
Reviews

Teaching Plato In Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World

Carlos Fraenkel

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Philosophy is precisely what a culture becomes capable of when it . . . substitute[s] . . . conversation with foreigners for conquest of them.
—Richard Rorty¹

A pair of basic questions inspires Carlos Fraenkel's book: "Can doing philosophy be useful outside the confines of academia?" he asks, "And can philosophy help turn tensions that arise from diversity (cultural, religious, and so forth) into what I propose calling a 'culture of debate'?" (xiv)

The urgency of Fraenkel's first question has increased as American universities grapple with leaner budgets, and students struggle with higher debt loads. At one college of my acquaintance, a long-standing requirement that all students take a philosophy course was recently relaxed; I can't help but think that part of the reason for this action turned upon academic philosophers' difficulty to state, plainly, what the extra-academic *value* of philosophy is. More sharply, I can't even count the number of times a college graduate has confessed to me that, while they indeed took a (required) philosophy course, they still had "no idea" what the instructor was trying to *accomplish* in the course.

A positive answer to Fraenkel's second question would go a long way toward addressing the first—for few skills would do more to improve tomorrow's world than a widespread awareness of how to navigate, and discourse within, our increasingly diverse workplaces and neighborhoods. Carlos Fraenkel's brief book offers an excellent contribution to this valuable effort, while having the further merit that it seems potentially accessible to even first-time philosophy students.

Motivation: Fraenkel's motivation for a *Culture of Debate*² flows in part from noticing that, while the invitation to *celebrate diversity* is laudable, it's unwise to turn a blind eye to the fact that diversity also inevitably gives rise to *disagreements*. Should a local YMCA feel obliged to put curtains on its gymnasium windows, so as to shield the Yeshiva students next door from distraction by "barely clad men and women exercising in the gym"? (175) Should a fast-food restaurant chain famous for its hamburgers face civil liability for serving beef-seasoned French fries to Hindu customers?³ Which

religious holidays should a public school recognize as all-student vacation days (if any)?⁴ There are more legitimate intercultural disagreements on heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our sensitivity training workshops! So rather than try to suppress such disagreements, students would do well to learn how to air them constructively.

Another motivation for Fraenkel's project is that it encourages an insight-inviting habit of *self-interrogation*. "I would get up early to study Torah [at the temple] for a couple of hours before . . . the morning prayer," recalls Jacob, in Fraenkel's chapter on his discussions with Hasidic Jews in New York, "[and o]n the way [to the temple], I noticed that Muslims were already praying at the mosque. So I asked myself: If we're both passionate enough about our religion to get up while it's still dark—how can I be sure that my religion is true and theirs is false?" (67–68). In an age where social media makes it all too easy to "unfriend" those who fail to fit one's procrustean preconceptions and prejudices, Fraenkel's project promises to invite readers toward a new openness to differences and diversity.

Elements of a "Culture of Debate": Given, then, that there's ample motivation for a Culture of Debate—"an institutional framework in which diversity and disagreement can be transformed into a joint search for truth" (150)—what's the structure of this framework? Fraenkel addresses this question in two complementary ways: In chapter 6 ("Diversity and Debate"), he offers an explicit description of the program he recommends, as well as arguments for its philosophical presuppositions. In chapters 1–5, he illustrates the Culture of Debate in action by recalling his teaching-travels to five diverse communities: Muslim students in Palestine and Indonesia, Hasidic Jews in New York City, impoverished youth in Brazil, and politically active Mohawks in Canada.⁵ In each case, Fraenkel leads each group of participants through a rather conventional syllabus of readings (viz., some subset of texts by Plato, Aristotle, Al-Ghazali, Maimonides, Spinoza or Nietzsche) and banquet of topics ("Does God exist? Is piety worth it? Can violence be justified? What is social justice . . . ? Who should rule? What does political self-determination require?" (xv)).

But while these readings and topics are conventional fare in most undergraduate texts and anthologies, Fraenkel's book distinguishes itself by describing the nuances of debating these issues, in real time, within non-Western contexts. Plato famously argued against retributive justice; but this question takes on concrete political dimensions in Fraenkel's discussions in Palestine (20–21).⁶ It's one thing to discuss Maimonides' and Spinoza's ideas of reason and revelation in religion in the abstract; but these questions are literally matters of life and death to Fraenkel's Hasidic interlocutors (69–74). Can philosophy assuage political apathy in a state? As an abstract question, it's hard to imagine first-time philosophy students' meeting the matter with more than glazed eyes; but Brazil's attempt at using high school philosophy

courses to improve civic participation gives the question substance by wedding it to “real life” (79–99).

