

Thoughtwashing: A Modern Curse?

Andy Fisher* & Freya Fisher**

Within philosophy classrooms in universities there is a practice which we have termed 'thoughtwashing'.

We can usefully think of thoughtwashing as acting in a way that gives the impression of philosophical thinking without genuine philosophical thinking.

Some examples of thoughtwashing could include: A student in a seminar stating, 'well, it depends what you mean...', or 'well, with a pause and concerned look, I hadn't considered it in that way'; a student employing phrases and structures in assessments to pass as philosophical writing; or plagiarism, where the student copies text from another philosopher's paper slightly altering it, so as to appear original; and, we are sure, the reader can think of many other examples.

Thoughtwashing is analogous to 'greenwashing', the practice of convincing a consumer that a product is 'green' without actually making the product green. The thoughtwashing student - and we think academics are involved in thoughtwashing as well, but that is a different story, engages in the talk, writing style and body language of genuine philosophical thinking without genuine philosophical thinking.

This comes about, we take it, because of the capitalist environment in which universities in the UK work. With the introduction of fees, a

cost/benefit/transactional mind-set has bled into philosophy classrooms.

As a company: why invest hard work and capital into radically changing the structures of your company if you can instead paint the original product green, add the word 'renewable', and see profits soar? As a student: why invest the time and become vulnerable through admitting that you genuinely don't know, when you can simply give that impression, and reap the rewards? After all, the short term payoff is great and the chance of being 'found out' is negligible.

Exams are one of the major enablers of thoughtwashing. How can you be a genuine philosophical thinker if you don't have space or time to think? How often are exam questions just a rehash of A-Level questions? And, just as a consumer buying a product often doesn't have the time to check the small print about a product's green credentials, academics don't have the time to expose thoughtwashing. Just consider how long it would take to run vivas, which seem like they have the potential to prevent thoughtwashing.

It is not just time which is a barrier to academics preventing and exposing thoughtwashing. There is no training that explains how to safely identify and expose thoughtwashing. And even if it were exposed, what is the correct course of action? Rather, for academics and students alike, it is a far easier, quieter life, to perpetuate thoughtwashing. Just as greenwashing is a problem we have created, are aware of, don't want and yet perpetuate, the seemingly unavoidable perpetuation of 'thoughtwashing' is the problem's most galling aspect.

There are some differences of course. With greenwashing, it seems completely fair to lay the blame squarely at the feet of big businesses. This is true because there is a generally agreed upon, easily accessible understanding of 'green', 'sustainable', 'renewable' and 'recyclable'. So, big business can reasonably be expected to know what these things mean, and what it takes to be acting in accordance with them. Moreover, they often have the means to alter their products in order to make them greener.

However, it seems unfair to say the same of students. Controversially, we think that, since primary education, the skill of thoughtwashing has been trained, honed and rewarded in students. There are few spaces in formal education for philosophical thinking or learning the skills it requires. There is no common understanding amongst students regarding how it 'feels' to be engaged in genuine philosophical thinking, and it is unclear where, or how, to start. So, the student is lost, with no point of reference.

It is, we suggest, uncertain in the current capitalist educational system whether the eradication of thoughtwashing is even possible. Our suspicion is that it is not, and worse, that in trying to do so, we would make the scope and depth of the thoughtwashing more sophisticated and consequently harder to spot. Consider, analogously, the steps a company will take to appear 'really sustainable this time!' when called out on their greenwashing, instead of actually making their product 'green'; given an increased scrutiny, their motivation is 'how can we get away with it?', and not 'how can we make our practice authentic?'.

We think that in the long run thoughtwashing can only be a bad thing. Just as greenwashed products will fail to do what they say,

The logo for pesgb, consisting of the lowercase letters 'pesgb' in a white, sans-serif font, centered within a solid teal square.

and instead pollute the environment and bring ecosystems to their knees. People who thoughtwash will weaken systems, relationships, politics and cultures. To adapt an environmentalist slogan: thoughtwash today, suffer tomorrow.

***Professor Andy Fisher** is a member of the philosophy department at Nottingham University. He has published on philosophy of education, metaethics, technology and teaching. He has taught philosophy to primary school children across Nottingham for the last 15 years.

With Mark Dimmock he has published a highly successful free A-level ethics text book, [*Ethics for A-Level*](#). You can find out more about his work [here](#).

****Freya Fisher** is a second year philosophy student at the University of Sheffield. She is particularly interested in logic, philosophy of education and social philosophy.