

## [S2]<sup>1</sup> F. R. Leavis and Pedagogy: the ‘Critical Exchange’

*Paper delivered to the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*

26 October 2016

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<http://www.philosophy-of-education.org/events/london-branch-seminar-9>

**Abstract.** Seldom can a ‘philosophy’ of pedagogy have been encapsulated in so few and such simple words as: ‘This is so, isn’t it?’, ‘Yes, but—.’ The schematic conception of the critical judgment or exchange, as expressed in this dialogic paradigm by the English educator and critic F. R. Leavis (1895-1978), has proved remarkably fertile as an idea. It has also prompted criticisms that it is theoretically ungrounded and unrealisable. This presentation will take a sustained look at the heart of Leavisian critical practice and explore its relevance to contemporary higher education.

### Introduction

[S3] ‘Philosophers are always weak on language.’

F. R. Leavis in a letter to the Italian poet Eugenio Montale (mid-1970s)

[S4]

Tonight I am going to discuss some of the ideas of the English educator F. R. Leavis, and specifically Leavis’s ideas about pedagogy, language and collaborative creativity. I’ll consider some of the criticisms that have been made against the practicability of Leavis’s ideas and then go on to explore some of the implications of that Leavisian slogan – I suppose you might call it a provocation really – that I put up on the first slide: ‘Philosophers are always weak on language’. It may not mean what you think it means at first sight. Because I have assumed that for some you here Leavis may be an unknown quantity, I’ll begin by giving you some background to Leavis’s career, focusing on the educational aspects of this.

F. R. Leavis was a major literary presence of the twentieth century, by any account a key figure on the English-speaking cultural landscape. He died at the age of 82 in 1978, after a long, prolific and embattled career as teacher, critic, educationalist and social commentator. He was a co-founder and guiding light of the Cambridge-based journal *Scrutiny* (1932–1953) which has good claims to be considered the most influential literary-critical journal of the last hundred years. He knew the philosophers Michael Oakeshott and Ludwig Wittgenstein: he published the former and wrote a memoir about the latter. In 1943 he produced his seminal book *Education and the university* and in the final decade of his life he issued several books and essays touching on social and educational themes. A few of these are listed on the abstract for tonight’s seminar. Incidentally, if you would like to learn more about Leavis after tonight, a good place to start would be the Leavis Society website at [theleavissociety.com](http://theleavissociety.com). I have to declare an interest this evening since I am the Vice Chair of the Leavis Society. I was also taught by Leavis when I was an undergraduate at the University of York after his retirement from Cambridge, and I have written about what it was like to be taught by Leavis. In tonight’s presentation, however, I shan’t be talking about Leavis the Man but about aspects

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<sup>1</sup> Bracketed numbers refer to text in the separate PowerPoint presentation slides.

of his thought and practice – difficult as it can sometimes be to keep the man and his thought separate.

[S5] Leavis located himself as a social and educational thinker in an English tradition running from Samuel Taylor Coleridge through John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin to what was then the present in D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot. In this genealogy Arnold has a central role (Leavis 1982: 53–64). Arnold's *Culture and anarchy* (published in 1869) was the classic mid-Victorian statement putting the case for 'high' culture in an age of commerce and waning religious faith. Leavis's *Mass civilization and minority culture* (published in 1930) and *Culture and environment* (written by Leavis & Denys Thompson and published in 1933) had offered to update and extend Arnold's cultural critique by stressing a number of unprecedented developments of the machine age: levelling-down, substitute living and the debasement of culture. All of these developments could be traced to the encroachment of instrumental reason on all aspects of life through a complex of assumptions, beliefs and behaviours that Leavis would call 'technologico-Benthamism' (Leavis 1972: 111). While an avowed anti-Marxist, Leavis would have agreed with Marx's verdict that the market 'drowned [everything] in the icy water of egotistical calculation' (1968: 38). Similarly, the technologico-Benthamite mind-set drowns out any alternative conception of how life might be. It does not [S6]

admit any other kind of consideration, any more adequate recognition of human nature and human need into the incitement and direction of our thinking and effort [than] technological and material advance (Leavis 1972: 78).

Leavis's fundamental thesis as an educator was that the study of English in institutions of learning should produce an intellectual elite (not a class-based elite, I should stress) morally aware of this technologico-Benthamite threat to society. To an extent, therefore, the kind of education Leavis had in mind as meeting the needs of our increasingly troubled and troubling civilization was not a cozy, traditional or passive affair: it was to be a matter of fostering, through what Leavis called 'the training of sensibility', a marked degree of critical resistance to a number of prevailing intellectual, social and commercial trends. If this makes Leavis sound a rather rearguard, even reactionary zealot, a proponent of what Roger Scruton has called 'anxious conservatism' (Scruton 1985: 118), it needs to be remembered that Leavis was in his own way a genuine subversive who not only set out to reform but to revolutionise the teaching of English from within. He championed several avant-garde writers like T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and Ezra Pound, and he did so through the pioneering method of the close reading of texts, 'the black marks on the page', eschewing theory and predetermined standards and sticking as much as possible to the concrete; he inaugurated a journal *Scrutiny* with contributions not from respected dons but from unpaid graduate research students; in conjunction with his *Scrutiny* colleagues, notably his wife Q. D. Leavis, he drew up a radically revised literary canon; and he argued for wide-ranging changes to methods of teaching and assessment. In the realm of compulsory and adult education Leavis with his colleague Denys Thompson pioneered a primer of 'critical training' for school pupils and adult learners which went through ten reprints between 1933 and 1966. Among other things, this included exercises on how to analyse and decode the commercial influences contained in advertising, the popular press and the cinema, and its recommended readings included not Jane Austen and Keats but a study of the sociocultural conditions of Mexican peasants. None of these ventures made Leavis popular with many of his English faculty colleagues; quite the reverse, they secured him powerful, envious and resentful enemies not only in Cambridge where it mattered career-wise but in Oxford, London and further afield.

