

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