# Teaching Statement

My first classroom experience with philosophy was in high school: My teacher, John O'Malley, carefully explained the history of the Northern Ireland conflict (as he understood it), and then immediately challenged us for nodding along with what he was saying, writing down his explanation without question. "You shouldn't just accept what I say in this class! You should look for the assumptions in my point of view and challenge them. How do you know I'm not just full of BS?" Everyone was startled. And I felt suddenly awakened from what would have otherwise been another dreary and uninspired day of high school. I had never been asked—certainly never been ordered—to question the authority of an instructor. The very possibility of this brought life and excitement to the classroom that I had never seen before. It became clear to me not long after (especially when O'Malley recommended that I read Nietzsche and Laozi) that I was excited about *philosophy*.

When I began teaching in graduate school, I struggled to awaken my students in the way that O'Malley had awakened me. I initially approached teaching with the mindset that, above all, there is content for the students to learn, and that this content is all-important. This influenced the way my courses were structured: lots of quizzes, tests, writing assignments, and forum posts in which students were asked to explain the readings, and so on. But I distinctly remember the exhaustion of the students in my summer 2018 course—and above all, their lack of inspiration. They had been so overloaded with content and examination that there was no opportunity for their own ideas, curiosities, or experiences to make a connection with the philosophical themes under discussion. Seeing their disappointment, I felt that I had failed them.

The experience made me face up to a fear that was working in the background: that if my classes were not heavily structured with assignments, quizzes, and the like, then maybe things would not go as well as they should. If class discussions were open and relied on students' contributions, what if they had nothing to say? What if our discussion went off the rails? The experience in summer 2018 made me realize that, although these are the risks of a more improvisational style, they are worth taking. There is wonderful content to be learned, but none of that content will make contact with students unless they are active and engaged. Further, adopting new methods allowed me to see that some of these risks are in fact virtues: responding to a student's question with an honest confession—"this is a very hard question! I do not know the answer. What do you think?"—is perhaps the best illustration to them that their contributions are extremely important. Even better: to remind students that there is (currently) no absolute authority in philosophy, and so (as O'Malley had taught me years ago) they should question what I say.

"Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity." My utmost goal in teaching is to invite students into the *activity* that is philosophy. If philosophy were simply a body of doctrine, I might do no more than report these doctrines to my students and test whether they were sufficiently memorized and understood. But since philosophy is an activity, I aim to make students *practice* that activity, learning the doctrines of various philosophers throughout history along the way. In other words, the emphasis in my courses is on *doing* philosophy rather than merely learning about it.

The most fundamental activity of philosophy is conversation. To ensure that each of my students participates in this most fundamental activity, I prepare a shuffled deck of cards including each student's name and call on them to answer questions randomly. Typically, this is not an instance of "cold-calling," since I will usually give them the relevant questions in advance, allowing them time to prepare notes (e.g., before class) or to consider the matter with a group before calling on any individual student. I have heard from several of my students that this method is initially intimidating, but that with several weeks of practice it becomes natural and ensures that everyone gets an opportunity to contribute to our discussions. Whereas students might arrive on the first day shy or reticent, I find that by the end of the semester most are quite talkative and confident in the value of their contributions.

An important benefit of this teaching method is its inclusivity—indeed, it comes from a deep commitment to diversity and inclusivity in philosophy. Merely learning *about* philosophy might make students feel alienated, especially if it means learning the opinions of authors who do not look like them or come from the same parts of the world as they do. But when the emphasis in class is on learning *every* student's opinion and treating each person as part of the conversation, this allows us to break barriers of exclusion and make students feel that their voice matters.

As mentioned, something that helps facilitate this regular demand on students to contribute to discussion is that I often provide them with questions (about the reading assignments and the general themes of the course) ahead of time. This allows students to focus on the major issues in the readings and to prepare their own thoughts for discussion. It also allows me as the instructor to take on a "Socratic" stance in my teaching, feigning (or honestly confessing) either ignorance or agnosticism on the relevant topics in hopes that students will help me gain wisdom. This energizes students to inquire, to formulate their own opinions, and to see what kinds of challenges their opinions encounter along the way. In short: the "Socratic" approach energizes them to perform—and to become invested in—the activity that is philosophy.

Admittedly, many of the questions I give students in advance are geared toward interpreting or clarifying the views or arguments of an author in the assigned readings (especially in history-of-philosophy courses). However, I find that our attempts to answer exegetical questions typically lead to critical inquiries of our own. "Now that you've described so-and-so's argument, do you think it is persuasive?" "So-and-so thinks that this is morally reprehensible—do you agree?" To help ensure that students are given many opportunities to consider the relevant issues for themselves, I also assign forum posts in which they are asked to answer a general philosophical question that does not require consultation of the readings. For instance, I might ask them to report their own opinion on questions such as: "When you introspect, do you notice a self that endures through time?" (perhaps during a week on Hume or the Upanishads); "Imagine yourself 10 years from now—what sorts of virtues do you hope to embody?" (while reading Aristotle or Confucius); or "How do you know that you are not dreaming?" (while reading Zhuangzi or Descartes). A major result of this, which I think students appreciate, is that they leave the course with more clarity about their own philosophical views—or at least about the questions they find most intriguing.

Something that I remind myself of regularly, however, is that for most of my students this will be the beginning and end of their academic experience with philosophy. What, then, is the value of practicing philosophy in the manner described above—and for such a brief phase of their lives? Perhaps (as I tend to think) the experience is intrinsically rewarding, allowing them one small chance to ponder some of the deepest and most difficult questions about reality, knowledge, and value. But intrinsic rewards aside, the opportunity to communicate with their peers on these difficult issues allows them to hone skills that are relevant to any vocation—for instance, to communicate their opinions confidently, to report the major ideas in a challenging text, to listen carefully and engage critically with others' ideas, and to formulate questions that help us gain insight and progress on important problems. If the goal were merely to ensure that students could memorize and report the doctrines of (mostly dead) philosophers, they might soon forget this content upon returning to ordinary working life. Having practiced philosophy, however, they come away with improved skills in communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and cooperation.

Something that I hope to learn more about in my years of teaching is how to encourage creativity in my students' writing and thinking while also maintaining rigorous standards for their work. Some guides to philosophical writing discourage students from writing in a literary or dialogic form, expressing a preference for the style of contemporary philosophical journals—i.e., a narrow focus, explicit statement of one's view, and the careful articulation of a single problem. The benefit of this is clear: students learn to write with clarity and precision and are prepared for upper-level or graduate philosophy courses. But the downside is that this leaves little room for experimentation or personal voice. I have tended to waver on this issue—initially following the straightforward and "rigorous" model, while more recently allowing students to write in various styles depending on their preferences. I hope, with more experience, to learn how to achieve a "middle way": encouraging personal creativity in students' writing while upholding the rigorous standards demanded in academic philosophy.

I'll conclude by confessing the selfish gains of my teaching style. The open-ended and often improvisational model that puts students' thoughts and opinions at the forefront keeps classes fresh and interesting for me. It ensures that I learn from my students, that no two courses are ever exactly the same, and that every meeting is an adventure. This method makes the classroom a place for me to continue honing my own skills in the essentially dynamic and conversational activity that is philosophy.