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Teaching the Debate

ABSTRACT: One very common style of teaching philosophy involves remaining publicly neutral regarding the views being debated—a technique commonly styled 'teaching the debate.' This paper seeks to survey evidence from the literature in social psychology that suggests teaching the debate naturally lends itself to student skepticism toward the philosophical views presented. In contrast, research suggests that presenting one's own views alongside teaching the debate in question—or 'engaging the debate'—can effectively avoid eliciting skeptical attitudes among students without sacrificing desirable pedagogical outcomes. Thus, there are good reasons to engage philosophical debates as an educator, not merely teach them.

In a sequence of lectures delivered while visiting Rome, the Academic skeptic Carneades is said to have scandalized his audience by first persuasively arguing in favor of the value of justice and on the next day persuasively arguing against the value of justice. Carneades was 'teaching the debate.' At least during Carneades's tenure at the Academy, the practice of arguing both for and against a view was implicitly oriented toward eliciting an attitude of mitigated skepticism. Contemporary philosophy lecturers may not intend to produce the same mitigated skepticism amongst their students, but in this paper, I will argue that there is good reason to believe some variety of philosophical skepticism is an

undesirable consequence of a standard way of teaching philosophy courses. However, as I will also argue, this consequence can be avoided without sacrificing desirable educational outcomes, by not just teaching but engaging the content of the debate in a personal way. Following the example of Carneades, I will focus especially on styles of teaching courses in ethics, though much of what I have to say also applies to other philosophy courses.

I begin with some assumptions. First, I assume that most philosophers have considered views on the subject they are teaching. In other words, I assume a majority of philosophers are not personally philosophical skeptics. This appears to be a safe assumption, at least with respect to ethics. According to the Philpapers survey data (Bourget and Chalmers 2014), most philosophers are moral realists and cognitivists about moral judgment. And philosophers as a group are closely split between deontological, consequentialist, and virtue-ethics approaches (with a sizeable group adhering to some further theory). In brief, most lecturers in ethics have more or less settled views on normative theory, and by extension, have more or less settled views on the various cases that tend to arise given the standard selection of readings in typical ethics courses (e.g. pushing the fat man, abortion, 'Singer's solution,' etc.).

Partially based upon this first assumption, I also assume that most philosophers do not intend to produce in their ethics students largely agnostic attitudes toward the subject. Put differently, I assume lecturers don't wish to see their students completing an ethics course more at a loss as to what to say about morality than before they began. That is, we don't want to be fiducially corrosive, eroding or eliminating confidence in reasonable moral beliefs. Though it is strictly-speaking not a form of attitudinal agnosticism, I will classify moral relativism as broadly falling within the tent of agnostic views that most

lecturers do not wish to see instilled in their students upon completion of an ethics class. For present purposes, I understand moral relativism to be the view that moral judgments are subjectively-determined, that is made true by an individual's beliefs, preferences, desires and so on, and consequently 'true' only for that individual (and whoever shares the relevant features of that individual's subjective state, such as fellow members of a culture). It is important to note that the second assumption is not that most lecturers intend to dispel agnostic attitudes, such that one of their desired educational outcomes is a relatively more confident belief in some normative theory (or particular normative propositions) than before a student began the class. I am confident that some do have that educational outcome. But my second assumption is weaker, namely that a relative increase in agnostic attitudes among students completing an ethics course is not a desirable educational outcome in the minds of most teachers. It is thus a desideratum of teaching philosophy to avoid increases in agnostic attitudes among students.

The third assumption is more banal, but nonetheless important to set out. That is, a second educational desideratum is that students become knowledgeable on the theses and arguments considered central by most contemporary philosophers working in ethics. In brief, I assume that we philosophers as a group have more or less settled views in ethics and, in the course of learning about a range of plausible moral views (and arguments in their favor), we wish our ethics students to feel rationally comfortable coming to their own moral conclusions—or, at least, for students to have a deepened understanding of plausible theoretical explanations for the substantive moral conclusions they maintained throughout the duration of the course. This is not to say that the average philosopher thinks every moral conclusion a student may come to is equally rational. We have our own settled views, after

all. But we simply don't wish to dogmatically insist upon students coming to the same moral conclusions we have ourselves endorsed. Such dogmatism would be unphilosophical and thus counterproductive.

