

# Personal Attachment to Beliefs

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## Introduction

There is a tendency in philosophical discussions to see beliefs as belonging to specific people—a tendency to see things in terms of "your" belief and "my" belief or "Smith's belief." I call this phenomenon personal attachment to beliefs. This mindset is unconscious and so deeply ingrained in us that we are usually totally unaware of it as a background assumption in discussions and thinking.

When such attachment occurs, it often has a dramatic and quite negative impact on the quality of classroom discussions and learning. At the very least it frequently causes: difficulties in acknowledging error and changing beliefs, blindness to new evidence, difficulties in understanding new ideas, entrenchment in views, rancorous behavior, and discussions that become competitive personal contests rather than collaborative searches for the truth. Unfortunately, personal attachment to beliefs is so much a part of our culture that we are often completely unaware of it and its negative impact, or that there is an alternative.

The intention in what follows is to investigate the nature of attachment, and to trace out some of the undesirable consequences for classroom philosophical discussion, thinking, writing, and learning. Toward the end of this paper, some constructive suggestions will be made for implementing the results of this investigation in the philosophy classroom. It is worth noting that what is written here is written in manner that is intended to be an *example* of the alternative approach to philosophical thinking presented in what follows.

## The Nature of Attachment

Frequently in philosophical discussions, and in discussions in general, we speak in terms of "your view" and "my view" or "your position" and "my position"—we identify with or attach ourselves personally to beliefs. We view beliefs as *belonging* to someone. I call this mindset being *personally attached to beliefs*.

Working with personal attachment in class, I like to use the analogy of packages (presents) with name tags attached with strings. Over here is a package with a string attaching it to a paper tag that says "John's view" and over here is another package with a string attaching it to a tag that is labeled "Ann's view" and so on for each package. I ask students to now imagine pulling out a pair of scissors and cutting all the strings and throwing the name tags away. At this point we can just examine the packages and not concern ourselves with whether they "belong to" any particular person. Now there is no "your view" and "my view," there is only "the view that we are examining right now." When we are able to do this it makes it much easier to change one's mind, and avoid feeling that one has to "dig in" and *defend* a personal position.

However, this is often not easy to do initially, and it helps to have a deeper understanding of how attachment to beliefs works.

There are at least two possible levels of attachment. At the first level, we can attach to beliefs by thinking that we *own* certain beliefs—they belong to us and are extensions of our selves. People often do this with physical objects as well, and speak of "my car," "my shirt," "my house" and so on. When this happens and someone says something questioning about one of our extensions of self, we may feel that we have been attacked personally and feel we need to defend our car, our

shirt, our house, or our belief. This makes it much more difficult to hear what is being said and really consider it and learn from it, and often leads to taking a competitive stance toward discussion where the emphasis is on winning and defeating another person—or at least not being defeated oneself. This draws attention away from our real goal which is seeing reality more clearly—discovering the truth.

A second, and even deeper, level of attachment can occur when we see our beliefs as part of our *personal identity*—our beliefs are *who we are*. This is the idea that "My beliefs *are me*." This is a difficult idea to get students (and people in general) to question because it seems very natural to many people to think of their beliefs as a very core part of who they are. However, once again, when this happens, any questioning or criticizing of a belief on an issue is likely to be perceived as an attack on the person holding the belief, who will then tend to adopt a competitive stance and the perception that there is a need to somehow defend one's personal honor—one must dig in and defend one's *self*.

Since this is such a deeply rooted unconscious assumption, it is necessary to spend some time working with it. Within the classroom, the approach I have adopted has been two-pronged. First, I talk about how our beliefs change over time. Clearly, none of us has all the same beliefs that we had 15 years ago, 10 years ago, 5 years ago, before last school term, or even last week (or even perhaps a few minutes ago in this particular discussion). And yet, in some sense, we are the same *person* throughout all this. Just as clothing comes and goes, so do beliefs; neither one needs to be viewed as who we are.

