Affirmative Action in the Classroom and Beyond

In this the second in our, **'Some thoughts from…Philosophy'** series, Dr Charlotte Blease from the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy at QUB considers the complicated interplay between common sense and ethics in human reasoning

"Poor pupils wouldn't be happy at Oxbridge anyway". This was the insight of one of Northern Ireland's 'gifted and talented' sixth formers who just received a place at Cambridge. Perhaps she will be afforded some comparable insights by some Old Etonians and revisit her thesis! However, if Wittgenstein derided philosophers' 'penchant for generalisations', how much stronger is it a characteristic in general discourse?

I had raised the issue of affirmative action in one of my weekly philosophy sessions with sixth formers. As a philosophy teacher, I have taught in some excellent schools in Northern Ireland and it has been my pleasure to observe pupils engaging in discussions on a wide range of subjects, often asking questions they had never thought they could ask. At the end of these weekly discussions, the most rewarding comments I have heard from pupils are: "My head hurts"; "I feel really confused now!" However, confusion is often proportionate to the difficulty of a problem and showing that a problem exists and leaving a trail of puzzlement is a philosophy teacher's stock in trade.

In this particular session, I had asked the pupils to consider examples of 'affirmative action' or 'positive discrimination' in Northern Ireland. Affirmative action

occurs when an organisation gives preferential favour to an individual from a disadvantaged (or under-represented) minority. It is often contrasted with the view that individuals should be judged according to their own merits and not against any external, societal concerns to redress perceived social imbalances. The pupils in the schools at which I have taught often (if not always) provide the example of policing in Northern Ireland and the Patton Report's stipulations for increasing the number of Roman Catholics and women in the police.

In order to stimulate some more reflective discussion, I next ask

them to consider the positive discrimination invoked in the grading of the 11 Plus (pre-1988): Should the pass mark for 11 year old boys have been lower, given the supposition that they matured more slowly? If we can consider it a 'fact' that pre-pubescent boys are intellectually less mature than girls at age 10-11 is that good grounds for positive discrimination on their behalf? If this scenario doesn't whet the pupils' appetite for complexities, I raise the following scenario. You are an interviewer at an Oxbridge college and you have one place left in college for a budding philosophy student. You interview two pupils,

one of them boards at one of the finest public schools in England which has a strong tradition of sending pupils to Oxbridge; the other attends a very middling comprehensive in a socially deprived part of London. If both candidates perform exceptionally well but the public school pupil is a little more

polished, is it clear whom you should admit? If both perform equally well does your answer change? In short, do you think there are ever circumstances in which it is right to employ affirmative action?

In the UK positive discrimination in employment is deemed unlawful. But those behaviours that are deemed to be legal may

not be coextensive with what we consider to be ethically correct (moreover the law can be sluggish in reflecting intricate, philosophical and empirical advancements in our understanding of human behaviour). Should an individual's 'merit' be sacrificed in order to redress societal imbalances? Are we entitled to be judged according to our own merits in every situation? How do we decide when it is appropriate (if ever) to employ affirmative action? (Note that, even the choice of terminology:

'affirmative action' vs. 'reverse discrimination' somehow seems to load the dice in favour of divergent ethical views). But such action is relevant to education in numerous ways and it is important to consider these ethical concerns and their significance not just in the hiring of educational personnel but in terms of children's education.

Consider the following: if the gender of a school teacher has a positive impact on (for example) encouraging children to pursue a subject that is traditionally associated with the opposite sex, should we aim to make more appointments on this basis? Given the publication of psychological studies back in 2009 which purported to show that Barack Obama's appointment raised the IQ level of African Americans, is it our duty to raise the esteem and thereby the achievements of marginalized sections of society via affirmative action? We have a commonsense tendency to view 'intelligence' as something that is 'innate' and fixed but intelligence is a concept that deserves fragmentation: our cognitive attributes and our skills are certainly mutable and responsive to a range of unconscious social and personal influences.

While it might sound right to tell people: "If you're a black, female, Muslim, working-class student of course you shouldn't be put off joining an overwhelmingly white, male, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class industry! Just do it! " in practice this is psychologically naive. An ethical debate which is not attuned to how we actually think and behave (and not how we think we think and behave) is intellectually barren. There is more to our choices than commonsense 'informs' us and policy decisions in education have repercussions not just for the individual but for us all. **gtcni**