NEWSLETTER ON TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

FROM THE EDITORS, TZIPORAH KASACHKOFF AND EUGENE KELLY

ARTICLES

GEORGE MACDONALD ROSS
“The U.K. Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies of the Higher Education Academy”

STEVEN M. CAHN
“The Logic of Plato’s Euthyphro, 10A-11B”

LEE BRAVER
“Paraphrasing: An Exercise to Teach Close Reading in Introductory Classes”

BOOK REVIEWS

Janet Broughton: Descartes’s Method of Doubt
REVIEWED BY YAKIR LEVIN

Peter Lipton: Inference to the Best Explanation
REVIEWED BY DAVID B. MARTENS

BOOKS RECEIVED
Welcome to the Spring 2005 edition of the APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy. This is our second edition in the new electronic format upon which Michael Kelly, the Executive Director of the APA, has decided. We look forward to receiving responses from the membership and our readers to this change in format. It has occasioned considerable discussion among the editors of the Newsletters, and that discussion can only be enhanced and fostered by comments from the broader membership. We will publish any letters concerning the change that are sent to us here, but comments, reflections, and suggestions can also be sent to the executive director of the APA, Michael Kelly, for inclusion in the APA Proceedings and Addresses.

Our first paper, “The U.K. Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies of the Higher Education Academy,” is a contribution by George MacDonald Ross of the University of Leeds, who directs this Subject Centre. He describes the activities designed by the Centre to engage philosophers in the improvement of the quality of teaching in their field and the obstacles they have encountered in these efforts. The article is useful not only as a description of the Centre’s work but also as a discussion of the salient differences between the American and British systems of higher education with regard to structure, administration, and funding. The article lists available resources on the teaching of philosophy in the U.K., including a Website database, and describes the contents of the Internet-available journal Discourse, which the Centre publishes. Professor Ross invites readers to attend an international conference at the University of Leeds in July of this year.

The second paper, “The Logic of Plato’s Euthyphro, 10A-11B,” by Steven M. Cahn of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, tackles a famous passage in Plato’s Euthyphro that has served many unwilling students of philosophy as an example of unmitigated philosophical gobbledygook. Socrates appears in the passage to lack the technical vocabulary needed to express the distinction he has in mind. Yet, instead of making use of philosophical nomenclature introduced later in the history of philosophy, Cahn takes Socrates’ argument head-on and renders its logical structure with admirable clarity, while remaining true to the letter of Socrates’ speech. This brief paper would serve as a useful handout for instructors who lead their students through a close reading of Plato’s text.

The third paper, “Paraphrasing: An Exercise to Teach Close Reading in Introductory Classes,” is by Lee Braver of Hiram College. Dr. Braver reports that he was dissatisfied with his students’ ability to answer brief questions on a quiz about the readings assigned for that day. Upon questioning, he discovered that most, if not all, of his students were unable to read the texts with comprehension. He therefore decided to read the texts aloud in class, asking students to recast, in their contemporary English, what they took to be the author’s meaning in each sentence read. This process evolved into the exercise described here: He has the students write paraphrases, at home, of selected brief and important passages from the assigned readings. The paper describes the format of this exercise in detail, how the student paraphrases are graded, and the role of the exercise in determining the final grade. The paper includes a handout to students in which the exercise is defined.

We remind the readers that all articles published here are subject to review by a committee of four persons, including the editors, whose names are listed at the end of this letter. Our readers are encouraged to suggest themselves as reviewers of books and other material that they think may be especially good for classroom use. The names of the books and materials we have for review are listed in section IV of the Newsletter.

The following guidelines for submissions should be followed:

- The author’s name, the title of the paper, and a full mailing address should appear on a separate sheet of paper. Nothing that identifies the author or his or her institution should appear within the body or within the footnotes/endnotes of the paper. The title of the paper should appear on the top of the paper itself.
- Four complete copies of the paper should be sent.
- Authors should adhere to the production guidelines that are available from the APA and that are published in the members-only section of the APA Website. The most important features of those guidelines are the following:
  Adhere to the Chicago Manual of Style.
  Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use italics instead of underlining. Use an “em dash” (—) instead of a double hyphen (–).
  Use endnotes instead of footnotes. In writing your paper to disk, please do not use your word processor’s footnote or endnote function; all notes should be added manually at the end of the paper.

Examples of proper endnote style:

The situation is beginning to change since the introduction of tuition fees for all but the poorest students. The government determines the maximum fee that universities can charge U.K. and European Union citizens, and, from 2006, the limit will be nearly tripled to 3,000 British pounds (over $5k at the current exchange rate). The government subsidy per student will remain the same, so universities will have a welcome increase in income, which will partially correct serious underfunding over the past three decades. However, the new fee level falls far short of actual teaching costs, and even the fee plus subsidy is totally inadequate for supporting both a high-quality education for students and a decent standard of living for teachers. If some future government decides to lift the cap on fee income, we may see a system more like that of the U.S. (warts and all).

