The Open University

Introduction

The Open University exists to provide a university education for adults who cannot leave their jobs or families to attend an ordinary university. They study in their spare time, either in their own homes or at local study centers. They are not required to have formal academic qualifications on entry, and the courses are designed to take account of the fact that many students may have left school at age fifteen or earlier, and may now be in their thirties or forties. To overcome this educational and age disadvantage students need to be, and usually are, very highly motivated.

To get a BA, students have to pass six courses; to get a BA Honours, eight courses, two of them advanced courses. A “course” lasts thirty-two weeks and notionally involves the student in ten hours’ work a week. Actually it may turn out to be quite a bit more. “Work” for a course consists of working through what are called “correspondence texts”; reading books prescribed for the course; viewing and listening to Open University television and radio programs broadcast by the BBC; completing eight or nine assignments set as part of the course; attending day schools or week-long summer schools; and, finally, sitting a three-hour examination on the course. Whether or not the student passes the course depends, in equal measure, on his performance in the assignments during the course and on his performance in the final examination.

The correspondence texts and broadcasts are produced by “course teams” at the university headquarters, but the marking of assignments is done by part-time tutors working in the region where the student lives. Many of these tutors are staff in ordinary universities who work as Open University tutors in their spare time in return for remuneration and for the pleasure of tutoring keen, mature students.

There are six faculties: Arts, Social Sciences, Science, Maths, Technology and Educational Studies. All but the last provide “Foundation” courses. These are multi-disciplinary courses, of which the student must take two. The Arts Faculty Foundation Course combines studies in the five disciplines of History, Literature, Art History, Music and Philosophy. Arts Faculty second-level courses are period studies, such as “The Age of Revolutions” and “Renaissance and Reformation”. These, again, require work in more than one discipline. In “The Age of Revolutions” course there are four weeks' work on Kant. Arts Faculty third-level courses are single-discipline courses. The philosophy course is called “Problems of Philosophy”. The more advanced fourth-level single-discipline philosophy course is called “Thought and Reality: Central Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein”. Courses are presented for not less than four and not more than eight years, and then replaced. Work has begun on the Arts Faculty's second Foundation Course, to be presented for the first time in 1977.

The Open University is large, and many more people apply to enter it than we...
can take. There were 52,000 applicants for places in 1975 of which we can take
20,000. The 1975 quota for the Arts Faculty Foundation Course is 5,400. The
number of full-time staff in individual disciplines at the university headquarters,
on the other hand, is small. There are just four philosophers.

Since the correspondence texts are on sale to the public and the broadcasts
are available to anyone who has a radio or television we are very much in the
public eye and mistakes do not pass unnoticed. We try not to make them. There
may be as many as seven or eight drafts of correspondence texts circulated be­
fore a final draft is approved by the course team for passing to the publishing
division. In addition to criticizing one another’s work we get outsiders to check
it too, and sometimes drafts of correspondence texts go through a process called
“developmental testing” in which they are tried out on groups of volunteer
“guinea-pig” students a year in advance of normal course presentation. It is not
unknown for a course team to reject even the final draft of a correspondence­
text author’s work, if the reaction of the internal and external critics is unfavor­
able.

The Course Team

A “course team” comprises the authors of the correspondence texts, production
staff of the BBC, a member of the university’s Institute of Educational Tech­
nology, representatives of the library, and of the publishing division, and a course
assistant who, under the course team chairman, has responsibility for a whole
range of functions from scheduling course production to planning the mailings to
students. The course team is responsible, via the Faculty Courses Committee
(one of the committees of the Faculty Board), and the University Courses Com­
mittee, to the Senate for the syllabus, the content and the design of the course.
The BBC producers are full members of the course team and so have a voice in
the content of the course as well as in the decisions about what parts of the
course call for television and radio presentation. During the production cycle
of a course there are regular course team meetings which may last for up to
three hours. The first meetings of a course team will be devoted almost ex­
clusively to discussing the aims and objectives of the course, the choice of
content likely to achieve those aims and objectives, and the distribution of
work among the members of the course team and external consultants. The
next step is for the correspondence text authors to produce outlines of what
they propose to contribute, and their plans, worked out in collaboration with
their BBC colleagues, for the related broadcast element of the course. These
outlines and plans are then discussed at a subsequent meeting of the course
team, and modified as may be necessary. The member of the Institute of Educa­
tional Technology has a considerable contribution to make to this discussion.
Questions of illustrating the text are taken up with the library liaison officer,
who is responsible for picture-search, or with the editor from the publishing
division, if the illustrations are to take the form of diagrams or cartoons. The
editor advises about such things as lay-out, and the use of color. He has also to
be something in the way of an expert at cost-analysis.

