Two conceptions of university teaching

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Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Anthony Weston, a philosopher of education at Elon University, in North Carolina, observes that while most people in their thirties and older think psychological egoism is false, most undergraduates think it is true, even obviously true.

Psychological egoism is the thesis that whatever a person does, that person does it out of concern for herself. The thesis implies that no one digs a neighbour's car out of a snow bank in order to help the neighbour; one does it, rather, to gain the neighbour's good will or to enjoy the warm glow one feels when one helps another.

Prof. Weston adds that since today's undergraduates will one day be in their thirties, likely enough they will one day lose their belief that psychological egoism is true. Nonetheless, he notes, right now no number of counter-examples and no amount of critical argument can cause them to doubt their belief. That undergraduates understand the counter-examples and the critical arguments is clear, for they report them accurately on their tests and can discuss them intelligently. But they remain convinced that egoism is true.

The fact that sound argument leaves undergraduates unmoved suggests to Prof. Weston that philosophy professors are wrong to try to disabuse their students of their false belief. They should, instead, try to help their students outgrow their belief that egoism is true.

According to Prof. Weston, we go through stages in our beliefs and other attitudes, from less rich and connected to richer and better connected. The purpose of university teaching, he maintains, is to help students make the transition from the lower stages to the higher, and to ensure that the transition is complete and lasting. University teaching, by helping bring students to higher stages, helps students become better people—though, perhaps, only by helping them to find and inhabit the better person already within.

We should note that Weston's conception of the purpose of university teaching is actually just the same as the conception that underlies the practice he rejects, the practice in which professors use convincing arguments in order to instil in their students true beliefs and correct attitudes. Weston is just as keen as anyone that students come to believe the true and to value the good. He just thinks professors should take a longer view of their task, and that university teaching would be more effective were professors to supplement their use of argument with other, more nurturing techniques.

Both Weston and those he criticises, that is, hold that the purpose of university teaching is to help students develop into their full personhood. Now indeed this is probably the majority view among those who write about universities and university teaching. Take, for instance, a recent article in *Teaching and Learning*, a publication here at Saint Mary's. Margaret-Anne Bennett, the Director of the Centre for Academic & Instructional Development, proposes that professors be concerned to help their students develop not only their intellectual and academic competence, but also their multicultural awareness, their cultural and sexual identities, and their civic responsibility. Ms Bennett is herself simply reporting from a well-received book on student success.

Certainly this all sounds noble and bright. Yet it is, clearly, to recommend that university professors take up the task of engineering human souls. But what business is it of we professors what stage of maturity our students are at, or what false or childish or confused beliefs they have? Isn't what he or she believes, as well as the matter why she believes it, each individual student's private business?

Another conception of university teaching has it that the professor's concern is with the intellectual and academic competence of her students, and with nothing other than that. On this view, the professor has done well in the classroom when she has brought her charges to an understanding of the topic at hand. To teach psychological egoism, for instance, is to bring one's students to an understanding of the thesis, of the arguments for and against it, of objections to the arguments, and so on. And on this view the professor has done well generally when she has imparted to her students the skills of thinking circumspectly, rigorously, and, above all, dispassionately about the subject matter before them.

It is no concern of the professor whether her students continue to accept some false doctrine or not. On the contrary, once they understand the topic at hand and are able to think dispassionately about it, she's done. More, it is no concern of hers even whether her students actually become dispassionate thinkers, that is, whether they acquire a commitment to think dispassionately. That they are able to think dispassionately is her only goal. It's up to them whether they embrace or reject the skill they've acquired.

I favour the conception of university teaching according to which the professor is to impart understanding and intellectual skill and to leave the rest alone. But I wouldn't have Anthony Weston, Margaret-Anne Bennett, or others change their ways, except, of course, in light of their free acceptance of argument and example. I would, though, have professors and students alike become aware of the two conceptions, and appreciate the strong differences between them.

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