Teaching Philosophy in Britain's Open University (II)

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In the first part of this paper, published in the first issue of Teaching Philosophy, an account was given of the working of a “Course Team”; of Correspondence Texts, with examples; and of radio programs on philosophical topics. In this second part I shall consider “Television Programs”, “The role of the correspondence tutor”, “Summer Schools”, and “The scope of philosophy in The Open University”.

Television Programs

Television programs are much more costly to produce than radio programs, and since The Open University has the use of only one national broadcasting channel, and that for only a limited number of hours in the week, television has to be put to the best possible use. This means that courses that need to demonstrate experimental techniques are more likely to be considered favorably, when they make their bid for television broadcasting resources and air-time to the Broadcasting Sub-Committee, than are courses on subjects that are less inherently visual. The philosophy television programs that have been made so far are of one or other of two sorts. They are either programs in which an attempt has been made to put across a philosophical “message” in visual terms—a message that could not have been put across without the use of visual material, or they are what are sometimes referred to as “chat shows”. Both kinds of program present problems.

One Open University philosophy television program in which an attempt was made to illustrate a philosophical point visually was a program relating to what Kant says in The Critique of Pure Reason about the relationship of causality and objectivity. Kant’s own examples, of a house, the different parts of which are seen successively, and of a ship moving downstream, my perception of its lower position following upon the perception of its position higher up in the stream, were not found to be suitable for putting across the philosophical point in a striking manner. Instead, we decided to make use of the fact that there are some things about which the observer can be in doubt as to whether he is seeing an actual objective change or not. Under certain conditions it may be virtually impossible for an observer to tell whether he is seeing a balloon which is being inflated, or a balloon which is not being inflated but is being brought closer to his eyes. The philosophical point we wanted to make was that the possibility of distinguishing between the case in which there
is a real change in size, and that in which there is merely an apparent change in size, may be dependent on the observer bringing his causal knowledge to bear on the situation. The television program we made embodied an actual experiment to illustrate this point. Introducing the experiment, the presenter said:

Kant was trying to prove that only if what really happens always has a causal explanation can we work out what really happens. The world, as an object of our knowledge, is necessarily subject to the rule of causal law. That was what Kant was trying to prove.

How did he try to prove it? On the face of it, it might seem that you can simply see whether or not you’re dealing with objective succession. Kant has to prove that it isn’t simply a matter of perception.

Well, he offered a number of proofs. What I’m going to do in this program was suggested by one of them, the one sometimes referred to as the “indirect” proof. (An indirect proof, incidentally, is one which begins with the supposition that what has to be proved is not the case, and then shows that the consequences are unacceptable.)

In place of two examples I’m going to have one—but one that can illustrate what both of Kant’s examples illustrate. My one example is that of a balloon.

Let me explain how it can illustrate both things. Suppose you apprehend a succession of increasingly large balloon appearances. In other words, a balloon takes up more and more of your field of vision. There are two possible explanations, one of which makes it like the house example; the other, like the ship example. It’s like the house example if the change is due to a change in your point of view—that is, if you are approaching the balloon. It’s like the ship example if there is an objective change—that is, if the balloon is actually getting larger, being blown up.

Now then, we’re going to have an experiment. I’m going to show you a number of balloon-appearances on a television monitor, and I want you to try to judge whether or not the balloon is being inflated. And remember, what is at issue is whether or not a judgement can be made without somehow making use of causal knowledge.

There followed the experiment. I shall not go into the details of it, except to say that it involved a balloon being, or not being, inflated against patterned, or plain, backgrounds. Use was also made of the means whereby a television camera can “zoom” in on what is being filmed, and of such refinements as the use of a split screen. At the end of the experiment the presenter said:

Right now. What, if anything, have we proved?

Let me begin by saying this: there are some facts about the things we look at, and about ourselves, that we know so well we take them for granted. We know, for instance, that whereas balloons can get bigger or smaller, walls cannot. About ourselves, we know that if a wall is taking up more of our field of vision it can only be because we are approaching it. That is, we know that the lenses in our eyes aren’t zoom lenses.

