Lecture 13 – Debate, *disputatio*, and philosophical discussion

For the most part, this course has been devoted to learning how to present philosophical content (or else) to an audience. Another locus of oral expression in philosophy is, of course, philosophical discussion. These discussions most often take place in class, during Q&As, and sometimes panel sessions at conferences. A philosophical discussion can take the form of what is called a *disputatio*. Below, I touch upon the history of this practice and go on to explain what it consists in.

1. Discussion in the history of philosophy

Disputatio, or philosophical disputes, were a very important practice in academia during the Middle Ages in Europe. These discussions had a very specific format. The teacher would raise a question to the class, very much like what we did last week with the question of the artist and their work, and then select a student to lead the dispute. They would then evaluate the validity of arguments for and against a certain position from their classmates. At the end of the *disputatio*, the teacher would assess the different positions, reasons for disagreement and on this basis propose a nuanced view (Cory 2019).

Some scholars trace the origins of disputations to Artistotle's writings with "two participants, and possibly an audience to serve as a judge between the participants. The opponent (questioner) leads the disputation through putting forward propositions which the respondent (answerer) typically either grants or denies" (Spade & Yrjönsuuri 2020).

Nowadays of course, disputations are not necessarily part of a standard academic curricular. Instead the ideals of logic and scientific rigor are very much present in the way in which we write and publish papers in analytic philosophy. Ideally, a philosophy paper defends a thesis which answers to a question, and offers arguments to support it. These papers are presented in front of peers at scientific talks, which allows the discussion to be extended to 'real life' exchanges, during Q&A sessions.

2. What does a *disputatio* look like?

In a formal *disputatio*, a thesis is offered in answer to a question. Arguments in support of the thesis are then offered and objections against the thesis and these arguments are considered, and, ideally, refuted. For example, in answer to the question: 'Is there free will?', one could offer the following

thesis: 'There is no free will'. Then one would have to provide an argument in favour of this position, for example: 'All events are determined by prior causes. Whatever is determined by prior causes is not free. Therefore, our will is not free'. The opponent then offers an objection to the argument, to which the one who is defending the thesis replies and so on.

This is very similar to what would happen during a debate, with the difference that often in the context of a formal debate, arguments are rehearsed and prepared in advance. In such case the discussion becomes a matter of remembering these arguments well and place them at the right moment, more than a matter of having a logical discussion in response to a question, although it is certainly part of it. An important difference between a debate and a *disputatio* are their goals: in a debate you hope to win by provide the best arguments and refuting the opponents', while originally the aim of disputations is scientific: the goal of this type of discussion is also to understand ideas better and to get closer to the truth.

3. How to have a great a philosophical discussion?

Because the aim of a *disputatio* is not only to convince the other side, or to "win" the discussion, a successful philosophical discussion does not necessarily consist in the mere firing of bullet proof arguments at each other, until one of you is proven wrong. Sometimes, what might be more important than raising a fatal objection, or even necessary in order to do so, is to make sure you have a understood each other's position. Thus, one way to reply to your interlocutor is by reformulating what they have said and ask them if you got it right. Or by asking for or proposing a clarification or a distinction. You may also point out your interlocutor relies on an implicit premise that need to be made explicit. Another way of replying which is not focused on raising an objection, is to make a suggestion that would help improve your interlocuter's argument.

The non-combative aspect of the discussion is also crucial in order to make progress. This goes back all the way to our second lesson, devoted to the rules of Q&A.

4. Sources and further resources

Prof. Therese Cory (University of Notre Dame) on what philosophical disputatio is:
Cory, T. 2019, "What is philosophical disputatio?",
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uuANFScjh0

Chalmers, D. 2017, "Guidelines for respectful, constructive, and inclusive philosophical discussion", http://consc.net/guidelines/

Spade & Yrjönsuuri, "Medieval Theories of Obligationes" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (Summer 2020), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/obligationes/