For most of the twentieth century, the government kept relatively light control over universities by giving a block grant to a body called the University Grants Committee (UGC), which then redistributed money to universities with few strings attached. Central control increased under Thatcher and still further under Blair. Thanks to devolution, which has meant the devolving of certain powers to assemblies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, we now have four separate funding councils responsible for transferring government funds to universities, with the anomaly that the U.K. government can dictate policies to English universities, but not to those in the Celtic fringe. One of the undesirable consequences of devolution is that decisions about U.K.-wide bodies, such as the Higher Education Academy, have to be agreed upon by four separate funding councils.

A further complication is that there are two separate organizations: Universities U.K. (UUK), consisting of the heads of all U.K. universities; and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCoP), consisting of the heads of all colleges that do not have independent university status, but which deliver degrees validated by universities. Some government policies are directed towards UUK/SCoP to be delivered in a consensual way, whereas others are directed towards the funding councils to be delivered in a more top-down fashion.

Funding for U.K. universities ultimately comes from the U.K. Treasury, and the Treasury is rightly concerned that the taxpayers’ money should be well spent. It has long been noted that the only profession for which there is no certificated training is higher education teaching, and there is a widespread view in government circles that academics are mere amateurs as teachers, even if they are fully qualified as researchers. Under pressure from the Treasury, the funding councils have for many years diverted funds away from employing teachers towards employing education development professionals whose task is to help teaching staff to improve the quality and efficiency of their teaching. But the view of most academics (fairly or otherwise) has been that the courses provided are blind-reviewed by the members of the editorial committee. They are:

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ARTICLES

The U.K. Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies of the Higher Education Academy

George MacDonald Ross
Director of the Subject Centre, University of Leeds

This article is about the work of the U.K. Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies of the Higher Education Academy. In order to explain what the Academy and the Subject Centre are, I need to point out some key differences between the U.K. and the U.S. higher education systems.

In the U.K., we do not have a distinction between private and state universities (except that there is just one small university, the recently founded University of Buckingham, which receives no direct funding from the government). All universities are private in the sense that they are self-governing charities with a royal charter granting their status as legal entities. On the other hand, they are all state universities to the extent that they are largely funded by the government and subject to indirect control by the government as a condition of that funding. Even the best endowed universities (Oxford and Cambridge) are poor by U.S. standards, and they cannot afford to go it alone in competition with heavily subsidized institutions.

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Centre from Leeds was successful. The Network formally came into being on January 1, 2000.

After a few years, the funding councils became concerned at a proliferation of organizations concerned with improving the quality of student learning, and, in 2004, the Learning and Teaching Support Network was merged with some smaller players to form the Higher Education Academy, still based at York. The Academy is a charity owned by UUK and SCoP (the organizations representing the heads of universities and higher education colleges) but financed mainly by the four funding councils. The network of subject centers has been largely unaffected by the move to the Academy, apart from rebranding.

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies covers the disciplines of philosophy; philosophy of science; history of science, technology, and medicine; theology; and religious studies. We currently have an annual grant of 366,000 British pounds (roughly $700k), supplemented by a subsidy from the University of Leeds, and additional funding for particular projects, such as promoting the employability of our graduates. The main expenditure is on staff salaries: myself as half-time director (I think it is crucial that I set an example by continuing to practice and develop myself as a teacher), a Centre manager, a computing manager, an information manager, subject coordinators for the individual disciplines (though some of these roles are shared), a resource development officer, a Centre assistant, and some part-time support staff.

Our main activities are:

• visiting individual departments and providing customized workshops;
• running national or regional workshops and conferences;
• maintaining a mailing list of nearly 2,000 academics in the disciplines and sending them monthly electronic bulletins;
• issuing questionnaires to establish what academics want from us and to provide information about the state of the disciplines (for example, information about syllabi, teaching methods, the use of part-time staff, student:staff ratios, and other statistical information);
• keeping staff informed of national and international developments that may have an impact on how they teach in the future;
• maintaining a Website with a growing database of resources specific to the disciplines (http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk);
• publishing the journal Discourse twice a year and distributing it free of charge to U.K. academics (it can also be downloaded from the Internet);
• distributing a six-monthly bulletin about our activities to senior managers (the Discourse Supplement);
• making grants of up to 3,000 British pounds (about $5k) to individuals or teams for research projects, the outcomes of which are published in Discourse;
• obtaining additional funding for specific projects, such as the employability of graduates, entrepreneurship, guides to dealing with students of different faiths, the needs of students with disabilities, the teaching of applied ethics in different disciplines, developing the skills of postgraduate students, and the distinctive methodologies of research in our disciplines and how they can best be applied to pedagogical research;
• translating the outcomes of generic pedagogical research into a form and language that is relevant and accessible to teachers in our disciplines;
• identifying and producing subject-specific materials that will be useful to teachers, whether they are new or experienced, and full-time or part-time;
• summarizing and reviewing the existing literature on teaching the disciplines in higher education (in the case of philosophy, the richest resources are the journal Teaching Philosophy and the APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy);
• establishing partnerships with other subject centres where we have interests in common;
• fostering international links so that we can learn from others and others can learn from us;
• reaching out to students through focus groups and essay prizes, since our mission is to improve their learning experience, and their views are as important as those of academics.

With this level of activity over a period of five years, one might expect a noticeable change in the way philosophy is taught in the U.K., and in the quality of the student experience. However, I don’t think any readers of this Newsletter will be surprised to learn that the actual impact of our activities has so far been somewhat limited.

