The Advocacy Method

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Introduction

This paper presents an outline of the advocacy method of teaching philosophy and attempts to answer what I take to be probable objections to that method. Before beginning, however, I would like to make a few remarks. First, I assume that there is something seriously wrong with the state of the teaching of philosophy. It seems to me that most teachers of philosophy are failing in their attempt to get students interested in doing philosophy. In this paper, I suggest a partial remedy for that situation. I point out, however, that one need not share my assumption. One could claim that there is no crisis but might still use the method to make the situation better.

Second, the method in theory and practice has a distinct Jamesian "flavor". A good part of the method was generated by reading and teaching from *Essays on Faith and Morals.*

Third, the method may appear novel, radical, or outrageous. It makes use of sophistry and rhetoric. It may be claimed that such methods are unacceptable in teaching philosophy. But if we accept this objection we should ban teachers like Socrates and Philonous from the profession. I maintain that the advocacy method is very much in the tradition of the dialogue form. Indeed, an apt subheading for this paper would be "Some New Names for Some Old Ways of Teaching Philosophy".

Fourth, I have only been using the advocacy method for three years (in introductory classes only). My "data" therefore is, at best, sketchy. My only claim is that the method has worked successfully for me, and for a colleague, and that I believe the same success could be achieved by any competent user of the method. Students have gotten seriously interested in, for example, the problem of induction when introduced to it by the advocacy method. As most teachers would admit, this is an achievement.

The Method

One first presents to a class a given philosophical thesis (hard determinism, for example) as coherently and clearly as one can. One attempts to get the student to think of this thesis as the only reasonable thesis. Meanwhile one studiously refrains from mentioning any of the unpalatable consequences of that thesis or any of the difficulties connected with it.

If one is lucky, the student will "internalize" the thesis. He will now call it his own. For example, if determinism is the thesis in question, then the student will, as it were, adopt the attitude of a determinist. That is, when presented with an event Y he will assume necessarily a causal X. Determinism will now be part of his credo, an article of faith.

At this point, the particular article of faith is not one for which the student would die. It is probably not even one for which the student would risk a mild case of influenza. One must get the student seriously concerned about his belief. One attempts to do so by means of the following activities:

Present a competing thesis (indeterminism, for example). Begin by listing as many difficulties with that thesis as you can muster, but only difficulties that one can overcome. (It should be remembered that, if one was successful, the original thesis was taken to be the only reasonable thesis. Obviously, a fundamental charge against the second or counter-thesis will be one of unreasonableness.) One should then begin the process of overcoming these difficulties while at the same time advocating the counter-thesis. One should pull out, as it were, every trick he can use from the rhetorician's bag.

Next, return to the original thesis and begin pointing out the consequences of maintaining that thesis. "If you maintain X then you must maintain Y". What one wants to do is show that some of the practical consequences of the thesis in question are totally unpalatable to the student. The student is then faced with the following alternatives: (a) Opt for the "reasonable" thesis and accept the consequences. (b) Reject the "reasonable" thesis and reject the consequences. (c) Opt for the second thesis and ascertain what consequences follow from it.

Explanation

The method, as outlined above, has no "time-component" packed into it. On the average, I have found that a period of two or three weeks is about the usual time it takes to use the method to its fullest advantage. The method is flexible enough, however, to be used in a single class—if the topic is small enough and the teacher can move fast enough.

This sketch of the method is an idealization. In this paper I have assumed that all students would always react in a particular manner. In practice, one usually does not find this universality of a given reaction. It is important to realize that the more effectively one is using the method the more uniform will be the student's reaction. Uniformity of reaction is crucial to the method and is a test of the effectiveness of the method. When the student gets around to facing his alternatives one wants him to believe that he is in a crisis situation. One of the best ways to engender this belief is to have everybody around him telling the student that he and they are in a crisis situation.

