

## TEACHING STATEMENT

I'm an openly queer, religious philosopher from the Deep South. I make sure my students know and I ask them to use my pronouns, but I try—in accordance with my faith—to practice grace and forgiveness. My identities and teaching history inform my teaching expectations and practices. While I'm particularly concerned with teaching students who traditionally feel marginalized, my job is to teach everyone. For me, the 'teaching bullseye' of teaching philosophy is *instilling philosophical wonder*. It's my desire that students have a deep but wide understanding of philosophical perspectives, arguments, and figures, and that their understanding instills in them an intense curiosity for the world. This manifests itself in a variety of ways, from the "aha!" expression to desires to engage further with academic philosophy. It's to provoke, as J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote, "questions that need answering," and to equip their natural curiosity with philosophical rigor.

### TEACHING PHILOSOPHY TO THE UNDERREPRESENTED

I'm convinced the best way to do this is to *be* underrepresented, and transparently so. For me, this means outing myself in each and every course as a non-binary trans person and a bisexual, usually with a touch of humor. (I once joked in a lecture on same-sex marriage that, as a bisexual, "all the marriages are mine.") In addition, I invite students to disclose their pronouns when they introduce themselves in their groups, if they want, but I make clear they're not required to out themselves. These efforts don't always succeed, of course. One student refused to use my pronouns. Another questioned the very existence of binary and non-binary trans people. But these are problems of a more general kind: What do you do with students who refuse to abide by the rules of minimal decency, or who lack the background education to see where they've gone wrong? I wish I could point to a universally useful strategy here, but I don't always know what works. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that it's a battle better fought on *my* turf (where I, if anyone, will bear the scars) than on a queer student's, whom I'm obligated to protect in my classroom.

It's useful to start with yourself when teaching philosophy. Students are naturally curious about their instructor's view on most everything. Attempts to hide your views and appear like a dispassionate thinker don't pass their smell test, so I don't bother. Once students know I'm queer, they make inferences about my beliefs: some good, some bad, but what matters is their sense that I'm not hiding from them. Everyone has a right to keep their views private—to a "closet," one might say—but when students know you're being private, you model privacy instead of openness. Students who disagree can't learn to deal with their differences unless they know they have them, and that's because a spirit of inclusivity was never built that way. Outing yourself also models a kind of philosophical vulnerability. In her book *The Minority Body*, Elizabeth Barnes claims that she was afraid of doing philosophy of disability because of a fear that others would interpret her work as self-interested (Barnes 2016: ix). She came to realize, as I have, that philosophy is sometimes best done this way because underrepresented perspectives are epistemically crucial, but also because we have something to lose if philosophy about the underrepresented is done poorly. When students have a sense of the moral costs of doing philosophy poorly—at the potential expense of me or their classmates—they tend to do it better. It also invites students who *aren't* from underrepresented groups to model vulnerability, since their privileged perspectives can be called into question.

### TEACHING PHILOSOPHY IN PRISONS

In Autumn 2016, I co-taught an Introduction to Philosophy course at the Washington Corrections Center for Women. My students were held in minimum- and medium-security facilities but were brought together for class. While undergoing Department of Corrections safety and policy training, I was told that because I was considered a contracted hire, I wasn't permitted to question Department of Corrections policies or practices with students. Since I was operating under the assumption that my students would care deeply about the ethics of confinement and other issues that immediately affected them, this presented a serious teaching difficulty both in terms of what to teach and how to teach it. Still other difficulties included unexpected lockdowns, which often meant some or even most of our students couldn't get back to our classroom after the break, and one student who was sent to solitary confinement for a month.