As for the participant in a Culture of Debate, Fraenkel hopes to inspire and instruct students to achieve a certain attitude, skill-set, and ethic. Specifically, Fraenkel hopes that students will be moved by diversity to adopt an attitude he calls *fallibilism*: “If considerations such as [Jacob’s while passing the mosque] lead us to concede that [a]) our present convictions could be false, then we are *fallibilists*. . . . At the same time, fallibilists [b]) assert the existence of objective norms in relation to which we can be wrong and [c]) to which we can get closer by critically examining our beliefs and values. . . . [O]ne purpose of a culture of debate is to enable a joint search for the truth” (145). Unsurprisingly, Fraenkel urges that Culture of Debate participants gain fluency in the “*techniques of debate*—basic logical and semantic tools that allow students to clarify their views and to make and respond to arguments (what Aristotelians called the *Organon*, the ‘tool kit’ of the philosopher” (151). Lastly, participants in Fraenkel’s envisaged Culture of Debate are expected to adhere to certain ethical ground rules; thus his recommendation that students “cultivat[e] *virtues of debate*, most importantly valuing the truth more than winning an argument (that is, disciplining what Plato called *thymos*, the victory-loving part of the soul) and trying one’s best to understand the viewpoint of the opponent” (151).

In sum, Fraenkel’s book is clearly written, engaging and thought-provoking. It would make for an enriching supplementary text alongside the typical introductory philosophy texts or anthologies. What’s more, Fraenkel’s image of philosophy as a tool for intercultural mediation is a notion which is quickly grasped and whose extra-academic value is easily granted.⁷

Notes

1. “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 25.

2. While Fraenkel speaks of “debate,” I might have preferred the word, “discourse,” so as to avoid conflating Fraenkel’s project with attempts to teach philosophy through explicit debating techniques and formats (as is described, for instance, in Jacob Nebel, Ryan W. Davis, Peter Van Elswyk and Ben Holguin, “Teaching Philosophy through Lincoln-Douglas Debate,” *Teaching Philosophy* 36(3) (September 2013): 271–89).

3. Laurie Goodstein, “For Hindus and Vegetarians, Surprise in McDonalds Fries,” *New York Times* (May 20, 2001): A1.

4. Michael M. Grynbaum and Sharon Otterman, “New York Schools Closing for 2 Muslim Holidays,” *New York Times* (March 5, 2015): A1.

5. Parts of the first four chapters of Frankel’s book were previously published as stand-alone essays. Respectively: “Teaching Plato in Palestine,” *Dissent* 54(2) (Spring 2007): 32–39; “Teaching Aristotle in Indonesia,” *Dissent* 55(3) (Summer 2008): 5–13; “Spinoza in Shtreimels: An Underground Seminar,” *Jewish Review of Books* (Fall 2012):

38–43; and “Citizen Philosophers: Teaching Justice in Brazil,” *Boston Review* (January/February 2012): 46–51.

6. Sometimes even raising such questions can prompt anger, education notwithstanding, as one American journalist discovered: “I asked about [bus-bombing planner Hassan] Salameh and whether the kinds of attacks he orchestrated would ever end. ‘The suicide bombings were the reactions against what Israelis do,’ [Hamas official Dr. Mahmoud] al-Ramahi said, sharply, almost as a rebuke to my question. ‘We are the victims’” (Mike Kelly, *The Bus on Jaffa Road* [Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2014]: 290).

7. I thank the Philosophy Club at the University of Hartford for helpful discussions of Fraenkel’s text and ideas.

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Engaging Political Philosophy: An Introduction

Robert B. Talisse

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One of the more challenging tasks for any instructor of social and political philosophy is to find a textbook that covers the important issues and problems in a way that is at once engaging and accessible to students. As the title would suggest, *Engaging Political Philosophy: An Introduction*, by Robert Talisse, attempts to be just that. This relatively short book is more than your standard secondary source, however. In fact, it eschews heavy emphasis on the work of the major figures in the field and instead tries to provide the reader with an appreciation for the “terrain of political philosophy from the ground up.” (19). Whether it succeeds or not is a matter of debate. In many ways, it is a fine piece of supplementary work that expertly condenses the major issues raised by the primary literature, at least with respect to liberalism. The writing is taut, the focus is unwavering. But as an “introduction,” the book’s strengths are also arguably its weaknesses. Rather than building from the ground up, it tends to speak from the perch of the professional philosopher attempting to help the novice negotiate a daunting terrain of disciplinary contestation. That would be laudatory, but it is not entirely clear that the audience for whom this book is written is up to the task.

“Political philosophy,” says Talisse in chapter 1, “is the normative enterprise of seeking justifications,” for the state and the exercise of power. Now, I do not think it controversial to say that this is only one, if very important, arm of political philosophy. Moreover, Talisse explores this question of normative justification almost exclusively from the standpoint of liberalism, more accurately, liberal democracy. It assesses the various and competing philosophical positions with respect to liberalism, from anarchism to deliberativism. Talisse anticipates student confusion by carefully distinguishing