Secondly, students benefit from being given a different *model* for belief. The following story is helpful in this respect. Imagine that we are going for a hike in the Three Sisters Wilderness area. It would be wise to take a map with us so we don't get lost, so you have brought one with you to consult from time to time. The map shows trails, streams, mountain peaks, places where we can get drinking water, and so on, as well as distances between various geographical features. While we are consulting the map you have brought, I notice and point out to you an error in the map—the map shows the spring where we can get drinking water as being three miles west of our present location, rather than its actual location which is three miles east. Because I have an aerial photo of the area, and hiked this trail last year, I have excellent reason to know that the map is in error. When I help you to see the error in the map, do you get upset with me? Do you feel you must "defend your map" as being correct? Probably not, because you recognize that *the map is not you*—it is only a useful and important *tool* that helps us find our way around and make good decisions. If the map is inaccurate, we may make some bad decisions that will hurt us and/or others. Having someone help correct errors in the map we are using is something for which to be grateful.

In the same way, beliefs can be viewed as reality maps. When someone points out an error in the map I am using, I can simply make the correction on the "reality map" and thank them for helping to produce a more accurate description of reality. Beliefs do not have to be viewed as who we are, we can see them as only a map which can and should be continually revised in the interests of making it more accurate.

Sometimes students have a hard time understanding the idea of attachment because we live in a society in which virtually everything is owned by someone—so it is hard to think of something as not belonging to anyone. Again, an analogy can be very useful. In class, I like to start by asking a student about a personal belonging; I might point to a backpack at a student's feet and ask "Who does that backpack belong to?" When the student says "Me," I might then ask about a statement that student had made earlier in our class discussion: "Who does the belief that 'Only material objects exist' belong to?" When the student again says "Me," a different way of relating to objects and beliefs can be introduced by using the following example.

Let's imagine we are at the beach and see a shell at our feet. Who does that shell belong to? Clearly, at this point, it belongs to no one. However, suppose you pick the shell up and look at it closely? Whose shell is it? At this point you have a choice. You could say it is "your shell," or you could say it is nobody's shell in particular, it is just a shell we are presently looking at. It might even be useful to us as a tool for scraping tar off our feet. But we don't have to see the shell as belonging to anyone.

Suppose you now leave the beach, go across the street and *buy* a shell in a gift shop. What if someone later said that the shell was ugly? Would you defend it and argue that it was beautiful? In this case, the tendency would be to think of the shell as "yours," something that is attached to you and must be protected and defended. You are invested in it. But you could also *choose* to *not* see it as part of your personal identity, just as you did with the shell found at the beach.

In a similar manner, we can choose to do essentially the same thing in regard to beliefs as we can shells. They do not have to be viewed as belonging to anyone in particular. They are simply descriptions of reality. If they are accurate descriptions they can be useful to us. But they do not have to be viewed as "your description" or "my description."

This can be of enormous help in moving a discussion away from worrying about "*Who* is right?" to being concerned with "*What* is right?" This is a crucial distinction. Beliefs need not be seen as attached to specific people—once you have said or written something you can let it go; it is no longer "yours," it is simply a belief, an attempt at drawing part of a map, if you will, that we can all look at and work with and try to make as accurate as possible. At this point our efforts can more easily become collaborative rather than competitive. It can be you and me working *together* to find the truth and make a better map, rather than you *against* me competing to determine who will "win" and best the other in some sort of personal contest.

## Consequences of Personal Attachment

One of the greatest disadvantages to being personally attached to beliefs is that it increases the likelihood that an *adversarial, competitive, or debater's stance will be taken* in a discussion. If there is a "my" view and a "your" view, it becomes more likely that the focus will be on winning and proving that "I am right and you are wrong." This, in turn, often leads to looking only for where the other person is wrong with an idea rather than what is right or helpful and what can be learned. Robert Nozick has described this attitude quite well.

"I find I usually read works of philosophy with all defenses up, with a view to finding out where the author has gone wrong. Occasionally, after a short amount of reading, I find myself switched to a different mode; I become open to what the author has to teach. No doubt the voice of the author plays a role, perhaps also his not being coercive. (1)

When there is attachment to views and an adversarial or *debate stance* is taken, the goal is to instruct or persuade the other party to adopt "my" point of view. When we are debating, our focus is typically not on learning. Let us examine the debate stance more closely.