Dull or ignorable, Leavis was not. Nearly everything Leavis said or did, or was imagined to have said or done, became the subject of controversy, not just in educational circles. In the 1960s and 70s Leavis made the headlines of national newspapers, usually by further outraging the powers that be, most notoriously when he attacked the celebrated novelist, scientist and politician C. P. (later Lord) Snow, describing him as ‘portentously ignorant’ (Leavis 1972: 40) and ‘not only not a genius ... he is as intellectually undistinguished as it is possible to be’ (ibid.: 41). Nevertheless, while Leavis suffered a woeful lack of institutional recognition throughout his career at Cambridge, his influence on generations of teachers and educationalists must be judged immense and far-reaching. The counter-reaction to Leavis, as I have indicated, was correspondingly deep and widespread.

We are thus faced with a paradox of a once immensely influential critic and educator who has, to all intents and purposes, vanished from contemporary debate about higher education, except as a historical point of reference. Did Leavis speak too soon when he claimed he was the heretic who had survived?

The subject of my seminar tonight is on Leavis’s conception of the critical exchange and its relevance to aspects of thinking about contemporary higher education. It’s my belief that Leavis’s most fruitful contribution to current debates about teaching and learning lies in his idea of critical pedagogy. Leavis’s adult life and career were spent almost exclusively in a university setting and it is in this context that his pedagogic ideas developed and matured. However, his ideas about education probably had greater initial impact outside higher education, notably in the compulsory, further and adult education sectors in Britain and overseas. These ideas appealed immediately to teachers in secondary schools and in adult education organisations such as the Workers Educational Association who wanted ideas about how they could make a practical difference, not just in the classroom but in the lives of their pupils and students. [S7] The educational historian Christopher Hilliard (2012: 142–170) has provided a detailed account of the widespread impact of what he calls ‘Left-Leavisism’ on adult education from the 1940s to the 1960s. Another example of the influence Leavis exerted was on David Holbrook’s pioneering work teaching disadvantaged school children during the 1960s chronicled in his book *English for the rejected* (1964).

However, this record of Leavis’s influence outside the academy may point a further moral. It may offer us a key to appreciating the potential wider contemporary application of Leavis’s educational thinking at a period when the academy is increasingly looking outside itself, or being exhorted to. Its past record of contributing to innovative teaching in contexts which would nowadays be described as fitting the description of ‘non-traditional learners’ ameliorates to some extent Leavis’s reputation as an elitist within the academy and hence of little if any contemporary relevance. My own view is that some of Leavis’s ideas are uniquely suited to a higher education system seeking to meet the needs of learners within a ‘widening participation’ agenda (National Audit Office 2008). This is not, of course, to suggest that higher education should be concerned solely or predominantly with the needs of non-traditional learners but that the anti-elitist record of Leavisian pedagogy in practice is an important factor to consider. Leavis’s later despondency in the 1970s about the creative potential of what he called the ‘democratic mass university’ (Leavis 1975: 7) impeded to some extent his curiosity about subsequent innovations in pedagogic practice. However, his idea of the critical exchange, which is the focus of tonight’s discussion, is not incompatible with modes of teaching and learning in mass or universal education. Far from it. It connects strongly to contemporary research in higher education about the value of critical thinking as a necessary life skill for inculcating the habit of reflection and questioning in all aspects of life (Scriven & Paul 2007). It may also serve, along with Leavis’s closely associated ideas about

language, collaborative creativity and what he calls the Human World, as an intellectual tool for thinking about and influencing current discourse on teaching and learning.

### **The critical exchange**

So what is Leavis's concept or paradigm of the critical exchange? Let's look at it first in its condensed, perhaps more familiar form. [S8]

A critical judgment has the form, 'This is so, isn't it?' [...] though my judgment asks to be confirmed and appeals for agreement that the thing is so; the response I expect at best will be of the form, 'Yes, but—'. (Leavis 1969: 47)

Leavis's paradigm of the critical judgment (or exchange) has gained the attention of many of his expositors as a cornerstone of his thought and practice. The literary critic Ian Robinson (1973) sees it as underlining a general truth about the nature of language and 'its relation to the individual's critical activity by which we live' (235). The critic Geoffrey Strickland (1981: 157) regards it as an example of the critic's responsibly pursuing truth claims about and responsibilities to the real world, a project which he sees structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers as having misguidedly abandoned. Sean Matthews (2004), another literary critic, argues that Leavis's procedure in the paradigm is determined by 'the conviction that "we" shall get further by argument, rather than by acceding either to convention, orthodoxy or absolute truth' (60, emphasis in original). As a contribution to ideas about higher education, Ronald Barnett (1990) sees the formula 'This is so, isn't it?' as 'an essentially open conception of truth, in which truth claims are invested with personal meaning, commitment and judgment' (58-9). The German cultural theorist Jürgen Kramer (2011) – who completed a thesis on Leavis, in Germany, during the 1970s – revisited Leavis's ideas some 30 years on in 2011 and he has drawn attention to the paradigm's emphasis on literary value judgments attained through dialogue: 'the interpretation is an individual one and a trans-individual one; the individual interpretation is preserved and superseded in the collective one' (104).