In the U.S., the movement to engage academics actively in learning and teaching issues has a far longer history, going back at least thirty years. Yet the number of academics who participate in conferences and contribute to journals and newsletters is a small fraction of the number of U.S. philosophers. The APA membership of over 10,000 probably underestimates the number of U.S. philosophy teachers because not all are members. But only a few hundred are active in the scholarship of learning and teaching. In the U.K., the number of philosophy academics is about one-twentieth of the number in the U.S.; so if we scale down the numbers, the Subject Centre is doing quite well if it has engaged more than a dozen or so. We have, in fact, done better than this, but we still have a long way to go if we are to make a substantial impact on students’ learning experience across all institutions.

Philosophers are a particularly difficult constituency to reach for a number of reasons:

• unlike subjects that are also taught at school, there is little or no tradition of pedagogical research to build on when considering how to teach philosophy at university;
• philosophers are highly individualistic and have a culture of disagreeing with one another, rather than working cooperatively;
• philosophers invest their own personalities and opinions into their teaching and are reluctant to take advice from others (in contrast with the U.S., philosophers in the U.K. are even reluctant to use textbooks written by others);
• there is a widespread feeling that, despite its progress, philosophy as a discipline has remained essentially the same for two and a half millennia, and tried and tested teaching methods are as valid now as they were in the past;
• philosophy offers less scope than other disciplines for many of the innovations promoted by educationalists—problem- or work-based learning, multiple-choice tests, Websites with jazzy graphics, and so on;
active in learning and teaching issues are employed at colleges. During my visits to the U.S., I have noticed that most of those teaching, let alone research into teaching, takes second place. The greater reward for research success means that it happens, there is no evidence that better teachers are better researchers, and a difference between teaching-only and research universities. (This may not last because it is the policy of the present government to concentrate funding for research into a small number of "world-class" institutions, thus reinstating the divide between teaching-only and research universities.)

Ideally, there should be a close connection between teaching and research, with each invigorating the other. As it happens, there is no evidence that better researchers are better teachers, or that better teachers are better researchers, and a number of educationalists are working on ways to improve the teaching/research nexus. However, the large majority of academics see teaching and research as in conflict for their time, and the greater rewards for research success mean that teaching, let alone research into teaching, takes second place. During my visits to the U.S., I have noticed that most of those active in learning and teaching issues are employed at colleges whose primary mission is teaching. Although staff are up to date with current research and themselves publish, there is clearly less pressure to neglect teaching, and thinking about teaching, in favor of the publication rat race. The proportion of staff in research universities who research into learning and teaching seems to be very small—and, as I have said, all higher education institutions in the U.K. regard themselves as research universities, which means that we lack a dedicated core of teachers whose first interest is in teaching.

The concept of "publish or perish" is an import from the U.S. to the U.K., but the education bureaucracy of the U.K. has elevated it to a status undreamed of in the U.S. When we had a binary system of universities and polytechnics, the polytechnics complained that they had a lower level of funding per student, and the universities responded that their higher level of funding was to support research. The government decided to resolve the issue by making a clear distinction between funding for teaching, and funding for research. The idea was that both types of institution would have the same level of funding for teaching, and that research would be accounted for separately. As always, the Treasury insisted that institutions had to be accountable for how they spent public money, and the result was the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), through which every department is periodically assessed on the quantity and quality of its research publications. Each department is given a rating, and a change in rating from one exercise to the next can mean an increase in or a loss of funding of hundreds of thousands of pounds. The next RAE will take place in 2008, and academics throughout the U.K. are frantically trying to get books and articles into print by the cut-off date of December 31, 2007—anything published after that date simply does not count.

Parallel to the RAE, there has been a regime of teaching quality inspection carried out by a body called the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which is owned by UUK and SCoP (the organizations representing the heads of universities and higher education colleges). However, poor outcomes have not resulted in loss of funding because an unsatisfactory learning environment is often the result of a lack of resources and excessive teaching loads, and financial penalties would make the problems even worse.

Putting the two together, departments have little incentive to improve the quality of their teaching, apart from the damage to their reputation and student recruitment caused by a low rating in comparative statistics published in the press and other sources of information. On the other hand, they have a huge financial incentive to focus on subject research at the expense of teaching. It is therefore hardly surprising that some people have told us that they would like to write for us about their teaching methods but have been forbidden to do so because it would detract from their subject research efforts. Similarly, we have often been rebuffed in our attempts to organize sessions on teaching at philosophy conferences (building on the APA model), on the grounds that thinking about teaching would spoil the research atmosphere of the occasion.

Previous Research Assessment Exercises have made it clear that pedagogical research would be acceptable, but no such research appears to have been submitted in the last exercise, at least in the case of philosophy. It is really important that pedagogical research should be taken seriously, and I hope that the next Research Assessment Exercise will include some serious publications on educational research and generate funding for further research.