When we have become attached to views and are in debate mode, there are likely to be three key features in the thought process. 1) In debate, I *start from a belief*, a position, a point of view. I start from the assumption that *I already know* the truth, and then set out to convince others that I am right. For example, if I enter a debate on abortion, I start by taking some *position*, perhaps that "Abortion is always morally wrong." I then *identify* with this position in some way, seeing it as *my* position. 2) Having already staked out a position (a territorial metaphor), I then set out to collect evidence. However, typically, I am only interested in evidence that supports my pre-existing belief. I collect only information that supports "my" view and undermines the views that conflict with "mine." 3) I then present the evidence on behalf of my

belief and defend it against criticisms or "attacks" by others who do not agree, in the hopes of persuading them that "my" view is correct.

Often what happens in debate is that each side simply gets more deeply entrenched in the belief that they started out with, and very little real learning takes place. All of us have seen this happen many times. One simply becomes more committed to defending their initial view, and in so doing becomes more closed to new or different ideas. This does not seem like a reasonable and worthwhile outcome to me.

Research in conflict mediation tends to bear this out, and this research can easily be applied to academic discussions as well. Roger Fisher and William Ury (in *Getting to Yes*) found the following to be true. The words inserted within brackets are my own.

[It is important to] focus on interests, not positions. At the Harvard Negotiation Project, researchers found that when people stated their goals in terms of positions that had to be defended they were less able to produce wise agreements [or wise thoughts]. The more you clarify your position and defend yourself, the more committed you become to the position. Arguing over positions endangers ongoing relationships, since the conflict often becomes a contest of wills...

Trying to resolve a conflict [or philosophical issue] in the face of an adversary narrows one's vision. Pressure reduces creative thinking at the very time when creativity is most needed. Searching for one right solution [or position] might be futile. You can get around this problem by setting up time to focus on new solutions instead of defending your prospective goals [or the initial position staked out] endlessly. (2)

There is an important alternative to debate. This alternative is called *dialogue* (3).

In dialogue, the thought process used in debate is reversed. Instead of starting out with a belief ("my" belief) and the assumption that I already know, we can utilize the following process: 1) I start from a *question* and a *desire to find out*. Staying with the abortion example used earlier, one might start with the question, "Under what conditions, if any, is abortion morally wrong?" 2) I then set out to collect and evaluate evidence and information on *all sides* of this issue, not just information that supports a pre-existing view I have identified with (come to view as "mine"). And finally, 3) I decide (tentatively) which belief seems the most accurate, based on an analysis of the best evidence available so far. Choosing a belief is thus the *last* step in the process and is based on information provided from a number of perspectives. I accept a belief based on a thorough examination of all the available evidence, while also remaining open to the possibility that more information may well become available later and that, upon reflection, this belief may need to be altered in the future.

Choosing debate rather than dialogue produces distinct negative consequences.

Being in debate mode and wanting to prove "our" particular thesis has a very real tendency to *blind us* to important pieces of information and avenues of thought. Buddhism has something important to teach us in this regard, pointing out to us that "Desire blinds us, like the pickpocket who sees only the saint's pockets." (4) Our desires in general, and our desire to prove "our view" in particular, can truly serve as filters that prevent us from seeing important parts of the situation in front of us.

Within Buddhism this is called "the wanting mind." Suppose, for example, I am waiting at a train station, and I am eager to board my train and begin my trip. There are many sounds in the train station but my mind is focused on listening for *one* sound only, the sound of an approaching train. Because I *want* so much to hear the train sound, many other sounds around me go unnoticed or noticed only very superficially.

When we are in debate mode--when we have a specific agenda of proving a thesis--anything that does not pertain to our thesis and its defense tends to be cast aside, barely noticed, or not noticed at all. *Wanting* to

"win" and be *personally right* makes us *blind* to things that don't further the desire to promote our specific thesis. If our objective is truth or wisdom, clearly this blindness is not a good thing.