Now that I have canvassed some central assumptions, I turn to outline one plausibly-common way ethics courses may be taught, arguing that there is good reason to believe that this approach veers too strongly away from the Scylla of dogmatism, inadvertently plunging many students into the Charybdis of agnosticism—an undesirable educational goal, according to previous assumptions. After making a case against this approach, I will turn to present an alternative that is capable of maintaining the same educational outcomes I assume are intended, while at the same time steering a middle course that avoids both dogmatism and agnosticism.

The first approach to consider is one where a lecturer essentially takes himself out of the picture: presenting views and arguments while carefully avoiding tipping his hand and revealing his own personal views on the course content. It is the role of an impartial narrator. I will call this approach 'teaching the debate' for obvious reasons. As previously suggested, Carneades appears to have been teaching the debate. For, rather than publicly pick a side and explain his reasons for supporting it against rival views, Carneades advocated for both sides and thus took his own informed perspective out of the educational environment, as it were. In much the same way, contemporary lecturers who teach the debate do so by treating both sides of covered debates with approximately equal sympathy, arguing first in favor of, say, the hedonic calculus, and then against it and in favor, say, of Kantian rationalism. Students who look to their professor for cues on how to weigh the

various sides of the debate and come to some rational normative conclusion will find little more than a philosophical chameleon.

My suspicion is that there are a few motivations for a professor's remaining publicly neutral in the classroom between the various views. The first is that, in remaining neutral, they will appear less biased and thus more objectively rational—an appearance desirable for its own sake but also because it may allay student concerns about biased grading as well as provide a model for students to follow as they consider rival views. The second rationale may be that professors do not wish to cloud the rational judgment of students by inclining them in favor of the theory or conclusion the professor himself has endorsed—the thought being that the strongest argument should prevail, not the professor's own voiced view. In other words, the lecturer wishes to avoid the faintest hints of dogmatism. A potential third rationale is that some lecturers lack confidence in their own normative judgments (theoretical or concrete) and consequently feel squeamish publicly advocating for their mere intellectual leanings toward one view when they are aware of strong, live arguments against that view.[1]

Yet the example of Carneades suggests a problem with this style of teaching. That is, it tends to decrease audience confidence and foster skeptical, agnostic attitudes toward

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[1] The motivations that favor teaching the debate, combined with the forthcoming empirical evidence that favors engaging the debate, may make 'engaged' team-teaching these discussions (e.g. as described by Cray and Brown 2014) a particularly attractive option when possible—potentially allowing the best of both models. I thank Michael Cholbi for this suggestion.

the views presented. The example of Carneades is of course anecdotal evidence, insufficient to support the view that teaching the debate leads to agnosticism. But contemporary social psychology lends support to the same conclusion. In one of the central studies done on so-called attitude strength and disagreement, McGarty and fellow researchers (1993) found that the discovery of peer disagreement tends to decrease an individual's confidence in a judgment favoring one of the sides of the disagreement. The epistemology of disagreement is currently a hot topic, and I will take no sides here on whether a shift in credence upon discovery of peer disagreement is rationally required or not. The point is rather an empirical one, though it has epistemic implications.[2] Studies on disagreement (though limited[3]) support what anecdotal experience strongly suggests, namely that "there is greater certainty about attitudes that the majority either accepts or rejects and less certainty about those on which people are divided" (Gross, Holtz, and Miller 1995, 226).

One prominent model for the relevant social effects of disagreement employs Festinger's popular (1957) cognitive-dissonance theory, according to which we are motivated to harmonize our recognizably-conflicting beliefs (and attitudes more broadly)

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[2] In particular, peer disagreement may generate mental state defeaters, even if propositional defeat does not occur and belief revision is not rationally required.