Another recent development has been the setting up of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). The government has recognized that U.K. academics are underpaid relative to other professions and to academics elsewhere. However, it is not prepared to foot the bill to restore parity.
across the board. Instead, it had the idea ("thought up on the back of envelope," admitted the minister responsible) of rewarding about 70 departments or teaching teams by designating them as Centres of Excellence and giving them very large sums of money. Bids were invited for amounts of up to 500,000 British pounds (about $900) a year for five years, plus up to two million British pounds (nearly $4m) in capital funding. I won’t go into the absurdities of the scheme here—in particular, its divisiveness and the problem of financing any increased salaries after the end of the five-year period. The Higher Education Academy was concerned from the start that Centres of Excellence, which will have a very narrow focus, were being funded at a higher level than its own Subject Centres, which have U.K.-wide responsibilities and a much broader agenda. The one saving grace is that Centres of Excellence are required to work closely with Subject Centres in disseminating their excellent practice more widely—so some good may come out of the scheme, even if the large sums of money could have been put to better use. The outcome of the bidding process will be formally announced in January 2005, but it is already known that only one philosophy department has been successful—my own department at Leeds will be leading a Centre of Excellence concerned with teaching professional ethics across the disciplines.

In this article, I have dwelt on the difficulties we face in getting our colleagues to spend more time sharing ideas about how to teach philosophy more effectively—difficulties that are common to readers of this Newsletter, though in a somewhat different educational context. I do not wish to end on a pessimistic note. Although we have found it hard to attract people’s attention to what we are doing, once we have succeeded, our services are warmly appreciated. Our journal, Discourse, grows from strength to strength, and our Website (about to be extensively revamped) is the largest electronic repository for materials on teaching philosophy in the world. The outcomes of a number of major projects (the faith guides, employability of graduates, disability, and entrepreneurship) will be published early in 2005, and we expect to have an even higher profile from then on. Despite its flaws, the U.K. higher education system has many merits, of which the Higher Education Academy is one.

Finally, to celebrate our fifth anniversary, we are organizing an international conference on teaching philosophy at the University of Leeds on July 1-2, 2005. We hope that as many readers of this Newsletter as can will attend. Details are at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/philosophy/events/conference.html.

Postscript

The Editors of the Newsletter have suggested that readers might be interested in a little more detail about research projects and the journal Discourse.

Because of the nature of our funding, we can award grants only to academics employed in U.K. higher education institutions. We have a competitive bidding process, and bids are assessed for their relevance to learning, teaching, and evaluation; their potential benefit to others in the discipline; an effective dissemination strategy; procedures for monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of the project; and value for money.

At present, we are very open about research methodology because we believe that current educational research is too restricted to social science paradigms. One of our ambitions is to articulate a methodology that is more appropriate for research into the teaching of philosophy and that will exploit the special research skills of philosophers. When we have built up a substantial body of precedents for what is accepted as good philosophical research into the teaching of philosophy, we may become more prescriptive.

Projects funded so far include topics such as various aspects of e-learning in philosophy, teaching applied ethics, aids to teaching logic, the use of personal development portfolios, evaluating oral performance and other innovative methods of grading students, the use of personal response systems in lectures, helping students to read difficult texts, and so on. Most projects give rise to articles published in Discourse.

Discourse is not restricted to U.K. academics, provided only that articles are relevant to the teaching of philosophy as practiced in the U.K. For example, the latest issue (volume 4, number 1) contains an article by Marvin J. Croy of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte ("Making Useful Comparisons of Traditional, Hybrid, and Distance Approaches to Teaching Deductive Logic"). The criteria for acceptance of articles are broadly the same as for research projects—Will their publication be helpful to U.K. academics who wish to improve the quality of their teaching by building on the experience of others?

The articles in the latest issue are typical, except that there is an accidental bias towards philosophy at the expense of theology and religious studies, and the history and philosophy of science (in some previous issues, philosophy was under-represented). Apart from some news items, the issue contains:

- The text of the Subject Centre’s annual lecture by Keith Ward (Regius Professor of Divinity, Christ Church, Oxford), on “Why Theology Should Be Taught at Secular Universities”;
- My own update of an earlier article on “External Pressures on Teaching,” outlining national and international developments that affect the context within which we teach;
- An article by Dan O’Brien of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham on “Shakespeare and the Analysis of Knowledge” (about Gettier-type scenarios to be found in Shakespeare’s plays);
- An article by Anne Gunn of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Kent on “Practical Suggestions for Teaching Students to Think for Themselves”;
- A report by Emma Tomalin of the PRS Subject Centre on a project on “Supporting Cultural and Religious Diversity”;
- A report by a group of Leeds philosophers on a project on “Healthcare Ethics Scenarios”;
- A “Focus on Formal Logic”—a group of papers on teaching logic by Paul Tomassi, Brendan Larvor, Peter Milne, and Marvin J. Croy.

There are detailed “Notes for Authors” at the end of each issue (see also: http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/journal/authors/).

Endnotes

1. A charity is a not-for-profit organization that serves a public good, such as education. Charities have the advantage of exemption from certain forms of taxation.
2. See previous footnote.
The Logic of Plato’s Euthyphro, 10A-11B

Steven M. Cahn

In Plato’s *Euthyphro*, a staple of introductory philosophy courses, Euthyphro proposes that “piety” be defined as “that which is loved by all the gods” (9E). In response, Socrates offers an intricate argument (10A-11B) to demonstrate that Euthyphro’s definition is unsatisfactory. Some crucial steps of this argument are compressed, making it difficult for students to grasp. The following reconstruction of the logic involved should render the argument’s structure clear and reveal the force and elegance of the proof.