Being personally attached to views and entrenched in debate mode produces a number of additional undesirable consequences. In focusing on being right and winning, frequently the truth is lost and there is a tendency to *move away from wisdom and embrace cleverness*. This is something we see quite clearly in our legal system, which is extremely adversarial and oriented toward winning. Frequently the side represented by the cleverest, most aggressive lawyers "wins," but justice is not served in the process.

Additionally, in our tendency to be attached and competitive, relationships between people are weakened rather than strengthened. Often at the end of a debate, people like each other less well and sometimes go away feeling angry and/or hurt. Collaborative discussions tend to produce the opposite result. If you and I have just spent an hour helping each other on some common project—whether it is talking through a problem to find a solution or helping each other build a boat—we are likely to feel closer and more connected than we did before we worked together.

Some students actually find competitive discussions and conflict uncomfortable enough that they lose interest in the subject matter and in classes. They are put off by the attack and counter attack and what they see as fighting and wrangling, and decide to avoid philosophy classes in the future. It is also true, of course, that some students are attracted to intellectual sparring, debate, and competition. What I often tell students in class is that I am asking them to *try out* dialogue for 4 hours a week for 10 weeks (I teach 4 credit classes on the quarter system). They have already had plenty of exposure to the debate mode through news, TV talk shows, the legal system, other classes, politics, business, sports, games, discussions with friends, and so on. There may be times when it is useful to argue for a position, though it still does not have to be viewed as *your* position. But it is useful to have more than one tool—debate only—in one's toolbox. Our tendency is to view debate and intellectual sparring as the be-all and end-all of intelligent interchange, and this is a very limiting way of looking at things.

Furthermore, discussions based on personal attachment and competition also contribute toward reinforcing a territorial, aggressive stance toward working on issues—which is not what the world needs more of at this point. How many times have we as a nation had intractable problems working with other countries on issues because we were there to defend "our interests" rather than approach things with an open attitude and a genuine desire to see the truth of the situation and act accordingly?

Additionally, attachment and competition tend to reinforce students (and others) in their habit of clinging tenaciously to and defending pre-existing views. Clearly, this is not conducive to learning or deep understanding. Everything we can do to encourage openness to learning, deep listening, understanding, the ability to take in new information, and collaboration promotes a better and more peaceful world.

Lastly, discussions that are personally attached and adversarial can become quite *negative*; the emphasis is often on finding defects ("shooting down" views) with the idea of "winning." When this happens, students often come away from the discussions with the idea that reasoning is futile and that *all views are defective and wrong* and that it therefore does not matter what you believe in regard to a given issue. There is a tendency to conclude that there is no wisdom or truth to be found in the world, since every possible idea on a topic can (and is) picked apart and its flaws discussed endlessly. This is much less likely to happen in a collaborative, dialogue-based discussion.

Epicurus once said "In a philosophical dispute, he gains most who is defeated, since he learns most." This truth is an excellent starting point for making necessary changes. If we can take the additional step of *moving beyond the concepts of victory and defeat*, and "your" side and "my" side, our chances of learning become greater still.

## **Applications In the Classroom**

What can we do, as philosophers and philosophy instructors, to turn things in a more positive direction? Simply being *aware* of these issues, in and of themselves, will create significant change. In addition, it is hoped that the following four concrete suggestions will be helpful.

First and foremost, we can set a good example. As Gandhi once said, "We must *be* the change we wish to see in the world." If we want peace, we must be peaceful ourselves. If we want philosophical discussions that are not adversarial and negative, we must begin by changing our own behavior and discuss and write philosophy in a new way. The example we set is so much more important than what we tell people to do verbally. If you have children and you tell them why it is important not to eat junk food, what are the chances they will learn from your verbal instruction if you continue to eat junk food yourself?

