

Philosophy Teaching as Intellectual Affirmative Action

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There is general agreement that the goal of courses such as those in critical thinking or applied ethics is to inculcate in the students an ability to cogently criticize and construct various sorts of non-technical arguments. Furthermore, many teachers of such philosophy courses tend to focus specifically on arguments dealing with contemporary social or political issues.¹ Students are generally told that to properly exercise their thinking skills they must, at least temporarily, set aside their prior personal beliefs, and examine the arguments in question simply on their own merits from an objective, neutral point of view. Teachers usually attempt to demonstrate this stance in their own participation in class discussion. It is often said, after all, that modeling is the most effective form of teaching. If the goal is to produce fair-minded reasoners, it seems logical that the pedagogic stance of teachers should not betray any bias towards any particular point of view. All opinions should be given equal weight in the classroom, and judged solely on their intrinsic merits as a consequence.

While I join in the consensual formulation of the goals of critical thinking and applied philosophy courses, I believe the reasoning which leads from these goals to the pedagogical stance adumbrated above is seriously flawed. I believe that, in its inattention to the social context in which philosophy is taught, its model of neutral pedagogy is analogous to the position that the way to reach a non-racist or non-sexist society is to be blind to color or gender in the present society. Given prevalent racism and sexism, however, being color or sex blind is not really an alternative to prejudice, but it is rather the condition of its perpetuation. Similarly, given the students' existing prejudices, the teacher's neutrality is not an alternative to their prejudices on social issues, it rather allows their perpetuation. What is required in all these cases is some sort of affirmative action to redress past prejudice. To achieve the goals of a course in critical thinking, then, I believe teachers must consequently conceive of their task as practicing a kind of intellectual affirmative action in advocating minority views, rather than conceiving of their task as modeling neutrality.

This departure from usual pedagogic norms requires theoretical justification, since it will undoubtedly raise fears in some that some sort of indoctrination in

which teachers abuse their power in the classroom is being advocated. Providing this justification is the task I have set myself in this paper. I shall argue that what I shall call the principle of advocative pedagogy fits the stated goals of critical thinking and related courses better than the alternative, and that it is not an unethical practice. Given the limitations of this paper, however, I shall not be able to provide much in the way of practical guidance as to how this principle is to be implemented in the classroom. I trust the sort of teaching strategy I have in mind will be made sufficiently clear by the ensuing discussion for readers to call to mind their own examples of its application.

The argument for advocative rather than neutral pedagogy has both liberal and radical versions. An exemplary model of the former can be found in the theory of John Stuart Mill, and of the latter in the theory of Herbert Marcuse. In a passage from *On Liberty* in which Mill is discussing the progress of truth through the interplay of opposing ideas, he writes:

...if either of the two opinions has a better claim than the other, not merely to be tolerated, but to be encouraged and countenanced, it is the one which happens at the particular time and place to be in a minority. That is the opinion which, for the time being, represents the neglected interest, the side of human well-being which is in danger of obtaining less than its share.²

The point here is that for one to have a realistic expectation that a person with no particular bias will reach a cogent judgement on the issue in question, the weight of argument adduced for that person's consideration must be tilted towards the minority side of the question, so as to overcome the society's general bias towards the dominant, accepted view, a bias which one can reasonably expect individuals in that society to have internalized. This is a perspective shared by both radicals and liberals which would lead one to adopt the principle of advocative pedagogy. One recognizes that, in a social context, "neutrality" favors the status quo. Nonetheless, two issues, one conceptual and one methodological, differentiate Mill's from the radical position. To begin with, one may note that since the point is hypothetically stated (i.e. "if" either position has a claim to greater advocacy), one could argue that Mill is not really espousing the position I attribute to him. I would argue, however, that in the context of the entire essay it is clear that this "if" is merely stylistic, and Mill is indeed advocating that minority views deserve "not merely to be tolerated, but to be encouraged and countenanced" because only in this way can they gain a serious hearing. If this reading of Mill is granted, then the more significant issue which emerges here is that for Mill the minority view is merely "in danger of" being given less attention than it merits. This rests on Mill's judgement that present-day European nations have "long since reached" the general level of rationality at which people can properly be said to be independently exercising their rational faculties of judgement. As Mill puts it in his infamous justification of Western benevolent despotism over inferior nations:

Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion.³

That the requisite level of autonomy has been reached to enable individuals to function as enlightened consumers in the free marketplace of ideas is an empirical proposition which the radical position disputes. It follows from the radical position that the minority view is not merely "in danger of" being neglected, with the liberal implication that one has only to devise ways to hold liberal society up to its own norm to overcome this danger. The radical position, as we shall see, holds that our society is intrinsically structured so as to prevent proper consideration of minority views.

