

The Advocacy Method: A Reply

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I agree with Ronald Reed's claim that there is a problem in the academic discipline of philosophy today. Simply put, this problem is lack of popularity. Undergraduate interest in philosophy seems to be dropping, resulting in declining course enrollments, the loss of teaching positions, and a general loss of professional mobility — in short, a sort of professional stagnation. To some extent this problem can be viewed as part of a general trend affecting most of the disciplines of the humanities. But not all the problem can be so explained, for philosophy seems to be suffering more than the other disciplines. As philosophy teachers we must try to discover the reasons for this lack of student interest, even though this problem may require empirical rather than strictly philosophical study.

Reed suggests that one reason for this lack of interest is that the undergraduate student tends to view philosophy as an abstract, esoteric subject. He further suggests that this view can be changed through the way philosophy is presented in the classroom. I do not agree with Mr. Reed. I think the problem of lack of interest has its roots in other views held by students about philosophy. Moreover, I shall argue that the teaching method presented in Reed's article is not a cure for the problem, but rather would exacerbate it.

I suppose this method is called the advocacy method because the teacher gets the student to advocate a thesis against which the teacher advocates a counter-thesis. This advocacy involves the student in an issue in which he or she has a personal view or an emotional commitment at stake, and philosophy thus ceases for the student to be quite so abstract and esoteric, and he or she becomes interested in it.

I do have some questions about the adequacy of Reed's description of the advocacy method. For example, it is not at all clear why a uniformity of student reactions should be felt to be either possible or desirable, or why the teacher should be so completely negative when discussing the student's thesis and so completely positive when discussing his or her own. But my main concern in these comments is not to criticize the description of the method Reed presents. We have all experienced, as teachers or as students, the use of some form of the advocacy method of teaching, and it is the reasons for and the consequences of this use in philosophy that is the subject of this exchange. Further, there are questions to be asked concerning the morality of the distortion and manipulation required of the teacher by this method. But again, that is not my concern here. Pedagogy is the systematic manipulation of the student in his or her own interest, and it could be argued that the simplification practiced by most of us in the teaching of undergraduates is but an accepted form of distortion.

My main concern is that Reed's paper betrays what I believe to be a basic misunderstanding of the causes of and the cure for the problem of the declining popularity of philosophy.

In claiming that students are not interested in philosophy because they view it as being abstract and esoteric, Reed overlooks the fact that for the most part this is a correct view of philosophy. At least in so far as philosophy is the activity of professional philosophers, it is fundamentally abstract, if we take the undergraduate's use of the word to mean that philosophy is not directly concerned with practical, everyday matters. For philosophy is in some sense essentially theoretical in a way in which even physics is not. That is, there is no distinct area of practical application of philosophical theories. While in a sense we may say that philosophical theories are applicable to every area of practical concern, philosophy is generally not an activity directly concerned with practical matters. Further, philosophy is a rather esoteric activity. Every human being is said to be in some vague sense a philosopher, but the kind of philosophy taught in university philosophy departments — the results of the activities of professional philosophers — is available in all its import and complexity to a comparatively small group of human beings, *e.g.* those with the time, the inclination, the education or the native insight needed to master a new vocabulary, and to find certain questions expressed in this vocabulary important or perhaps even compelling. Finally, if I (and the undergraduates) am right about this — if philosophy is basically abstract and esoteric — the only avenue left open to the teacher of philosophy who views this as an unfortunate situation is to change not the method of teaching philosophy but the method of doing it. One removes philosophy from its lofty theoretical level and gives it practical application. One simplifies philosophy to make it more universally available. I would not advocate these moves, but there are those who would. The point however is that if Reed has really discovered the primary reason for the lack of student interest in the students' view that philosophy is abstract and esoteric, then this problem will not be solved by the use of his or any other teaching method, for if it is a problem at all, it is a problem with philosophy, not with the teaching of it.

But Reed is mistaken. While the students' declining interest is a result of a view they hold about philosophy, it is not the view he attributes to them. In a recent poll conducted in my introductory courses, fully two-thirds of the students said that philosophical theories are matters of opinion or belief, not matters of knowledge. One-half said that it is unimportant whether or not philosophical theories can be shown to be true or false. I do not offer these surveys as proof of any thesis, but they do suggest to me an implicit view of philosophy I feel is the root cause of declining undergraduate interest. This implicit view is that having a philosophy is just a matter of having an opinion on a variety of personal matters, albeit an educated opinion. The undergraduate student views the study of philosophy as the study of others' opinions, in the effort to justify or to change or to improve or to make more intelligent his or her own opinion. The student approaches this study prepared only to believe an opinion, but not to know a truth. Further, as the study of opinion, philosophy is for the student an easily dispensable study — it does not help one to do anything any better (at least not directly or obviously); particularly it does not help one make more money and, as opinion, it does not even increase one's knowledge, except in the history of others' opinions. So, the student reasons, why bother with all the trouble of learning a new vocabulary and reading all that difficult theory just so my opinions and beliefs — which have thus far served me adequately — may be changed or improved? As philosophy teachers we can only hope that the more curious student will join those students unable to enroll in Introduction to Sociology in taking one philosophy course, but for most students, taking a second course in

philosophy would be a frivolous waste of increasingly valuable credit and study hours.

If as a teacher one shares this belief that philosophy is primarily a matter of believing rather than a matter of knowing, then one would have no problem presenting philosophy to the undergraduate student. I do not view philosophy in this way however, and so the problem for me becomes changing this view of the student — that is, teaching the student that philosophy is the ongoing critical activity of developing theories to describe, explain, or account for certain aspects of human experience — theories that can be and have been shown to be true or false, valid or invalid, and that can be and have been rejected or accepted on the basis of public criteria for this truth and validity. I do not argue the truth of this view, I merely assert it as a correct empirical description. This is the pedagogical problem in philosophy: By what teaching method does one convince the undergraduate student that philosophy is the meaningful and important attempt to discover objective truth?

If I am correct in these claims about undergraduate views and about philosophy itself, then the advocacy method is most certainly not the teaching method to use in philosophy, for its use would directly contribute to the view that philosophy is mere opinion.

First, the method seeks to “personify” the thesis and the counter-thesis. To the student, the thesis becomes “my belief or view,” the counter-thesis “yours” or worse yet “hers” or “his,” referring to the teacher. Also, by forcing the student to choose between these personally held views without adequate knowledge of the implications of either thesis, the method forces the student to present his or her choice as a matter of opinion, and prohibits such a choice from attaining the status of a knowledge claim. To those few promising students astute enough to see what the teacher is about — *i.e.* those students we would desire to interest in further philosophical study — philosophy becomes cheapened by what they perceive to be cheap sophisticated (sophistical) trickery by their teacher. Philosophy becomes mere clever verbiage.

Finally, what most concerns me about the use of the advocacy method is the possibility of a fourth choice for the student when the teacher forces the student to make a choice between the competing theses. This choice is not mentioned as a possible one by Reed, but it is a choice all too often made by the undergraduate student. Confronted with the dilemma of choosing, without adequate background knowledge or analytical skill, between the internalized view he or she wants to believe and the teacher’s view, which is not so attractive personally but is powerful philosophically, the student decides to reject the future serious study of philosophy altogether, and perhaps even rejects the proposition that the study of philosophy is in any way a valuable enterprise. It is these students we lose by the advocacy method — those who decide that philosophy is, in the words of one of my undergraduates, “an impossible mishmash of contradictory opinions resulting from the attempt of philosophers to answer the unanswerable questions.”