Socrates relies on a common distinction between a thing or person who is receiving love, the loved one, and a person who is giving love, the loving one. To use a more specific example than Plato offers, we can distinguish John, who is loved, from Mary, who is loving him. Mary’s loving John is why John is loved; that John is loved is not why Mary is loving him. Instead, she is loving him due to certain lovable characteristics he possesses. In other words, John is loved because he is being loved, and he is being loved because of his lovable nature, not because he is loved.

Socrates illustrates this point by a series of analogies. A thing is carried because it is being carried; it is not being carried because it is carried. A thing is led because it is being led; it is not being led because it is led. A thing is seen because it is being seen; it is not being seen because it is seen. This pattern leads to the first step of the proof.

1. A thing is loved by someone because it is being loved; it is not being loved because it is loved.
2. Why is the pious being loved? Not because it is loved (that would violate l) but because it is pious (i.e., of a pious nature).
3. Restating 2, the pious is being loved because it is pious (not the reverse).
4. Substituting in l “that which is loved by all the gods” for “a thing” and all the gods” for “someone”:
   That which is loved by all the gods is loved by all the gods because it is being loved (not the reverse).
5. According to Euthyphro, “the pious” is equivalent to “that which is loved by all the gods.”
6. But 3, 4, and 5 are an inconsistent triad; all cannot be true.
7. For assuming 3, the pious is being loved because it is pious, and assuming 5, the pious is equivalent to that which is loved by all the gods, and, substituting twice in 3, then that which is loved by all the gods (the pious) is being loved because it is loved by all the gods (the pious).
8. But, according to 4, that which is loved by all the gods is not being loved because it is loved by all the gods; rather, it is loved by all the gods because it is being loved. So, 3 and 5 taken together contradict 4.
9. Similarly, assuming 4, that which is loved by all the gods is loved by all the gods because it is being loved, and, assuming 5, the pious is equivalent to that which is loved by all the gods, and, substituting twice in 4, then the pious (that which is loved by all the gods) is pious (loved by the gods) because it is being loved.
10. But, according to 3, the pious is not pious because it is not being loved; rather, it is being loved because it is pious. So, 4 and 5 taken together contradict 3.

How are these contradictions to be avoided? 3, 4, or 5 has to be abandoned. 4 is unlikely to be abandoned, since 4 follows from 1, and 1 was a distinction accepted as clear from the beginning. To abandon 3 would be to say that the pious is being loved by all the gods for no reason at all, an implausible position. So the only recourse is to give up 5, thus rejecting Euthyphro’s definition of “piety” as “that which is loved by all the gods.”

Paraphrasing: An Exercise to Teach Close Reading in Introductory Classes

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When I first began teaching “Introduction to Philosophy” courses as a late graduate student, it was particularly important to me that my students do the reading completely and consistently. I was worried that they would show up unprepared, with books kept in pristine condition to be sold back as soon as the semester ended, if not earlier. This would not happen in my class, I resolved. The method I chose to ensure their diligence was a series of pop quizzes; with unscheduled quizzes, the students had to be prepared every day. I tried to make the questions easy enough that no one who had read the material would have any trouble answering them. To my dismay, however, the students struggled with these “easy” questions, and, one day, a group of students buttonholed me after class to complain. They were doing poorly on the quizzes even though they had done the reading, creating feelings of bitterness and frustration along with bad grades. Because many of them were talented and serious students, I couldn’t chalk up their complaints to sour grapes. Nor, given their understandable frustration, could I tell myself that their poor marks would spur them on to work harder. Something was wrong with my method.

In retrospect, the questions were almost certainly poorly written, but I don’t think that was the problem. I worked on improving the questions over the next few semesters, tinkering with the phrasing to rule out ambiguities or to point more explicitly to what I was looking for, but I continued giving pop quizzes. I saw no alternative for securing careful and consistent reading.

Then, about a month into an “Introduction to Ethics” class a couple of years later, the students stopped me from delivering the lovingly prepared, beautifully structured lecture on Hume that I was about to launch into. They decried Hume’s incomprehensibility: he simply did not make sense, even to the brighter students. They could not extract enough meaning from the reading even to begin reconstructing his thought, much less answering basic questions on a quiz. The prospect of writing a paper terrified them.

At that moment, I faced a decision: I could either ignore their complaints and continue with the lesson plan (“they’re just not working hard enough; surely my eloquent exposition of fellow-feeling will resolve all doubts!”), or I could take their feedback seriously and deal with it head-on. Reluctantly, I put my lecture back in my briefcase, sat on the edge of the desk, and opened the book to the beginning. They said that they couldn’t understand Hume, so we would read him together. I read the first sentence of the book out loud and asked the class what it meant. A long silence. So I read the first clause of
the sentence, “disputes with men, pertinaciously obstinate in their principles, are, of all others, the most irksome,” and again asked for a “translation.” After a pause, one student raised her hand and gave a hesitating but perfectly fine version of Hume’s idea, something along the lines of, “it’s annoying to argue with people who never admit they’re wrong.” I went on to the next clause and asked a second student to put Hume’s ornately complicated (but beautiful!) phrases into simple, contemporary English, which she did. We passed the entire period this way, and, by the end of class, hands were going up quickly, even from the students who had complained most vociferously of Hume’s incomprehensibility. I created a new homework assignment on the spot: continue this process of translating or paraphrasing the next five pages of the book. The next class, the paraphrases turned in were excellent, evincing a strong grasp of Hume’s ideas, and discussion that day was lively and informed. I haven’t given a quiz since.