Now, it may be charged that uniformity of reaction is inimical to the teaching of philosophy, *i.e.,* we want people who can think and not automatons. However, this charge is mistaken. It is like saying that teaching uniformity in grammar is inimical to good writing. The advocacy method does not attempt to "legislate" uniformity for all time. That attempt, of course, would be inimical to philosophy and the teaching of philosophy. The only thing that the advocacy method claims is that uniformity at t_1 and t_2 can lead to independence of thought at t_3. Briefly, the method can lead to that time when the student can do philosophy.

It may also be charged that the creation of a "crisis situation" is phony or trumped up, that it is the teacher's rhetoric that creates the crisis. If the student could see the scaffolding, then he would see how fragile the building really is. Remove a sophistical plank here and all comes tumbling down. If the student had adequate knowledge of what the teacher was up to, the student would see that there is no real crisis. However, this charge is easily overcome. It does not matter who creates the crisis. It does not matter that the problem is solvable by a "rhetoric-antidote". (Indeed, many real life crises are created by people in authority who bandy fallacies around like clubs.) What does matter is that people in crisis situations are forced to decide, to act. This is precisely what the advocacy method attempts to get the student to do.

With these explanatory comments we can now review the method as presented in the preceding section.

1. *The student should think of X as the only reasonable thesis.*

It should be remembered that to the beginning student philosophy is as foreign and esoteric as physics or calculus. The student has to learn a new vocabulary and a new way of reasoning. He has to learn to tackle problems from a new viewpoint. In short, he has to learn a new way of thinking. Therefore, what one wants to do is give the students some guide-posts, some familiar landmarks. One wants to give the student some place to start from. A good way of doing this and, happily, a way which is essential to the advocacy method is by means of presenting a "problem-free" thesis. The thesis that is presented is one which, at first glance, appears to have no problems. It is one which the student is led to believe is accepted by all philosophers. It is, as it were, a thesis which any reasonable man would accept. It should be remembered what one is trying to do. One is trying to get students interested in philosophy. One may and, according to the advocacy method, must play loose with the truth.

2. *The student "internalizes" the thesis.*

The best way of unpacking the sense of "internalization" that we are after here is by means of an example. A first year student is attending his first class in physics. The instructor tells him that throughout the course of the year they (the instructor and the class) will be making use of a notion of "theoretical entities". "Entities" denoted by that term will be constructs necessary for the maintenance of a theory. The term "theoretical entity" will not denote anything extra-theoretical. This notion becomes an unquestioned first principle—a principle which makes progress in the class, at least, possible. If the student is only fulfilling a course requirement then this notion will probably only be part of his intellectual make-up for a semester or two, *i.e.,* the degree of internalization is low. If the student wants to go on in physics then, hopefully, the degree of internalization will be high. And if the student does go on in physics he will eventually run into a competing thesis, *viz.,* the view that those entities are not simply theoretical.

It would seem a safe assumption that most students will internalize a thesis (the first one presented) and that their degree of internalization will be low. The method demands, however, that *all* students internalize the thesis. Again, uniformity is what should be strived for and is a test of the effectiveness of the method. Therefore, one ought to present the thesis as a first principle. The method moreover, becomes more effective as the degree of internalization increases. Therefore, one ought to stress to the student that any reasonable person should accept this thesis. The teacher should attempt to get the student to see acceptance of this thesis as an important part of his (the student's) right to a claim of rationality. Obviously, at this point, the need for rhetoric is quite pronounced.

3. *A competing thesis is presented and advocated.*

There should be some time-lag between the presentation of the original thesis and the presentation of its competitor. The student should have some time to feel "at home" with the original thesis. (This also helps to increase the degree of internalization.)

The teacher now begins a procedure of exposing and advocating a counter-thesis. Since the students believe that their thesis is the only reasonable one, they will probably view the current thesis as a piece of science fiction. The students will maintain that the teacher's advocacy of the counter-thesis amounts to little more than a "defense of the indefensible". Using a religious term, one is not at a "conversion-stage". All that one is trying to do at this point is to plant some seeds of doubt and to show the students that a seemingly reasonable person (the teacher) may refuse to accept the original thesis.