Taking this further, if students can see how using an alternative model for discussion *benefits* the instructor, they will have some reason to move toward adopting the new way of doing things as well. For example, suppose I am able to listen carefully to someone in class who is disagreeing with something I have said and, without identifying with this view as being "mine," then easily acknowledge that the view in question appears to be mistaken. I then go on to thank the student for bringing this to our attention. If students can see that doing this creates a conversation that is productive, free of anger, fun, has not made anyone appear weak or foolish or defeated, and has actually strengthened our liking and respect for one another, then they have been given a powerful incentive to actually try out the new model in their own lives.

A second useful approach is to take some time to openly discuss the manner in which we have discussions. Many beliefs about *how* to have a discussion are held unconsciously—we have assumptions about how to discuss issues but we have never formulated them consciously and explicitly so that we can evaluate whether they make sense or not. Without having it pointed out to us, many people are simply not fully and *consciously* aware of the discussion model we have learned to use and the disadvantages it may have. We can take the time to present alternative models, such as dialogue instead of debate, and explain the advantages of making a change. In class, it is often useful to bring conscious attention to the *kind* of discussion that is taking place, and sometimes remind participants that we have drifted over into a more competitive or attached kind of discussion.

A third suggestion is to encourage sensitivity to the language that we use to discuss philosophy and to recognize that the language we use does two things: 1) it strongly *reveals* our attitudes and beliefs, and 2) our language also *shapes* those attitudes and beliefs—the language that we choose is both a symptom of the problem and a lever for change. Much of the language of philosophical discussion uses territorial and even combative metaphors that help to create a certain kind of discussion. Talking about "questioning" or "investigating" an inference connotes a very different attitude than "attacking" an inference. We can become aware of the competitive and personally attached language we use and substitute language and metaphors that are more appropriate and which will help to create a different kind of philosophical discussion.

If we change the metaphors we use it will help us to reframe what we are doing. Right now, our metaphors are simply encouraging identification with views and adoption of a posture of attack and defend. The following list of expressions has been gleaned from actual published philosophy articles and from philosophy colloquia.

We need to attack the assumption that...

knockout argument

intellectual ammunition

deal a death blow to the theory that...  
forced to accept the view that  
marshal your arguments  
battle the assumption that  
the argument comes under fire when  
go on the offensive with the argument that...  
occupy the territory formerly held by...  
several lines of attack  
part of a broader salvo launched against ...,  
pick a safe path through the minefield of...  
a crushing argument  
defend the view that  
destroy the argument that  
his criticisms were right on target.  
his onslaught demolished the argument.  
I've never won an argument with him.  
You disagree? Okay, shoot!  
If you use that strategy, he'll wipe you out  
He shot down all of my arguments  
The argument was defeated  
Time to run up the white flag

I'm sure that readers can add many additional examples from their own experience. Clearly these are metaphors that encourage an adversarial, even warlike and highly personalized view of philosophical interchange. It need not be this way. With a little thought and effort we can substitute and get in the habit of using different expressions that create a different model for discussion. Instead of "shooting down" arguments we can "look them over for possible problems," instead of "running up the white flag," we can recognize that "the view we're considering is probably not true." Rather than talking about "defending a position," we could say we are "putting forth a view for consideration."

We can also drop entirely talk of "my view," "your view," and "Smith's view" in favor of constructions such as "the view that..." and "this belief" or "that statement." There is no need to attach people's identities to various views. (5) These are not difficult changes to make, but they will have a powerful effect on how we view what we are doing when we do philosophy.

Personally, I like very much the map-making metaphor as a guide for having a productive discussion. We are all working on the same map—it does not "belong" to anyone—and our collective intention is to produce as accurate a map as possible.

Fourth, we can consider what class assignments we choose to make from the standpoint of what impact they will have on shaping student perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. For many years, having students write "a philosophy paper" was a staple in all my philosophy classes. This is what people in English departments call a thesis paper. Students are asked to formulate a thesis or position, carefully explain what the thesis is and define key terms, and then go on to provide reasons to support the thesis. They are also told that it is important to anticipate, state, and then rebut the best objections to their view.

About four years ago I finally stopped having students focus on this kind of work for my classes. Doing so has helped to create a transformation of the classes. Looking back on it, so much energy went into "writing a good paper" and "defending a thesis" that frequently the focus was really not on *learning*.