The second issue differentiating the radical from the liberal position has to do with how one identifies a "minority" view. For Mill, this is simply a numerical calculation. Minority positions are simply those held by the minority of the population. From the radical point of view, however, the classification of a view as a "minority" one is a matter of political judgment, not statistical sampling. The issue of sexism clearly illustrates the difference. Women constitute a political minority but a numerical majority.⁴ If we return to the analogy with affirmative action, one can see that there is precedent for the radical criterion even on the liberal model. There are, after all, many groups which constitute numerical minorities in our society, groups which even have their own social or political organizations, from left-handers and redheads to all sorts of white ethnic minority groups. Yet only certain groups are classified as "minorities" for affirmative action purposes. This is clearly a political judgement. It seems to me to hinge on a sense that the relevant minorities are in some sense what I shall call "constructed" rather than "natural" minorities. That is to say, the relevant minorities for affirmative action purposes are held to be those minorities whose minority status has in large part resulted from some direct actions wrongly taken or not taken towards them by the society at large, rather than resulting simply from membership in the group happening to be a numerically insufficient occurrence to constitute a majority. The group is held to have less than its legitimate share of the society's resources to propagate its views because some sort of illegitimate constraint has been applied to it, either in the present or in the past of such a nature that its deleterious effects are still felt.

Given this methodological commitment of the radical stance, one must then ascertain what results it yields. The radical position holds that the minority views which must be more actively advanced to achieve parity with "the privileged position held by the predominant interests"⁵ are essentially the views of the left. This is based on two contentions, one empirical and one theoretical. The empirical proposition is that a study of history will show that the views of the left have not gained ascendancy because of campaigns waged against them by the established order. Tactics in this campaign have ranged from peremptory dismissal of leftist ideas as nonsensical or impractical, to co-optation of the least threatening of them coupled with a use of this co-optation as evidence for the superiority of the established society over the faction whose ideas have been appropriated, to direct repression, from overt political violence to more subtle economic man-

ipulation or social condemnation. The left is thus a minority not simply because it has failed to convince a majority to subscribe to its tenets on their own merits, but rather because it is a “constructed” minority in the sense described above, therefore meriting compensatory treatment.

One might, of course, argue that the same could be said of the radical right, whose ideas are also unwelcome by the liberal center. An answer to this objection must invoke the radical position’s second, theoretical proposition just alluded to, which holds that an objective analysis of the content of ideas of the left, right, and center shows that it is only the ideas of the left which are in fact in opposition to the established society. The right, it is claimed, while often distasteful political bedfellows to the center, nonetheless constitutes part of the established majority, not the suppressed minority, since it advances dominant interests. The radical position argues that historical confirmation of this contention can be gained by noting that, when push comes to shove, so to speak, the liberal center has shown a disturbing tendency to topple to the right rather than the left.⁶

This is an obviously controversial thesis. Much of Marcuse’s essay on “Repressive Tolerance,” which advances this argument, is devoted to defending it against the charge that it is merely a subterfuge for advocating repression *from* rather than *of* the left. An adequate discussion of the validity of this thesis is clearly beyond the scope of the present essay. Of primary concern here, however, is how it serves to further differentiate the radical from the liberal version of the principle of advocative pedagogy. Mill’s argument invokes general principles of majority/minority relations, such as majoritarian intolerance or the need for a “devil’s advocate” against one’s own views to fully appreciate them, which rely on sociological or psychological generalizations applicable to all societies past the requisite age of maturity. Marcuse’s analysis, in contrast, is specific to advanced capitalist societies. It is these societies, made up of “indoctrinated individuals who parrot, as their own, the opinion of their masters,”⁷ in which “breaking the tyranny of public opinion and its makers in the closed society”⁸ requires awareness that “unless the student learns to think in the opposite direction, he [or she] will be inclined to place the facts into the predominant framework of values.”⁹ Thus, in contrast to Mill, for Marcuse advocative pedagogy is required not simply to forestall a possible lapse in otherwise normally exercised independent judgement, but to create a conceptual space in which, if the teacher has been able to successfully counter the normal bias in favor of the status quo, students would be able, perhaps for the first time, to exercise truly independent judgement.

