

# Affirmative Action Philosophy

*Michael Levin*

**T**he connection between philosophy and its surrounding culture has always been obscure. On one hand, certain social conditions have been strongly associated with philosophical vigor: material prosperity (a culture must be able to support a large cadre of thinkers who do nothing but think about impractical matters), international trade (for the intellectual ferment of ideas in collision), a fascination with science, and a tradition of individual liberty. These traits distinguish classical Greece, England since the seventeenth century, and America since the nineteenth century—three periods of exceptional philosophical activity. Yet Renaissance Italy—prosperous, free, the land of Galileo—contributed almost nothing to philosophy. Also required, it seems, is some inward intangible that might be called “national temper”: the world’s philosophy has been produced, in essence, by Greeks, Britons, Germans, and Rene Descartes. Indeed, the extreme abstractness of philosophical reasoning makes it unclear how social developments could influence philosophical ones. Surely social status cannot determine one’s views on whether the world exists beyond one’s present sense perceptions. In fact, a desire to mix philosophy with issues of the day, especially when combined with excitement over fashionable novelty, has often been a mark of philosophy in decline.

One illustration of this is the recent attempt by large numbers of philosophers to deduce from pure reason the need for the U.S. to abandon its atomic arsenal unilaterally. Another—and for the purist equally disturbing—illustration of this point is an article entitled “Philosophy Teaching as Intellectual Affirmative Action” that appeared in the March 1986 number of *Teaching Philosophy*. In it, its author, Henry Brod of the University of Southern California, argues that just as “being color or sex blind is not really an alternative to prejudice, but is rather the condition of its perpetuation,” so “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 modelling neutrality.” The “minority views which must be more actively advanced to achieve parity” are “essentially the views of the Left.” Prof. Brod does not specify these views further, but he mentions that “one can construct a valid analogous argument for teaching from a feminist standpoint.”

To assess the significance of this article, it is helpful to locate *Teaching Philosophy* among current philosophical publications. Before the mid-1950s, there were only a handful of important philosophical journals. In the U.S. the *Journal of Philosophy* and the *Philosophical Review* had been founded just before the turn of the century, and these were joined by *Philosophy of Science* in the 1930s. In England, meanwhile, *Mind* and the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, both also founded

near the turn of the century, were dominant. Along with the books of individual philosophers, what went on in those five journals *was* Western philosophy.

The two decades following World War II, however, saw an immense increase in the number of professional philosophers and a consequent proliferation of philosophical journals. Not only were there new wide-spectrum periodicals, but there also appeared specialized journals covering, among other sub- and sub-sub-areas, such topics as phenomenology, the relationship of philosophy to public affairs, the history and philosophy of logic, the nature of philosophy itself, and, of course, the teaching of philosophy.

Naturally, not everything in every journal, particularly the specialized ones, is of epochal significance or stellar quality. On the other hand, facile generalizations about the sterility of “more and more about less and less” would be quite unfair: most of what goes on in the current periodical literature is not bad at all. Apart from “continental deconstructionism” and “Marxist philosophy,” which are widely practiced as forms of automatic writing and are indeed uniformly dreadful, even workaday philosophy makes considerable demands on the intellect and is not easy to produce. In short, the decades since World War II have seen the emergence of the philosophical foot-soldier, who will never wear stars on his epaulets, but who keeps the juggernaut rolling along. Periodicals like *Teaching Philosophy* promulgate and reflect the thinking of this echelon of philosophy—neither the figures of historical importance (like Willard van Orman Quine), nor the current luminaries, but the reasonably competent professors of philosophy who teach the vast majority of philosophy courses in the U.S. and who bear the responsibility of transmitting philosophy to future generations. For this reason, the appearance of Brod’s article in one such journal—together with the fact that it would not have been publishable even thirty years ago, an eyeblink of philosophy-time—is quite noteworthy.

Although Brod is candid about his own radical-left convictions, he claims to base his conclusion on pedagogical, not ideological, considerations. In fact, he cites a well-known passage from John Stuart Mill, perhaps *the* classical liberal, as the linchpin of his argument:

... if either of 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.

Brod’s invocation of Mill, incidentally, shows that the language of classical liberalism, if perhaps not its substance, still has so strong a hold on the American intellectual community that the Left finds it expedient to employ it in order to be seen as an extension of the tradition of classical liberalism.

It of course does not follow from the need for a devil’s advocate in pedagogy that the Left deserves special treatment. To secure the necessary minor premise that, as

he asserts, the “neglected minority” perspective is that of the Left, Brod switches philosophical allegiance from Mill to his very opposite, Herbert Marcuse. “Our society,” Brod asserts, “is intrinsically structured so as to prevent proper consideration of minority views.” Nor is the low esteem in which Leftist ideas are allegedly held the result of their failure in free discussion: “the views of the Left have not gained ascendancy because of campaigns waged against them by the established order.” Consequently, the aim of helping students reach “intellectual autonomy” requires “the radical concept of a kind of counter-pedagogy” rather than “the liberal concept of merely preventing lapses in objectivity.”