First drafts of the correspondence texts are circulated to members of the
course team, and the author can expect to get back from them a great deal of
criticism, with suggestions for improvement. Sometimes, in a returned draft,
there is more in the way of red-ink marginalia than there is text. After four or
five years of mutual criticism we should be growing thick skins, but I can only
report that my own remains as thin as ever. Rewriting of drafts of correspondence
Correspondence Texts

Correspondence texts are not lecture notes, stencilled on inferior paper, and held together with a paper clip or staple. They are attractively presented, large-sized, paperbacks, illustrated with diagrams, photographs, and cartoons. The author uses 'I' of himself and addresses the student as 'you', and tries, within the constraints of one-way written material to make the student feel that he has been engaged in a two-way dialogue. As he works through the correspondence text the student is again and again required to do things—such as agreeing or disagreeing with some view (listing his reasons for doing so), paraphrasing some argument, or assessing the implications for some issue of something he has read. He can then compare his efforts with those of the correspondence-text author. Some idea of the variety of tasks that can be incorporated in a correspondence text may be gained from two examples:

(A) In a correspondence text for part of the Arts Foundation Course there is a passage from an article, 'Pictures in the Mind', by a scientist, J. A. V. Butler, in Science News 22, Penguin Books, 1951. Preceding the passage are the following instructions:

PLEASE DO THE FOLLOWING THINGS. (i) Read the passage through once or twice, or until you feel you have a rough idea as to what he is saying. (ii) Now go through it sentence by sentence, or phrase by phrase if the sentences seem to you to contain more than one idea, asking yourself of each sentence or phrase (a) "Do I understand this?" and (b) "If I understand it, and the sentence is a statement do I know roughly what sort of thing I would have to do to discover whether it is true or false?" (iii) If you do not understand something underline it with a wavy line.

The passage by Butler is as follows:

Let us begin by considering how we get our information about the world from our senses: chiefly from sight, hearing, and touch. We know for example, that when we see an object, the rays of light from the object enter the eye and are focused on the retina, where they cause sensitive cells to send messages or disturbances of an electrical nature along nerve fibres which go to the brain. These disturbances can be traced within the brain to regions which are known to deal with vision, and no doubt the nerve cells which they enter influence many others in the intricate layers of cells which form the cerebral cortex. There our present information comes to an end, although we are aware of the result. Out of the messages we make, and in some way are aware of, a 'picture' of the outside world. We are so familiar with this picture that we take it to be the outside world. We say that we are 'looking' at the world, and primitive and simple people think that when they look out of their eyes and see what is before them, they are performing a positive act. There is no doubt that what we are aware of is a 'construct', made from the varied sensations which reach the brain; a picture which we make by selecting and emphasising some data and ignoring many others, a picture which in many ways is highly personal.

The student is then asked, before he turns over the page, to make a list of the things he has found questionable or puzzling. When he turns over the page he finds a list of ten things the author of the correspondence text found questionable or puzzling. He is asked, if there is an item in this list which was not in his list
and it contains a question, to think out how he would answer the question. The list of ten points is as follows:

(i) There are some expressions which can be understood quite literally: for example, "rays of light ... cause sensitive cells to send ... disturbances of an electrical nature along nerve fibres which go to the brain." But there are also others in which the language is more or less metaphorical. Sometimes we are warned not to interpret a word literally by the use of inverted commas (e.g. 'picture'). But elsewhere there is no warning, and we must be on our guard against being misled by metaphorical language into thinking of things in ways which do not correspond to reality. The expression "how we get our information about the world from our senses", and the word 'messages', used apparently as a synonym for "disturbances of an electrical nature", are examples of this. What one expects as an answer to the question, "How do you get your information about the world?" is something like "From watching the news on television, and from reading the newspapers." What does the statement that we get our information 'from our senses' suggest?