[3] One rationale for the limited studies on decreased confidence in the face of disagreement, Gross, Holtz, and Miller (1995, 225) suggest, is that the attitudinal changes tend to be short-lived. For drops in confidence levels tend to motivate us to seek out some related view upon which we can be relatively confident.

with our actions. Sometimes that means that we change our actions to follow our beliefs, but it doesn't always go that way. Actions can also motivate changes in belief. Although much research has focused on intrapersonal sources of cognitive dissonance (Prislin and Wood 2014, 684), Festinger (1957, 261–262) also argued that cognitive dissonance can arise from social factors, including the recognition of a intra or intergroup disagreement (cf. Matz and Wood 2005). In other words, we are typically motivated not just to achieve a personal harmony amongst our own beliefs and actions; we are also motivated to achieve social harmony in belief and action. The recognition that there's a disagreement over one of our beliefs in turn motivates individuals to come to some social agreement, much the same as if the various beliefs were all held concurrently by the same individual (Olson and Stone 2014; Jetten, Hogg, and Mullin 2000).

Given the evidence from social psychology, in the context of a philosophy classroom, student discovery of theoretical or concrete disagreement—among not merely their peers but also among the ostensible experts whose views are being considered—is not plausibly thought to lead individual students to come to unbiased, rational judgments, driven by the strongest argument. Discovery of the unresolved debate seems rather to leave students largely emptied of their confidence in those areas upon which the debate revolves, while at the same time motivated to converge upon a socially-acceptable position if one were available. When a majority of students don't feel confident taking a stand in a debate that requires assessing and evaluating various sophisticated philosophical positions, a motivation to converge on a socially-acceptable position would naturally lend itself to endorsing what might be considered fallback positions.

What sort of position requires taking no stand in a complicated debate? Agnosticism, and the close cousin I've grouped with it, moral relativism. What unites this cluster of reactions—agnosticism, relativism, skepticism—is an unwillingness on the part of a student to commit (even if tentatively) to the truth of one or more of the views presented and debated in the course. Whereas an agnostic or skeptic may deny that we know the positions to be true, relativism empties ostensible truth claims of their ordinary, non-relative normative and epistemic force. Positions in the debate become more aptly described as merely "true" or "false," for such students. Reactions like these involve a kind of attitudinal withdrawal from covered views. Now, given that views like agnosticism and relativism also have their respective philosophical defenders, the psychological pressures that make teaching the debate favor these attitudes among students may shift somewhat when the attitudes themselves are prominently featured as possible positions in the course (e.g. in an ethics course that includes debate over moral skepticism, error theory, or non-cognitivism, among others). That's not to say that covering the debate over these views will make students just as hesitant to endorse relativism or skepticism as any other presented view. For sociological research (as well as extensive anecdotal experience) suggests that many students come to college already strongly disposed to agnosticism and relativism on positions like these (Smith et al. 2011, 27–69).[4] Hence, these views are likely

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[4] Smith and colleagues estimate about one third of contemporary young adults endorse moral relativism, and about two thirds endorse various skeptical or agnostic attitudes regarding morality (2011, 29).

to remain appealing to students as socially-acceptable fallback positions, even when explicitly discussed and debated.[5]

Whereas teaching the debate may be motivated by the rationale of displaying a model of objective rationality to students (the first motivation above), so that they may have an opportunity to form an unbiased judgment on the issues (the second motivation), it is more likely that teaching the debate instead leaves students with the impression that

