

Editorial: Philosophical Policemen

In G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, we encounter that intriguing individual, the philosophical policeman. His job is at once bolder and more subtle than that of ordinary policemen. Rather than arresting thieves or common or garden criminals, he goes to 'artistic tea-parties to detect pessimists', he reads books of sonnets to discover crimes about to be committed, he traces 'the origin of those dreadful thoughts that drive men on at last to intellectual fanaticism and intellectual crime'.

Chesterton wrote in 1908. This century has certainly seen ideas of philosophical origin having strange and alarming political ramifications. That in itself though does not justify the view of Chesterton's policeman that 'the most dangerous criminal now is the entirely lawless modern philosopher'.

In 1995, however, we do have philosophical policemen even if in a sense slightly different from Chesterton's. These are academic regulators, who by their hold on grants and finances determine which philosophy departments and which individual philosophers thrive academically, and which waste away. In British universities, the position of these regulators is becoming enshrined in centrally constituted bodies monitoring both teaching and research.

There are those who are aghast at this. Academic freedom, it is said, demands the right of academics to self-regulation. But this argument, in its purest form, is valid only for a Socrates, one who took not a drachma for his philosophical activity from the city of Athens or from anyone else.

Public funding and the award of publicly recognized qualifications sully the purity of arguments about academic freedom. In any case, do we really believe in self-regulation? Those who advocate it most strongly in the academic realm are often the very people who are quickest to want to impose ever more stringent statutory controls on employers, or shop-keepers, on members of parliament, on the insurance market, and on industrialists—and this despite the fact that many in business are already burdened with more bureaucracy than most academics would tolerate for a moment.

In one form or another, academics, including philosophers, are going to have to live with more public interference in what they do. Right or wrong, this is an inevitable adjunct of the receipt of public funds in a democratic, anti-*élitist* age. What will be of most concern will be to see how centrally directed scrutiny of research

Editorial

and teaching affects the content of what is done: not whether, but how, for some effect is inevitable. The effect will surely not be that eradication of godless pessimism sought by Chesterton; but philosophical policemen we will have nonetheless.