Since my primary purpose in this paper is to espouse the principle of advocative pedagogy, as a required kind of intellectual affirmative action, against the paradigm of pedagogic neutrality, I could have simply neutrally stated both versions of this principle, and invited the reader to choose between them. Nonetheless, I choose to take a bit of my own advice about advocacy, and state that I find the radical version more compelling. While for me personally this radical stance is a matter of both political and pedagogic conviction, I wish here to recommend it to others only on pedagogic grounds. I believe that its analysis

of the depth and nature of students' resistance to ideas which challenge the notions they enter the classroom with more adequately captures and explains problems I have encountered in the classroom than the alternative. Given that philosophy aims to aid the students in reaching intellectual autonomy, I therefore believe the radical concept of a kind of counter-pedagogy is a better guide than the liberal concept of merely preventing lapses in objectivity. I recognize, however, that many will have reservations about this approach. I can anticipate two significant fears I expect many may have about implementing this strategy which I would like to conclude by addressing.

First of all, I fear I may have left the impression that I advocate teachers presenting and advocating in their classes the most extreme views they can find. After all, if the students' minds are as heavily indoctrinated with conformist ideology as the radical position suggests, it seems plausible that only extreme positions have a chance of shaking them out of their doldrums. To explain why my argument does not entail this conclusion, it may be useful to have recourse to a distinction made by William James in "The Will to Believe," a distinction I believe all teachers should bear in mind. James distinguishes between hypotheses as *live* or *dead* in the following manner:

A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature—it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however, (even if he be not one of the Mahdi's followers), the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: it is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker.¹⁰

A pedagogically effective discussion must revolve around live hypotheses. If the propositions proposed for the students' consideration are too far removed from their present beliefs, they cannot enliven their minds. I recall that many years ago I was told by a friend who was a leftist political activist that the most progressive position one could take at any given moment was the position one step to the left of the person one was talking to. I still find this sage advice, and an exemplar of the best way to truly expand students' intellectual horizons. I hope it is clear that, for much the same reasons plus simple respect for other views, I am not recommending that teachers in any way harangue students with leftist diatribe or rhetoric, but simply that teachers have an obligation to plausibly and seriously present these views.

The second concern I anticipate will come from those, of all political persuasions, who fear I am proposing some sort of reverse loyalty test for teachers. An important point in favor of the neutrality model is that the political convictions of the teacher are not relevant to one's teaching qualifications or credentials. Civil libertarians would quite rightly rebel at the suggestion that one needed some sort of leftist political affiliation to effectively teach social or political philosophy. To respond to this criticism, I must recall the distinction I made earlier between recommending the principle of advocative pedagogy on

pedagogic vs. political grounds. My concern here is solely with the *persona* assumed in the classroom, not with the individual's actual beliefs. The neutrality model makes this same distinction. After all, it is not recommended that we really *be* neutral regarding the issues raised in the classroom, simply that we *appear* to be so. Similarly, I advocate arguing from the left as a matter of pedagogic necessity, not as a matter of political strategy. I believe most of us have had the experience as teachers of playing devil's advocate for positions we find preposterous or even distasteful that this recommendation will not be too taxing on the histrionic abilities or ethical convictions of those who do not subscribe to leftist views. Of course it does follow from my argument that teachers must be knowledgeable in the area of leftist social and political theory, but this is no more than a requirement that teachers be competent in the full range of their field. Nor am I advocating that teachers ignore or gloss over reasoning defects on the left, or that they ignore arguments from the right. The point is to create a context in which leftist views can be reasonably appreciated, not to propagandize for them, and divergent positions on any questions must be considered before the true significance and fullest implications of any view can be realized.