It is important to note that Brod’s argument has distinctive bearing on philosophy (and may be more persuasive to philosophers already inclined in Brod’s direction) because of the unique role in philosophy of advocacy on the devil’s part. Philosophy is a corrective for the mind’s seemingly incorrigible penchant for conceptual confusion. As philosophy is not about facts per se, but the correct ordering of the facts, it can become engaged only when the facts are initially disordered. Students must feel a problem before discussion of it can be worthwhile. Philosophy is unique in that philosophical insight requires initial attraction to error. There is no point in first misleading biology students about DNA and then setting them straight, but without prior seduction by error the philosophy student will not know what the fuss is supposed to be about.

Take as an example the issue of psychological hedonism, the hoary theory that people act only to maximize their pleasure. This theory is regularly demolished in introductory philosophy courses because it rests on errors regularly committed by undergraduates wishing to appear worldly-wise. The average undergraduate is willing to believe, and is encouraged by his instructor to say, that the ostensibly self-sacrificing hero differs from the ordinary mortal only in what causes each of them pleasure. The hero and saint get pleasure from helping others; the ordinary mortal gets pleasure from watching television. In terms of their motives, they are on a par. Having induced the student to say all this, the instructor then observes that a person can derive pleasure only from actions he *likes doing for their own sakes*. No one can take pleasure in watching TV (or helping the poor) unless he enjoys watching TV (or helping the poor). No TV-watcher or altruist can pursue the pleasure that TV-watching or altruism are alleged to produce. If one could, it would be quite in order for an avid swimmer, for example, to say “I can’t stand swimming; I only do it for the pleasure it produces”—and that statement is in fact unintelligible. Now, this lovely argument cannot be mounted by an instructor whose class greets psychological hedonism with the response “What a silly theory; *of course* people do all sorts of things for their own sake, not for some mythical common element called ‘pleasure.’” Unless the instructor can judiciously reinforce his students’ initial readiness to confuse “I watch TV because I enjoy it” with “I watch TV for the joy it causes,” he has nowhere to go except charging through an open door.

Notice, however, that while advocacy for the devil thus has an important place in

philosophy, its importance lies precisely *in setting up error for definitive rebuttal*. No teacher would introduce psychological hedonism, sell its virtues, and then simply drop the matter. Error is given a run for its money so that it may be more effectively rejected. It is for just this reason that a teacher will give no run at all to views he regards as too silly to be worth refuting. I myself never discuss Aristotle's views of the biological function of the brain because they contain no instructive errors. Devil's advocacy in the philosophy classroom, or any classroom in which Socratic dialectic looms large, is only a means to the end of objectivity. When all the results are in, there is no affirmative action.

It is perfectly plain, however, that the main thrust of Brod's argument is not Mill's general principle—which, in sufficiently abstract form, commands the assent of all reasonable men—but his specific contention that it is the Left, and only the Left, that deserves special treatment. Any such claim is open to the charge of special pleading, and faces two very obvious objections: 1) How can Brod forbid affirmative action teaching of *any* position—conservative, creationist, or Confucian—deemed “minority” by the instructor? and 2) Who says that the Left is the oppressed minority in the general culture? Brod in effect tries to meet both these objections in four sentences in his penultimate paragraph:

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.

The Left has never made a fetish of impartiality, so it is not surprising that Brod should attempt to substantiate his claim that “established discourse” is biased against the Left by repeating it, and then meet the charge of circularity by accusing all “investigation” whatever of circularity. This repudiation of objectivity is certainly convenient, given the impression so widespread among non-Marxists of a deep entrenchment of Marxism in the academy, and reminiscent of feminists' justification of their classroom partisanship in terms of the supposedly political nature of all teaching. (“When reason goeth against a man,” Hobbes said, “the man goeth against reason.”) Such positions are of course invulnerable to external criticism, all of which may be dismissed as “theory-dependent.” For those unfamiliar with this item of jargon Brod deploys, theory-dependence refers to the alleged formative influence on *all* perception of antecedently held theories. Where a Darwinian will see natural processes at work in the birth of a baby, for example, a theist will see a miracle.

But if labeling all empirical investigation inherently circular neatly disposes of inconvenient facts, it is also logically self-defeating, for it implies the impossibility of a “non-partisan analysis” of contemporary society or anything else. Any of

Brod's radical opinions—for instance, his suggestion that liberalism is prone to fascism—would then be no worse than anybody else's, but also no better. Marxists assert that their theory somehow lifts them above the epistemological relativism in which everyone else is mired, but they have never satisfactorily explained how this particular trick of bootstrap-tugging is managed. What is more, it is extremely unlikely that Brod or any other relativist really believes his own relativism. The example I gave in the foregoing paragraph may (*may*) indicate that preconception colors perception *to some extent*. But to be interesting and useful to Brod, relativism must maintain that *no* scientific theory can be empirically tested without circularity. This means that, for instance, all observations relevant to testing a theory of aircraft design are “theory-dependent,” which entails that an experimental aircraft built in accordance with the theory would appear to remain airborne to the partisans of theory and appear to crash to its critics. I am embarrassed to admit that many current philosophers of science say things which appear to imply this curious conclusion—although I notice that they fly to philosophy conferences exclusively on airplanes designed on orthodox principles.