Writing the standard kind of philosophy paper most definitely promotes a specific mindset on the part of students and a certain kind of energy for the class as a whole. The emphasis is not primarily on learning, exploration, or trying out new ideas in one's life. Instead, the focus is on developing and defending something called "your view" which creates a sense of personal attachment to, or ownership of, a belief and as a result promotes a competitive stance where the primary focus is on debate and personal "victory."

In the next phase of the traditional paper, the focus is on providing reasons to support "your view" as being correct. This means, practically speaking, that the student is put in the position of searching to find only reasons to support a pre-existing view. As the author, I must cast about for what supports my view and discard whatever does not. This does not seem to contribute to a true openness to learning and to change.

Lastly, the thesis paper must anticipate what will be the best objections to "my view," not with the purpose of learning from what others with a different view may say, but with the purpose of discovering and then *defeating* each of these contrary ideas. As the author, I am not interested in others' ideas as a source of learning, but only as a possible *threat* to "my thesis." These threats to the thesis must be shown to be inadequate. The writer's mindset is thus one of looking for weaknesses (rather than for strengths or for what can be learned) in the perceptions of other people.

None of this seems very helpful to me or likely to lead to receptiveness to new information, but simply reinforces the existing dysfunctional paradigm for engaging in discussion. It is instead a sort of verbal sparring match, where the objective is to push "my thesis" through unscathed.

As an alternative, I have switched to short weekly papers that focus on applying some idea we have been studying to a situation in the student's life or a current issue in our society. In addition, there are midterm and final exams, as well as frequent quizzes on the readings. This approach is explained more fully in "Learning At A Deeper Level." (6)

Another alternative to the traditional philosophy thesis paper is what might be called an investigation paper. Instead of arguing for a view in a paper, one can report on one's investigation of an issue or question. This report includes arguments on *several* sides of the issue, along with the author's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of those arguments. Conclusions can be drawn from the analysis without starting from the idea that the paper must be a defense/proof of something called "the student's position." This is not dissimilar from the structure of scientific research reports in which an investigation is described, followed by an analysis of what may or may not be concluded from that investigation or experiment, as well as suggestions for possible future research to resolve unanswered questions.

This approach has much in common with that often taken by Socrates. In Socratic dialogues, there are frequently discussions which shed light on some topic but there is not necessarily a thesis proven or specific conclusion drawn. It is, rather, an exploration of an issue or question. Socrates examines views (and reasons) but most often does not *start* out with a view, particularly a view that is "his." He typically starts with a question or series of questions.

#### **IV. Dialogue, Nonattachment, and Critical Thinking**

In exploring the ideas of nonattachment and dialogue with others, one of the questions that comes up regularly is in regard to critical thinking. People will sometimes say something like the following. "Debates and having participants take positions and argue for them enhance critical thinking skills, and this includes the ability to defend a view or position, as well as analyze the defects in other positions. To do this, there needs to be a certain amount of competitive discussion or debate. Consequently, debate is a necessary aspect of philosophical thinking, discussion, and writing."

This is an important observation. Instead of approaching it in the traditional manner and viewing it as an *objection* and *rebutting* it, one can view these remarks simply as questions inviting further investigation: "How can critical thinking take place effectively within the framework of nonattachment and dialogue being presented here? Within that framework, how would one deal with the issue of the need for critical thinking in discussion and writing?" An adequate response to these questions will need to examine at least three avenues.

First, we must ask what it means to think critically. Does critical thinking consist *only* of fault-finding? The work of Peter Elbow and Deborah Tannen is very insightful and useful here. Consider the following remarks from Tannen.

"The doubting game" is the name English professor Peter Elbow gives to what educators are trained to do. In playing the doubting game, you approach other's work by looking for what is wrong, much as the press corps follows the president hoping to catch him stumble or an attorney pores over an opposing witness's deposition looking for inconsistencies that can be challenged on the stand. It is an attorney's job to discredit opposing witnesses, but is it a scholar's job to approach colleagues [and ideas, or written works] like an opposing attorney? (7)

Elbow suggest that we learn the ability to approach new ideas in a different way, which he calls "the believing game." This requires us to look for what is right or useful about an idea. (8) Tannen stresses that learning to play "the believing game" and becoming gullible are not the same thing.

