forms. This is not to say that the British group has been very successful in challenging these structures and in developing an anti-authoritarian, radical practice: in the absence of a student movement, and student struggle, this is hardly possible. But there might still be an importance in developing these sorts of critiques and in raising

these issues that is not fully reflected in the self-description of the American group. Maybe this is an implicit recognition of the fact that once again the owl of Minerva has taken flight at dusk, and that the arena of political struggle has moved elsewhere.

Other differences may be noted: a less militant tone than, at least in the first few issues, was characteristic of Radical Philosophy, and a much less 'heavy' manner than RP has, especially recently, developed: though of course there is 'a shared interest in Marx' there is little overt Marxism in this first issue at least: the group seems in other respects to be moving from a starting-point rather like ours, trying to escape the more stultifying and oppressive aspects of academic philosophy, to find a way of doing intellectual work which enables the expression and development of people's radicalism, without necessarily being fully committed to any definite, already given form of Marxism: one respect in which the group differs from, say Telos, and which may help to make it more intelligible than they often are. But the tendency to a concern with problems internal to, or deriving essentially from, academic philosophy runs the risk of turning attention away from the possibility of doing work which has a political point. The organisers of the *Newsjournal*, however, avow 'a common interest in enlisting philosophy in the service of radical social change, and particularly, in restoring the philosopher's role as articulator and critic of the presuppositions of her/his time' (p1), but this still involves the acceptance of the division of labour and of roles involved in this self-description.

One of the main problems radical philosophy confronts concerns the kind of relationship that can be forced between a radical movement in philosophy and wider struggles for social revolution: between the inside and the outside: suppose we learn to work in democratic, anti-individualist, anti-competitive ways, that we learn to work collectively: this may be important for us, but what bearing does it have on our political role, if any? The *Newsjournal* contains a fine statement on the importance of working in groups, but does not face the issue directly:

We came to feel that the small discussion group would be a natural setting for developing radical, socialist philosophy. It provides a context which is supportive yet critical for people to test out and develop tentative ideas which do not fit into the current orthodoxies of one's department and of philosophy generally. Without such a context, such ideas will almost inevitably

remain undeveloped and eventually lost. We need to overcome the habit of regarding our written work and our ideas as intellectual private property, i.e. as ideas or 'views' with which an individual philosopher becomes identified, is judged on by others, must defend against attack and 'refutation'. Rather we must think of ourselves as engaged in a collective enterprise of working on serious and important issues about which we are all trying to achieve some understanding. This notion, central to our radicalism, is also implicit in the area of philosophy itself, yet is so often subverted by the competitive and individualistic structures and values of our academic departments and universities, our forms of education, and our society generally.

We will hear much more from our American comrades in the years to come, and certainly there is a lot of scope for a fruitful dialectic between us and them. While claiming to be inspired by the British Radical Philosophy Group, there are many things that we will have to learn from them: so far I would say plain talking is one of them, and emphasis on collectivity another. Not least, the existence of this group testifies to the reality of the needs that brought radical philosophy into existence, and the extent to which they are shared over a wide spectrum of political and philosophical orientations. We all have to hope that the second number of the *Newsjournal* will not be long delayed.

Correspondence should be addressed to The Radical Philosophers' *Newsjournal*, 175 Hillside Street, Boston, Mass. 02120, USA.

Sydney

Anne Neale writes: The strike at Sydney University over a course on 'Philosophical Aspects of Feminist Thought' ended (6 weeks after it began) when the Professorial Board appointed Jean Carthays and Liz Jacka to teach the course, under the supervision of John Burnheim. (As it turned out, all that this supervision amounted to was consultation with Liz and Jean about exam results). Yet, although we succeeded in publicising the need for women's studies in the university, and the issue of self-management and democracy was greatly forwarded by the strike, these gains occurred at the expense of the real issue: sexism.

