

TEACHING STATEMENT

Zita Veronika Tóth

“It is not enough that my devotion to you has not helped me at all, but you are now made the victim of the hatred. . .” — complains Boethius, with the barbarians standing at the gates of Rome and himself sentenced to death. It seems that students often have a similar complaint about studying philosophy: it is unhelpful and fairly frustrating. So far I have taught philosophy in two, very different environments. First, at Fordham University, as a graduate student, where I taught the core curriculum courses for students in business, communications, and all kinds of other majors. Second, at Conception Seminary College, where all students were Philosophy majors, but they were only so because they had to be. These two different contexts thus presented the same challenge: to help students see why philosophy is both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable, even if these students would have rather been studying business or communications or theology.

I meet this challenge by helping students to recognize three things: first, that certain intellectual skills that philosophy develops in us will be able to serve them in many professions; second, that thinkers long dead are interesting in their own right because they show that our current way of thinking has not always been taken for granted; and third, that philosophy points us towards questions that are of utmost importance to us all. In order to achieve these goals, I use a variety of techniques, all relying on the conviction that we can only learn philosophy by actually doing it. I ask students to develop argument rehearsals; I ask them to live according to our discussed ethical theories for a day or two and reflect on their experience; and perhaps most often, I use the medieval format of disputed questions.

During a *questio disputata*, a student is asked to consider a question, consider a variety of opinions that authors had proposed, present and argue for his own position, and finally refute the objections brought up by his peers or some authority. For instance, when teaching Ethics, issues almost inevitably come up on which students’ pre-theoretical intuitions vary greatly. (They are not always the same issues; last year, for instance, one was Hardin’s lifeboat ethics dilemma, whether we should take on the burden of more people even if we do not have all the necessary resources to do so.) After some initial surveying of these varying intuitions, I divide the students into groups and assign each group a position for which they have to present a case. I give some background context to the issue in question, and after some preparation, each group does an exposition of their views and argues for it, at least somewhat relying on the text prepared for the class. The other groups listen carefully and present objections to the view or to the arguments, to which the original group has to respond to the best of their ability.

I have also used this method in teaching various thinkers in the history of philosophy (Anselm and Gaunilo, or Descartes and Arnauld very easily give themselves to similar treatment, but of course so do Plato and most medieval thinkers where the format is “built in” to the texts), because I found that it results in a much deeper engagement with the texts in question than a simple lecture or even Socratic-style discussion. Although in this way a lot of material is

prepared and presented by the students, I have found that they often learn more effectively from each other than from a plain lecture, and that they regard the knowledge acquired this way more as their own. By this method I can also guide them to attain the three aims I set out at the beginning.

First, we can understand arguments and formulate claims and objections clearly only with practice. At the beginning of the semester we have a logic tutorial focusing on argument forms and various fallacies to facilitate this task. That knowledge, however, becomes active only when the students actually need to put forward a *modus tollens* or recognize a *petitio principii*. I do have argument rehearsal exercises that further help along this learning process, and as my students often note, that is one of the most difficult exercises they have during their whole curriculum; but the stake gets higher when the students need to construct an argument in the classroom, being continuously confronted with the arguments of other students. By using this argumentative technique, while also engaging with the text, students develop a clearer way of thinking.

Second, although most students find reading past thinkers initially cumbersome or pointless, as the course progresses they recognize that once we understand Aristotle, Aquinas, or Mill, and engage with their positions, they can become lively and puzzling — especially if they seem to provide a good argument for a position that contradicts our own assumptions. Before starting a *questio disputata*, I give a detailed historical context for the author or the issue to be discussed, which facilitates this recognition. On the one hand, being familiar with such a context, students often become more interested in the philosophical text itself, especially if that particular context connects to their other interests (such as history, the history of science, theology, or literature). On the other hand, by learning, for instance, that early modern mechanics and the Scientific Revolution play a crucial role in Descartes's overall project just as Ptolemaic physics does in Aquinas's, they start to question whether and how our intuitions and arguments today are influenced by other contemporary disciplines such as cognitive science or quantum physics.

Third, by the second half of the semester students start to see that the questions we have been asking have great importance even in their own lives. Some recognize the value of good argumentation (both instrumental and intrinsic), and think that philosophy can help them achieve it. Others become interested in more specific questions: I have had students after a session on physicalism asking how to reconcile it with their religious convictions; or students who on the contrary became worried about their physicalist convictions in light of Aquinas's arguments. Others realize when trying to live according to an ethical theory for a few days that they make very different choices depending on what ethical principle they choose as their guidance. Still others, as my seminarians usually did, recognize that metaphysical questions about even as abstract entities as prime matter may have great implications with respect to as particular theological doctrines as transubstantiation or the resurrection.

Thus, overall, by the end of the semester, my students who originally raised the “philosophy is not at all helpful” complaint, can usually answer it on their own. First, by seeing that philosophy has some instrumental value by forming in us the habit of clear thinking. Second, by recognizing that philosophy has intrinsic value by constantly questioning our tacit assumptions. Third, by recognizing that philosophical questions are important questions about the human condition, and by thinking about them we can become better human beings. All of which are valuable whether they become businessmen, journalists, or priests.