Leavis expressed the paradigm in varying degrees of detail throughout his career; the fullest exposition of it occurs in one of the Clark Lectures given at Cambridge in 1967 and is printed in *English literature in our time and the university* (1969), the one I have just quoted from. In this lecture Leavis sets out to characterise the nature of standards in English studies; he is keen to avoid any misconception that these are susceptible to metrics as conventionally understood: where English is concerned [S9]

No one, then, who knows what standards are and what is the nature of critical authority could talk of 'fixed standards' or of 'providing them with a legal backing' (Leavis 1969: 47).

The paradigm is then introduced (Leavis 1969: 47) to exemplify the critical or pedagogic process by which individual value judgments are developed and form the basis of consensual standards rather than being derived from them. [S10]

Essentially, as I've said before (I suppose) in a good many places but the point has to be made and much hangs on it, a critical judgment has the form, 'This is so, isn't it?'. And the concurrence appealed to must be real, or it serves no critical purpose, and, if he suspects insincerity or mere politeness, can bring no satisfaction to the critic as critic. What, of its very nature, the critical activity aims at, in fact, is an exchange, a collaborative exchange, a corrective and creative interplay of judgments. For though

my judgment asks to be confirmed and appeals for agreement that the thing is so; the response I expect at best will be of the form, ‘Yes, but—’, the ‘but’ standing for qualifications, corrections, shifts of emphasis, additions, refinements. The process of personal judgment from its very outset, of course, is in subtle ways essentially collaborative, as my thinking is—as any use of the language in which one thinks and expresses one’s thoughts must be. But the functioning of criticism demands a fully overt kind of collaboration.

The paradigm can be seen to have three main components: personal judgment; critical activity; and the functioning of criticism. These form successive stages of widening reference, from personal to inter- or trans-personal to public and institutional. For Leavis, the function of criticism is of necessity an inclusive concept, encompassing more than the critical act. Critical pedagogy is a matter of increasing intellectual and social initiation into a collaborative community, and the emphasis falls on the continuity in transitions between individual (student), collaborative interplay and community this creates and sustains. Elaborating on the synthesis of these last three constituents, Leavis explained (1972: 207) a few years after the lecture in question was delivered that: [S11]

A university that is really one [...] will make it possible for the student (who won’t be just a ‘student’) to feel he belongs to a complex collaborative community in which there are his own special human contexts to be found, and will make him, in his work and the informal human intercourse that supplements it and gives it life, more and more potently aware of the nature of high intellectual standards.

Leavis seeks to consolidate his argument by stressing the nature of the student’s belonging to, or living into, a ‘complex collaborative community’ in which awareness of ‘high standards’ owes as much to informal as formal contact—what we might term the ‘hidden curriculum’ (Jackson 1990). This community will not be limited by the student’s discipline, although it will make space for it; the phrase ‘special human contexts to be found’ also suggests a process of discovery and sense making not restricted to the acquisition of specialist knowledge and skills.

### **Ontological assumptions**

At this point it is worth pausing briefly to identify certain ontological assumptions about the way in which any given language constitutes our sense of reality, which are imbued in Leavis’s text. Several of Leavis’s commentators, including a number of philosophers, have written at length about these ontological assumptions, making connections between them and, variously, the later philosophical investigations of Wittgenstein, the phenomenologists Husserl and Heidegger, and the post-critical philosophy of Polanyi. For the moment I wish to make only three points which in my view represent Leavis’s anti-positivist and anti-scientist stance, and which it will be helpful to bear in mind as the discussion proceeds. Each point is illustrated by a quotation from Leavis. [S12]

1. Reality is a collaborative creation. Reality, as we humanly experience it, is an organic whole, not a mechanical assembly of parts. Objective reality is a construct that is incurably anthropocentric:

Pure reality *an sich*—reality not humanly created—is beyond our experience (Leavis 1986: 296). [S13]

2. Reality is humanly created and science offers but one perspective on reality. The achievements of science, moreover, depend on a basic and comprehensive type of collaboration which arises from this humanly created reality:

there is a prior human achievement of collaborative creation, a more basic work of the mind of man (and more than the mind), one without which the triumphant erection of the scientific edifice would not have been possible: that is, the creation of the human world, including language (Leavis 1972: 61). [S14]

3. Language is heuristic and always in a process of development and change. It is much more than a means of expression or communication:

A product of collaborative creativity, [language] makes continued and advancing collaborative thought possible—and it will hardly be forgotten that such collaboration entails, vitally and essentially, disagreements. Finality is unattainable. (Leavis 1975: 49).