Sexism as an issue was constantly either ignored or underplayed - always on the pretext that it was tactically advantageous - we needed support and mention of sexism might alienate

potential supporters. It is obvious that most of the men on the left are unable to see the relationship between sexism and self-management - they are seen as two unconnected issues, sexism being the less important one. The kind of self-management they were pushing assumes that there are no inequalities built into personal/institutional relationships: but this is an inadequate theory and, unless there is a deeper analysis of the situation, the issue of self-management remains a superficial liberal one, and women will remain oppressed. Unless self-management movements are integrally related to anti-sexist movements, they will not be successful.

The sexist nature of the politics of the strike - male domination, heaviness and hassles - invalidates all the left's mumblings about self-management and democracy. Although we got the course on, and it was a really worthwhile and satisfying course to do, the price we had to pay was great, and we cannot afford to sacrifice feminist issues in that way again.

Calgary

Kai Nielsen writes: During October 1973 the philosophy department of the University of Calgary held a symposium 'What is Radical about Radical Philosophy?' The symposiasts were Bob Ware, Charles Travis, John Baker and Kai Nielsen. Three weeks later a rather similar, but less divisive discussion, was held among an interdisciplinary group of faculty and students at the University of Calgary with Bob Ware and Kai Nielsen starting off the discussion.

Playboy of the Month

'The search for abstract and speculative truths, for principles and axioms in science, for all that tends to wide generalisation, is beyond a woman's grasp; their studies should be thoroughly practical. It is their business to apply the principles discovered by men, it is their place to make the observations which lead men to discover those principles. A woman's thoughts beyond the range of her immediate duties, should be directed to the study of men, or the acquirement of that agreeable learning whose sole aim is the formation of taste; for works of genius are beyond her reach, and she has neither the accuracy nor the attention for success in the exact sciences...'

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Reports

Radical Philosophy Conference

Saturday 27 and Sunday 28
October 1973 at the Central
Collegiate Building, University
College, London.

The event was advertised via the slogan: 'Philosophy: Deliberation or Liberation?' The conference itself seemed to involve much more of the former than the latter. Originally conceived as a relatively small gathering acting as the prelude to a larger conference in Easter 1974, about 70 people attended. Apart from contingents from Swansea and Cardiff, few local groups were represented in large numbers, and, as might be expected, given its locale, most of the participants were from London.

There were five sessions altogether, three on the Saturday, and two on the Sunday. The Saturday morning session was devoted to the discussion of local group activities, and various struggles by people working within various philosophy departments. Keith Graham outlined some of the recent events at Bristol, Mary Routledge told us of the attempts by the Swansea Radical Philosophy group to change the form and content of philosophy courses there (see article on Swansea below), and Tony Skillen gave a run-down of the recent trial of strength at Sydney University between Professor David Armstrong, in the one camp, and the rest of the philosophy staff and students in the other. Various experiments in mounting alternative philosophy courses were mentioned, in particular a new course on Philosophical Aspects of Social and World Problems at Swansea, and a course on Philosophy and Contemporary Life planned at Middlesex Polytechnic.

In the afternoon, the gathering split into four groups, to discuss Exams, Moral Philosophy, Philosophy of Science, and Radical Philosophy in relation to other radical organisations. I was at the group on Moral Philosophy. The discussion was, to my mind, disorganised, dilatory and desultory: it represented Radical Philosophy at its worst. More successful, apparently, was the discussion group on Exams. The examination issue is obviously an important one around which the dwindling flame of student radicalism can be rekindled. Members of the group went away with the plan of producing a pamphlet on the subject. Anyone who is interested in helping on it, or finding out about it, should contact Keith Graham, at the Philosophy Depart-

ment, University of Bristol.