(ii) There are different viewpoints, and it is not always clear which is which. There is what may be called the 'objective' viewpoint, that of the scientist ("There our present information comes to an end"), and there is the 'subjective' one, that of the perceiver ("When we see an object . . ."). But there is also the 'we' of "Out of the messages we make, and in some way are aware of, a 'picture' of the outside world." Calling disturbances of an electrical nature 'messages' is reporting the findings of the objective viewpoint in the language of the subjective one. It opens the way to talk of our making 'pictures' out of the messages. But it does not enable us to understand such talk.

(iii) Butler seems to admit that all is not yet clear. In 'some way' we are aware of the 'picture', but in what way? Having traced the causal chain, from the rays of light from the object entering the eye to the nerve cells in the cerebral cortex being influenced, Butler says: "There our present information comes to an end, although we are aware of the result." Does he mean that scientists may one day provide us with some more information, which will take the causal chain a step further, and so explain how we come to be aware of the result? But so far as their sources of information are concerned, is not the brain the end of the line?

(iv) At the beginning of the paragraph Butler writes of 'the world'. At the end, he writes of 'the outside world'. Does this mean that he thinks there are two worlds—an outside world and an inside world? By 'the outside world' does Butler mean to refer to that part of 'the world' that is literally outside a person's head? If so, does he mean that the 'picture', of which he says we are in some way aware, is literally inside our heads?

(v) At the beginning of the paragraph Butler writes: "When we see an object, the rays of light from the object . . ." At the end he writes: "We . . . are aware of a 'picture' of the outside world." Would he say that we do not literally see what is outside our heads?

(vi) Butler says that we take the 'picture' to be the outside world, and he gives, as the reason for our making this mistake, our familiarity with the 'picture'. But he does not explain how this constitutes a reason. On his account, in visual perception we are always aware of 'pictures', never of the real thing (the 'outside' world). Why should our familiarity with what we are always aware of lead us to mistake it for what we are never aware of? Furthermore, if we are never aware of the outside world, what can the words 'outside world' mean to us? (Surely they must mean something if we can mistake something for the outside world.)

(vii) He puts 'looking' in inverted commas, thereby indicating that in talk of 'looking at the world' the word 'looking' is being used in other than its ordinary meaning. What would he regard as the correct, literal, use of the word?
(viii) He attributes to 'primitive and simple people' the thought that 'when they look out of their eyes and see what is before them, they are performing a positive act'. I have never asked primitive and simple people what they think about visual perception. The thoughts Butler ascribes to simple people do not strike me as being simple. There are, in fact, two thoughts: that we look at things out of our eyes, and that looking and seeing is a positive act.

What one expects as an answer to the question "What sort of things do people look out of?" is something like 'Windows'. Is Butler ascribing to primitive and simple people the thought that people are related to their eyes as they may be to windows? And, if so, what would he regard as the correct way of thinking of the relation?

It is not immediately obvious what is meant by talking of looking and seeing being 'a positive act'. Perhaps Butler is thinking: "In perception we do not act, we are acted on." Certainly our sense-organs, nerves, and brain are acted on. Why should it be thought to follow that we are acted on?

(ix) Butler writes of "sensations which reach the brain". Does he mean, by 'sensations', disturbances of an electrical nature?

(x) Butler calls the picture we are said to be aware of 'highly personal'. What does 'personal' mean in this connection? What is a 'personal picture'?

In the next four sections of the correspondence text the issues raised in the critical analysis of the passage from Butler's article are discussed, with further opportunities being given to the student to exercise his critical judgement on selected passages.

(B) In the correspondence text on the Other Minds problem in the Arts Faculty third-level course, "The Problems of Philosophy", the student is asked to read Norman Malcolm's article "Knowledge of Other Minds", paying particular attention to his use of the term "criterion". He is then asked:

Malcolm does not explain what he means by the word 'criterion'. It is a word you have already come across. Can you remember where, and what it meant?

It was in the quotation from G. E. Moore, in Section 5.3. You'll notice that both Moore and Malcolm have a way of italicizing the word. But italicizing a word is not explaining what it means.

I think that as Moore uses the word, X is a criterion of Y if (i) 'X' does not mean 'Y', but (ii) X is a necessary and sufficient condition of Y. In other words, Moore is saying that being directly knowable by one mind only is, it has been suggested, a necessary and sufficient condition of an entity being mental.

