

## STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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More than anything else, my approach to teaching reflects an ongoing commitment to communicate the relevance of abstract philosophy to life in the real world. This shows up in my theoretically-oriented classes, where I strive to find connections between philosophy and cultural controversies, and in applied classes, where I take every opportunity to be a salesman for philosophic theory.

As an example of the first half of this commitment, let me describe a course I developed first for Loyola, an intermediate-level course for non-majors called Philosophy of Knowledge. The epistemologist has a set of standard theoretical topics to teach in introductory epistemology courses, but I decided that these would not meet the needs of my students. Instead I decided to feature a mix of issues in epistemology, the philosophy of science, and the philosophy of religion unified by a running case study: the controversy between Galileo and the Catholic Church. The example is effective in dramatizing the origin of early modern epistemology in the scientific revolution and in illustrating the relevance of various theoretical questions to the ongoing controversy over cultural relativism. In the latest version of my Introduction to Philosophy class (Philosophy of the Human Person), I also begin the semester by showing students how contemporary cultural and political controversies (e.g. abortion and inequality) often turn on disagreements about ethics, epistemology, and even metaphysics. In the remaining semester, we then dig deeper and deeper into these branches, starting with ethics and ending with metaphysics.

I could say more about how I have pursued the same strategy in other courses, but for now I invite you to examine my syllabi for Introduction to Philosophy, History of Modern Philosophy, and Free Will and Determinism courses, all of which manifest a similar approach. On the flip side, I've also made an effort to draw attention to theoretical questions in "applied" courses such as Practical Logic and most recently in my ethics courses, Making Moral Decisions, and Ethics and Social Justice (which I teach to students in Loyola's nursing doctoral program).

Many philosophers enjoy the challenge of motivating students to rethink parochial opinions they have absorbed while growing up. I do sympathize. Oddly, however, students in many colleges are especially uncritical in their acceptance of a crude form of relativism, to the point where it is the new parochial conventionalism. A second hallmark of my teaching, as it happens, is an increasing insistence on encouraging students to overcome this complacency, to see how philosophy is a serious discipline that offers not only interesting questions but sometimes, at least, the prospect of answers.

Students who think that philosophy is nothing but a succession of exploded theories will never be convinced that our field has anything relevant to say to the world. They will agree with politicians who say we need more welders and fewer philosophers. Of course it is true that philosophic consensus is often fleeting. But in my courses I try to emphasize what progress philosophers have made, if only in their refinement of philosophic questions. I stress what makes philosophers think that it is at least possible in principle to answer their questions. I stress analogies between our field and the sciences (without reducing the former to the latter). I emphasize this particularly in my ethics class, Making Moral Decisions. I begin this class not by discussing ethical theory or controversies but paradigm cases of moral virtues and vices that most people agree about, with the aim of collecting data by reference to which ethical theories can then be tested before controversies are discussed.

The above is my teaching strategy. Now for a quick word on tactics. I devote significant time to finding ways to present philosophy in an inviting way. I use a wide array of technology to make course material accessible and to facilitate my interaction with students both in and out of the classroom. This includes the use of Powerpoint presentations, iClickers, online discussion groups, AdobeConnect recordings of lectures and slide presentations, and regular Excel-facilitated grade reports during the course of the semester that let students know their current average. I use Doodle surveys to encourage students to meet to discuss paper drafts before their deadline. This past fall I convinced over 60% of my students to show me drafts or outlines. In the classroom, students complement me on my engaging lecture style and interactive classroom presence. Some say I am funny.

I have some evidence of the modest success of my approach. My average rating as an instructor from student course evaluations since the fall of 2010 is about 4.05 out of 5. I don't necessarily put stock in student ratings, but I do find it interesting that these ratings have held in spite of the fact that I give out very few "A" grades. Typically about one tenth of my students in a given semester are taking a second classes from me (Fall 2014: 12/100; Spring 2015: 12/100; Fall 2015: 6/60; Spring 2016: 7/59; this semester it is low because I am teaching a lot of freshman). I find that the more I communicate my expectations to students (especially by sending regular grade reports), the better students get at seeing how they get the grade they earn.

If I only loved thinking about philosophy, I would simply pursue it as a hobby. So it's mainly because I also enjoy selling people on the relevance of the field that I want to pursue philosophy professionally. Pursuing it professionally, for me, means using all of the tools and techniques at my disposal to open channels of communication between me and my students. I hope you get the chance to see me do it in person.