But suppose—just suppose—that we couldn’t rely on these facts. Suppose that for no reason at all our eyes started behaving differently, producing the sort of results that can, in fact, only be produced by television cameras, with zoom lenses, split screens, and the rest. Suppose, in short, that there was no regularity in the way eyes, and walls, and balloons behaved. Then what?
Then, I suggest, we could not sort out reality from appearance. Reference
to causal regularities of one kind or another is our "decision-procedure" for
arriving at what is objectively the case. Explicitly—or, more often,
implicitly—we take account of the way things behave, the laws of nature
they obey, in order to decide what the reality of the situation is. It is only
because this is so often an unconscious process that it seems to us that we
simply see what the reality is.

What I've tried to do in the balloon experiment is to make this seem
plausible to you. If it does seem plausible, then you may go on to draw the
conclusion that if it weren't true that everything that happens is in accord­
ance with a rule, we couldn't work out what happens. In other words, you
may conclude that the world as we know it, in virtue of the decision­
procedure involved in our knowing it, must be such that the principle of
causality is true of it.

Now I can't claim to have demonstrated that conclusion. At the most, I've
suggested a line of thought which leads in the direction of it. If someone
were to say to me: "But I don't see why there shouldn't be an occasional ex­
ception to the principle that everything can be brought under causal laws.
Surely the occasional uncaused event wouldn't rock the boat", I must admit
that I don't know how I would answer him. I'm not sure that I would want
it. I think I'd be satisfied if he admitted that there was, in general, a con­
ceptual connection between causality and objectivity.

But would Kant be satisfied? Well, this brings me to an admission I must
make. Just now I formulated the principle of causality as follows:

"Everything that happens is in accordance with a rule."

But this is to leave out something that seems to be important for Kant,
namely an explicit reference to time. For him the principle is something
more like:

"Everything that happens follows on a preceding event according to a rule."

This suggests that the key to understanding him, or to realizing the truth
of what he says, lies in recognizing something about time, about causation
being a relation between earlier and later events.

A question I should like answered is "What is the significance of Kant's
reference to time in his statement of the principle of causality?"

Does it suggest a more convincing proof of the principle than the balloon
experiment?

At this point in the program the presenter introduced Professor W. H.
Walsh, who proceeded to comment on the relevance of the balloon experi­
ment to the point Kant was trying to make, about time and the principle of
causality, in the Analogies of Experience. Professor Walsh is a Kant scholar
who acted as assessor for the related correspondence material, and had
contributed the postscript to it.

The other kind of philosophy television program we have used is what I
earlier called a "chat show". The general idea behind this kind of program
was to present two philosophers engaged in a lively philosophical disputation.
One of the philosophers would be a fairly senior person, with an established
reputation, and a well-known "line" on some philosophical problem, and the
other would be someone who would challenge the more senior one to explain
and defend his position. As things turned out, only a few of the twelve
programs we made for the course entitled "Problems of Philosophy" fitted this precise format. For a number of programs the philosophers involved were both people with established reputations, and for one or two the person whose views were being challenged was not a philosopher at all. Judging from the sales of the films, one of the most successful of the programs we made involved a philosopher, G. J. Warnock and a psychologist, B. F. Skinner. The program was about the morality of trying to control behavior by conditioning. Sometimes philosophy television programs have been criticised on the grounds that if they simply involve people talking the content could be put over as well on radio as on television. This was not the case in the Skinner/Warnock program, for some of Warnock's "comments" were purely visual—a matter of an eyebrow being raised, or lips pursed at just the right moment in Skinner's exposition.

