
Tools for Young Philosophers: The Elements of Philosophy

Paul Timothy Jensen

Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011, xviii + 144 pp., \$18.00 pbk. ISBN 13: 978-1-61007-691-6

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I admire colleagues who write, and I particularly admire colleagues who write for their students. I am saddened, therefore, to report how disappointed I am with Paul Timothy Jensen's *Tools for Young Philosophers*.

Let's begin with the title. It's not exactly ageist, but darn close. The audience is beginning philosophy students who are already curious about some of the issues in the discipline, and are motivated to undertake some serious intellectual work to learn a little more. In my experience this could just as easily be a former state legislator in his seventies pursuing his lifelong dream of a college degree in retirement, as the bright young high school senior taking her first college course. The paradox in this first complaint is that I believe the book would work better for my retired former student, than the very traditional aged young woman.

We all assign readings in our classes that contain controversial philosophical theses with which we disagree. This is both unavoidable and pedagogically useful. But in a short reference work where deep controversies are not just mentioned or introduced, but settled with an authoritative voice in a paragraph or two, it's hard for any responsible teacher to recommend a book that takes stands on so many issues with which he or she disagrees.

Consider one example that simply drives me crazy.

Arguments are divided into two general categories based on the way premises are connected to the conclusion. This connection, called the inference, is a kind of mental glue. One brand of glue we call *probability* and the other we call *necessity*. When premises are glued to the conclusion by probability, the argument is *inductive*. When the premises are glued to the conclusion by necessity, the argument is *deductive*. (7)

Now I actually like the metaphor of mental glue, and will probably steal it in my teaching. But for the substantive claim that arguments are either based on probability or necessity, my whole career as both a scholar and a teacher is committed to the rejection of this thesis. It completely ignores abductive arguments, or inferences to the best explanation. These inferences which I believe permeate science, philosophical theology, good police work, and much of everyday critical thinking, are certainly not formally sound deductive arguments, nor are they probabilistic in any strict or formal sense. I fully recognize that for many colleagues this example will fail to resonate since they will not share my reverence for inference to the best explanation. But I strongly suspect that there will be other examples that bother them just as much. This is almost unavoidable in a book that deals with a sampling of

some of the deepest questions in logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy in such a short compass.

This brings me to a more profound level of disappointment. The book seems doomed to failure at the very task it sets out for itself.

[T]his book will give you a jump start. In about three hours of reading time you will become familiar with the most basic building blocks of philosophy and become familiar with twelve of the most influential philosophers in western history. (xi)

That's a pretty tall order in a work that devotes eighty-two pages to science, logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy, and an additional forty-five pages to twelve major philosophers in the western tradition. I believe the project at best will yield the most superficial sort of "familiarity," and at worst, flat-out misunderstanding and confusion.

Again, excuse an idiosyncratically chosen example.

What property, then, must a true belief have to transform it into knowledge? Until 1963, most philosophers answered that question by saying that a belief had to be true and *justified* to qualify as knowledge. In that year, a fascinating paper was published by Edmund Gettier demonstrating that a belief could be both true and justified while still not qualifying as knowledge. Since then a great deal of work has been done by epistemologists to offer alternative theories. To date, while there continues to be general agreement that humans know some propositions, there is no generally accepted account of what properties a belief must have (in addition to truth) to qualify as knowledge. (21–22)

I'm not sure that the beginning philosophy student even needs to be considering the Gettier problem. But I am pretty sure that Jensen's answer does not help the student understand what is at issue. But if you are going to introduce all of this, wouldn't you want to say at least something about the causal theories of knowledge that were developed in response to the Gettier problem?

Generally Jensen is a fair and measured author, but occasionally he allows his philosophical passion and his rhetorical skill to unintentionally model uncharitable name-calling rather than reasoned argument. He quotes Richard Rorty, but rather than making the case that radical relativism is seriously mistaken, he simply dismisses the whole approach.

As you might expect, some philosophers deny there is a real world, and then understandably deny that any propositions correctly describe it. They say interesting things like, "[t]he aim of all such explanations is to make truth something . . . more than what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying." These philosophers should be left to themselves. Some think they do harm, but mostly they should just be laughed at. (30)

I'm sorry, but telling our students that they should simply laugh at philosophical positions that play, or played, a central role in our discipline, for however short a time, borders on irresponsibility. This is exactly the sentiment the popular culture programs our student to bring into our classes. If there is

one tool a beginning philosophy class should give every student, it is the ability to articulate reasons for rejecting those positions with which they disagree.

I will close this all too negative review with not another complaint, but simply a declaration of a different pedagogic instinct about what young, or older, beginning philosophers most need to be reading. I see far less value in philosophical dictionaries, or surveys of technical jargon and academic distinctions, than works that further excite these students about what our profession has to offer, and model it at its best. I'd much rather have my students read Descartes's *Meditations*, Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, or Nagel's *What Does It All Mean?*

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The Philosophy of Art

Theodore Gracyk

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Each of the nine chapters of *The Philosophy of Art*, by Theodore Gracyk, presents an outline both of a major topic in contemporary analytic philosophy of art and the debates this topic has inspired. Some of these topics Gracyk chose because they are so central to the field (for example, picturing, expression, aesthetic value, and the definition of art), others because they promise to be of special interest to beginning students (creativity, fakes and forgeries, popular art, and the appropriation of another culture's art). Indeed, the book reflects Gracyk's long engagement with its subject matter, not only as a scholar but also as a teacher. While the material covered is unavoidably abstract and theoretical, especially for newcomers to the field, Gracyk anchors his discussion at every turn with a wide range of examples, drawing not only from artworks, high and low, but also from a range of things that are, in one way or another, art-like, such as video-games, garden design, and sporting events. The study questions he includes at the end of each chapter are particularly thoughtful, and students will be challenged and stimulated by many of the open-ended, imaginative "exercises"—for the most part, thought experiments—that appear, set off in italics, in the body of the chapters. These encourage readers to grapple directly with a wide range of puzzles and paradoxes about art's nature, limits, meaning, and value.

While this book is not an anthology, like many anthologies it covers a greater number of topics than easily fit into a semester-long syllabus. This is not necessarily a problem, but in places Gracyk's presentation of arguments