4. *One should list and overcome as many difficulties as possible.*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the more difficulties that can be exposed *and* overcome, the greater stock the student puts in the counter-thesis and the less inclined is the student to believe that the counter-thesis is totally unreasonable. Sheer number is enough to accomplish this purpose. However, if the student believes that the difficulties that are being overcome are important ones then this purpose is even better served. This is where one must use whatever rhetorical skills one possesses.

5. *Unpalatable consequences of "the reasonable" thesis are pointed out.*

The teacher now begins the process of attacking the original thesis by means of pointing out the practical consequences of that thesis. One is not concerned with pointing out internal inconsistencies, contradictions in the thesis, etc. One is concerned with merely pointing out the *practical* consequences of that thesis. One wants to show the student that beliefs that he arrives at in a class in philosophy do have practical consequences. One must get the student to accept the principle that one ought to act on the basis of one's belief (everything else being equal). For example, hard determinists *ought* to do x in situation y. Religious believers ought to do j in situation k. Briefly, one tries to get the student to judge his thesis in terms of the consequences that follow from that thesis. By pointing out unpalatable consequences, one is forcing the student to deal with a thesis which he wants to maintain (it seems reasonable) but cannot maintain (it doesn't work the way that he thinks it should work).

6. *The student is forced to make a decision.*

At this point, the teacher should step in and give a survey of what has transpired. He should make sure that the students know (1) what has happened and (2) that they must attempt to decide the issue. No new information should be given to the students. The students should attempt to come to a decision on the basis of the data on hand.

In the description of the method, I listed three possible outcomes, three possible decisions that the students might make. If the student opts for the reasonable thesis and accepts the consequences then the teacher can begin the process of pointing out internal difficulties with that thesis. One here makes the move from a pragmatic attack to a theoretical attack. "Not only does your thesis force you to do what you don't want to do, it is vague, contradiction-riddled and needlessly complex." One can and should also continue to point out new practical difficulties of the thesis in question. Even if these difficulties are simply varying tokens of one type of difficulty, the mere listing of them will serve the teacher's purpose, *viz.*, get the student agitated about a philosophical problem.

If the students take the second option, then the way is open to an attempt to "ground" practice in some other thesis or theory. The other thesis may, of course, be the counter-thesis. The students may, however, want to attempt to formulate their own thesis or they might want to see what other philosophers have said about the subject. The way is also open for a discussion of whether students should want to ground their activities in any philosophic theory. The assumption throughout this paper has been that one ought to ground or justify one's activities on the basis of some thesis or theory regarding those actions *e.g.,* if X is a hard determinist then X can only give a teleological justification for punishing. The student may now want to deal with this assumption.

If the student takes the third option and if the counter-thesis itself has a number of unpalatable consequences then the way is open for setting up a Bentham-like calculus in order to "grade" various theses. ("Thesis X is better than thesis Y because it has more desirable consequences"). If the student takes the third option and if the counter-thesis has no or few unpalatable consequences then the teacher can begin the process of pointing out difficulties internal to the counter-thesis.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of the advocacy method is to get students interested in philosophy. For the average beginning student, philosophy appears to be a dry, abstract subject. The advocacy method attempts to overcome this "appearance" by means of drawing on and using the student's emotions. It attempts to give the student an emotional stake in the doing of philosophy. Essential to the method is rhetoric, sophistry and subterfuge. The method is outside the bounds of traditional scholarship. The method relies on the creation of prejudices. Students are forced to accept various views without having all the facts that they need to judge those views. Again, students are forced to decide various issues without all the pertinent data. The manipulator, the force behind the method, is the teacher. It is the teacher's job to create prejudices in the student and then force the student to see the consequences of those prejudices.

The preceding has been the most blatant, the most strident characterization of the method that I can give. I think that the method is a good and powerful tool. If one is aware of the nature and purpose of the tool, then one can use it effectively. The method is a device that can be used to get students interested in philosophy. It is a step towards philosophy but it is not philosophy. Hopefully, in upper-level courses it would not be needed, although I think it could be used with suitable modifications. Once students do become interested in philosophy, it seems to me, other methods should be adopted.