Leavis holds that a critical judgment has the form of ‘This is so, isn’t it?’; however, this does not mean that it necessarily consists of a literal question or request expressed in precisely these words, as Leavis makes plain when he says ‘the “but” standing for...’. The appeal to corroboration via ‘a fully overt kind of collaboration’ is, in Leavis’s view, a defining feature of university life in general, although this is not to suggest that every interaction between a teacher and a student will be framed as one of equality of partnership. The collaborative exchange is essentially open-ended and persuasive; when it operates heuristically, that is as a mode of discovery, it consists of what Michael Polanyi (1959: 229) calls ‘statements in the fiduciary mode’, statements of personal commitment that should have the words ‘I believe’ attached to them. The goal of such statements is to move beyond the merely personal assertion of a belief or conviction without resorting to criteria dependent on an idea of objective knowledge, that is, impersonal knowledge, independent of individual persons doing the knowing. For Leavis the literary critic and Polanyi the scientist-philosopher all knowledge is embodied, personally committed knowledge. There is moreover no template for achieving this kind of corroboration (Leavis 1982: 190): [S15]

I have had a habit of telling pupils that you can’t prove a value-judgment but I go on to say that you can always (no doubt I ought to say generally) get beyond the mere assertion of personal conviction. The process of ‘getting beyond’ is tactical, and its nature is most clearly brought out in the ‘practical criticism’ of short poems. But what is brought out in this way is the essential critical process.

To an extent the paradigm shares features of the Socratic method of teaching (Overholser 1992), including the asking and answering of questions to stimulate critical thinking, and a dialectical method in which participants work collaboratively to construct a meaning rather than win an argument. Where it departs from this method is the absence of any ironic dissimulation of ignorance which might act as a disruptive force to undermine student and text alike. The paradigm’s ‘isn’t it?’ is not ironic understatement. The critical exchange is reality-oriented and provisional, though never arbitrary. Its main purpose is not intellectual display for its own sake, nor the skeptical undermining of mores, standards and values, but the getting of wisdom, a key concept for Leavis. Wisdom is not cleverness or intellectual brilliance. Indeed it explicitly places these attributes. Wisdom represents [S16]

a more securely poised resultant, one more fully comprehensive and humanly better centred [...] than any ordinarily brilliant person could offer us (Leavis 1975: 69).

### **Criticisms of Leavis's paradigm**

Criticisms have been advanced against Leavis's idea of the critical exchange on theoretical and epistemological grounds, notably by the British Marxist historian and political essayist Perry Anderson (in a study written in 1968). Anderson is one of Leavis's most interesting critics and I have explored recently elsewhere some of his arguments against Leavis, particularly those of the difficulties facing consensus-making in an epistemologically pluralist society. To discuss these arguments would, however, divert us from some other educational and conceptual issues I am interested exploring. So instead, I propose to discuss some of the criticisms made of Leavisian practice before moving on to some specific issues arising from Leavis's ideas about pedagogy, language and collaborative creativity in the context of contemporary discourse.

Just how practicable is Leavis's critical exchange? Some have claimed that in today's higher education system any performance of the critical exchange at the level assumed by Leavis is simply not a going concern. Much as teachers would like their students to be active if not sometimes equal partners (Healey et al. 2014), how realistic is this aspiration in everyday teaching? Objections to Leavis's paradigm as a method for teaching may be summarised as follows. The goal of the exchange may be a worthy one but the burden Leavis places on the participants to achieve it is unreasonable given the structural and power differentials of those involved. Judgments arrived at via Leavis's paradigm are more likely to be arbitrarily imposed than authentically agreed, and at their most coercive may serve the interests of a strategy for indoctrination rather than empowerment. These unwelcome outcomes may be a pervasive risk in higher education generally due to wider trends in teaching and learning and society, including notably the delegitimation of authority and knowledge claims (Barnett 2000) and the discourse of 'students as consumers' (Singleton-Jackson et al. 2010); if this is so, these outcomes can only be accentuated by the structure and values of Leavis's pedagogy.

These objections were addressed directly more than two decades ago by John Wyatt (1990: 73–90), an educationalist and historian of modern European higher education, in his 1990 book *Commitment to higher education: Seven west European thinkers on the essence of the university*. In many respects these objections still withstand scrutiny, perhaps more so, given subsequent developments.

In an otherwise sympathetic account of Leavis's contribution to the history of higher education singles out Leavis's 'This is so, isn't it?' as highly problematic and symptomatic of a 'self-generated dilemma' at the heart of Leavis's thought. Seeking to foster a genuine encounter between tutor and student with no pulling of rank, Leavis assumes a level of student autonomy and readiness which is not there except for the special few. As Wyatt (1990: 83) explains: [S17]

... this is the master addressing the novice ... It is not easy for many students of literature, never mind for people working in unrelated academic disciplines, to accept the leadership implied in 'This is so, isn't it?', no matter how much this question becomes more genuine because a collaborative response is needed.