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[5] Given previous assumptions, it may be rational to have mixed feelings regarding students who take a stand in the debate by embracing a sophisticated version of the skeptical attitudes mentioned above (e.g. a student who embraces and even argues persuasively in favor of moral skepticism or noncognitivism). For on the one hand, this outcome does not appear to involve fiducial corrosion, as the student did not (necessarily) lose confidence in their relevant beliefs—they are taking a philosophical stand, after all, not withdrawing from the debate. But on the other hand, given contemporary sociological research, it is plausible to think that a central (albeit potentially unconscious) factor driving the student toward this view over others was the combination of nascent, background skeptical attitudes mentioned above with the ordinary classroom pressures involved in covering a debate. On this front, such students are not unlike those who come to a class with strong, pre-established moral views and adopt whatever covered position best accords and explains those views. Both sorts of students appear to satisfy the pedagogical desiderata previously detailed, but they do so in a way that runs against other common pedagogical desideratum (e.g. that students be challenged, or be made to consider more deeply whether the views they come in to the classroom are correct).

there is no (known) right answer, and the rational attitude is to remain neutral with respect to all options. After all, taking up a position of neutrality toward all options is at the heart of this style of teaching. And, of course, if a lecturer herself does not take a stand because she is ambivalent between her philosophical options, it is plausible to think students may detect this ambivalence as no mere posturing and converge the more readily upon a similar agnostic attitude. In sum, teaching the debate may satisfy one desiderata assumed at the outset, namely imparting to students knowledge of the central theses and arguments taken seriously by many contemporary philosophers. But it arguably does so at the expense of the other desiderata. That is, we have good reason to believe that teaching the debate is reinforcing a preexisting, nascent agnosticism.

There is an alternative style of teaching, one I argue satisfies both desiderata. We can call it 'engaging the debate.' If Carneades's lectures on justice are a paradigm of teaching the debate, the Scholastic pedagogical *disputatio* is a paradigm of engaging the debate.[6] The essence of engaging the debate is taking an explicit, public stand on the positions surveyed in the debate. Of course, one needn't be an enthusiast. But as the model of the *disputatio* suggests, engaging the debate involves a lecturer personally evaluating and assessing the theses and arguments for the class. The same material is covered, satisfying the educational desiderata of acquainting students with the central theses and

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[6] Many contemporary philosophers may be familiar with the style of *disputatio* as it occurs in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, or another prominent medieval philosopher. A more complete explanation of the widespread pedagogical (and cultural) use of the technique can be found in the work of Alex Novikoff, see among others his (2013; 2012).

arguments taken seriously by contemporary philosophers. Teaching and engaging the debate thus substantially overlap in content, the material is just framed in a slightly different way. Thus, the lecturer does not merely explain Kantianism and arguments for it before moving on to discuss criticisms, for instance, she adds that she personally finds Kantianism more plausible than rivals and goes on to explain why she finds the arguments supporting it more persuasive than the arguments in favor of, say, virtue ethics. When discussing criticisms, the lecturer engaging the debate adds why she does not see these criticisms as decisive.

Done well, this engagement is thoughtful and moderate in its tone of argumentation, presenting to students a model of how to be both unbiased and committed to a substantive philosophical view. The overall impression given by engaging the debate, in contrast to merely teaching the debate, is that despite there being a disagreement, it is rational to take a stand in the disagreement and to believe there is some knowable, right answer on the topics in question. Students are also given insight into how a professional philosopher goes about assessing the debate and coming to reasoned conclusions in the face of countervailing evidence. The chief difference between a classroom teaching the debate and one engaging the debate is that students in the former are left educationally directionless, whereas in the latter students are provided with a socially-acceptable alternative to agnostic attitudes, namely the professor's own presented views.

What we know from psychological research into persuasion implies that engaging the debate works better than teaching the debate at satisfying the desiderata of avoiding student fiducial corrosion. First, non-experts tend to find experts persuasive, particularly when the material the expert is discussing is perceived as complicated (Hafer, Reynolds,

and Obertynski 1996). (And the students most disposed to fall back to an agnostic position will presumably be those who find the material too complicated to take a personal stand in the debate.) This persuasive effect is enhanced when an audience is distracted or tired (Petty, Wells, and Brock 1976), as undergraduates tend to be. Moreover, positions that appear capable of resisting alternative arguments are seen to be more plausible (Tormala and Petty 2004), so a professor who discusses and evaluates arguments contrary to her own settled views will give a persuasive advantage to those views. Even when a lecturer is seen by students to have low credibility, evidence suggests that over time, students may be prone to be persuaded by the views she expresses (Kumkale and Albarracín 2004).

