August 15, 1998

THINK ON

Philosophy is a quintessentially modern discipline

For Immanuel Kant, the Enlightenment could be captured in two small words: *sapere aude* - "dare to think". When 3,500 individuals professionally devoted to this proposition are gathered under one roof, as happened at the 20th World Congress of Philosophy in Boston this week, the effect may be more of Babel than of 18th-century discourse. Modern philosophy speaks a bewildering variety of languages, from analytic logic to existentialism, poststructuralism, semiotics and the wilder shores of ecofeminism, and there is a fair degree of apartheid between its practitioners.

Hence the temptation to view the discipline as too rarefied and "academic" for mere mortals. Britons are notoriously wary of theory; the national prejudice is well captured by Kipling's "If you can think and not make thoughts your master . . ." Isaiah Berlin captured British hearts with his tongue-in-cheek remark that he had turned to political thought because "philosophy can only be done by very clever people". This is one of the few European countries where almost no school teaches philosophy. Yet in this age of uncertainty, when today's vocational training may be tomorrow's passport to redundancy, "dare to think" should be the motto pinned on the wall of every undergraduate room and recruitment agency. Philosophy is making a modest comeback in British universities, and not before time.

The great virtue of philosophy is that it teaches not what to think, but how to think. It is the study of meaning, of the principles underlying conduct, thought and knowledge. The skills it hones are the ability to analyse, to question orthodoxies and to express things clearly. However arcane some philosophical texts may be - and not everybody can come to grips with the demands of Austrian logical positivism - the ability to formulate questions and follow arguments is the essence of education.

It can also be studied at many levels. In the US, where the number of philosophy graduates has increased by 5 per cent a year during the 1990s, only a very few go on to become philosophers. Their employability, at 98.9 per cent, is impressive by any standard. Philosophy has always been a good training for the law; but it is equally useful for computer scientists. In this country, the Higher Education Statistics Survey puts philosophy of science right up with medicine in its employment record for graduates.

Philosophy is, in commercial jargon, the ultimate "transferable work skill". That is not the only argument for expanding philosophy departments, and encouraging sixth-formers to read

Plato, or John Stuart Mill on liberty. Chris Woodhead, the Chief Inspector of Schools, has cautioned against an obsession with the narrowly vocational. Lecturing the Confederation of British Industry on the "sly utilitarianism" of employers, he defends a liberal education as needing "no justification beyond the satisfaction and enjoyment that it brings". Teenagers waiting for their A level results and pondering degree courses should consider philosophy. It is rewarding in itself; and it could nowadays be the passport to a successful, varied career.