

Teaching Statement

Aaron Mead

University of California, Los Angeles

Philosophy is an art: to do it well requires creativity and imagination. However, it also requires a set of skills and knowledge of a subject matter. In these latter two respects philosophy resembles any craft, like carpentry or cooking. The subject matter is, of course, the content of the many sub-disciplines of philosophy (e.g., ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, etc.). The skills—which are central to any good education—include reading historical and contemporary texts, following and engaging in discussion, thinking logically, and communicating in writing. As a teacher, my primary aim is to help students make progress in both the subject matter and the skills of philosophy in an environment that stimulates creativity and imagination.

In my experience, such learning requires active engagement on the part of the student. Unless a student articulates the subject matter in her own words and practices the skills, she will not learn them. However, students typically do not take to this sort of active engagement naturally, since it can be exhausting and uncomfortable. As Robert Leamson puts it, “Learning new things...is strenuous. Students will avoid it if they can.”¹ Thus, my first task as a teacher is to motivate students toward active learning.

The best motivation for active philosophical learning is interesting subject matter. If students can grasp the problems that philosophers wrestle with, in most cases they will be interested in them. Who isn’t interested in whether we have free will, or whether God exists, or whether moral values are real or just a sham?

Thus, as a teacher, I strive to make the problems of philosophy available to my students. For example, I recently led a discussion of Thomas Nagel’s paradox about moral responsibility from his article “Moral Luck.” I began by suggesting, as Nagel does, that our moral responsibility for the outcomes of our activity seems to depend on our being in control of these outcomes. Then, I prompted students for examples of moral luck—i.e., cases in which we are morally responsible for an outcome, even though the outcome is beyond our control. With these clear and conflicting positions on the chalkboard, students immediately saw the problem and a vigorous discussion ensued. I take this teaching approach whether I am leading a discussion

¹ Robert Leamson, *Thinking About Teaching and Learning* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 1999) 20.

group or lecturing. I use familiar, concrete examples to help students ascend to the abstract claims of philosophy, and I leave ample time for direct classroom interaction in the form of questions, answers, and discussion.

To generate such interaction, the classroom must be a safe place for students to speak up. For this reason I run a welcoming classroom, not an intimidating one. I take all student questions and contributions seriously—regardless of whether they are squarely on target. This practice makes students more willing to take intellectual risks. In a recent anonymous student evaluation I was very pleased to receive the comment that a student who ordinarily did not feel comfortable speaking up in class felt comfortable doing so in mine. Similarly, my students often report that they find me caring and approachable. I aim for this kind of classroom environment since it removes the barriers of fear and anxiety that sap students' motivation for learning.

Once students are motivated, of course, it is essential to require active engagement with the course material. Term papers and exams naturally demand this sort of engagement, and so they are a central part of my course design. As noted above, I also use direct classroom interaction, which pushes students to articulate course material and to practice the skill of discussion. To encourage active reading, I keep reading loads light (typically no more than 20-30 pages per class period), and I often require students to answer a series of ungraded comprehension questions about the reading. The questions demand active reading without the pressure of "getting it right".

My aim, then, as a teacher, is to help students learn the craft of philosophy. This job begins with helping students to catch an interest in philosophy's subject matter. Once caught, students are motivated to do the hard work of acquiring the skills and subject matter of the craft. My reward is to watch the creativity and imagination of my students emerge as they advance in their mastery of the craft.