I think we can accept without hesitation that the challenge Wyatt highlights here is one faced on a daily basis by many teachers in higher education. I see it whenever I engage with

colleagues in professional learning conversations about their teaching practice: ‘How do I get students to ask questions, challenge what I am saying, or critically analyse what they’ve read on Wikipedia or social media? How can I get them to venture a personal judgment in essays let alone defend this in front of peers, when their main goal is to get better marks, or when the prevailing ethos is to avoid students’ making any value judgments full stop?’ Here I am calling on Wyatt in a representative way, to focus attention on two of the more commonly levelled charges made against Leavisian practice, those of indoctrination and elitism, both considered as deriving their energy and motivation from an aggressive and alienating self-belief on Leavis’s part. When Leavis goes on, in the same lecture in which he describes the paradigm, to say that: [S18]

a genuine teacher doesn’t find himself holding back his subtlest insight and his most adventurous thought because they are not suitable for communication to first- or second-year men (Leavis 1969: 66).

there might seem to be some support here for Wyatt’s reservation about the teacher’s intent and the student’s equally strong resistance. Leavis’s remark may indeed appear to indicate unduly high expectations of students and an insensitivity to their individual needs and interests. The teacher by this account could be seen as intervening too eagerly, and overwhelming the student. By seeming to privilege the teacher’s mature insight, what space is allowed for the student’s developing one? Wyatt highlights a potential disjuncture between intention and effect if students are not ready to rise to the occasion of the teacher’s ‘subtlest insight’. Students might prefer to express a completely unrelated opinion, no opinion at all, or otherwise exercise the right to silence. Quite so, Leavis might retort, if that is the case then the students concerned probably ought not to be there, or at least not yet. This is an instance where Leavis’s determination not to talk down to students may acquire uncomfortable elitist or dogmatic undertones.

Yet, Wyatt possibly misreads Leavis’s intention, as when he states that Leavis is ‘quick to add’ that his ‘question ... expects a response’ (83). Leavis is not quick to add anything: indeed, there are 87 words intervening between posited question and posited response highlighted in red. [S19]

Essentially, as I’ve said before (I suppose) in a good many places but the point has to be made and much hangs on it, a critical judgment has the form, ‘This is so, isn’t it?’. **And the concurrence appealed to must be real, or it serves no critical purpose, and, if he suspects insincerity or mere politeness, can bring no satisfaction to the critic as critic. What, of its very nature, the critical activity aims at, in fact, is an exchange, a collaborative exchange, a corrective and creative interplay of judgments. For though my judgment asks to be confirmed and appeals for agreement that the thing is so; the response I expect at best will be of the form, ‘Yes, but—’, the ‘but’ standing for qualifications, corrections, shifts of emphasis, additions, refinements. The process of personal judgment from its very outset, of course, is in subtle ways essentially collaborative, as my thinking is—as any use of the language in which one thinks and expresses one’s thoughts must be. But the functioning of criticism demands a fully overt kind of collaboration.**

What is communicated in this intervening passage strikes me as a sufficiently scrupulous account of what might be expected to happen, including time allowed for reflection, for a genuine proposition from an interlocutor in a critical exchange to elicit a genuine and unforced reply. The critic’s expectations, ‘what I expect at best will be’, are also couched in

appropriately modest, pragmatic terms which counterbalance any tendency towards condescension on his or her part. It is clear from the language here that this dialogic process is not to be reduced to a matter of transaction only although this is not to say that the turn-taking that underpins it when it takes the form of a spoken exchange may not be played out differently in other cultural and lingual contexts (see Martin-Jones and Saxena 1996).

There is much more I could expand on here, including Wyatt's criticism of 'master' and 'novice'. But I really want to use the remaining time to think about some of the wider conceptual issues involved in Leavis's idea of collaborative creation. So I will move swiftly on to these.

### **Leavis and Archer on creativity**

In this next section would like to explore how Leavisian ideas might engage with current aspects of research and practice in higher education. Specifically, how might Leavis's ideas on creativity, language and collaborative community, as encapsulated all too briefly here in his idea of the critical exchange, shed light on some current developments in teaching and student learning research in higher education, including those which are philosophically inflected? I say 'inflected' because I want to discuss not so much 'educational philosophy' but how certain developments in educational research and practice are informed, in more or less overt ways, by philosophical notions or doctrines, and how a Leavisian reading might shed light on these.

In order to address this question I want to bring in another, contemporary figure who has exercised some influence on the course of research into student learning in higher education, before re-introducing Leavis. This is the distinguished contemporary sociologist Margaret Archer. Specifically I would like to discuss a very short extract from a text of Archer's as a foil to Leavis. In fact, it's only one sentence from Archer, so I have to be cautious about quoting her out of context. But in so doing, I am following the precedent of Leavis whose practice sometimes revolved around seizing on a particular piece of text and its form of expression as indicative of more significant issues at stake. Of course I am not Leavis and I need to avoid treating one sentence of Archer's with overwhelming gravity. But I have chosen it because I believe there is something interestingly contentious in what it is saying, that this has wider pedagogic implications, and that with the aid of Leavis we can pinpoint both the contentiousness and the wider implications. In the process I am going to venture some unflattering comments about Archer's mode of expression so I apologise in advance to any admirers of her work present. If I risk showing her a minor discourtesy tonight I should stress that I am using her words tactically and very much for my own purpose, which as previously mentioned is to act as a foil to Leavis and highlight the potential positive contribution that his ideas can make to our way of thinking. Here then is the quotation. Archer in her text *Realist social theory* (1995: 72) refers to the creative potential of human beings, including where language is concerned, in the following terms: [S20]

This is the human condition, to be born into a social context (of language, beliefs, organization) which was not of our making: agential power is always restricted to re-making, whether this be reproducing or transforming our social inheritance.

