

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Perhaps the most important role philosophy plays in a college education is to provide students with the opportunity to critically examine the grounds of their convictions and beliefs, thereby liberating them from what Bertrand Russell calls the “arrogant dogmatisms” and “tyrannies of custom” that often stymie open dialogue. The ultimate goal is always to use philosophical texts and arguments to induce students to consider the potential fallibility of some of their most cherished views while at the same time encouraging them to understand and appreciate other perspectives and ideologies. The purpose of this activity is not to convert them from one way of looking at things to another—although this sometimes occurs—but rather to help them to expand and enrich the views they already have. A course in philosophy both can and should help students appreciate the value of having well-informed beliefs—whatever these beliefs may be. If you are going to believe x , then you ought to have good reasons for believing x rather than not x .

As participants in a democratic society we owe it to ourselves to develop the habit of critically examining our beliefs and practices—not necessarily in order to eliminate these beliefs and practices, but in order to improve them. When people believe x simply because they have been told x , it makes for a less informed—and hence less democratic—society. Many bad things have been done in the name of tradition. And equally bad things have been done in the name of change. This is something else a philosophy course can help students appreciate—namely, the intimate relationship between our ideas and our social institutions and relations.

My experiences in the classroom have reinforced my conviction that philosophy really can open students’ minds so long as it is presented in a way that resonates with them. By giving students stimulating topics to think about and discuss, you thereby lay the foundation for a successful and productive learning environment. After all, if students are not engaged with the material it is much harder to get them to critically evaluate the topics under discussion. Hence, in survey courses I think it is particularly important to select subjects that students have already thought about even if they have never had a philosophy course—e.g., the existence of God, the problem of free will, the

limits of human knowledge, and various moral, legal, and political issues. In my experience, getting students to appreciate the practical importance of philosophy is a necessary first step in getting them interested in some of the more complicated theoretical issues.

For instance, when teaching the Socratic discussion of our obligation to obey the law in Plato's *Crito*, I always try to relate what Socrates says to the views of other great thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. The goal is to show students why Socrates' discussion of "The Laws" is as salient today as it was almost 2,500 years ago. This not only involves paying close attention to both the letter and the spirit of Plato's masterpiece, but also to the historical circumstances surrounding Socrates' execution for "corrupting the youth." By my lights, the *Crito* can serve as an excellent vehicle for prompting students to think more carefully about the limits of political power and criminal sanctions as well as whether we have an obligation to obey laws that we find unjust. I often ask students whether they would have escaped from prison if they were in Socrates' shoes or whether they, too, would have accepted their punishment. Ultimately, in answering this question students are forced to develop their own views about both personal and political virtue—thereby paving the way for their fuller appreciation of the importance of our civil liberties and obligations.