

Who are my peers?

The Research Assessment Exercise in Philosophy

Sean Sayers

British universities have just gone through their third Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The 'research output' (i.e. publications) of every participating department has been graded by panels of 'experts' on a seven-point scale. The purpose of this massive operation is to provide a basis for distributing funds for research. In theory, the idea of allocating these scarce resources according to the standard of the work produced seems fair and reasonable; but in philosophy, at least, that is not how things work out in practice.

The assessment process is supposed to be one of 'peer review'. This sounds reassuringly cosy and communitarian; however, it is doubtful whether it operates that way in a subject as divided as philosophy. What assurance is there that the panel adequately represents the diversity of contemporary British philosophy and is competent to undertake a peer review of the field? The short answer is: none. The panel is a quango, with all the secretive and undemocratic features typical of such bodies. How its members are chosen is a mystery. Little attempt is made to present them as representative of the different schools and approaches in the field. It is only a few years since a number of prominent philosophers opposed the award of a Cambridge honorary degree to Derrida (see Jonathan Rée, 'Massacre of the Innocents', *Radical Philosophy* 62, Autumn 1992, pp. 61–2). Are such philosophers suitable to conduct a 'peer review' of the work of the followers of Derrida? Indeed, what constitutes a 'peer' group in a subject like philosophy? Questions like these must be answered before the title of 'peer review' can have any credibility.

The panel, so it is claimed, assessed the work submitted to it objectively and impartially. In the previous exercises quantitative data were collected. This time the assessment was purely qualitative. How 'quality' was judged is shrouded in Kafkaesque obscurity. The panel does not explain or justify its decisions; nor is there any appeals procedure. The criteria it employs are specified only in the vaguest fashion. 'International' and 'national' excellence are the key terms. According to one member of the panel, however, these were not treated as geographical but rather as 'value concepts'. Assurances are constantly given about the care and scrupulousness with which the task was undertaken. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, we are simply required to have faith in the panel's judgements. In typically British fashion, we are expected to defer to the wisdom of authority. And, in typically British fashion, we do. This extraordinarily opaque and undemocratic system has been accepted with scarcely a murmur of dissent (though the demoralized state of the universities in Britain has doubtless contributed).

The 'oxygen of competition'

The exercise is designed to inject the 'oxygen of competition' into philosophy by rewarding 'excellence' wherever it is found. It is most unlikely to have this effect. 'Of course, Oxford and Cambridge will get 5s' (the top mark), one member of the panel is reported to have said, even before the submissions were in. Of course they did. Of course Warwick and Essex (the main centres for 'continental' philosophy) will not get 5s, he could well have added. Of course they did not. As regards the standards of 'international' excellence, a colleague was assured: 'only the US and Australia count.' In short, what is regarded as philosophy in Oxford, Harvard and Sydney is the standard. If you want a high rating, you would be well advised to follow that model.

There can be no doubt that all this will have a deeply conservative impact on the subject. Instead of promoting 'excellence', it will impose a narrow orthodoxy and stifle innovation and creativity. Assuming that the RAE is going to be repeated, the system should be opened up and made publicly accountable.

In the first place, the panel should be selected by an open process with the aim of representing the diversity of approaches and schools in the subject as a whole. In the USA this could be achieved through the machinery of the American Philosophical Association, whose membership covers virtually the whole profession. Unfortunately, there is no similar organization of philosophers in Britain.

Second, the rating criteria should be specified more precisely, and the reasons for the panel's decisions explained and opened up to appeal. There is nothing particularly radical in these suggestions. Apart from anything else, they are matters of elementary justice which simply echo the recommendations of the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Given the divisions within philosophy, however, it is difficult to see how they could be implemented without taking some account of more objective – that is to say, more quantitative – standards. Scepticism about the value of these is very widespread, and not just among defenders of the status quo. Sheer quantity of output – a concern in previous exercises – is crude and unsatisfactory (and it engenders a deluge of pointless publications). However, there are other indicators, such as frequency of citation and even market success, which could help the system respond more fairly to the diversity of approaches in the subject.

No doubt, as criteria of 'quality', these measures are crude too, and I am not suggesting that they should be used mechanically or on their own. No doubt they would generate their own distortions, as authors would be motivated to cite and be cited rather than to say anything worth saying. But rating philosophical work on a seven-point scale is an inherently crude business. At least such criteria offer some objective indication of academic standing, relatively free of the personal opinions of a few individuals; and

what they reveal is illuminating.

The very idea of consulting citation rates and the like is often treated with disdain. According to Professor Hepburn, reporting on the work of the 1989 panel in philosophy which he chaired, 'we made no use of mechanical aids such as frequency of citation; a notably *unsatisfactory* attempt on a philosophical problem can be cited repeatedly in the early pages of books or articles that aspire to a more adequate theory!' This well illustrates the complacent amateurism which has so far characterized the whole exercise. Actual citation figures tell a very different story. The most frequently cited philosophers include Rorty,

Citations 1981–97

| Name | Humanities | Social sciences | Total |
|----------------|------------|-----------------|-------|
| Derrida, J. | 1,867 | 578 | 2,445 |
| Habermas, J. | 1,493 | 1,291 | 2,784 |
| Gadamer, H.-G. | 884 | 284 | 1,168 |
| Rorty, R. | 720 | 428 | 1,148 |
| Levinas, E. | 680 | 93 | 773 |
| Putnam, H. | 647 | 382 | 1,029 |
| Davidson, D. | 646 | 333 | 979 |
| Quine, W.V. | 552 | 254 | 806 |
| Rawls, J. | 328 | 342 | 670 |
| Dummett, M. | 284 | 112 | 396 |
| Singer, P. | 238 | 364 | 602 |

Source: BIDS ISI Humanities and Social Science Citation Indexes.