Is Malcolm using the word 'criterion' in this sense? If so, then it is hard to see how he avoids behaviourism. Indeed, there are some things he says which sound very like behaviourism, such as the sentence, 'A philosopher who believes that one must learn what thinking, fear, or pain is "from one's own case" does not believe that the thing to be observed is one's behaviour, but rather something "inward"' (my italics). And yet he clearly does not regard himself as a behaviourist.

In view of his frequent references to Wittgenstein one might suppose that he is using the term 'criterion' as Wittgenstein uses it. In The Blue and Brown Books, page 24, Wittgenstein writes that he introduces the two antithetical terms, 'criteria' and 'symptoms', 'in order to avoid certain elementary confusions'. If you were to read the two or three immediately preceding paragraphs (on page 24) you might suppose that the 'elementary confusions' he means are those involved in asking the philosophical question about other minds. Please read a bit more than one page. I won't ask you to try to say what point Wittgenstein is making, only whether or not he is here concerned to answer the question 'How can I meaningfully talk of feelings other than those I am aware of?' I think it will be enough if you read from the bottom of page 19 to the top of page 29, bearing in mind the question 'Is this directed at the Other Minds problem?"
Broadcast time is limited, so the best possible use must be made of it. The philosophy programs on radio tend to take one or other of three different forms. They are either imaginary dialogues, based on correspondence, etc., discussions, or talks. Examples:

(A) For the Arts Foundation Course there is an imaginary dialogue between René Descartes and Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, based on their correspondence. The following is an extract from the second half of the dialogue:

ELIZABETH The intellect, you say, tells us that the soul is immaterial. But is our intellectual perception of the soul sufficiently clear? Perhaps if we had a clearer perception of its nature we would realize that it is, in fact, material. Isn't there at least this possibility?

DESCARTES Not if the argument of my Meditations is sound. You remember, I imagined that an extremely powerful, malicious demon does everything he can to deceive us?

ELIZABETH Yes.

DESCARTES He may deceive me about everything that has to do with my body, but when it comes to my thinking—well, then he can't deceive me. That I cannot doubt. [Slowly and emphatically] Therefore, in so far as I cannot be deceived about my existence I am no more than a thinking thing.

ELIZABETH Agreed. But that is 'what you cannot be deceived about'. The question I'm raising is a different one. It isn't about what you do or don't know; it's about what is in fact the case. I'm suggesting that although you can suppose yourself not to have bodily attributes it may nevertheless be the case that you do have them.

DESCARTES No. They may seem quite different questions—the one about what I know or don't know and the one about what is in fact the case—but they aren't. They're connected.

ELIZABETH How? How are they connected?

DESCARTES Well, it's really to do with possibilities. If it is possible for thinking to go on apart from a body then ...

ELIZABETH [Interrupting] But is it possible? That's the question.

DESCARTES All right, I'm coming to that. I did say 'if'. If it is possible for thinking, and the body, to exist in separation then ...

ELIZABETH [Impatiently] Yes, yes, then what-does-the-thinking isn't the body. I can quite see that. But what you've got to do is to get rid of the 'if'. That is, you've got to show it to be possible for thinking to go on apart from a body.

DESCARTES Precisely, and that is where what I know and don't know, comes in.

ELIZABETH Go on.

DESCARTES Well, I know certainly that I am thinking and at the same time I can doubt that I have bodily attributes. So I can perceive the one thing, the thinking, apart from the other. And since this perception is clear and distinct it must be possible for the one thing to exist apart from the other.

ELIZABETH Just a moment. You said 'since this perception is clear and distinct'.

DESCARTES Yes.

ELIZABETH And you'd say that if you clearly and distinctly perceive yourself as no
more than a thinking thing then it would follow that you could exist as no more than a thinking thing?

DESCARTES Yes.

ELIZABETH And therefore that you really are no more than a thinking thing?

DESCARTES Exactly.

ELIZABETH All right. Well now, isn't it possible that your perception is clear, but only as far as it goes? And that it doesn't go far enough for you to know the truth? In other words, isn't it possible that you really do have bodily properties although your knowledge of yourself doesn't go beyond your mental properties?

