

The Philosopher's Fallacy  
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Philosophers love arguments. They love to make arguments, they love to attack other people's arguments, and for the most part, they assume that the strongest argument is the factually correct one. Thus, the best way to obtain knowledge is to evaluate which argument is most persuasive, and to conclude that this must be the position that is factually correct. For example, consider the thoughts of R.M. Hare concerning what philosophy is:

So what is philosophy, and what does it do? When I am asked this question, the answer I always give is that it is the study of arguments to find a way of telling good from bad ones. In short, philosophy, broadly speaking, is Logic. By "Logic" I mean . . . any study that casts light on what are good reasons for holding opinions that we hold, or what would be good reasons for abandoning them. If there are good reasons, then we ought to be able to defend them in argument; and that is what philosophy is about.<sup>1</sup>

I think Hare's explanation of what philosophy is, and what philosophers do, is basically correct. However, there are some assumptions that philosophers<sup>2</sup> make that may not be justified. What counts as a "good reason" and are so-called good reasons always those that can be easily defended in argument? I assume a "good reason" is the one that seems most persuasive to the listener. Yet, what a person sees as a good reason probably depends upon the view that he himself holds. People tend to seek out arguments and individuals who agree with them and that confirm their own personal views.

In ancient times, sometimes two competing armies would each select a champion or champions from among their ranks to go out and fight the battle on behalf of the entire army. Of course, each military would select its most able and skilled soldier(s). The whole battle was won or lost based upon the results of this one battle between a small group of men, or sometimes only the best man from each side. I believe that we often select our own philosophical champions to go out and do battle for us, and debates are a perfect example of this. If you are a Christian, perhaps you select Thomas Aquinas, C.S. Lewis, or Alvin Plantinga. If you are an atheist, you may instead select David Hume, Bertrand Russell, or Richard Dawkins as your champion, for the same reasons as the Christian selected his champion. An individual with Liberal tendencies would obviously like much of Karl Marx's view, or perhaps use John Rawls to justify his own position, whereas those with Libertarian leanings love Robert Nozick, Ayn Rand, or Milton Friedman. For practically any issue you can think of, this process seems to apply. You have certain beliefs, either from what you were taught to believe as a child, or out of self-interest

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, R.M. "One Philosopher's Approach to Business Ethics."

<sup>2</sup> I mean the broad definition of "philosopher" to include historians, scientists, politicians (in debates for example; why think the person who is the best debater is the one who is most qualified to be President?), health care professionals or practically any subject matter or field of endeavor. People in every walk of life assume without question that he who seems to have the strongest argument is right.

based upon your own particular circumstances (this is especially true in economic debates), and then you seek to confirm that those beliefs are right by selecting your particular champion.

Whatever champion you choose, you are attracted to his or her ideas because they are in harmony with your own. This is an important point, worth repeating: you do not like them because you agree with them, you like them because they agree with you. The philosophy that you like is based upon the views that you have coming into the contest. You love the fact that these writers say things that you agree with, and as an added bonus, they say it in a much better way than you yourself could. Of course, you root for your champion and are not exactly an unbiased observer while the battle is being waged. Anyone who has ever been to a football game or a boxing match realizes that fans who are biased towards one side often see the same event in a much different way. One side's fantastic officiating call will be seen by the other side as the worst call of the century.

I will provide an example from a real debate that I attended. It was held at the University of Missouri-St Louis, and the topic was whether pornography was harmful. One debate participant was Ron Jeremy (an actual porn star), and on the other was a youth pastor whose name unfortunately escapes me. The debate was moderately entertaining, and in my opinion only moderately substantive, but each side seemed to have a few good points here and there. I wouldn't have necessarily said that either individual won or lost the debate, although Mr. Jeremy's arguments were definitely more entertaining, and he drew a lot more laughs and applause from the audience. Towards the end of the debate, both participants took questions from the audience. One young man stood up and had some sort of question for Mr. Jeremy, but before he asked it, he heaped on some rather fulsome, over the top praise that was just downright awkward, and then declared, "You totally killed him in this debate, you obviously won!" I don't remember anything about his question for Mr. Jeremy, I just remember his declaration that Mr. Jeremy had "obviously" won, accompanied with some hoots and applause from some members of the audience. However, I noticed that the kid who declared victory for Mr. Jeremy had on a T-shirt that read, "Relax, it's just sex," and a hat, on backwards and turned to the side, with the word *Penthouse* on it, undoubtedly after the pornographic publication of the same name. Several members of his little group had on similar garb as well. My question for you, the reader, is this: Do you really believe that this young man was an unbiased observer in this debate? Do you suppose he had any particular views about pornography already, coming into the debate? Do you suppose he would have been very open to what the youth pastor had to say? Whose views do you think he would be more inclined to believe? The answer should be obvious, of course. So, when he declares Ron Jeremy as clearly being the winner of the debate, and he sees Ron Jeremy's arguments as being far stronger than the pastor's arguments, are we to believe that this is based upon anything other than this audience member's own personal views being already in harmony with Mr. Jeremy's view? The religious folks in the audience were far less vocal, but I have my doubts that they would have agreed that Ron Jeremy did "way better" and "totally killed" the pastor. Who won the debate depends upon who you ask. As a side note, at the time of the debate, I was undecided on the issue, myself. I had been taught in my church that pornography was very wrong, and indeed harmful. But, at that time I was going through a crisis of faith, and was