This does not mean accepting everything anyone says or writes in an unthinking way. That would be just as superficial as rejecting everything without thinking deeply about it. The believing game is still a game. It simply asks you to give it a whirl: Read *as if* you believed, and see where it takes

you. Then you can go back and ask whether you want to accept or reject elements in... the idea. Elbow is not recommending that we stop doubting altogether. He is telling us to stop doubting exclusively. We need a systematic and respected way to detect and expose strengths, just as we have a systematic and respected way of detecting faults. (9)

According to Elbow, "We tend to assume that the ability to criticize a claim we disagree with counts as more serious intellectual work than the ability to enter into it and temporarily assent." (10) This is a very central point.

Both doubting and believing are important intellectual skills, but the debate model stresses only the former. Our approach needs to include *both* tools in order for us to truly be effective as critical thinkers. Tannen puts great emphasis on this point.

Although criticizing is surely part of thinking, it is not synonymous with it. Again, limiting critical response to critique means not doing the other kinds of critical thinking that could be helpful: looking for new insights, new perspectives, new ways of thinking, new knowledge. [Only] critiquing relieves you of the responsibility of doing integrative thinking. It also has the... [effect] of making the critics feel smart, smarter than the ill-fated author whose work is being picked apart like carrion... [In addition, it] has the disadvantage of making them less likely to learn from the author's work. (11)

This brings us to the second consideration in regard to critical thinking in relation to nonattachment and dialogue. Critical thinking certainly does include wanting to be aware of problems and defects in the idea under consideration. However, having the desire to investigate for both strengths and weaknesses in an idea does not make the decision for us regarding *how that investigation is to take place*: whether the activity of investigation is competitive and attached, or collaborative and nonattached is a *choice*; there is nothing in the activity itself that requires that it be done one way or the other.

One can still state reasons for a given view, examine those reasons, and also state and examine reasons to think that view is false, all without personally identifying with that view and thinking of it as "yours." One can do all these things in regard to a view without needing to be personally right or viewing the discussion as a competitive contest. Exploring reasons on both sides of an issue, and drawing conclusions from starting premises, can be done collaboratively in a discussion and without staking out a personal position and defending it in a paper. I frequently critique the written work of students in my classes, but the critique is always focused on the statements in front of me and our mutual desire to see the truth, not on a desire to prove that I am right and they are wrong. We can subject a view to close scrutiny without needing to attach statements to people and without needing to prove the truth of some particular statement ("ours") that we entered the discussion with.

Reasons can be assessed either in a competitive way or a collaborative way. Why should assessing reasons and statements be any different from any other activity? One can climb a mountain competitively with the objective of beating the other climbers or one can climb in the spirit of collaboration, and climbers can help each other climb to the best of their abilities. The same is true of telling stories, singing, dancing, sculpting, or skipping rocks on a pond. There is nothing in any of these activities that dictates that it be done either competitively or collaboratively, calling the outcome/product "mine" or not doing so. In the case of philosophical analysis and critical thinking, we simply have a very strong habit of doing it competitively and with attachment to views, so strong that we tend to think if we don't do critical thinking competitively, we are not doing it at all.

Gardening is one of my favorite analogies here. One can garden competitively, trying to grow larger plants, better vegetables than other gardeners, defeating them in gardening prowess, or one

could grow the best vegetables one can and help others to grow the best vegetables they can in a cooperative spirit of collaboration and desire to further the enterprise of growing good quality food. In philosophy, and other research disciplines, the garden we are cultivating is aimed at growing the produce of truth, a clearer vision of reality. We can point out defects in the gardening techniques being utilized without having an emphasis on winning or viewing the gardening techniques as the extensions-of-self of any particular gardener. And if it is a community garden, the products belong to everyone, and ideally this is the goal in research: to find the truth and share it with everyone so that all may benefit from seeing things a bit more clearly.

