

Floris Velema (ed.): *Debate/Philosophy. How to start debating in the philosophy classroom.* ISVW Uitgevers, Leusden, 2022.

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With a turquoise cover that makes it stand out, the book *Debate/Philosophy* proves to be both enjoyable and practical. The graphic design is particularly well done, the most remarkable aspect being the logical symbols in the margins, the so-called “debaticons” or key concepts for debate, such as definition, clash, exclusivity, relevance, or impact. The body of the book consists of seven contributions. The panel of contributors was clearly chosen with a view to achieving a balance between higher education and research (2 contributors), philosophy teaching in high schools (2 contributors), and the debating specialists (3 contributors). This spread is entirely appropriate for a book on debate, a form of discussion that requires basic rules to be respected, notably the fair allocation of speaking time, recalls editor Floris Velema, philosophy teacher at the Wolfert Bilingual School in Rotterdam and chairman of the board of the Dutch Philosophy Olympiad. The cover of the book visually separates philosophy and debate with a large slash: it should not be taken for granted that debate and philosophy go hand in hand. On each double page, in the inner margins, this theme is being recalled by the abbreviations d/p.

Can the merits of a good philosopher be equated to the skills of a good debater, asks Han van Ruler, Professor of intellectual history at the Erasmus University Rotterdam (chap. 1)? The question was formulated in these terms by Plato, who structured philosophical thought in contrast to the art of public speaking. With the emergence of Athenian democracy, power was no longer the monopoly of patrician families; a culture of debate had developed, making room for teachers of rhetorical skills called “sophists”. Among these, one of the most notable was of course Socrates, Plato's mentor. “Both Socrates and Plato were skilled debaters, but neither of the two were uncritical of public debate,” underlines Van Ruler (p. 19). Their critical attitude toward debate is justified by the fact that more than one Athenian orator has put his rhetorical skills at the service of nationalist, populist or warmongering positions. In sharp contrast, philosophy was defined by the contemplation of truth. Later, Aristotle acknowledged the need to allow room for opinions: persuasion relies not only on logical argument (*logos*), but also on personal credibility (*ethos*) and emotions (*pathos*). The history of the relationship between debate and philosophy is both rich and complicated: Han van Ruler encourages us not to oppose them, but to see that each can benefit from the contributions of the other (p. 37).

Tomislav Reškovic then presents different ways of teaching philosophy in secondary schools in Europe (chap. 2), rather surprisingly without mentioning debate as a specific form of learning. However, this contribution provides valuable background for examining how debate can be related to the aims of philosophy teaching, as Floris Velema points out in a contribution which focuses on highlighting the main “features of debate” (chap. 3). Since a successful philosophical education aims not only at specific knowledge, but also at the ability

to do things by oneself – here to think for oneself, and with others –, the practice of debate seems particularly appropriate to any good philosophy teaching. Debate is a way to enhance student participation in the classroom. But how does it work? “Students do their own research, prepare together in teams, chair the debate, share their learning with their peers through their speeches and can also take on the role of assessors. As such, debate is a form of *active, student-led, and peer-to-peer learning*,” (p. 64-65) points out Velema. Debate also provides a secure environment in which two opposing perspectives can be rationally argued. Indeed, the formal organisation of the debate gives each participant a fair chance. Debate is not a mere rhetorical game, in which one learns to argue about any subject; this traditional criticism overlooks the fact that arguments can and must be carefully compared with those of the other side. Nowadays, in sharp contrast to the isolation of groups as a result of filter bubbles, the practice of debate teaches students to depersonalise an issue. Viewpoints can be explored regardless of an individual’s own initial beliefs. Not only do students become aware that there is always another viewpoint; they also realise that the other viewpoint can be rationally and successfully supported. Thus, concludes Velema, debate offers “an *open and democratic* environment that prepares students to take place in civic life” (p. 71). Is there a more important lesson, for private and for public life, than learning to express disagreement in a respectful manner?

Debbie Newman, debate coach and former president of the Cambridge Union, a debating club, proposes various formats of debate (chap. 4). The main one is the “parliamentary debate”. A diagram shows the position and the role of each participant. The link between debating and representative democracy being obvious, one may be surprised that debating is not practised at school in some countries. There are also “alternative formats”, for example the “balloon debate”: each student of the group plays a different philosopher; they are all in the same hot-air balloon, flying dangerously low; the balloon needs to be lightened, so one of the philosophers is regularly thrown out by a vote of the audience. The students must demonstrate the importance of their philosopher to stay in the balloon for as long as possible. The book is not only aimed at philosophy teachers: as Devin van den Berg, debating champion and coach, also emphasizes, “engagement in debate” (p. 166) can take place on many subjects and in various contexts. Should we impose a blanket ban on smoking? Should we allow prisoners to volunteer for risky military missions in return for lighter sentences? Engagement firstly requires preparation: training, reflection and prior work are the keys to a successful debate. This preparatory work can be formalised by reflecting on three main questions (p. 168): “1. Are there severe problems in the status quo that need to be solved? 2. Why is the motion the best way to solve these problems? 3. Is solving the problem more important than the harm that might occur?” The team should convince the public that the answer to all three questions is positive on their side in order to win approval.

Then, with well-wrought “sample debates”, Gijs von Oenen, Associate Professor at the Erasmus School of Philosophy, illustrates the analytical and critical functions of debate in philosophy (chap. 5). Instead of considering thought as a set of definitions or peremptory statements, the will to debate acknowledges that we are bound to argue about the basic judgements that organise our lives. Philosophical debate is a way of accepting and exploring our disagreements by the means of reason. At the same time, it is “a combative, competitive,

and quasi-sporting” (p. 116) way of life, which authoritarian societies and regimes do not accept. The sample debates investigate key notions, such as freedom - but who would want to question freedom? The question at stake is whether freedom represents the highest philosophical value. Greek civilization regarded piety and justice the highest human achievements; our notion of freedom would have been viewed as a “licence to deviate” from the prescriptions of religion, tradition or world order. Gijs van Oenen proposes “self-understanding” as the main competitor to modern freedom. The same process is adopted with the pairs of concepts formed by “power” and “authority”, “state” and “citizenship”, “security” and “privacy”, etc. In the last chapter, Miha Andrič, a debating trainer and head of the national debating organisation in Slovenia, shows how the main philosophical concepts of freedom (as non-interference, as non-domination, as a capability to act, as non-frustration) can underpin various approaches to debate topics (chap. 7).

A word about the context. The book is one of the intellectual outputs of an Erasmus + Project, funded by the European Commission. The project has been coordinated by Natascha Kienstra, assistant professor at Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, and supported by a consortium of secondary schools, universities and debating associations. It aims to promote debating resources in the philosophy classroom. The outputs can be viewed on a dedicated website (URL: debaticons.com). Available online and in hard copy, the book is one of the three main outputs, alongside classroom worksheets, that will help put debate into practice, and the “debaticons” symbols, also available for 3D printing on the website. In the same way that abstract symbols can be here transformed into real objects, the practice of debate in the philosophy classroom should produce concrete benefits for participants throughout their lives.