

Teaching Philosophy

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“True philosophy entails relearning to see the world anew.”

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

I approach philosophy as the disciplined effort to think about our thinking and to disclose and critically evaluate the basic presuppositions that we take for granted in forming a coherent perspective on the world and our place in it. As I see it, the goal of a philosophical education is to take our implicit, uncritical reliance on foundational notions that lie at the basis of all our sense-making - notions such as being, knowledge, value, and self - and to make that reliance explicit and self-conscious so that we can responsibly take charge of our own sense-making.

In my experience, a key barrier to entry into the discipline for many students lies in the difficulty they have in seeing how the abstract and general subject matter of philosophy could be relevant to their most immediate concerns. In my teaching, I try to show students that they are always already involved with the foundational problems of philosophy - like the problem of knowledge, or of explaining what we are - given that such problems stem from tensions between notions that structure the perspective on reality that they currently take to be “just obvious.” I try to make the case that philosophy is an effort to bring systematicity and conceptual rigour to the sense-making activity that they, as human beings, are continually involved in even in their most humdrum pursuits. In my teaching, I approach philosophy as a practice of defamiliarizing and problematizing “the obvious.” Through this defamiliarization, I think that a philosophical education can reveal the most obvious, familiar and taken-for-granted phenomena - such as the fact that things can make sense for us at all - as sources of inexhaustible wonder. My hope is that by creating a community of practice in my classroom aimed at “relearning to see,” I can help students return to their most intimate concerns with fresh eyes. In this, I take my inspiration from Merleau-Ponty, who suggested that to be a philosopher is to approach life as “a perpetual beginner.”

In my teaching, my goal is not merely to give students the polished product of my philosophizing through lectures, but to instead also help them cultivate the skills they need to participate in the process of generating and communicating philosophical insight. My teaching practice is inspired by Jack Mezirow’s (2000) theory of

“transformative learning.” On this view, the deepest learning occurs when students transform their perspective on the world. According to Mezirow, this transformation of perspective is best facilitated when students learn to apply diverse frames of reference to reformulate problems, as well as to analyze and test the limitations of their presuppositions in dialogue with others. In my classroom, I apply this pedagogical approach by emphasizing from the start of each class that philosophy is above all a practice. As a practice, it involves cultivating a core set of skills:

- identifying, critically evaluating and constructing arguments;
- using argumentative essay writing as an instrument of worldview critique, repair, and refashioning;
- active reading aimed at identifying and critically evaluating the argumentative structure of texts as well as their (oftentimes implicit, historically-inherited) foundational assumptions;
- metacognition, or monitoring the quality (and limitations) of one’s own perspective-taking;
- engaging in dialogue by exercising *the principle of charity*; that is, internalizing others’ perspectives and understanding them in their most rhetorically-forceful and aesthetically-appealing light, regardless of how antithetical to one’s own these views may be, prior to critiquing them.

I structure my courses at the level of the lesson, unit, and course as a whole in terms of scaffolded, learner-centered activities and assessments (both formative and summative) that have as their learning outcomes the cultivation of each of these skills. For instance, to teach students how to engage in dialogue guided by the principle of charity, I provide them with weekly small group discussion opportunities in which I instruct them to reconstruct others’ views and present them in their most persuasive light prior to proposing a strong objection to them. The energy of these discussions is invigorating, and I am always heartened to see how students come to appreciate and to embody this principle so crucial for well-functioning democratic discourse as the term progresses. Moreover, I also try to model rational empathy in my lectures by presenting opposed sides of debates in their strongest form to communicate not just what the views are, but also what would drive a rational agent to adopt that view. On several occasions, students have commented that they valued my commitment to putting into practice the principle of charity in class. My goal in all this is to communicate to students both my respect for and my commitment to supporting them as they cultivate their intellectual autonomy and their individual approach to philosophy.