Perhaps the most fundamental point I wish to make is the necessity of recognizing the significance of the social context in which what we teach will be received, and the need to take affirmative action against ingrained biases. For example, such sensitivities to context have led me in the past year to radically change the tone of my introductory remarks at the beginning of the semester. In the interests of fostering an atmosphere of objective analysis, I used to stress the need for tolerance, of detachment from adherence to a particular view. I have recently come to see, however, that my undergraduate students are in some sense already overly detached from moral judgments. They have a tendency, as one writer recently put it, "to replace the demands of ethical judgment with the deferrals of tolerance and understanding."¹¹ They tend to talk as if they believed their sole moral obligation was not to pass judgment on others, as if reaching moral conclusions were some sort of totalitarian act against others by imposing one's will on them. In the face of this extreme ethical relativism, I now find myself, to my surprise, stressing in my introductory remarks the need to take a stance, to make moral commitments, to be ethically engaged. It seems to me necessary, in the current situation, for these reasons to be critical of the neutral, detached model of pedagogy, and instead to present the students with a model of someone rationally engaged in ethical commitments. Otherwise, given the likelihood that our best students will be the ones most likely to take our model to heart, we run the risk of perpetuating the situation described by Yeats in *The Second Coming*, wherein the best lack all conviction, and the worst are filled with passionate intensity.

I have tried to present a case for teaching from the left on pedagogic rather than political grounds. Yet some may still object that, even if such teaching accomplishes laudable objectives, it is impermissible on moral grounds because, as Linda Bomstad put it in a response to an earlier version of this paper, the

stance I take “is morally suspect because it violates students’ autonomy” because it “is tantamount to proselytizing.”

Such criticisms form part of what Michael Goldman, in an article entitled “On Moral Relativism, Advocacy, and Teaching Normative Ethics,” calls “the perennial debate about ‘advocacy.’”¹² I shall let Goldman’s reply in that article to Elias Baumgarten’s “The Ethical and Social Responsibilities of Philosophy Teachers” stand for mine to Bomstad:

To advocate a position is not to manipulate or coerce; it is, at least as I and those I know who support the position believe, to offer the most intellectually and rationally compelling reasons one can in its favor. It is not to ignore or even to slight alternatives.¹³

Furthermore, as Goldman notes in the same paper, in honestly and straightforwardly advocating a position, making explicit its attendant presuppositions and implications, the philosophy teacher represents “a model of self-assurance, pride, and individuality, as opposed to the manipulator in non-advocacy clothes” who joins the society at large in presenting its implicit assumptions and views “through manipulation disguised as neutrality, through direct and indirect propaganda, etc.”¹⁴

Lest I be misunderstood, I would add that my line of argument should be differentiated from that of many in the “advocacy vs. neutrality” debate as it has appeared over a number of years in the pages of *Teaching Philosophy* and *Metaphilosophy*.¹⁵ Much of this literature argues over the morality of advocacy vs. neutrality on epistemological or moral grounds on the assumption that the teacher believes some point of view to be true. The question taken up then is whether teachers have a right to advocate such a view or whether they are required to abstain from such advocacy. Here, contra the argument that advocacy represents an abuse of the students’ trust and the teacher’s authority, the argument has been advanced that by refraining from such advocacy, one is deceiving the students, presumably motivated by either fear or condescension regarding their abilities to deal with the teacher’s professions. This point of view notes that professors were once expected to *profess* in this fashion, and sees abstention from such professions as a kind of morally suspect deception or inauthenticity.¹⁶

In contrast to the terms of discourse of this debate, I have tried to argue for teaching from the left not as a consequence of the teacher’s leftist convictions, but as a consequence of an analysis of the students’ need for a counter-pedagogy which combats the established anti-leftist frame of reference, thereby helping to liberate students from uncritical acceptance of established conceptions. I hold that leftist pedagogy should enter the classroom regardless of the teacher’s convictions, on the basis of one’s social obligations, not one’s individual rights, as a teacher. I believe that such a stance is not only permissible by the proper standards of moral integrity, but also required by the proper standards of intellectual integrity. My argument entails not that teachers believe themselves in possession of some truth, but merely that certain conditions are more conducive to the likelihood of the truth’s being discovered than others. The argument is

pragmatic, not dogmatic.