Archer, as many of you here will know, is an influential theorist in the critical realist school that stems from the work of the late Roy Bhaskar. At the time of his death in 2014 Bhaskar held the post of World Scholar at UCL Institute of Education. Several factors have combined to gain critical realism a critical and appreciative audience among higher education researchers and practitioners. These factors include the following: a concern with

emancipatory social practice; an adherence to the principle of adequate interpretation as a pre-requisite of change; and an emphasis on the philosophical notion of the independent existence of the natural and the social world. (These are factors which I see no reason to call into doubt, I should make clear.) Archer herself has been credited with the notion of ‘the reflexive imperative’ (2012) as enacted by today’s students in their experiences of teaching and learning (see Case 2013). She is also associated with ‘an “ontological turn” in student learning research, with a focus on students “being” and “becoming” rather than just on knowledge and skills’ (Case 2015: 3). Again, this is a development I welcome, though I suspect that there is a strong element of the *Zeitgeist* in it and this ontological turn was explored by many others well before Archer and her contemporaries gave it a particular name. This ‘ontological turn’ resonates strongly with key aspects of Leavis’s ideas of the critical exchange and the student’s ‘living into’ a collaborative community referred to earlier. The idea of the reflexive imperative is based on the premise that in late modernity traditional guidelines are no longer adequate to new situations; awareness of this state of affairs creates a more pressing need for reflexivity. (Again, there is nothing here that strikes me as not having been anticipated by Leavis as well as other critics of the hegemony of instrumental reason such as those in the Frankfurt School.) We are thus witnessing the rise of what Archer calls a ‘morphogenetic society’ in which various types of reflexivity, including ‘meta-reflexivity’—‘the reflexive critique that subjects direct at their own internal conversations, which intensifies personal stress and social disorientation’ (Caetano 2015: 61)—begin to rise to prominence among the educated young.

For both Archer and Leavis reflexivity is an integral, imperative aspect of the modern student’s experience of learning and personal development or *Bildung* (Case 2013); it is not a take-it-or-leave-it affair and it operates essentially in a framework of an orientation towards collaborative meaning-making, including when this is focused internally on the individual student’s self-reflexive conversations. Leavis makes an equivalent point about the critical exchange when he states that [S21]

my thinking is—as any use of the language in which one thinks and expresses one’s thoughts must be ... in subtle ways essentially collaborative’ (Leavis 1969: 47).

However, some interesting (at least to me) differences between Archer and Leavis begin to emerge when we look at their respective conceptions of language and the collaborative creativity that are presumed to underpin the capacity to be self-reflexive. Here is where a ‘Yes, but—’ starts to emerge. I would imagine that the capacity to be aware of the particular language in which one’s self-reflexive conversations arise is a pre-requisite for this kind of process, even if as Leavis suggests the subtleties of this process are not always at the forefront of one’s attention. What I would not necessarily expect to see is a manifest emphasis on human limitation as an integral aspect of this capacity. This seems to me to look at things from the wrong end of the telescope. Individual human capacities are indeed finite and fallible but why start from and end with that standpoint? Doesn’t this exclude something vital, particularly when we consider the example of language? Let’s remind ourselves of the sentence of Archer’s and I will highlight what I think is the contentious piece of text, which occurs in the second half: [S22]

This is the human condition, to be born into a social context (of language, beliefs, organization) which was not of our making: **agential power is always restricted to re-making**, whether this be reproducing or transforming our social inheritance.

Here, Archer is giving voice to certain apodictic ontological assumptions of critical realism. According to the critical realist's ontology, human creativity is a capacity restricted to the notion of re-making. It has to be thus restricted because this forms part of critical realism's doctrine about material causes and emergence. In case I think Archer is going out on a limb here, and overstating, I am reminded by the following entry in the *Dictionary of critical realism* (Hartwig 2007: 22), co-written by the school's leading proponents, that this particular ontological claim passes as incontrovertible fact: [S23]

So far as we know, change always involves the transformation of pre-existing material causes, and the material continuity of fundamental elements through change [...] In the sociosphere we never create or make, but only change, our knowledge and social forms.

While the claims of this statement begin cautiously, even modestly, with 'So far as we know', the reader is soon swept into the realm of the categorical with an 'always' followed by a 'never'. Advancing a truth claim where the caveat 'So far as we know' applies is not the same as making a statement that is necessarily and logically true; indeed, the reverse may well be the case. An editor should have struck a line through this particular solecism. If this sounds like nit-picking, let's look back at the earlier extract from Leavis (Leavis 1982: 190) [S15] which I quoted, in which Leavis corrects himself exactly on this point:

I have had a habit of telling pupils that you can't prove a value-judgment but I go on to say that you can always (no doubt I ought to say generally) ...

Archer's 'always' in the text from here is replaced in this instance by the *Dictionary's* 'never' but I trust you will agree that the basic propositions are practically identical and I will treat them as such. The sociosphere encompasses language and culture and all those other aspects of reality which together constitute what Leavis calls the Human World, from fashion to Shakespeare, from breadmaking to Brexit, from novel reading to sending tweets. How valid is the notion – or perhaps doctrine is a preferable term here – that insofar as the Human World, human condition or sociosphere is concerned, the idea of creating or making knowledge *at all* is automatically to be excluded?