Research on the efficacy of engaging the debate at persuading students of a lecturer's own view may lend itself to the objection that this style of teaching works too well. But there are several mitigating factors in the classroom setting worth mentioning. If a student perceives himself to be pressured into accepting a view he does not find plausible, he is likely to exhibit a phenomenon known as 'psychological reactance' in which he deliberately opposes the position he is pressured toward (Brehm 1966). Since a philosophy course has presumably equipped students with the tools for engaging a position directly in debate, this reactance may express itself in the vocal expression of counterarguments (particularly among stronger students), which can have a strong effect in producing confidence in the position defended, at least for the student who provides that defense (Tormala and Petty 2004; Holland, Verplanken, and van Knippenberg 2003). This phenomenon may be the more deeply reinforced if a student believes that others in the class have been persuaded otherwise and derives a sense of self-validation in feeling unique from the crowd (Clarkson et al. 2013). Moreover, the expression of counterargument may well

reinforce the prevailing view that there is no consensus, thereby lowering the degree of confidence some students have derived in the professor's expressed views (McGarty et al. 1993; Gross, Holtz, and Miller 1995)—although the result of this mitigation is not likely to be so strong that it completely eliminates the persuasive effect of a professor's engaging the debate. In sum, an intellectually-regressive dogmatic effect is not to be expected by engaging the debate, though one can expect students to feel some pull toward their teacher's views (and thus away from agnostic fallback positions).

What of the motivations favoring the other model? Arguably, these considerations do not so strongly support teaching the debate as they initially appear. First, although teaching the debate retains a strong prima facie case for unbiased rationality, it does so by modeling rationality as involving impartiality among competing views. Yet, few lecturers are in fact impartial among competing views. Instead we often see our professional judgments in favor of views as a rational partiality, rather than a potentially-embarrassing lapse of objectivity. Some of us may be mistaken in our self-assessment, being subject to unconscious biases. Yet it would be reactionary to see in such a possibility grounds for feigning impartiality in the classroom—much less giving students the impression that rationality involves remaining noncommittal. If anything, the same unconscious biases in a lecturer may affect the objectivity of her presentation when merely teaching the debate; whereas, if students only knew where a lecturer stood, they would have an easier opportunity taking that stance into consideration in their evaluation of what's presented. And although it is possible for some students to be worried about biased grading, if one's engagement is done reflectively and dispassionately, simple verbal reassurances that a

student can defend any position in their coursework should be sufficient to ward off real anxiety.

Will engaging the debate cloud a student's judgment? Here a distinction must be made between generally stronger and generally weaker philosophy students—with stronger students being understood as those who are more inclined to form an informed, independent judgment regarding the material, and weaker students understood as those who are generally disinclined to form independent judgments on the material for various reasons (including lack of comprehension, caution toward a difficult subject, or personality, among others). Given this distinction (and the previously-surveyed evidence), stronger students will be those most likely to evaluate the arguments covered in class independently of their professor's own voiced appraisal. It's true that strong students may be more inclined to accept their professor's views in a classroom engaging the debate than otherwise, but this is also rationally appropriate given that the professor is a recognized expert from the perspective of the student (in a field where experts are known by the student to disagree). In other words, the psychological pressures mentioned above need not be construed as fully non-rational or manipulative. That a professor endorses the views that she does is defeasible evidence in favor of those views, evidence we should expect rational students to take under consideration (and thereby be the more inclined toward) when coming to their own conclusions. Rather than clouding a strong student's judgment, the addition of a professor's voiced views in the classroom is better construed as providing more relevant information than would be provided when merely teaching the debate.