DESCARTES No. You must distinguish between clearness and completeness. Certainly there may be things about me which I haven't clearly perceived. But that doesn't affect what I have clearly perceived. And, having clearly perceived that I am a thinking thing, I know that I can exist as such. That is, I know that I am certain of—my intellectual faculty—is enough for me to exist with. And if it is enough for me to exist with, then I really am distinct from anything bodily.

ELIZABETH So, the principle of your argument is: if I can clearly perceive something to be such-and-such while I cannot clearly perceive it to be so-and-so, then it can exist as such-and-such.

DESCARTES Yes.

ELIZABETH But now, consider this case. A triangle is a plane figure bounded by three straight lines.

DESCARTES Mm.

ELIZABETH That is something most people know. But not everyone knows that the angles of a triangle add up to two right angles. That is, someone might know very well that something was a triangle, and yet not know this further fact about its angles. Now, on your reasoning it should be possible for there to be a triangle whose angles did not add up to two right angles. Do you see what I mean?

DESCARTES Yes, it's the same point as Father Arnauld made in the fourth set of objections to my Meditations. But I do not accept that they are parallel cases. And I say why in my answer to him.

(B) A discussion is more comprehensible to students if they have had prior acquaintance with the views of the participants. In the correspondence text on "Personal Identity" I reprinted passages from a paper by Derek Parfit, "Personal Identity" (Philosophical Review, LXXX, 1971). I am sure that, having read these passages, the students found it easier to follow the discussion I had with him. This is how the discussion began:

VESEY Derek, can we begin with the belief that you claim most of us have about personal identity? It's this: whatever happens between now and some future time either I shall still exist or I shan't. And any future experience will either be my experience or it won't. In other words, personal identity is an all or nothing matter: either I survive or I don't. Now what do you want to say about that?

PARFIT It seems to me just false. I think the true view is that we can easily describe and imagine large numbers of cases in which the question, 'Will that future person be me—or someone else?', is both a question which doesn't have any answer at all, and there's no puzzle that there's no answer.

VESEY Will you describe one such case.
PARFIT One of them is the case discussed in the correspondence material, the case of division in which we suppose that each half of my brain is to be transplanted into a new body and the two resulting people will both seem to remember the whole of my life, have my character and be psychologically continuous with me in every way. Now in this case of division there were only three possible answers to the question, ‘What's going to happen to me?’ And all three of them seem to me open to very serious objections. So the conclusion to be drawn from the case is that the question of what's going to happen to me, just doesn't have an answer. I think the case also shows that that's not mysterious at all.

VESEY Right, let’s deal with these three possibilities in turn.

PARFIT Well, the first is that I'm going to be both of the resulting people. What’s wrong with that answer is that it leads very quickly to a contradiction.

VESEY How?

PARFIT The two resulting people are going to be different people from each other. They're going to live completely different lives. They're going to be as different as any two people are. But if they're different people from each other it can't be the case that I'm going to be both of them. Because if I'm both of them, then one of the resulting people is going to be the same person as the other.

VESEY Yes. They can't be different people and be the same person, namely me.

PARFIT Exactly. So the first answer leads to a contradiction.

(C) Talks, being the nearest equivalent to conventional lectures, might seem to be the simplest to prepare, but there are reasons why this is not so. The main reason is that there may be only two or three radio talks, of slightly less than twenty minutes duration each, in a 32-week course. Another reason is that the same talk will be transmitted twice a year for up to six years, and may be listened to by thousands of people. So what is said must be capable of being said clearly, and it must be worth saying. In a controversial subject like philosophy it might seem to be easier to put across the controversy in a dialogue or discussion. Moreover, whereas a dialogue or discussion is naturally better listened to than read, the opposite might seem to be true of straightforward prose. The result is that the preparation time for a twenty-minute radio-talk may be considerably longer than that for a discussion, and perhaps as long as that for a dialogue. Taking research time into account it was three months, and about seven drafts, from start to finish for the dialogue between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth. A talk I gave on “The Universal in Perception” in the third-level “Problems of Philosophy” course went to six drafts and took about two months to prepare from start to finish.

Part II of this paper, in the next number of Teaching Philosophy, will have sections on television programs, the role of the correspondence tutor, summer schools, and the scope of philosophy in the Open University.