

Editorial: Fourth Critique

In 1983 the Royal Institute of Philosophy organized a conference for teachers of Liberal Studies, designed to help them to develop critical skills in their Sixth Form and Further Education pupils. The announcement said that the conference would 'explore the competing claims of objectivity and relativism in different areas of inquiry, asking in each case to what extent there are objective ways of assessing competing views'. The event was innocently advertised under the title 'Critical Thinking'. The innocence was in the intention more than in the effect. One transatlantic visitor, though he expressed himself with New World courtesy, accused the organisers of something between bad faith and false pretences. Unknown to Gordon Square, the phrase 'critical thinking' had by then (to speak with Old World candour) been hijacked by a new movement and taken out of the main current of its currency, like 'peace' and 'gay' and 'anti-Nazi' before it.

In America semper aliquid novi. We were once asked if we were willing to be appointed an Apostle of a new religion that had been founded in Seattle. Sometimes the 'something new' is a new name for something old. Innovation and the accompanying jargonization are widespread in the field of education, especially when it is called Education. By the courtesy of Professor Richard W. Paul, Director of the Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique at Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California, we are now better informed about the connotation and denotation of the term 'critical thinking' in its new semi-technical use. Besides his center there is another at the University of Illinois, where Critical Thinking is practised without benefit of Moral Critique, contrary to the pragmatist inheritance from which many of the apostles of this new religion draw their inspiration, and in defiance of the sayings of Socrates that are intoned in their liturgy.

The precedents in the old world for what is offered under the new label include *Straight and Crooked Thinking* and *Thinking to Some Purpose*, but the names of R. H. Thouless and Susan Stebbing seem to be missing from the voluminous accounts given in the American educational press of the work of Professor Paul and his colleagues. Names that do occur are those of Mortimer J. Adler, Edward de Bono, Michael Scriven, Robert H. Ennis, Max Black and Israel Sheffler. Another may be hinted at in the condemnation of an old error under the new label of 'the "strawperson" fallacy'.

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The firmest plank in the movement's platform is the insistence that schools, colleges and education departments should have the general principles of critical thinking incorporated in their syllabuses, and that there should be a growing industry of imparting the principles and testing and grading the students who have been 'exposed' to them. To a cynical temperament or mood it is tempting to link this fermentation of old wine in new bottles with the overproduction of philosophy Ph.D.s and the narrowing of tenure tracks in philosophy departments. But one would need to be Timon of Athens or Diogenes himself not to allow that a large part of the inspiration of the movement is explained more innocently, and thoroughly convincingly, by the words of Saul Bellow's Mr Sammler:

'Did an American exist who was not morally didactic? Was there any crime committed that didn't punish the victim for "the greater good"? Was there any sinner that did not sin *pro bono publico*? So great was the evil of helpfulness, and so immense the liberal spirit of explanation. The psychopathology of teaching in the United States'.

And to this there can be no answer but the mutually critical thoughts of Walker and Froelich, mingled for us in a paragraph from Malcolm Bradbury's *Stepping Westward*:

Walker's very English brand of liberalism, a faith of unbelief, struck Froelich as a cultural artefact. Its most committed assumption seemed to be that you shouldn't do anything to anybody because people, and the world, like to be the way they are.

Since all sides were presumably represented at the Third International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform it is piquant to see how many hours of the programme were set aside for meetings on common ground under the invitingly capitalized heading: COCKTAILS.