In the final Saturday session we heard more accounts of what radical philosophers around the country, and around the world, had been doing or trying to do. All the same it was clear that concrete activities were too few and far between. The sad tale of the difficulties of getting some regular radical philosophy activity going in London provided an apt illustration of the problem. Discussion then moved to the more general plane of the nature of radical philosophy. Here our sound training in the art of meta-chat stood us in good stead. Should Radical Philosophy limit itself to the merely negative role of criticising the existing state of philosophy, or should it provide some positive doctrines of its own? To what extent should it be concerned with other radical academic activities? Would it, perhaps, be too imperialist to aim to adopt a unifying and organising theoretical role? And then we found ourselves into the problem of the politics of Radical Philosophy. Some of our number, we learned, considered themselves to be not merely radical, but actually Socialists - Marxists even. To what extent should the movement adopt an explicitly Socialist or Marxist stance? The question was delicately fingered with velvet gloves for a few minutes, and then as delicately dropped. A great pity, to my mind, that it did not receive a more searching and honest treatment at that occasion, because I feel that at the heart of that problem lies one of the major contradictions of the Radical Philosophy movement, concerning this question of the *accessibility* of Radical Philosophy. The magazine often contains relatively sophisticated articles on quite abstruse issues within Marxism. Yet one of the primary aims of Radical Philosophy, is surely to develop an opposition to any philosophical orthodoxy or theoretical obscurantism, whether of the ivory-tower Anglo-bourgeois variety, or of the traditional marxist variety; and another supposed aim is to attract the readership, the engagement, and the participation of students and others who have an interest in philosophy, but who, while feeling dissatisfied with the existing state of philosophy, do not possess any great degree of theoretical sophistication.

The Sunday activities of the conference were intended to provide a preparation for the larger conference, scheduled for Easter 1974. This was planned as a rather more ambitious conference, devoted to a particular theme, that of 'Work'.

On the Sunday morning G A Cohen read a paper on 'The Dialectics of Labour', as the basis for an anticipatory discussion around that theme. Cohen's paper developed a certain aspect of Marx's writings on labour. He was concerned to show how Marx viewed the proletarian form of labour under capitalism as, in certain important respects, progressive, when measured against the 'idiocy' and 'immersion' of the pre-capitalist craft worker - progressive in that it provided a necessary stage of detachment from the object of his labour which was a pre-condition of the workers' coming to achieve control over the means of production under socialism. The paper hinged upon a certain notion of 'dialectic', and it had the virtue of providing a careful and clear exposition of this notion, rather than taking some prior understanding of it for granted in the audience.

The concluding session of the conference, on Sunday afternoon, was intended to produce some form of organisational basis for the Easter conference. Unfortunately, a large number of the participants of the conference had by this time disappeared, and the discussion was shortened because many of the participants who were there wanted to get away by 3.30 to see a film on R D Laing which happened to be showing in the building. As a result, although everyone there showed great enthusiasm for the idea, and many suggestions were put forward, there was little in the form of concrete offers of help in putting the conference together. The upshot is that a rather different type of conference will be held at Easter at the University of Kent at Canterbury. Details inside back cover.

Steve Torrance

Open meeting

Depleted of most representatives from outside London except for Kent by the rail work-to-rule, the Open Meeting took place at 19 Gordon Square, London on 15 December. In Barry Wilkins' absence Richard Norman agreed to take the chair. Perhaps owing to the transport problem the meeting comprised even more than usual a floating membership that had not attended before.

Magazine

Comment on the last issue of the magazine centred on ways of avoiding becoming more like an orthodox unapproachable philosophy journal without humour, or 'a magazine written by and for young philosophy lecturers'. Some untapped sources

of material were suggested: reprints of concern to radical philosophy from radical pamphlets, local broadsheets or other radical magazines that our mostly student readership would not normally see; reviews/summaries of material in conventional journals also not often seen by our readers; further critiques of the ideological implications of particular orthodox philosophers.