A third reflection on the question of critical thinking requires us to look outside our own profession. It can be a very useful experience to attend the colloquia of researchers and academics outside of philosophy. Science is a particularly good example in this regard. My own experiences are reflected in those of Norman Swartz.

"It is revelatory to attend the colloquia of academics and researchers outside of philosophy I remember when as an undergraduate, a year before I was to switch my career to philosophy, I took a summer job at the General Electric Research Laboratory, a scientific mecca which, at that time at least, was the largest privately funded research lab in the world. Every Friday afternoon there was a visiting researcher scheduled to deliver a talk in the auditorium explaining his latest research. These sessions were well-attended and keenly anticipated. The discussions following the talks were animated and exciting. And they were totally unlike much of what I have experienced in philosophy. To the best of my recollection, there was not a single instance... of anyone's ever challenging the speaker on anything said. Instead these sessions were made up entirely of replies of this nature: "I'm working on such-and-such. Do you think I could adopt your techniques for what I am doing?" or "I think I can help you with so-and-so aspect of your problem; let's get together on this," or "Have you heard of x's results/techniques? I think his results/techniques could be useful to you," etc.

In other words, the discussions were invariably, and wholly, given over to trying to enhance, and make use of, one another's work, to a cooperativeness, and selflessness that was natural, easy, and uninhibited. No one tried to "score any points" off anybody else; no one tried to attack any other person's work." (12)

Others that I know have had similar experiences in attending scientific and other nonphilosophy colloquia. Perhaps we, as philosophers, can learn something important from our colleagues in other disciplines.

What all this suggests to me is the possibility of a *broader concept of critical thinking*: one that includes *both* a concern for finding defects *and* for finding strengths, as well as a desire to carry out the investigation in way that is not hampered by the need to win or the habit of viewing beliefs as attached to specific people.

## Concluding Comments

The present paper attempts to be an *example* of the alternative approach to philosophical thinking and writing that is suggested here. It attempts to investigate and shed light on some important issues, but is not an attempt to argue the reader into accepting a thesis or position held by the author, though there certainly are reasons present in what is said. It is not an attempt to defend the author's point of view against objections in the way that a traditional philosophical paper might.

My original training as a philosopher was along the lines of the traditional model. I am still in the stages of feeling my way along with this new approach, but on the whole I am convinced that it is a valuable approach to both the doing and the teaching of philosophy, and my hope is that others will be working in similar directions and share what they have learned with all of us.

## Notes

(1) Nozick, Robert, *Philosophical Explanations*, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 6.

(2) Hocker, Joyce, and William Wilmot, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition,

Dubuque: William C. Brown Publishers, 1985, pp. 102-3. Hocker and Wilmot are reporting on the work of Roger Fisher and William Ury (*Getting to Yes*, by Fisher and Ury, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

(3) Poliner, Rachel A., and Jeffrey Benson, *Dialogue: Turning Controversy Into*

*Community*, Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility, 1997.

(4) Kornfield, Jack, *Buddha's Little Instruction Book*, Bantam

Books, 1994, p. 55.

(5) The reader will note that I have avoided using competitive language and referring to

views in this paper as "mine." In this way, the paper becomes an *example* of the kind of dialogic and nonattached approach being suggested here.

(6) Lugenbehl, Dale, "Learning at a Deeper Level," *Teaching Philosophy*, 26:4,

December 2003, pp. 351-9.

(7) Tannen, Deborah, *The Argument Culture*, Ballentine Books, 1999, p. 275.

(8) Elbow, Peter, *Embracing Contraries: Explorations In Learning and Teaching*,

Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 258.

(9) Tannen, p. 273.

(10) Elbow, p. 258.

(11) Tannen, pp. 273-4.

(12) Swartz, Norman, "Philosophy as a Blood Sport," 1994, URL

[http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/swartz/blood\\_sport.htm](http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/swartz/blood_sport.htm). This revision: April 9, 1994, Department of Philosophy, Simon Fraser University.