Second, Brod's contention refutes itself. If a “probing, non-partisan analysis” (assuming such a thing possible) reveals an “established anti-leftist frame of reference” which obstructs recognition of Leftist insights, this same non-partisan analysis must necessarily validate those insights themselves. You cannot very well prove that A is biased against B without proving that B is better than A thinks. But if non-partisan neutrality suffices to reveal the merits of Leftist positions, compensatory treatment for the Left is unnecessary. The instructor keen to shake up his students' thinking by exposing them to Leftist ideas need not bend over backwards to make his case exciting. Intellectual honesty will do.

Brod would very likely turn the logical screw one more revolution, replying that while a non-partisan analysis reveals a social bias against Leftist ideas, only Leftists are capable of recognizing and appreciating a non-partisan analysis. Such a reply, assuming it was made, would raise all the same objections. Just how did it become possible for Brod and other Leftists to recognize non-partisanship, when no one else can? Why, in practice, do Leftists, like everyone else, rely on the objectivity of airplane designers? What prevents a Confucian from claiming that he alone is capable of appreciating the unbiased analysis which shows the compelling need to favor Confucianism in the classroom? Once Brod lets us in on how he manages to recognize non-partisanship, the best pedagogy would once again appear to be to teach the secret to students, and forego special pleading.

As mentioned, “Philosophy Teaching as Intellectual Affirmative Action” is one essay among the hundreds that appear every quarter in the philosophical literature. It is impossible to say now whether it is just one more case of the Left battening onto the latest thing, namely, special pleading for weak causes in the guise of “compensatory justice,” or a predictor of developments in the philosophical mainstream. Some reflections and some observations are in order, however.

Affirmative action inflicts two major blows on society: it unjustly penalizes the

innocent by disadvantaging them relative to individuals they have not harmed, and it attacks the meritocratic basis of democracy. Affirmative action in ideas cannot deprive the innocent of their rights—however capacious the bubble of rights has grown, it does not yet surround true theories—but it can undermine the idea of excellence. The exigencies of affirmative action in employment have included the use of “minimum competency” as a hiring criterion, thereby repudiating the idea that jobs should go to the best and awarding positions to the demonstrably *incompetent*. (For documentation, see Chapter 5 of my recent *Feminism and Freedom*.) One may expect a similar erosion of standards, with its consequent confusion and demoralization, in philosophy.

I recently attended the convention of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, which met in San Francisco in March. I know one shouldn't paraphrase Yeats yet again, but I must report that the best lacked all conviction, while the worst were full of passionate intensity. Perhaps it was the balmy Bay Area weather, or just too many symposia for too few philosophers, but many of the most intriguing meetings were poorly attended. A paper on “Primary and Secondary Qualities,” a central question of epistemology currently enjoying a revival, drew an audience of two. (Three more philosophers wandered in in the course of the paper.) A session in which the distinguished logician Haim Gaifmann presented some results on the logical paradoxes—another philosophical staple—drew about twenty philosophers in a room with chairs for two hundred. Quite apart from body counts, the discussions from the floor about such provocative questions as the continuity of time, the existence of theoretical entities, and (my own symposium) the bearing of modern game theory on Hobbes, struck me as tame and desultory, lacking the relentlessness of philosophy at its best.

But the marginal and meretricious prospered. The Presidential Address by Richard Wasserstrom concerned race relations from, *pace* Brod, a radical-1960s perspective. (Prof. Wasserstrom believes that the Supreme Court should have ordered the complete integration of the American public school system by forced busing *the day after Brown v. Board of Education*.) “The Science Question in Feminism,” a symposium sponsored by the American Philosophical Association's Committee on the Status of Women, went SRO. As far as I could tell, everyone there found the papers intelligible. “Feminism and Economic Justice,” also well attended, ended with the suggestion that comparable worth be used to usher in socialism surreptitiously. For better or worse, “The Philosophy of Jacques Derrida,” featuring Derrida himself as a speaker, was both relatively well attended, and not nearly as well attended as the APA expected.

For the most part, pure merit standards of a very demanding order still control American philosophy. You get a certain measure of feminist rant in the book-review sections of the journals, since editors feel duty-bound to give a professional boost to young women in the field by assigning them book reviews, but the featured articles are refereed blind. But at an individual level a kind of intellectual schizophrenia seems to have overtaken a great many philosophers, who combine

rigor for professional specialties with laxness and indulgence toward radical ideas about the general organization of society—intellectual affirmative action, in other words. These antagonistic habits of mind cannot coexist forever, and Brod's article may mark the point at which professional philosophy itself has begun to be corrupted by slackness of mind.