Putnam, Davidson; Derrida, Habermas, Gadamer (see Table, previous page). It would be absurd to suggest that any of these writers has gained his position merely by being repeatedly refuted. Rather, it is clear that the most cited philosophers are on the whole the best known and most influential ones.

The high citation rates for 'continental' philosophers like Derrida and Habermas are striking. There can be no doubt that Derrida's work is cited not only by philosophers but also in literary theory, cultural studies and many other areas, mainly in the humanities. Habermas has a similarly wide influence, though more in the social sciences. To those who regard philosophy as a narrow and self-contained specialism, such influence is at best an irrelevance to their standing as philosophers, perhaps even grounds for suspicion on this score.

Market success arouses similar distrust. To quote Hepburn again, 'a substantial published work could be of a semi-popular nature, perhaps summarising the research of others rather than breaking new ground, and might well not qualify as research at all in this context.' The concept of 'research' at work here may apply well enough in the sciences, but it is far more debatable in philosophy. The idea that 'genuine research' is written only for a tiny band of specialists, and that the 'semi-popular' is suspect, has had a lamentable impact on the style and content of contemporary professional philosophy (of both the analytic and continental varieties); one of the most harmful aspects of the RAE in its present form is that it enforces this conception of philosophy on the profession as a whole.

A huge flood of such work has poured forth as a result of the obsession with 'research' dictated by the present system. Much of it is pointless from a philosophical point of view; its main *raison d'être* is to gain a research rating and/or promotion. It remains unread and undiscussed on library shelves; it has no other market. Philosophers like Derrida and Davidson can scarcely be accused of being 'semi-popular'. And yet their work is very widely read and discussed, and sales of their books, I am sure, are healthy. I do not suggest that frequency of citation or market success alone should be adopted as measures of research quality. I do suggest that they should not be so complacently disregarded in the assessment process. For there is every reason to believe that they provide an indication of 'quality' less liable to partiality and prejudice than the personal judgements of panel members.

A dead hand of conformity

To anyone of my generation, the situation in philosophy being fostered by the current RAE system will be familiar. We have been there before. When I was a student in the 1960s, philosophy in Britain was entirely dominated by the narrow conception of the subject which then prevailed in Oxford and Cambridge. There were virtually no courses in British universities on Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger or Freud. Even Sartre, I was told by one of my teachers at Cambridge, was 'not a philosopher'. Philosophy was treated as an entirely distinct and separate subject. The idea that philosophical insights could fruitfully be derived from, or applied to, other subjects or concrete practical issues was alien.

It was to combat this situation, and to provide a forum for an alternative and broader conception of philosophy, that journals like *Radical Philosophy* were founded. These attempts to widen the subject were resisted by the established authorities. Mercifully, this resistance was largely overcome and the subject has broadened very greatly in the last thirty years, even if such resistance continues, particularly in those departments rated as most 'excellent' by the RAE. Oxford and Cambridge remain almost untouched by these changes.

Elsewhere, the subject has been transformed. New approaches and ideas have been introduced and taken up. They have won an audience, they are cited in the literature, they have gained a market. Citation rates and market forces have proved far more

responsive to innovation and diversity in the subject than the judgements of senior academics of the sort typically chosen for the RAE panels.

Such indicators demonstrate the reality of the changes that have occurred in philosophy in Britain, and its resulting diversity, in an empirical and objective manner that cannot plausibly be dismissed. This is their significance in the present context. Until this diversity is duly recognized, the RAE system, so far from introducing new oxygen, will impose a dead hand of conformity on the subject and stifle its development. The sooner it is changed, the better for British philosophy.

Society for European Philosophy

The results of the recent assessment of philosophy departments within the UK clearly demonstrated the marginalisation of European philosophical traditions. In order to counter this marginalisation we believe there is a need for an organisation which would affirm the expanding influence and vitality of European philosophical traditions.

We therefore propose that a society be founded to provide a forum in which all those working within these traditions – whether within philosophy departments or not – could meet, further their own work and defend their common interests.

In order to found the Society an inaugural conference will be held at Birkbeck College, Malet Street, London WC1 from 10.30am–4.30pm on Saturday June 28. All those interested in participating in the Society are invited to attend.

Panels will include: 'Traditions in European Philosophy' and 'The Philosophical Geography of Europe'

For further information write to:
Society for European Philosophy,
c/o Department of Philosophy,
University of Warwick,
Coventry CV4 7AL

Dr Christine Battersby,
University of Warwick
Professor Andrew Benjamin,
University of Warwick
Professor Geoffrey Bennington,
University of Sussex
Professor Howard Caygill,
Goldsmiths College, University of London
Dr Simon Critchley,
University of Essex
Professor Peter Dews,
University of Essex
Dr Joanna Hodge,
Manchester Metropolitan University
Professor Salim Kemal,
University of Dundee
Dr Peter Osborne,
Middlesex University
Mr Jonathan Rée,
Middlesex University
Dr Kate Soper,
University of North London
Professor Margaret Whitford,
Queen Mary and Westfield College,
University of London