

## REFLECTIONS ON OXFORD ADMISSIONS     Joseph Shaw

In mid December 2009 I took part in the Oxford University Admissions process, in a serious way for the fifth time, on behalf of St Benet's Hall (*Dr. Shaw is a Fellow in Philosophy at St. Benet's Hall - Ed.*). Admissions at Oxford is ludicrously demanding on the academic staff, but it is always very interesting, and my experience may be of interest to some of Faith in Home's homeschooling readers.

First of all, it really is true that we have far more applicants with three or four A grades at A Level (either actual or predicted) than we can take. Having four or more A Levels obviously looks good in this environment, but there is no way of telling which of the candidates with only three could have achieved more if their schools had allowed them to take more subjects. This is the problem of 'grade compression': the top 25% of candidates being squeezed into the top grade of a qualification, making it impossible to distinguish between them.

In response to this problem, from this Summer A\* grades will be awarded at A Level. The new Cambridge 'Pre U' exam will at the same time extend the grades much further upwards. In the meantime we are increasingly seeing candidates taking the International Baccalaureate. The top mark of 45 is regarded as equivalent to an impossible 6.5 A Level A grades, and candidates with a mark of 44 make regular appearances in our lists. I dislike the IB because the 'Theory of Knowledge' component has a bizarre syllabus which bears no relationship with Theory of Knowledge as it is understood in English-speaking philosophy, but this is a rather narrow basis for criticising it. In the longer term, A Levels are clearly going to be replaced with exams which are better at separating the good from the best, but for the moment the great majority of candidates still have them.

So you have to look at other parts of the UCAS form. Examination results are arranged in chronological order so above the A Levels or equivalent you can see the GCSEs. All the candidates I reviewed had between 8 and 11 GCSEs, and B grades were rare—most candidates have no more than one or two. Instead, you find yourself noting how many A\*s the better candidates have missed. In the case of one candidate I saw (I'll call him Frank), in addition to the four A grades he was predicted for A Level he had 8 A\*s and one A at GCSE. He must have been annoyed at this blot on his escutcheon, but I'll come back to him.

It is of course a very crude measure of a candidate that he's got a certain number of grades. However, it is beguilingly attractive to the poor saps doing admissions because it is quantifiable and it is (for what it is worth) objective. You can even get machines to do the comparisons for you. You can turn the grades into marks out of 100 and rank all the candidates applying for a course at the touch of a button. You can even give greater weight to some subjects than others and adjust whether you punish candidates for doing fewer subjects or not. In a world where you may have to give an explanation for your decisions, as an individual or an institution, this has its advantages, and the many universities which do not use interviews in admissions rely on them entirely. In Oxford, we use them to 'desummon' from interview a certain percentage of applicants, so we aren't overwhelmed by interviewees.

Some candidates are not desummoned, despite poor grades, because of special circumstances: participation in an 'access widening' scheme (i.e. a very bad school); a bereavement while sitting exams, or an unconventional educational background—and this might include homeschooling. The great majority of candidates who escape desummoning because of special circumstances are rejected at interview: they have to show that those circumstances have left them as good as those candidates with wall-to-wall GCSE A\*s.

People always want to know what we look for in a candidate, in interviews, but it is no secret. In some subjects there are skills which candidates must have to start the course—language skills, for example, or mathematical ones. These ought to be tested by their exams. The real use of an interview is to test corrigibility—whether the candidate can be taught. You see if he can follow an argument, respond to criticisms, think of examples, things like that. When you are teaching him

in the course itself, in a lecture or a tutorial, will he *get the point*? And it is in this, as well as in teaching school children how to read and write or add up, that the modern British educational system is failing spectacularly. For it is painfully clear that it is possible to get every accolade the school system can bestow and still be incorrigible—indeed, in many cases the approach to answering questions in which pupils are drilled to get the best marks is an education in incorrigibility. It actually makes them less teachable than they would otherwise have been.

Let's go back to Frank. His application form was a sight to behold. Judging from his references, a place in Oxford was almost beside the point—the boy deserved a Nobel Prize at least. He was no exam-taking machine: he had all sorts of outside interests, showing everything from heroic compassion to Churchillian leadership qualities. In class he was always the one with the incisive question and the grasp of the topic. He was logical, enquiring, and broad-minded. So into the interview he came, quietly confident, determined to strut his stuff.

So what, for a good school or an A Level examiner today, does being incisive, logical and all the rest actually mean? It turns out it means the ability to drivel both for and against on the hot-button issues of the hour: euthanasia, abortion, war, vegetarianism. Whatever question he was asked, Frank determined the 'hot topic' which must be at issue, and he would start to drivel, stating the case 'for' in a couple of minutes and then changing tack to the 'against' side. He clearly had the A Levels on toast. The questions are highly predictable, and examiners have boxes to tick as candidates make specified points, for and against a position. In Religious Studies and Philosophy A Level, these tend to be on the 'hot topics'—English Literature and other subjects do their best to cover them as well—and these naturally come up a lot in class discussion. Until he came into my interview room, Frank had never been expected to provide any analysis of a claim, to respond to unanticipated criticisms, or to think about basic moral principles and how they work. On the contrary, he had been patted on the back for his ability to recapitulate show-case arguments for and against on each topic, which were never expected to lead anywhere or be resolved in any way.

My approach in interviews is to try to get the candidate to see that what he is inclined to say about one case doesn't cohere with what any sensible person would say about another. I move the discussion away from the hot topics in order to get clearer about the moral principles which apply to them; it is easier to see the principles at work in uncontroversial examples.

When I tried to do this with Frank, he practically refused to follow my lead. I would ask him to consider an example, and he would start talking about a superficially similar example back on hot-topic territory. Asking what he thought about anything produced the for-and-against spiel which, inevitably, wasn't a coherent position, and could not readily be criticised or analysed. When I asked him for an example (of a moral right, say, or a widely accepted moral prohibition), he was paralysed.

He was the most extreme example, but the phenomenon was widespread. School pupils have been turned into machines for spewing out pre-prepared opinions, carefully balanced, on the controversial issues of the day, and the gaining of this faculty actually makes it harder for them to address the fundamental questions upon which those issues really depend, or indeed to think, in a real sense, at all. It is pleasant to see some candidates, not necessarily the ones with the most flawless marks, beginning to see what I wanted of them and responding with interest to a genuine intellectual task—seeing that they had got themselves into a muddle, trying different options to escape, applying a principle grasped in one case to another, and so on. At the end of the day we were able to find enough candidates we would be happy to teach to fill the places we had available, but the superabundance of candidates with three or more A grades at A Level by no means translates into a superabundance of candidates capable of benefiting from an Oxford education.

Depressingly, if the box-ticking approach of the A Level system is carried over into new qualifications, the 'super A grades' are not going to help. In the meantime, mastering the material expected by the A Level examiner is going to continue to be a necessary chore for anyone wishing to get into University, or even to be considered for admission. This needn't kill the brain, but it can.