Teaching Statement

My first classroom experience with philosophy was in high school: My teacher, [John O'Malley](), carefully explained the history of the Israeli-Palestinian 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 had 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 began 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 that my courses were structured: lots of quizzes, tests, writing assignments, forum posts in which they were asked to explain the reading assignment, 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, their own curiosities, their own personal 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 are not heavily structured with assignments, quizzes, and the like, then maybe things will not go as well as they should. If class discussions are open and rely on students' contributions, what if they have nothing to say? What if our discussion goes 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 them unless they are active and engaged. Further, taking up new methods allowed me to see that some of these risks are in fact virtues: responding to a students' question with an honest confession that '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 the students that there is (currently) no absolute authority in philosophy, and so (as O'Malley had taught me to do so many 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 to see whether they were sufficiently memorized and understood. But since philosophy is an activity, I aim to make students *practice* that activity, learning the doctrines from 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 one 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 a bit intimidating, but that with several weeks of practice it becomes natural and ensures that every student in class gets an opportunity to contribute to our discussions. Whereas students might arrive to our first day of class 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 oppression and make students feel that their voice matters.

As mentioned, something that helps facilitate this regular demand on students to contribute to class discussion is that I often provide them with questions (e.g., about the reading assignments, but also about more general themes of the course) ahead of time. This allows the students to focus on the major issues in the reading assignments, and to prepare their own thoughts for discussion. This 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 the students will help me to gain wisdom on them. This energizes students to inquire, to formulate their own opinions, to see what kinds of challenges their opinions encounter along the way. In short: the 'Socratic' approach energizes them to perform and 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. (This is especially true when I teach a course in the history of philosophy.) However, I find that our attempt to answer exegetical questions typically leads to critical inquiries on our own part. '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, but is that something you would agree with?' But to help ensure that students are given many opportunities to consider the relevant issues for themselves, I assign forum posts in which the students are asked to answer a general philosophical question that does not essentially require any consultation of the reading assignments. For instance, I might ask them to report their own opinion on the question, 'When you introspect, do you notice a self that endures through time?' (perhaps during a week when we are reading 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 the students appreciate, is that they leave the course with more clarity either on their own philosophical views or at the very least on the questions that 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 experience studying or practicing philosophy at an academic level. What, then, is the value of their practicing philosophy in the manner described above – and for such a brief phase of their life? 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, I think that 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 own opinions confidently, to report the major ideas in a challenging text, to carefully listen to their peers and critically engage with their ideas, to formulate questions that will help us gain insight and progress on some important problem, among so many others. If the goal were merely to ensure that the students could memorize and report the doctrines of (mostly dead) philosophers, then 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 student's writing and thinking while also maintaining rigorous standards for their work. For example, 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 description of one's own view, the careful articulation of a *single* problem, and so on. The obvious benefit of this is that students are trained to write clearly and prepared to write in the style that will be expected in upper level or perhaps even graduate level philosophy courses. But the obvious downside is that this does not allow students the opportunity to experiment with the presentation of philosophical problems or ideas or to express them in a way that fits their own personal style (to the extent that it differs from standard journal writing). I have tended to waver on this issue – i.e., initially following the straightforward and 'rigorous' model while more recently allowing students the opportunity to write in various styles depending on their own tastes or preferences. But I hope, with more experience, to learn how to achieve a 'middle way' of encouraging personal creativity in students' writing while also upholding the rigorous standards that are demanded in contemporary 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 in my teaching, that no two courses are ever exactly the same, that every meeting is an adventure. The method I use makes the classroom a place *for me* to continue honing my own skills in the essentially dynamic and conversational activity that is philosophy.