What I discovered that day was the fact, obvious to all but beginning teachers, I suppose, that the way students read texts is different from the way I do. I had been trained to read primary texts for the previous ten years or so, to the point where it was second nature, but this was the first time many of my students had tried to do anything like it. I had been using quizzes to force the students to do something that they simply didn’t know how to do—read primary texts closely and slowly. Instead of assuming that they knew how to read texts and then punishing them on quizzes if they didn’t do it well, I realized that I first needed to teach them how to read. And the best method to do this that I have found is actually a slightly improved version of the exercise I made up in class that day.

This exercise, which I call Paraphrasing, operates on the assumption that the two main obstacles to getting a basic grasp of the kind of texts assigned in introductory classes are speed and passivity in reading. This assignment forces the students to slow their reading down by requiring them to provide a paragraph-by-paragraph paraphrase of the assigned text. They have to stop at each paragraph, think about it, and then articulate what it means before going on to the next one. The exercise also forces students to engage in an active analysis of the text by requiring them to write and explain a question or objection they have for the text. I generally find that when they do these two things—slow down and read actively—they are capable of getting a lot more out the usual introductory texts than they think they can. Rather than frustrating them, as my quizzes had done, this exercise instills confidence when they see that they can in fact understand at least the basics of what’s going on in Plato or Descartes.

It also ensures, much more reliably than quizzes, that the students actually do the reading, at least the portion to be paraphrased (which is why I always try to assign particularly important sections). Every time I use this method, I receive positive student comments on it, describing how much it helped them with the readings. Some students have told me that they use the method for any passage that gives them difficulty, even in other classes. Students also tell me that, since I usually choose important passages for them to work on, the paraphrases make good study aids for tests. It can provide a quick and easy make-up or extra-credit assignment; just pick a few pages and assign them. Furthermore, it often reveals common misunderstandings in the class.

This exercise is only a first step in learning how to read philosophy, of course, and I only use it in low level courses. It focuses on instilling good reading habits, primarily a slower pace and a greater attention to detail, which can then be used as a foundation for more sophisticated exercises or analyses of arguments. As teachers, we are constantly steering our students toward the golden mean between the vices of intimidation and arrogance in their approach to texts; they often either think that they can’t possibly criticize or even comprehend such weighty thoughts, or that the first idea that hits them is enough to demolish an argument beyond repair. This exercise helps reduce the former by enabling the student to approach the text in their own language.

I have included below the description of the exercise I hand out. I’m not completely happy with this description (I would appreciate any feedback) but it gets the point across. I usually assign five or six of them over a semester (dropping the lowest), graded on a scale of zero to ten and amounting to 10% of the total class grade. I assign passages that discuss central topics, and I grade fairly leniently. If it shows effort and is in the ballpark of the author’s meaning, I rarely give below an eight. One warning—invariably, a surprising number of students forget to pose the question or objection at the end of their first (and often following) assignments. I penalize this omission with an automatic two-point deduction. I also require that the question or objection be typed, in order to prevent last minute scribbled questions or objections when they realize in a panic that they forgot to do it. I allow them to do the exercise in small groups because I think this generates just the right kind of discussion about the book’s meaning that the students should be having. I do, however, require separate and at least slightly different paraphrases from each member of the group to prevent the simple copying of one student’s efforts.

Paraphrases

This exercise will teach you the technique of close reading which should improve your comprehension of philosophical writing. Philosophical texts are not written for quick consumption like newspapers or magazines; they are meant to be pored over, contemplated, and interrogated. You must read these works slowly, more than once, and with questions in mind. A proper reading should more closely resemble participating in an active conversation than passively listening to the radio. You should be constantly asking, “what does this mean?” and “is this true?” And once you finish, go back to the beginning and read it again. You will not be able to get much out of it on a single reading.

Paraphrasing will help you read this way. You are to read the assigned text all the way through once and then, the second time through, paraphrase each paragraph on the assigned pages in terms of four sentences or a general rule of thumb paragraph over a couple of times and then pretend that you are explaining it to a friend who hasn’t read it. Try to identify each paragraph’s central idea and put it in your own words. Use an informal, straightforward tone rather than a stilted or stilly academic one. Be as explicit and concrete as possible; don’t rely on vague phrases or metaphors. Quoting the text defeats the purpose, so don’t quote. Put the page number in the margin beside the first paragraph of each new page in the text.

At the end of the assignment, write and explain a question or objection you have for the text. It can be a request for further clarification of an idea you didn’t understand (be specific about what you didn’t understand about it) or, preferably, an analysis or challenge of the validity of an idea covered. You are welcome to disagree with the author, but be sure to give him or her the best possible argument consistent with the text. Like the rest of the assignment, this question must be typed. Correct spelling and grammar throughout are required.