It may be objected that there is a certain circularity to my reasoning, in that the alleged anti-leftist bias of established discourse will only be seen, some may claim, by those with initially leftist pre-conceptions. Personally, I do not believe that this is so. I believe this bias will emerge clearly enough from any probing, non-partisan analysis of our contemporary society. However, if a certain kind of circularity is involved, I believe it is one common to *all* empirical investigation which, the protestations of certain hard-line empiricists notwithstanding, remains theory-dependent.

My hopes for this essay are that it engender greater discussion of the hitherto to some extent hidden political agenda of philosophy teaching. I believe philosophy is, if properly taught, inherently subversive of the established order, and that it is so in the highest intellectual tradition, just as Socrates was, though he tried, to no avail, to deny it, much as the model of neutral pedagogy attempts to deny philosophy's inherent political thrust.¹⁷ While courses such as those in critical thinking are usually conceived of as propaedeutic to logic, I believe they are more often than not actually taught as propaedeutic to social and political philosophy. I believe we should bring our theory more into line with our practice. I hope ensuing discussion on this topic will have a salutary effect on the teaching of philosophy by bringing its politics out of the closet, making us more self-conscious and analytical about our pedagogy, and hence more effective.¹⁸

Notes

This paper was first presented at a meeting of the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking, Pacific Division, March, 1985, San Francisco. My thanks to Linda Bomstad for her comments at that meeting, and for subsequently typing them up and sending them to me. Also, I thank Arnold Wilson and the journal's anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions.

1. See Harry Brod, "Logic and Politics: An Approach to Teaching Informal Reasoning," *Teaching Philosophy* 5:3, July 1982, 211-19.

2. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Currin Shields (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980, orig. 1859), 58.

3. Mill, 14.

4. Hence the appropriateness of the title of a volume of essays on the male sex role: *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority*, ed. Deborah S. David and Robert Brannon (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1976).

5. Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 85.

6. The paradigm case here is the rise of fascism.

7. Marcuse, 90.

8. Marcuse, 106.

9. Marcuse, 113.

10. William James, "The Will to Believe," in *Essays on Faith and Morals*, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947), 33-34. James' audience for the original address, published in the *New World*, June 1896, was the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. He evidently felt safe in assuming there were no Arabs in the audience.

11. Berel Lang, "Tolerance and Evil: Teaching the Holocaust," *Teaching Philosophy*, 7:3, July 1984, 201.

12. Michael Goldman, "On Moral Relativism, Advocacy, and Teaching Normative Ethics," *Teaching Philosophy* 4:1, January 1981, 6.

13. Goldman, "Moral Relativism," 8. Baumgarten's article appears in *Metaphilosophy* 11:2, April 1980, 182-91.

14. Goldman, 9.

15. In addition to those already cited, especially relevant are Michael Goldman, "Institutional Obstacles to the Teaching of Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy* 6:3-4, July-October 1975, 338-46; Hugh T. Wilder, "Tolerance and Teaching Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy* 9:3&4, July/October 1978, 311-23, and Richard Momeyer, "Teaching as a Moral Activity," *Teaching Philosophy* 3:2, Fall 1979, 133-44.

16. See Goldman, "Institutional Obstacles," 339-43, Momeyer 137, and Wilder 322.

17. Cf. Diane Raymond, "Moral Commitment and Teaching Philosophy," *Teaching Philosophy* 5:2, April 1982, 97-108.

18. Though I do not make the argument here, I believe that if one substitutes "feminist" for "leftist" and "patriarchal" for "capitalist" in the preceding essay, one can construct a valid analogous argument for teaching from a feminist standpoint in similarly appropriate circumstances, e.g. a Philosophy of Feminism course. As Alison Jaggar put it in "Male Instructors, Feminism, and Women's Studies" (*Teaching Philosophy* 2:3&4, 1977-78, p. 254):

The critical approach which should be the hallmark of philosophy.... means that advocacy is an inescapable part of teaching and that the persuasion of students is a traditional and legitimate goal in all areas of education. Such persuasion may be described as indoctrination only when it results from the use of irrational and therefore illegitimate techniques. Commitment is not the same as dogmatism.

For a discussion which raises the sorts of questions dealt with here in the context of the debate between liberalism and Marxism regarding the intellectual autonomy of the electorate but reaches conclusions opposed to mine, see Barry Holden, "Liberal Democracy and the Social Determination of Ideas" in *Liberal Democracy, Nomos XXV, Yearbook of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy*, ed. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 289-312.

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