Two other philosophy television programs deserve mention: one involving R. M. Hare and Anthony Kenny, the other involving Stephan Körner and Renford Bambrough. The Hare/Kenny program had been very carefully planned, and use was made of graphics to illustrate points in what Hare was saying about the characterization of moral judgement in terms of prescriptivity and universalizability. Not all philosophers invited to take part in Open University programs are prepared to devote as much time to the planning and preparation of the program as these two philosophers. The Körner/Bambrough program was about the relevance of what Wittgenstein says about family resemblances to the problem of Universals.

The Role of the Correspondence Tutor

So far I have written about only one aspect of the Open University's teaching, that which is originated at the headquarters of the Open University and in the recording studios of the BBC. This part consists of the correspondence texts and the radio and television programs. The people responsible for "putting across" these teaching materials are the regional part-time staff of the University. One of their main tasks is that of marking the assignments which students are set throughout the course. In the Problems of Philosophy course students are set a total of nine assignments, most of which allow them a choice between two questions. The assignment may incorporate suggestions as to how it can best be tackled. The following is the second assignment in the Problems of Philosophy course in 1974.

Answer either question A or question B.

Question A

Is showing that there are other minds by an argument from analogy like showing that there is fatigue in metals by an argument from analogy?

Suggestions for answering TMA 02 (A)

(i) An argument from analogy to show that there is fatigue in metals might take the following form:

(a) When a person cracks up, having been subject to stress over a considerable period, it is because he is suffering from fatigue.

(b) A metal that is subject to stress over a considerable period cracks.
Therefore
(c) There is fatigue in the metal.
Consider: what does the argument do? Does it prove that metals have feelings, like us? Or does it merely explain how we might have come to use the term "fatigue" to refer to a purely physical condition in the metal?

(ii) An argument from analogy to show that there are other minds might take the following form:
(a) When tears come from my eyes it is because I am sad.
(b) Tears come from eyes in a body that is not mine.
Therefore
(c) There is sadness in the body that is not mine.
Consider: is there a significant difference in the form of this argument and the one in (i)? (To answer this, try to express the arguments in symbols. For example: Where there is W-type behaviour in an X-thing it is because of a Y-condition in the X-thing. There is W-type behaviour in a Z-thing. Therefore, there is a Y-condition in a Z-thing.)

(iii) Norman Malcolm, at the beginning of his paper "Knowledge of Other Minds" (Essays in Philosophical Psychology, ed. Donald F. Gustafson, Macmillan, London, 1967, p. 365) says that "the argument from analogy for the existence of other minds...leads nowhere".
Consider: Do the answers you have given to the questions in (i) and (ii) incline you to agree, or to disagree, with Malcolm?

(iv) There is reading matter relevant to this question in the correspondence book Other Minds (especially sections 1, 2 and 9), and in the paper by Malcolm referred to in (iii). The television program with Professor A. J. Ayer is relevant, also. There are many other books and articles to which you could be referred, but it is suggested that instead of doing a lot of reading on this topic you do a lot of thinking about it and, if possible, a lot of talking to other people about it. The resulting essay must be your own work, of course, but you may find that the best way of coming to a defensible conclusion of your own is by trying out your ideas on other people. They don't have to be people taking A303.

(v) Check that your essay is not over the required length. If it is, then try to express yourself more concisely.

Question B
What unites a person's present experiences with his past experiences? Is it a matter of their being related to one another in some way, or of their all being related to something that is not an experience (a "self", a brain), or what?

Suggestions for answering TMA 02 (B)
(i) Read sections 1 and 2 of the correspondence book Personal Identity and the passages in the prescribed books recommended in these sections.
(ii) As a result of your reading you may, or may not, have decided what the answer to the question is. (Note that an "answer" to a philosophical question may take the form of a criticism of the question—for instance, the criticism that the question is based on a misapprehension.) If you have decided what the answer is then state it, along with your reasons for thinking it is the answer, and your reasons for rejecting alternative answers. If you have not decided on an answer, then state in your own words what you take the possible answers to be, and say why each of them seems unsatisfactory to you.
(iii) Check that your essay is not over the required length. If it is, then try
to express yourself more concisely.