Jonathan Rée argued that what was more needed was the means to encourage contributions of an unorthodox type; open appeals for material produced hardly any response. The letters column now being developed was meant as a medium for contributions that were not polished articles. Some other suggestions were made: that the magazine should set up lines of communication between students who felt unhappy about the implications of texts they had to study and others who thought the same to discuss the problem - though no-one took up responsibility for this project; that single issues or sections within issues, perhaps with guest editors, should be devoted to particular topics (radical attitudes to logic was one suggestion) though it was agreed that this would depend upon finding a sizeable group of contributors under each topic. Tony Skillen emphasised that as reviews editor he was keen to get away from the idea that a reviewer wrestled with the mind of the writer; he thought that reviews simply quoting a few passages from a book were sometimes more useful in our context. He hoped to organise a system by which a student might volunteer to write a review in return for a free copy of the book in question. In general he wanted to avoid the assumption that only finished work could appear in the magazine, and suggested that the magazine should arrange to announce what people were currently working on.

Conference

Shortage of organisers following the conference in October meant that very little progress had been made in organising the projected conference on work for May 1974. In addition the conference organisers had to report a loss of £12 on the October conference. In London, where there was no natural centre for students to contact each other, where active enthusiasts were mostly fully occupied producing the magazine, and where perhaps the ideology of the capital city was particularly pressing, the difficulties of the local group seemed particularly acute. However, Tony, Richard Norman and Eva Eberhardt from Kent agreed to organize a conference at Canterbury at Easter where there would be more time to develop ideas together.

It was also suggested that a group from Radical Philosophy should make their presence felt at other conferences.

Radical Philosophy book

Peter Binns reported that so far the draft of one section of the book had been received. The means of publication was still undecided. The choice was between a wide unspecific audience with a big publisher or a specialist circulation with an underground press. There was discussion about the purpose of the book: that it should comprise discussion rather than a radical philosophy line; that drafts should be circulated and commented upon by others in radical philosophy to achieve this end; and that as well as essays on the conventional subject areas, considerable weight should be given to sections on what it felt like being a student, a woman, a teacher etc in philosophy departments, on the sociology of philosophy and philosophy departments etc.

Organisation

Noel Parker presented a summary of the accounts for the last six months. The magazine appears to be secure while its costs can be contained and it continues to end up with a slightly increased balance at the end of each issue. Demand for back-numbers continues and the cost of reprinting in particular issues 1 and 2 is being investigated. The meeting

felt that we should reprinted only when we were sure that there was sufficient demand to do so in large quantities.

The meeting was keen to extend our North American sales, perhaps in the future even setting up a separate distribution organisation over there. Advertising material is being prepared. Mike Dawney agreed to take over responsibility for advertising.

Richard Norman agreed to take on responsibility for keeping track of local groups' activities and handling communications between them. Various opinions about the current atmosphere of student radicalism were put forward in discussion. Now that the political situation had put workers back at the forefront of the struggle, ideas of students as the Red Base or the Tinder Box sparking off the rest were no longer viable. Entering into political struggles was consequently very different for students from activity in student politics within the college; and many students were inactive in the former because they were now contained within the institutions in which they studied.

Janet Vaux (18 New Row, London WC2) agreed to convene the next open meeting and draw up the agenda for it, and in the absence of other volunteers I will again draw up the report.

Noel Parker

Easter Conference

At December's open meeting the idea of an Easter conference was discussed. People were unenthusiastic about a straight conference, because it leaves those present in a state of dull passivity unable to discuss common problems and projects. It was decided to hold a gathering where social and academic barriers could be broken down and a new collective spirit arise.

The University of Kent was chosen because of the availability of food, floor space for sleeping bags, rooms, discos etc on the campus, so that the usual separation of social and other activities need not occur. There will be no formal programme.

Free accommodation could be found for people arriving from Friday night. Transport problems could be overcome by filling buses and cars.

To be held at University of Kent March 23, 24 etc beginning 11 am Saturday 23 March.

Please contact us as soon as possible, mentioning what you are interested in doing and discussing. This will enable us to estimate numbers, make arrangements and send further information.

Write to Richard Norman, Darwin College, University of Kent at Canterbury phone Canterbury 66822 or 60467 (evenings)

Open Meeting

The next Open Meeting will be held at Canterbury on Sunday 24 March at 2pm. Items for the agenda to Janet Vaux, 18 New Row, London WC2