Possessing an inclination to independent judgment, stronger students will also be more inclined than their weaker counterparts to think that the professor is wrong, and if so,

the evidence suggests that the student is unlikely to be cowed by a professor's voiced position. In other words, this stock of students will tend to find their proverbial voice and come to substantive personal views on the course material even in classrooms where a professor has engaged the debate. For these students, at least, engaging the debate is unlikely to make the weaker argument the stronger, in the student's mind.

Weaker students are admittedly the more likely to follow a professor's voiced position for at least partially non-rational reasons. Yet, even here, teaching the debate arguably offers no advantage, for at least two reasons. First, these are the same students whose judgements are arguably already clouded and directionless in a context of teaching the debate by the psychological pressures that favor their attitudinal withdrawal from covered positions. Thus, even if we assume that engaging the debate clouds the judgments of weak students through non-rational pressure to accept a view, these pressures parallel similar non-rational pressures faced in a classroom teaching the debate. What differs are the source and the direction of these non-rational pressures, but they predictably appear in both teaching contexts.

Second, as previously mentioned, the professor's voiced judgment is a rational basis for favoring her position. It would thus be excessive to describe a weaker student's coming to share those views on a professor's say-so a matter of clouded judgment, even if the student's motivations are partially non-rational as well as rational. Even if one were to assume weaker students favor their professor's position more for non-rational than rational reasons during the time at which they come to share those views, having once made a commitment, they are arguably better positioned to reflect upon the rationality of the particular ideas they committed to later in life. Whereas if the debate leaves students

perplexed and directionless while the material is fresh in their minds, it would be natural for these weaker students to avoid thinking about philosophy altogether as memories of the details fade and are consolidated (at best, students will remember such classes as "interesting").

The last motivation for teaching the debate—namely, that some lecturers do not have views they think are sufficiently strong or well-formed for them to feel comfortable publicly endorsing them—comprises more of an explanatory than a favoring rationale. It does after all seem just as disingenuous to feign endorsement of a philosophical view for the sake of avoiding student agnosticism as it does to feign personal non-commitment to views in order to avoid the faintest hints of bias. Yet, even here, there is something to be said for engaging the debate—at least on those topics where lecturers have commitments. For that a professor is willing to commit publicly to some philosophical theses, when unwilling to commit to others, is apt to even more genuinely reinforce in a student's mind the fact that rational people do make commitments in the face of what might otherwise have appeared to be a perplexing debate. In a classroom where a professor has expressed a view on nearly every topic, students may come away from the class thinking that the professor is simply opinionated. But in a classroom where a professor is more reserved generally, and yet expresses his views occasionally, those occasions on which a view is expressed will appear the more sincere and telling in favor of those views. As it is unlikely that a lecturer teaches an entire course with no formed views on the covered topics, these considerations should at least favor engaging the debate when possible.

I will now briefly reconsider the rationales that seem to motivate the alternative teaching style I've here defended before concluding. I have assumed from the outset that

one educational desideratum is avoiding fiducial corruption, or the erosion of confidence in otherwise rational beliefs. Whereas there are good psychological reasons—given contemporary student predispositions toward philosophically agnostic attitudes—to think that teaching the debate will tend to produce student agnosticism, engaging the debate can be plausibly expected to avoid that negative consequence. Engaging the debate is thus a better strategy for satisfying this assumed educational desideratum. And engaging the debate does so without sacrificing course content, merely framing that content in a slightly different way by including an expression of the lecturer's own views. Hence, both teaching the debate and engaging the debate appear on par when it comes to satisfying the second educational desideratum mentioned, namely helping students become knowledgeable on the theses and arguments considered central by most contemporary philosophers. Although engaging the debate satisfies this second desideratum in a way that will likely incline a share of the students toward the teacher's own views, it is not plausible to think that this is pedagogically negative. For research in social psychology suggests that the alternative is not that these same students will come to endorse the considered position with the strongest argument, but instead that they will walk away from their philosophy class most firmly committed to the view that each person is entitled to their own opinion. Such a view needs no further reinforcement.[7]

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