I said that one of the main tasks of the part-time tutor is to mark the student's work. I do not mean that he simply gives it a grade.

It is some indication of the thoroughness with which the Open University approaches its task that there is even a correspondence text for tutors, entitled “Teaching by Correspondence in the Open University”. Examples are given of the different sorts of comments a tutor may make. There are comments which indicate that the assignment as a whole has been received and considered by the tutor—comments that establish and maintain the “dialogue”; comments which correct straightforward errors of fact or simple misunderstandings; comments about the relevance or appropriateness of the contents or approach of the answer to the particular assignment; comments which support and encourage; and comments on assignment and study techniques. As a student in the isolation of home-based study, the Open University student can sometimes be more vulnerable to anxiety and sensitive to difficulties than his counterpart in the conventional full-time university. He needs to be convinced that his work is received by someone who has a genuine interest and concern for him and his studies. Accordingly the Open University part-time tutor is discouraged from using comments like “this just won’t do”, “disorganized”, “your spelling is atrocious”, “you appear unable to distinguish between that which is given and that which has to be proved”. The tutor is told that if his aim is to encourage his students to improve their written performance it is worthwhile his developing a new tentativeness in written language that aims to open-up the conversation between adults. Examples might be: “Is this as crucial as your earlier point?”, “I wonder if you can think of a more forceful way of making this point”.

The University reviews the work of its part-time tutors through a systematic monitoring procedure. The tutor’s comments on the assignments are evaluated in terms of such questions as the following: How easy are the tutor’s comments to read? How clearly expressed are the tutor’s comments? How well do the tutor’s comments stand by themselves, without further reading or contact with the tutor? How specifically are references given to chapters, pages, paragraphs, etc.? How clearly does the tutor indicate whether the assignment is adequate from the point of view of: amount of content, appropriateness of content, depth of coverage, organization of material, clarity of expression? How effective has the tutor been in discovering errors in the script? How fair is the grade the tutor has awarded? How clearly does the tutor explain the reasons for the grade awarded? How helpful are the comments in suggesting ways of improving future assignments? How well does the tutor face up to making criticisms where necessary? How sensitively does the tutor present criticisms? How encouraging is the overall effect of the comments made?

Although, as I said, one of the main tasks of the part-time tutor is to correspond with the student about his assignments, there is also provision for face-to-face tutorials. Inevitably, if the course is a high level one with a small enrollment, this provision is restricted. For a third level course, with an
enrollment of about 300 students it may be possible to arrange no more than two day-schools. In addition to these two day schools, however, there is a full week in the summer when students can meet other students at an Open University Summer School.

**Summer Schools**

The Open University academic year lasts from late January, or early February, to the end of October. All foundation courses, and, in the Arts Faculty, most third level courses, have a Summer School. This is held either in July or August on the campus of a conventional University. It is a highly organized week of intensive activity on the part of both students and tutors. In philosophy the staff/student ratio will vary from one to ten to one to fifteen, and the student will have different tutors for different branches of philosophy. Tutor-lead seminars take up most of the day. In the evenings there may be student-organized discussions, lectures by philosophers who have been specially invited for the occasion, or brains-trusts involving the people who have written the correspondence texts or taken part in the television or radio programs. An example may serve to illustrate the sort of thing that may be put on. The evening program at one of the 1974 Problems of Philosophy Summer Schools consisted of the following. First, a pilot television program which had never been transmitted was shown on the VCR apparatus. The program consisted of a discussion, about personal identity, between Sydney Shoemaker, of Cornell University, and H. D. Lewis, of London University. I had given a lecture earlier in the day to ensure that the students would be able to follow the program. After the television program had been shown, Professor Lewis spoke for about twenty minutes setting out the main points of the position he had defended in the program. This was followed by a very lively discussion, in the course of which Lewis was called upon to defend his position against pointed criticisms.