You may (if you wish) do these assignments in groups of no more than three. If you do so, each student must write and
turn in her own paraphrase, writing the names of the other students in her group on the first page. The three paraphrases from a group should not be identical, though they’ll probably be similar.1

Endnotes
1. I want to thank my colleague Colin Anderson as well as the editors of the APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy for insightful comments that greatly improved this paper.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Descartes’s Method of Doubt

Reviewed by Yakir Levin
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In the first of his Meditations on First Philosophy, Descartes presents two sets of radical grounds for doubt. The first set consists of the closely related lunacy and dream arguments for doubting our sense-based beliefs. According to these arguments, for all we know, we may well be like deluded madmen, or merely dreaming when acquiring such beliefs. The second set consists of the closely related deceiving God and the fate-or-cause arguments for doubting our sense-based beliefs as well as our beliefs in “the simplest and most general things” that are dealt with by “arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind” (Cottingham et al, 14). According to these arguments, for all we know, our Creator, or if there is no Creator, our original cause—“fate or chance or a continuous chain of events”—may have botched his/its creation so that we are “deceived all the time” (Cottingham et al, 14).

As generations of undergraduates may attest, on first glance, these arguments are very seductive. But like other aspects of Descartes’s philosophy—which, as the late Professor Körner used to say, enjoy a kind of “superficial clarity”—these arguments turn out, on closer scrutiny, to be rather puzzling. As Descartes himself implies in calling his radical doubts “slight,” “exaggerated,” “metaphysical” and “hyperbolical” (Cottingham et al, 25, 121, 159, 308, 373, 408-9), these doubts are not really “exaggerated,” “metaphysical” and “hyperbolical” (Cottingham et al, 270), which is based on this principle, as a game

...whose rules demand that players do things it would be ridiculous to do if they weren’t playing the game.

Suppose a girl is playing Statues. When her friend says, ‘Statues’, she immobilizes herself mid-stride. This would be ridiculous behavior if she weren’t playing the game. But because she is playing the game, what she does makes sense. The method of doubt is something like a game that requires a player to suspend judgment about any propositions that have a certain characteristic. This characteristic is not unreasonableness. The player winds up suspending judgment about things it would be quite reasonable to believe. This would be ridiculous behavior if she weren’t playing the game. But because she is playing the game, her suspens of judgment makes sense (49-50).

Contrary to what Descartes thought, however, we cannot simply will to stop believing those things we find reasonable to believe. So, in what sense are we supposed to suspend judgment within the doubting game? Broughton’s answer on behalf of Descartes is: by imagining, as surely we can, that the things we keep believing to be true actually are false. This imaginative maneuver may help the player of the doubting game to detach himself from his senses, thereby preparing him to accept fundamental beliefs that are at odds with the beliefs to which his senses seem to lead him. In Descartes’s own words,

I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former [sense-based] opinions are utterly false and imaginary. I shall do this until the weight of preconceived opinion is counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgment from perceiving things correctly (Cottingham et al, 15).

Due, then, to the game-like character of Descartes’s method of doubt, the hyperbolic nature of the doubts with which this method is concerned raises no real problem. The
game-like character of this method also reflects the fact that it is underwritten by the perspective of common sense from which Descartes’s radical doubts cannot be taken seriously. In this respect, Cartesian skepticism contrasts markedly with both Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism, both of which accord no special importance to the perspective of common sense. According to Broughton, however, unlike contemporary philosophers,

Descartes is not interested in the [perspective] of common sense because he thinks that to secure our claim to knowledge would be to defend the authority [of that perspective]. He is not starting with the person who occupies the perspective of common sense because he himself thinks there is a presumption in favor of its correctness, or that we ought to be able to defend such a presumption if we are to defend knowledge claims against skeptical conclusions. Rather, he is starting there because the person of common sense is the person . . . that he is interested in converting to a philosophical perspective that is in many ways deeply at odds with the perspective of common sense. He does not care about the ordinary person for what he is, but only for what he might become (84).

It is to the details of this line of interpretation of what might be viewed as the “negative” aspects of Descartes’s method of doubt that Broughton devotes the first part of her book—RAISING DOUBT—consisting of chapters 1-5.

Paving the way for a radical change in our beliefs, then, according to Broughton, is one main goal of Descartes’s method of doubt. But Descartes also intended his method as a means for identifying and establishing what we can know with absolute certainty. As he put it, “if you simply know how to make proper use of your own doubt, you can use it to deduce facts which are known with complete certainty” (Cottingham et al, 415-16). This complete or absolute certainty may be viewed as the “negative” aspects of Descartes’s method of doubt. Now, some of his clear and distinct ideas are conditions of his use of the method of doubt. Among these are the beliefs that he exists and that he has an idea of God. Now, Descartes thought he could show that [the beliefs whose absolute certainty he established in this way,] entail that he is created by a nondeceiving God, and from that, he claimed, it follows that all of his clear and distinct ideas are true. So ultimately the existence of God and the truth of clear and distinct ideas are conditions of his use of the method of doubt. Now, some of his clear and distinct ideas concern mathematics, and from others he draws the further conclusion that some of his sense-based beliefs are true, including the general belief that material things exist. Overall, then, by uncovering the conditions of his doubt, he thinks he can establish truths about his own existence and the existence of God, the truth of his clear and distinct ideas, and then also the truth of his mathematical judgments and of his judgment that the material world exists” (98-99).