We primarily focused pedagogy on a single problem: fixing boredom. Students told us they were often bored in prison. One attributed her frequent disciplinary problems to boredom. When our student was sent to solitary confinement for a month, she told us the only thing that kept her sane was reading metaphysics (on universals, no less!) and philosophy of religion. While initially unsure how to make the course especially interesting to students beyond the selection of provocative readings, something unexpected happened the first week of class when we asked students to complete a true/false philosophical survey of their views. One of the propositions, "We should believe what's true and disbelieve what's false," was *universally rejected* by the students. This surprised me, and I wondered if had some intuitive awareness of problems with doxastic voluntarism. But they rejected the proposition solely on the grounds that, as they put it, their "one freedom" in prison was believing as they pleased. They thus viewed claims of the form "S ought to believe X" as objectionably privileged, an obligation that applied only to individuals whose liberties far outstripped theirs. This largely reshaped how I taught the course, which I had initially planned as a merely typical philosophical exercise in providing reasons for various views and testing reasons-responsiveness, as I knew they wouldn't respond well to that approach. Instead, we emphasized throughout the course that we were hearing from oppressed people and their perspectives, including my own (as a queer person) and my co-instructor (as a person of color), and that doing philosophy can be liberatory insofar as it solicits and invites careful consideration of diverse reasons.

Students were also eager to share their own experiences without being stigmatized for them. When we discussed the problem of evil against theism, several of our students were open about their suffering in prison, their experiences with illness, and (in some cases) how their religious faith helped them through hard times. One of our students shared, on several occasions, how her experience with cancer and her long endurance with chemotherapy changed her life and altered a number of her philosophical positions. It was around this time that I was diagnosed with cancer and, while given a good prognosis, wanted to share my experience with my students. We openly discussed suffering and what we should make of it. This enabled some of the most open, empathetic, and applied philosophical teaching I've ever done, and when I had to hand things off to my co-instructor due to my illness, students frequently asked my co-instructor to pass along messages to me about what they were learning.

Where opportunities exist to teach philosophy in prisons, I'm eager to do so. I realize most colleges and universities don't currently offer such opportunities, but I'm only too happy to create those opportunities when reasonably feasible. Irrespective of whether I'm ever in the position to teach in prisons again, my past experience has improved my general teaching pedagogy in three important ways. First, it's encouraged me to be *flexible* in how I teach. Student needs and expectations vary both widely and unexpectedly, and it's critical to meet them where they are. Second, assume that students can be intellectually *resilient* even under difficult circumstances. Be understanding (and flexible!), but don't let them feel that you don't expect much from them. Third,

resist the temptation to strike an *enlightened pose*, especially if you're privileged and your students aren't (or aren't as much). Teaching invariably entails attempts at student enlightenment, but an enlightened pose is different: It assumes a strict asymmetry in which you have much to give and they have much to receive.

## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY TO ONE-TIME PHILOSOPHY STUDENTS

Most of the students I've taught take at most one philosophy course, so I'm all about making it a memorable impression. Some philosophical skills are taught elsewhere, but not so reliably that I'm unconcerned students learn them in my courses. To that end, I introduce a variant of the Preface Paradox in every course I teach: You endorse every view that you hold about Y (e.g., medical ethics or philosophy of science), but you also endorse the view that, probably, at least one of your views about X is false. Upon realizing they're wrong about *something*, most students are more willing and eager to discover *what* they're wrong about. Since it might be anything, they're open to reconsidering their views on (almost) anything about X. But this recognition is worth little if I don't take the time to *show* students the nuances of at least some arguments. For that reason, I don't rush material that's worth exploring accessibly. For example, in my Introduction to Medical Ethics course, I spent a week on the arguments of Julian Savulescu's "Procreative Beneficence" paper, offering students an opportunity to think deeply about principles of rational choice, beneficence, and the nature of disability. But too much focus tends to result in philosophical surrender, so I balance out fine-grained reading expectations with course-grained ones—readings where I'm expecting little more than for students to grasp the broad strokes of a position or argument and evaluate it critically but briefly. This tends to keep students' philosophical imagination alive and nicely complements deep exploration of nuanced argumentation.

Since one of my goals for the one-time philosophy student is to make their course memorable, I aim to keep my lectures funny. And I mean *damn* funny. A number of studies show that laughing improves memory retention (Kellaris & Cline 2007; Garner 2007; and Watson, Matthews, and Allman 2006). One consistent thread running through my teaching evaluations is that I make students laugh, and I've had numerous students tell me over the years that they remember my courses (and have recommended them) because my humor is philosophically engaging. Students in philosophy courses find any number of philosophical views and arguments laughably absurd, which presents an opportunity to concede that some views are genuinely funny but might nonetheless be true. Pairing humor with philosophical rigor has, I've found, been a powerful tool in student engagement and memory retention.

## SOURCES

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