



Book Review

Clark G. Porter and James M. Girsch. *Make Up Your Mind: A Classroom Guide to 10 Age-Old Debates*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press, 2011. 221 pages. \$25.95 paperback. ISBN 978-1-59363-714-9

According to the authors, this book was written explicitly with “gifted middle school students in mind,” but “high school students will also benefit from these lessons.” There are twelve chapters; the first two (“How To Use This Book” and “Thinking Philosophically”) are quite short (a total of ten pages) and functioning essentially as an introduction for teachers on engaging students in the age-old topics covered in the remainder of the book. Those are: (1) Nature vs. Nurture, (2) Deduction vs. Induction, (3) Absolutism vs. Relativism, (4) Discovered Math vs. Invented Math, (5) Reason vs. Revelation, (6) Free Will vs. Determinism, (7) Liberalism vs. Conservatism, (8) Free Markets vs. Regulated Markets, (9) Safety vs. Risk, and (10) Melting Pot vs. Melting Not.

Each chapter covering one of these topics includes an introduction for teachers, with overall objectives, background information, and materials for lesson planning, some suggested classroom activities (such as scripts for students to perform), and evaluation criteria (such as quizzes). For example, in chapter 5 (on Absolutism vs. Relativism), the authors identify several objectives: Students will compare two major conceptual foundations (i.e. absolutism and relativism) for determining what behavior is ethical/unethical, students will deconstruct ethical conflicts arising from cultural differences, students will analyze the relative merits of absolutist and relativist approaches, students will evaluate current controversies stemming from the conflict between absolutist and relativist ethics, and students will create an ethical dilemma (page 63)

The introductory material consists of four pages of commentary on the nature of ethical absolutism and relativism, including motivations for and critiques of both. Suggested classroom activities include a short script for students to perform on the issue of arranged marriages, accompanied by a set of questions for students to write short reflective essays (such as: “Has Najja been taught to follow a traditional role for women in her culture, or has she been brainwashed? Explain your answer;” and “What is the difference between being taught and being brainwashed?”). Another classroom activity focuses on the issue of lifeboat ethics, asking students how to decide what should be done and how to decide this in the context of not being able to save everyone in the imperiled lifeboat. Evaluative criteria for this chapter include grading students’ written work on the basis of analysis/evaluation of concepts, organization of their work, neatness/appearance, and usage/mechanics. There is a similar structure for the other topics that are covered in other chapters.

The authors also offer “suggestions from the trenches” on how to keep students engaged with these topics. These suggestions are about tactics on “keeping the discussion alive,” such as controlling the size of any group of students for a given activity, laying out ground rules clearly and firmly, helping students learn how to have a genuine discussion (as opposed to simply talking at each other), not pushing an agenda (although helping to guide students to stay on target), and not trying to reach any specific conclusion or right answer. They also suggest other specific classroom tactics (which most teachers would recognize as obvious), such as monitoring the small group discussions, making sure that students “have the floor” in order to speak so as to avoid chaos, even having students move to other groups in an effort to stimulate and cross-pollinate discussions and divergent views.

As can be seen from the constellation of topics covered in this book, the authors have tried to provide topics that span the broad philosophical areas of metaphysics (with nature/nurture, free will/determinism, and discovered/invented math), epistemology (with deduction/induction and reason/revelation), and axiology (with absolutism/relativism, liberalism/conservatism, and the final chapters on markets, risk, and social assimilation). Because each chapter is independent of all the others, individual teachers can select among them for classroom use.

Indeed, given the spread of topics it might be difficult for all of them to be covered by a single teacher. While the independence of each chapter is a virtue of this book, one might have wished for helpful guidance on synthesizing the various topics so that students can better see and appreciate their interconnectedness. For instance, having covered issues within the topic of nature/nurture, it would be useful to later have classroom activities and exercises connecting those discussions and any conclusions to the topic of liberalism/conservatism or safety/risk. This might also have the value of helping students see and appreciate not only the interconnectedness of philosophical issues, but also the interconnectedness of philosophy with other (such as economic or political) disciplines and concerns. Of course, teachers can do this on their own, without materials from this book, but such suggestions or guidance would have been both an added virtue and added value. Helping students to see and appreciate such interconnections would also demonstrate and reinforce for them the value and practicality of engaging with these topics and with philosophical approaches to them, as well as helping them see and appreciate the philosophical underpinnings of so many things that they encounter in their daily lives. So, while this book succeeds (I believe) quite well in demonstrating and engaging the analytic function of philosophy (the understanding and clarifying of topics and concerns), it does not do as well demonstrating and engaging the synthetic function of philosophy (the interconnectedness of these topics and concerns). Nonetheless, this omission can be remedied by good, thoughtful teaching and it does not detract from the virtues of the book. The authors provide accessible, fruitful, and helpful materials and this book deserves widespread use.

David Boersema

Questions is being reinvented!

Behind the scenes a lot of work is going on for a new look and increased social media presence. Look for these changes to roll out between now and the next issue.

An early thank you to Doug Umberger, BryAnn Peirson, Jason Pallotti, and the participants in our focus group studies for all their hard work and insight in to how to make *Questions* an even better resource for all of you!

Author Bios

David Boersema is the chair of the Philosophy Department at Pacific University, in Forest Grove, Oregon, where he has taught since 1985. He is a former member of the APA Committee on Pre-College Instruction of Philosophy. He teaches and publishes in the areas of philosophy of science, philosophy of language, and human rights. He is the general editor of the journal *Essays in Philosophy* and the book review editor for the journal *Teaching Philosophy*.

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