Of course understanding the sometimes contradictory demands of continuity and change is an important activity for socio-educational thought and practice generally: Leavis issued a book in 1933 called *For continuity* precisely because he recognized the array of problems and challenges arising from increasingly rapid, discontinuous change in all walks of life. The idea that we only ever change our knowledge and social forms might be taken as an ironic comment of some of the current manifestations of innovation in policy and practice in education. But the proposition 'we never create or make, but only change, our knowledge' – how true is this generally of our lived experience as well as what we know propositionally? This question of course is connected to another, very venerable one in the history of thought about knowledge, stretching back to at least as far as Plato's *Meno*: in this dialogue Socrates discusses the nature of knowledge and discovery and is given to argue that we cannot be said to search for something that we do not already know. Within philosophy, therefore, as in much aesthetic theory and literary criticism informed by philosophy, paradoxical questions about creation and novelty, continuity and change, have a long pedigree. That said, for those of us concerned with the praxis of teaching and learning, and in particular how education might be considered as more than reproductive in its function, how justified are we in going to philosophy exclusively, or at least to the school of critical realism and its sociological branches, for enlightenment on this question?

‘We never create or make, but only change, our knowledge’...? Well, this might be true of my own experience of certain types of learning, in certain frames of mind. But even in the most dispiriting classroom, led by the modern equivalent of Dickens’ Mr Gradgrind, am I really justified in entertaining that categorical ‘never’? In the most repetitive of didactic lectures or the most tedious assessments calling for the regurgitation of known facts are glimpses of new knowledge ontologically and epistemologically automatically ruled out of court? Can new ideas and possibilities never be created, even serendipitously? Leavis was in the habit of saying, when encountering propositions such as these, that while they might not be philosophers, mere students of English literature know better than that. Did a creative writer like Shakespeare never actually create or make something out of the common language but at best change pre-existing ways of knowing, writing and speaking about the world and ourselves? Admittedly, some literary critics, including those who define themselves as New Historicists or Cultural Materialists, see canonically important texts such as those of Shakespeare as being sites for the play and counter play of hegemonic social and political forces, and not much else besides. On the other hand, critics of this approach have suggested that whatever the Historicists and Materialists are intent on practising it is not *literary* criticism. Of course, no one, especially not Leavis, would claim that Shakespeare created *ex nihilo* or in a socio-economic and political vacuum but to leave the emphasis on the alteration of knowledge and social forms at best, is that a responsible treatment of the concept of creation? Why would students want to risk the effort to ‘be’ or ‘become’ something or someone other than what they presently are, with the self-reflexive anxiety this often generates, if they are to be restricted to re-making something that however transformational it may sound can never be credited with the actual *creation* of knowledge and social forms? Leavis’s answer to these and similar questions about creativity throughout his *oeuvre* is not a ‘Yes, but—’ but a carefully considered ‘No’. Considerable stretches of his later works, books even, are given over to trying to refute these assumptions and the disabilities he sees them generating in contemporary thought and practice.

Not that Leavis would disagree about the value and significance of an ontological turn in student learning, as suggested earlier. He might well have agreed with the substance of the first part of Archer’s sentence, even if he might have bridled at the portentousness of ‘the human condition’. Indeed, he makes similar-sounding statements throughout his *oeuvre*, for example, about how the child’s discovery and construction of the world ‘is possible because the reality he was born into was already the Human World, the world created and renewed in day-to-day human collaboration through the ages’ (Leavis 1975: 34). However, he might have contended that the second part of Archer’s sentence does not go nearly far enough. Here is Leavis (1986: 250) expressing a broadly similar idea to Archer’s at this point: [S24]

The creative, and re-creative maintaining of the full human heritage, the vital and unimpoverished human heritage, can’t be left to the old, traditional approaches. The ‘educated class’ most certainly—whatever it is—isn’t adequate to performing the function in the old ways.

Contrast Archer’s ‘re-making’ with Leavis’s ‘re-creative’. [S25]

This is the human condition, to be born into a social context (of language, beliefs, organization) which was not of our making: agential power is always restricted to **re-making**, whether this be reproducing or transforming our social inheritance.

The creative, and **re-creative** maintaining of the full human heritage, the vital and unimpoverished human heritage, can’t be left to the old, traditional approaches. The

‘educated class’ most certainly—whatever it is—isn’t adequate to performing the function in the old ways.

Perhaps only someone who has adjusted their way of thinking to accommodate Leavis’s vision of language and creative collaboration, or its equivalent, would notice the difference between these two words in their respective contexts. Here in the first example we have, I would argue, a Leavisian instance of philosophy, or rather thought which is clearly shaped by adherence to a particular philosophy, being ‘weak on language’: weak in the sense that the writer appears to be insufficiently attentive to what the multi-dimensional existence of language *portends*.

