Student Relativism

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In this paper I offer an analysis of, and suggest some methods for dealing with, a quite particular and peculiar problem in teaching philosophy. It is, perhaps, not a problem essential to the discipline or to its teaching, but it is nevertheless one of the most serious, pervasive, and frustrating problems confronting most philosophy teachers today. I speak of the problem of student relativism—or, SR for short.

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What is SR? It is a phenomenon or perhaps a cluster of phenomena manifested in statements such as the following.

> There is really nothing true or false—or nothing really good or bad—it's all relative. One person has an opinion or feeling, and another person has a different one. What is true for one person might not be true for another. After all, who's to say? Everybody has their own feelings.*

Quite a number of variations on these statements are open. One has only to replace *good or bad* by *right or wrong*, *feelings* by *values*, or *true* by *good*, in order to see the possibilities.

My suggestion, then, is that SR is not relativism, if by relativism one means a philosophical position characterized by holding that truth in some arena or field of inquiry (such as morality, science, religion)—or perhaps truth in all fields—is relative to the beliefs of individuals or social groups. Bluntly stated, my thesis is that SR is not the same as some such philosophical position because it is simply not a position at all. To have a position (and especially a philosophical position) it is necessary in some sense to engage with questions and issues. A position is something that one arrives at or achieves with respect to those questions or issues. But it is the mark of SR that it does not engage with questions or issues, but aims to avoid them. . . .

Particular care must be taken to remember that those who seem to express a liberal attitude are not necessarily liberals. The point again is one of nondisclosure rather than the profession of principles. This became clearer in my own class when we began to discuss human sexuality. Here, for example, most of the same students who evinced SR were the strongest homophobes. Those who insisted that human excellence lay in doing what feels right to or for one's own self were among the least tolerant of non-standard sexual relationships. . . . It became increasingly plausible to believe that the liberalism and tolerance that might seem to be (perhaps the best) part of SR are really demands or pleas that the hearer be liberal or tolerant toward the (still mysteriously undisclosed but usually disappointingly conventional) opinions, values, feeling, etc. of the speaker.

Here, SR is primarily a method of protection, a suit of armor, which can be applied to one's own opinions, whatever they may be—but not necessarily to the opinions of others. "Who's to say?" is not an expression of one's own intellectual humility, broadmindedness, or unwillingness to condemn others. Rather, it is an expression of the idea that no one step forward and judge (and possibly criticize) one's own opinions. One would not like that. One says it is impossible. One's own opinions are proper and acceptable just by virtue of their being "felt" as one's own. No further scrutiny, judgment, or improvement is to be allowed or tolerated.† . . .

If SR is an eraser, then the hand that reaches for the eraser must somehow be stayed. The suit of armor—really emperor's clothing—must be recognized for what it is. The chanting of SR must be stopped, its spell broken. One must be brought to realize that one is in a real world, not a fantasyland of platitudes and complacency.

*These expressions and their variants appear both singly and in clusters. The ungrammatical "their" is characteristic.

†With the forthrightness made possible by anonymity, the author of a collegiate graffito I recently saw wrote: "Kill anyone who makes me question my values."