In my view, learning to think and “relearning to see” both begin with learning to read deeply. I show students that philosophical texts are not just collections of inert theoretical propositions, but that they are instead recipes for reconfiguring their perspective on the world. These texts embody *ways of seeing*. Accordingly, to understand these texts is to re-enact the perspective they embody, and then to step back and identify its limitations. My lectures are designed to give students the tools they need to understand and *use* these texts as recipes for reflecting on and rethinking the structure of their own experience. Ultimately, I remind students that the meaning they get from the texts is a function of the level of their active engagement with and re-enactment of the perspective embodied in the text.

Moreover, I set aside small group discussion sessions each week. To guide these discussions, I design worksheets that guide students as they work together on answering questions about key aspects of the philosophical texts and theories that were discussed in lectures and readings, as well as debating the “pros and cons” of the different theories. Ultimately, these discussions are designed to help students better appreciate that philosophical theories are as much ways of seeing as they are ways of *not* seeing. For instance, to bring this point home for students in my *Introduction to Philosophy* course, I designed an exercise that asked them to describe what they can know about a tree by applying Descartes’ rationalism and Hume’s empiricism as competing lenses on the tree. Such exercises encouraged students to flexibly shift between competing theoretical perspectives, and to appreciate that philosophical theories make sense of things by illuminating some aspects of things while obscuring others. Through such exercises, students improve their capacity to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the presuppositions of different theories and, in the process, learn something about the limitations of their own presuppositions.

Another purpose of these discussion sessions is to facilitate the formation of a supportive learning community in which each contributing participant can enhance their metacognitive capacities. As Bransford (2000) pointed out, metacognition can be cultivated through dialogue with others. According to him, we develop our metacognitive ability to cultivate an “internal self-monitoring dialogue” by entering into earnest dialogue with others and by explaining not just the products of our reasoning, but also the quality of the process of reasoning. The discussion assignments I provide each term offer students the opportunity to do just this. Through these exercises, students begin to identify gaps in their understanding. Many of my students have commented that the effort to explain concepts to one another in these discussion activities helped them realize what they did and did not fully understand. Ultimately,

these discussion assignments provide students with an opportunity to cement their understanding of philosophical theories before having to write about them individually in their essays.

Finally, I put great emphasis on writing in my classes. I address the discomfort that many students experience when it comes to writing essays by encouraging them to see philosophical writing as a process of cementing their understanding. I design essay prompts with an eye to helping students master the twofold movement of thought that I think produces the most lasting philosophical insight: on the one hand, a movement of “zooming out” to see the big picture perspective that gives one a sense of the general significance of the topic at hand and, on the other hand, a movement of “zooming in” to perform detailed, nuanced and rigorous analysis of that same topic. Many students comment that they have a hard time finding the right balance between these movements of thought. However, by the end of term, I find that students tend to achieve this balance by earnestly practicing their writing and revising their work in light of my feedback. As one student said to me, “Writing for this class made me realize that you don’t know what you don’t know until you write about it.”

More specifically, I have experience teaching upper- and lower-level courses in philosophy of mind, the history of philosophy, epistemology, and ethics for the non-medical sciences (which included an extended unit on the ethics of technology and AI). I also have experience teaching to interdisciplinary audiences, as my experience teaching *PHIL 337: Ethics for the Sciences* (a course intended for both Arts and Sciences students) at UBC attests. My courses often combine foundational, theory-driven and case-driven approaches. In addition, while my philosophy of mind course explores the theoretical foundations of cognitive science and psychology by bridging Analytic and phenomenological philosophical traditions, I am also interested in teaching dedicated phenomenology courses at any level. I am currently developing plans for three such courses: 1. “Phenomenological Philosophy of Mind: An Introduction,” 2. “Experience and Nature: On the Relation Between Phenomenology and Naturalism,” 3. “Understanding AI: Phenomenological, Ethical, and Epistemological Perspectives on AI-human relations.”

References:

- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How People Learn*.
- Mezirow, J. and Associates. (2000). *Learning as Transformation*.