Students are not required to write essays during the Summer School week, but they are required to do what we call an “analysis exercise”. This may consist, for example, of passages from the writings of two different philosophers, who start from the same premises but argue for diametrically opposed conclusions. The student may be asked to evaluate the arguments, and to say what his own view is on the issue, and to give reasons for his holding that view. Later on in the week, when the tutors have had time to mark the analysis exercises, the student will go to see one of the tutors to discuss his piece of work, or any other matter that may be on his mind. The Summer School work is not graded for assessment purposes. If work is graded students are naturally reluctant to reveal their areas of weakness. The objective of the Summer School is partly “remedial”, and the attainment of this objective is made possible by the Summer School work not counting as part of the continuous assessment process.

**The Scope of Philosophy in the Open University**

The Open University has deliberately set out to provide much more broadly
based courses of study than those available at more conventional Universities. The student has to take foundation courses provided by two different faculties. And what may be called “faculty-hopping” is encouraged, rather than the reverse. Thus, the student may make up his six-credit degree from courses from a number of faculties. He may take the foundation courses provided by the Arts faculty and the Social Sciences faculty; then at second level he may take the Arts faculty full-credit course “The Age of Revolutions”, the Arts/Mathematics/Science/Technology half-credit course “Science and Belief”, the Arts/Science/Technology half-credit course “Science and the Rise of Technology”, the Educational Studies half-credit course “Language and Learning”, and the Science/Social Sciences/Technology half-credit course “Biological Bases of Behaviour”; and finally, at third level, the Arts faculty full-credit course “Problems of Philosophy”. Someone who had managed to do well on all these courses would be a polymath of some distinction!

The courses involving philosophy in the Open University, either currently being presented or planned, are as follows:

1. The Arts Foundation Course. We have started work on a new Arts Foundation Course, for first presentation in 1977. About one fifth of it will be written by philosophers, and will serve as an introduction to the subject.
2. The Age of Revolutions. As I mentioned earlier, this involves four weeks work on Kant’s speculative and moral philosophy. This second level course will probably be replaced, after it has had a seven year run, with a course entitled “The Enlightenment”. This will be a multi-disciplinary course with, I would hope, a considerable philosophical component.
3. Problems of Philosophy. This is a single discipline course, which is likely to run for six years, and to be followed by a course on the Continental rationalists and British empiricists, called “Reason and Experience”.
4. Thought and Reality: Central Themes in Wittgenstein’s Philosophy. This is a more advanced single discipline course, at fourth level. It, again, is likely to be presented for six years. Probably it will be succeeded by a course on the history of ideas.
5. There are plans, yet to be approved by the Academic Board, for a number of inter-faculty courses involving philosophy. The ones that have received most support are: Political Thought, The Philosophy of the Natural and Social Sciences, and Communication.

Postscript

In a journal entitled Teaching Philosophy one might expect to find reports of novel ways whereby a teacher, in a face-to-face situation, can teach a comparatively small number of students a subject with the peculiar characteristics of philosophy. One might expect the emphasis to be on problems arising from the peculiar characteristics of philosophy, it being assumed that one can at least talk, directly and frequently, to one’s students. In Britain’s Open University the emphasis, for philosophers as much as for art historians, psychologists, or anyone else, is on problems arising from the fact that the originators
of the educational materials very rarely see the people they are teaching. The main problems for philosophers are the same as the problems for teachers of History, Music and Literature.

There are problems not only for the students but also for the teachers. One of the problems for a teacher is that of knowing how his teaching is going down. There is not the instant feedback one gets in a small seminar, or tutorial group. In a conventional university a teacher may use his class of students as a sounding-board to develop his ideas. In the Open University one has to develop one's ideas largely on one's colleagues. Two weeks of summer school, with a different group of students each week, is not sufficient to develop the teacher-student rapport out of which a fruitful dialogue can grow. For this reason my colleagues and I have welcomed the recent introduction of a scheme whereby we can exchange with teachers in other universities for short periods. This, I believe, can be of benefit not only to the individuals concerned but also to the institutions, and the students, they serve.