doubting practically everything that I had ever believed. Perhaps my own ambivalence on the issue at the time helps to explain why I felt as though the debate was essentially a draw.

Another example comes from a student paper that I received. It said, "Anyone who is ever thinking about having an abortion should read the Abortion chapter in this book. The term above should be enough to change someone's mind about abortion. I have always been against it and no circumstance will ever change my mind." I doubt that someone with more experience with arguments would have dared to make an admission like this, because it shows that she is not being objective. I get lots of other students who read the exact same material and then write papers defending the right to have an abortion. What seems so obviously clear to her in the text is based upon what she brought into it, and, as she herself said, "I have always been against it, and no circumstance will ever change my mind." A debater with more experience and who had developed his or her skills to a higher level would instead come up with some sort of complex argument that sounded very detached and wholly rational, as though the author did not care at all about the issue in question, and was merely giving the answer to a simple math problem. However, I still wonder if the reasoning, no matter how unbiased and factual it may seem, still comes down to basically the same thing. The author has a gut reaction to an issue, and then seeks to find reasons to justify it. Then it is simply a matter of one's skills in how effectively one can make his or her case. Philosophers and academics often think that it is only the dumb people who do this, who do not have access to all of their learning and great intelligence. But all greater intelligence gives you is the ability to make a more persuasive argument. It probably does not change why you have that position to begin with, or at least that is my worry. Ideally, it would be best to evaluate all of the evidence and then come up with a theory based upon the evidence, but I just don't think that this is really how people acquire their beliefs in real life. In some respects, I actually prefer the student paper's position, because at least her paper does not put on airs of being objective and fully unbiased when it is not. Much of moral philosophy is simply intellectual sleight of hand for the purpose of giving the appearance of credibility to the philosopher's gut instincts, which are no more likely to be correct than the average person's instincts.

Perhaps it sounds as though I am arguing for relativism. I am not. I do believe that it is sometimes true, and perhaps often true, that facts can be evaluated in a reasonably unbiased fashion, and knowledge and truth can be obtained. My true position is that we should not simply assume that the person with the strongest argument is the one whose position is factually correct. An obvious counter-example to show this is that if someone during the middle ages was a very talented debater and was able to convince an audience of observers that the sun revolved around the earth, while the individual arguing for the opposite was not as good at explaining his position or didn't have the same rhetorical skills, or simply was not able to provide strong evidence at that time for whatever reason, then the audience may well believe that the sun must revolve around the earth, and think their position to be well justified. But of course this would not make the belief true, would it. Being able to articulate a position well does not necessarily mean that you are right, and not being able to articulate it well does not necessarily mean that your idea is

wrong. Even though people are vaguely aware of this, they do not acknowledge it nearly enough, and often conflate the strongest argument with the position that must be correct.

So, does this mean that we should not be persuaded by what appears to be the strongest argument? Well, not necessarily. I don't suppose that we have many other options. True beliefs are often correlated with the best argument, so I am not advocating that we no longer look for the best argument. After all, this essay would be rather pointless, and indeed, philosophy as whole would be essentially a waste of time if there were no benefit in evaluating the strength of an argument for a particular view, and I do think that philosophical discussions have some value. I say some value, rather than a lot of value, only because such discussions rarely change anyone's mind. But, at least they allow one to think critically about his or her beliefs, and learn about the other side's view, and this is, if nothing else, at least a step in the right direction. So instead, I would simply advocate a bit of intellectual humility in simply acknowledging that because of the bias of the hearers, the discrepancy in ability between the debaters, and other such factors, we should acknowledge and always remain aware of the possibility that what appears to be the best argument may not necessarily be advocating what is actually true. Knowing this will also help us to remember that we should not have to feel as though we must be able to defend every belief that we have with a better argument than our opponent's, or that we are forced to give up those beliefs if we are defeated in an argument. Under such a scenario, the belief should be scrutinized, of course, but not necessarily rejected outright simply for this one reason.