Thus interpreted, Descartes’s method of doubt does not involve the circularity of which Arnauld and perhaps also Bourdoin, among others, accused it. It does not prove the existence of God by assuming that distinct and clear ideas are true and prove the truth of the latter by assuming that God exists. According to Broughton, Descartes achieves certainty that all of his clear and distinct ideas are true by achieving certainty that God exists and is not a deceiver, and he achieves certainty about God’s existence by [independently] achieving [a prior] certainty about [some of his clear and distinct ideas] (177).

As already indicated, in Broughton’s view, Descartes sought to achieve certainty in the truth of the ideas that form the basis of his certainty about God’s existence by showing that the truth of these ideas is a condition of using the method of doubt. In employing this strategy, Descartes’s anti-skeptical moves resemble contemporary transcendental arguments. However, while the latter are usually supposed to show that we are entitled to the claims with which they both begin and end, the former are only supposed to show that we are entitled to the claims with which they end. Unlike the transcendental method, Broughton claims, Descartes’s method of doubt “is not a way of trying to get a lot from a little [but] a way of trying to get a lot from nothing” (196). In Bourdoin’s very apt formulation, Descartes’s method “struggles to derive something from nothing” (Cottingham et al, 359).

It is to the details of this line of interpretation of the constructive aspects of Descartes’s method of doubt that Broughton devotes the second part of her book—USING DOUBT—consisting of chapters 6-9.

In his introduction to a ground-breaking, posthumous paper by Evariste Galois, the nineteenth century mathematician Joseph Liouville ascribed to Descartes the saying that, when transcendental questions are under discussion, one should be transcendently clear. Whether or not Descartes is really the origin of this percept, insofar as his method of doubt is concerned, he did not keep to it. In providing a very clear reconstruction of Descartes’s skeptical moves that exposes them in all their subtlety, Descartes’s Method of Doubt does a great service to Descartes scholarship. For this, as well as for its sheer brilliance and great philosophical interest, this masterful study is to be highly recommended for faculty and students alike.

References

Inference to the Best Explanation

Reviewed by David B. Martens
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The second edition of Peter Lipton’s Inference to the Best Explanation is a welcome updating of this important contribution to the study of non-demonstrative inference. Lipton’s purpose and position seem not to have changed greatly since the first edition. The purpose is to describe and justify the role of explanatory considerations in our actual non-demonstrative inferential practices. The position involves a more general thesis and a more specific thesis, each of which has both a descriptive sense and a normative sense. The more general and more easily defended thesis is that “explanatory considerations are an important guide to inference” (p. ix).
The more specific and more contentious thesis is that “the version of inference to the Best Explanation we should consider is Inference to the Loveliest Potential Explanation,” where the loveliness of a potential explanation is related to its ability to provide understanding; to its possession of more specific explanatory virtues, such as simplicity, and so on; and to its likeness or probable truth (p. 61). The position rests on supporting argumentation laid out in the book’s eleven chapters. Lipton first (chapters 1–3) surveys “problems of induction (i.e., non-demonstrative inference) and explanation,” then (chapters 4–8) considers the prospects of inference to the Best Explanation as a partial solution to the problem of describing our inductive practices, and finally (chapters 9–11) switches from issues of description to issues of justification” (pp. 55, 2, 3). Naturally, the various supporting arguments laid out in the book collectively amount to a single inference to the best explanation. Lipton urges that his general and specific theses, in both their descriptive and their normative senses, together provide the loveliest potential explanation of a wide range of empirical and intuitive data.

The numerous additions and revisions in the second edition are offered to strengthen the supporting argumentation. For example, in a substantial new discussion (chapter 7) of Bayesianism and the threat it is widely thought to pose to explanationism, Lipton explores what he calls “a compatibilist view of the relationship between Inference to the Best Explanation and Bayesianism” (p. 119). Lipton suggests that any specific version of Bayesianism is likely to be either unlovely or itself a version of inference to the best explanation. On the one hand, while a pure Bayesianism, shorn of explanatory considerations, may be offered as a competitor to inference to the best explanation, such a Bayesianism seems (in light of empirical work by Kahneman and others) not to square with our actual non-demonstrative inferential practices and (since “we are not very good at abstract probabilistic calculation”) it seems harshly Puritanical as a normative account of the non-demonstrative inferential practices that use (rather some ideal reasoners) ought to pursue (p. 119). On the other hand, while an impure Bayesianism, invoking explanatory heuristics both descriptively and normatively, may be lovely, such a Bayesianism seems itself already to be a version of inference to the best explanation. As it now stands in the second edition, the supporting argumentation is very attractive. Nevertheless, as Lipton himself takes pains to emphasize, there is much room for improvement, for example, in the precision of our grasp of the notions of an inference to the best explanation and of one explanation’s being better than another (pp. ix, 3, 210).

The book is not introductory, though it is clearly written, well-organized, and equipped with a bibliography and index. Perhaps the book will be of some use to “a dedicated undergraduate,” but it is much better suited for use as a text in graduate rather than undergraduate courses. Certainly, it is essential reading for teachers of graduate or undergraduate courses in philosophy of science or epistemology, and for researchers in these areas (p. 4).

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