

## Teaching Statement

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A professor of mine once described philosophy as the effort to get clearer on things that matter through careful discussion with others. The image stuck with me, at least as a pedagogical touchstone: philosophy as a shared practice rooted in general human concerns. When we think critically about these concerns, problems arise and philosophy can be seen as our collective effort to resolve those problems. This effort involves developing arguments, presenting them to others for discussion, and considering those proposed by others. As a philosophy teacher, my main aim is to transmit that practice to my students, to help them acquire both the knowledge and skills necessary to do it well.

Like any practice or skill, one learns philosophy by seeing it done and then by doing it. In the classroom or lecture hall, I emphasize this practical dimension of philosophy to my students. I seek to model the different steps of the process and to call attention to the specific skills and virtues it requires. This works best when students are actively engaged with the material, as opposed to passively receiving it. For this reason, my courses are primarily discussion-based. By beginning with a problem posed by a concept or text, I invite my students to try to solve it or to explain to me how they think the author we are reading has done so. Through this exchange, we work through analyzing philosophical problems, interpreting texts, evaluating the cogency arguments, and constructing arguments ourselves.

The first step is eliciting and motivating philosophical questions, the starting point of the conversation. One way I do this is by inviting students to think carefully about what we mean when we say certain things in ordinary life. When teaching the Lockean approach to personal identity, for instance, I ask students what we mean when we say someone has “become a different person.” Do they consider themselves to be the same person they were yesterday? What are such judgments based on? These questions are a way of leading students to draw distinctions and to identify certain tensions and obscurities in the way we normally think. If these turn out to be difficult to resolve, yet seem to call for resolution, then we have encountered a philosophical problem. Some students can be impatient with such questions, so it is important to make it clear why they are worth asking. They establish an anchor point in our initial convictions and help us establish the stakes of a problem. By asking them, I am also modelling a skill for students to develop: the capacity to identify and articulate such tensions and to cope with our initial inability to find a satisfying resolution.

Once we have identified some problems, the heart of my lessons is helping students approach the philosophical texts that address them. In my experience, students tend to read too quickly, and to focus on the conclusions of the authors rather than the arguments. I ask questions that require students to read more methodically and patiently, taking philosophical texts as examples of how to develop and support an answer to the problem posed. In order to help students practice reading texts in this way, I often assign weekly one-page response papers. Students are asked to choose a claim made in the reading that they find interesting, identify what is at stake in the claim, explain the argument supporting it, and then respond to it, specifying why they find the argument convincing or not. Students then share them with each other in groups or present them to the class. In some courses, I assign longer, more developed oral presentations that involve similar evaluation of arguments as a way of starting a discussion. This is a nice way to show how an objection is most effective when based on a charitable attempt to adopt the author’s point of view and take the argument seriously. Students can see in real time that their critiques are more convincing to others if they have presented a recognizably fair version of the argument they are

critiquing. It also allows me to determine which aspects of the text need further explanation and to give continuous feedback to students throughout the semester.

I present the study of philosophical texts as way of widening one's perspective. Studying the practice of other philosophers, even those whose views seem strange or implausible, is how one improves one's own. I design my syllabi to reflect the diversity of the philosophical tradition or literature about a particular topic. From session to session, I try highlight the plausibility of different views, while also developing and defending a coherent position on the topic. This requires considering the contexts in which philosophers articulate the problem in the terms they do and what is at stake in them. The idea of philosophy as an effort to articulate fundamental problems and propose solutions allows for students to engage with texts in the history of philosophy not as a collection of doctrines but as potential interlocutors. This allows one to step back from one's own immediate convictions and ways of framing problems to consider alternatives. Doing so helps dislodge the conviction of some students that they already have a clear answer to some question, say, that free will is impossible or that its existence is obvious.

I adapt these pedagogical principles to the goals of the different types of courses I teach. One type focuses on what can be gained from close readings of texts. I often choose this for teaching English philosophical texts to French students. I find that examining the translation of philosophical concepts shows how a second language is not a barrier to expression, but a resource, an expansion of one's possibilities of thought. For example, "the self," is typically rendered in French by a nominalization of the first-person pronoun "*le moi*" (literally, the me). We don't generally say, "the me," in English. Why not? How is it different from "the self"? What brought philosophers like Pascal, Descartes and Locke, respectively, to perform these different nominalizations for the first time? It is by reading a text carefully and precisely that one can engage with it on its own terms. This can allow students to better evaluate whether some classic objections are convincing (this is a common theme in my course on Personal Identity in the post-Lockean tradition, since Locke's approach has drawn so many objections).

Another type of course focuses on developing argumentative and communication skills. To help French philosophy students practice those skills in English, I designed a syllabus centering each session around a question that seems to allow for reasonable disagreement. I chose readings drawn from Anglo-American philosophy that either take different views or defend a controversial position. This facilitates debate, since students' intuitions or convictions about them often diverge. This in turn motivates students to critically evaluate the arguments in the texts or to develop their own objections or defenses of the positions in question. I've found that such debate works best in smaller groups which then report their results to the class. This is important for allowing students with different levels of inhibition to express themselves. It also allows me to identify where to elicit further argumentation from students when they struggle to justify their positions or critiques.

Finally, in "Methodology for Foreign Students", I've taught students from all over the world the rudiments of three common French philosophical exercises. My approach is to break things down into simple, repeatable tasks with models to look at when we correct them. From the French *dissertation*, a kind of codified dialectical essay, I take the idea that a good piece of philosophical writing benefits from seriously considering other positions besides the one you ultimately defend. I seek embody the idea that one progresses in philosophy through trial and error, slowly broadening and deepening one's perspective through feedback from others.