The weakness is signalled at the outset in the cliché: ‘the human condition’. The French writer André Malraux might just have got away with this as the title of a novel in 1933 but a writer in 1995 needs to do a lot more work than Archer is doing here to make that phrase respectable. However, the most serious weakness, to my mind, occurs in the second part of the sentence. While Archer goes on to qualify ‘re-making’ as potentially ‘transforming our social inheritance’, it is notable that she describes this unambiguously as *always a restriction* of the power of the agent.

Of course, there are contexts in which it is salutary to speak of the restriction of power, even the creative use of power, such as with the power of laws and governments. And to stress the fact that we are born into a language we did not create makes sound sense. But how meaningful is the characterization of agential power here? This kind of insistence on the restriction and limitation of creative human potential is, for Leavis, a fundamental misapprehension of the nature of ‘creative thought’, for the same reason that it would for him be a fundamental misapprehension to emphasise the power of our minds as being restricted by our bodies. We commonly refer to certain uses of language as being ‘restricted’, as in artificial and highly specialized contexts. As far as Leavis is concerned, however, to talk of ‘thought, words and creativity’ (Leavis 1975) – and what is human agential power without this triumvirate? – as being restricted, not partially or under certain circumstances, but always and utterly, misses the point. If we follow Leavis’s logic, our thought is not restricted or confined by a language: on the contrary, language is what Leavis calls ‘our incomparable living ally’ (Leavis 1975: 25). Hence, when the poet T. S. Eliot refers approvingly to certain kinds of poetry having ‘confines’, Leavis retorts: [S26]

It is not, revealing not, *thought* that posits ‘poetry’ as something that can have ‘confines’: and such creative thought as Eliot commits himself to in *Four Quartets* (the ‘music’ of which actually entails self-commitment to creative battle) must take place, not on any confines, but on frontiers—the frontiers of language, which major creativity advances (Leavis 1976: 30).

I don’t know if Archer considers her own agential power as always restricted to re-making in the manner she describes as applying to humanity. It’s hard to imagine she does, given that she is widely regarded, and presumably considers herself, as seeking to make genuinely original contributions to thought, notably socio-educational thought. And while she is not a poet I presume that in the process of attempting to articulate and advance her own collaborative thought she is committing herself to an equivalent type of creative battle to the one Leavis sees applicable to Eliot and by extension to any responsible, self-reflexive writer, one that must take place not on confines but on frontiers. But isn’t there a self-contradiction between what Archer is saying and endorsing and the conditions that must obtain for her to be able to have said it, which are those which obtain for members of any speech community

and which apply with no less force to those using and developing its specialised forms of discourse?

The source of the kind of problem I am trying to pinpoint in this example, perhaps clumsily and certainly not technically, may or may not lie in the intricate depths of the tenets of critical realism. According to a Leavisian critical reading, however, the question of doctrinal provenance shouldn't stand in the way of the common reader coming to a reasonably informed judgement about a text's meaning, including when it is addressed to a technical, professional audience. I feel as a common reader that Archer has lost touch with certain fundamentals, even though it is only by virtue of such fundamentals that she comes to be seeking to advance her own thought philosophically and sociologically in the first place. I do not question the importance of some of the issues that Archer and those influenced by her work seek to address, including students' sense of agency and the urgency of self-reflexivity, any more than I wish to downplay the issue of pedagogic authority highlighted by Wyatt in his criticism of Leavis. There is undoubtedly more to be said on both sides; it would, for example, be interesting to have a critical realist's perspective on Leavis. But I see little evidence that the kind of limiting self-consciousness about language which I see at work in Archer would be recognized as such by many researchers, least of all regarded as a problem.

### **Conclusion**

Which brings me back in my conclusion to Leavisian pedagogy. The fundamental recognition for Leavis, who speaks as someone grounded in the humanities and in English, is about language as the collaborative creation of its speech community – a point pursued at some length by one of the most illuminating critics of Leavis, Michael Bell (1988). This recognition, as we've seen, lies at the heart of his conception of reality and of the idea of the collaborative interchange of thought and values expressed at its most succinct and explicit in his paradigm of the critical exchange. This paradigm, as I have suggested, incites us to conceive or reconceive of pedagogy in a number of fruitful, creative ways, provided we do not overlook its central assumption about the value of collaborative, everyday human creativity that maintains, contributes to, and we hope, enriches the human heritage and advances our knowledge of it and each other. But Leavis's disciplinary background is not the only reason or indeed the main reason why he stakes this claim. He is not saying this because he believes his idea or method is bigger than anyone else's or that it might not be expressed differently in philosophical or sociological forms of discourse. I hope I haven't been taken as arguing the case that Leavis sees no room for these. What is at stake here, it seems to me, is a conception of pedagogy, creativity and reflexivity as more than rhetorically transformatory. What would it really mean for our inquiries into the nature of teaching and learning if we were to take Leavis's ideas seriously? The recognitions at stake in Leavis's understanding of critical pedagogy are ones that remain to be met and assimilated. In furthering our appreciation of critical pedagogy, as of much else in the theory and practice of teaching and learning in higher education, Leavis's paradigm of critical exchange is still an irreplaceable exemplar and challenge.

### **Acknowledgement**

My thanks are due to Professor Paul Standish, Chair of Philosophy of Education, University College London/Institute of Education, for the invitation to present on Leavis to the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, and to the participants to the discussion on the day few if any of whom I should say in fairness agreed with my views about Margaret Archer.

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