

18

Teaching Ethics, Happiness, and The Good Life: An Upbuilding Discourse in the Spirits of Søren Kierkegaard and John Dewey

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“The more ideal the conception of being a Christian, the more inward it becomes—and indeed the more difficult. Being a Christian then undergoes a change that I will illustrate with a worldly analogy. Formerly, there were in Greece wise men, σοφοί. Then came Pythagoras and with him the reflection-qualification, reduplication, in connection with being a wise man; therefore he did not even venture to call himself a wise man but instead called himself a φιλόσοφος [friend or lover of wisdom, philosopher]. Was this a step backward or a step forward; or was it not because Pythagoras had more ideally apprehended what it would really mean, what would be

required to call oneself a wise man; therefore there was wisdom in his not even having dared to call himself a wise man.”

—Søren Kierkegaard¹

“To assume an attitude of condescension toward existence is perhaps a natural human compensation for the straits of life. But it is an ultimate source of the covert, uncandid and cheap in philosophy. This compensatory disposition it is which forgets that reflection exists to guide choice and effort. Hence its love of wisdom is but an unlaborious transformation of existence by dialectic, instead of an opening and enlarging of the ways of nature in man. A true wisdom, devoted to the latter task, discovers in thoughtful observation and experiment the method of administering the unfinished processes of existence so that frail goods shall be substantiated, secure goods be extended, and the precarious promises of good that haunt experienced things be more liberally fulfilled.”

—John Dewey²

The first epigraph above from Søren Kierkegaard ends with a question that is not marked as a question. Regardless of whether it was Kierkegaard, an editor, a typesetter, or a translator who made the mistake, the omission is instructive, because it glosses over a question that philosophy professors routinely fail to ask: “Is calling oneself a *philosopher* rather than a *wise person* a step backward or a step forward?” In this essay, I use Kierkegaard to recover the importance of this question and lay out my response in conversation with (1) John Dewey’s clarion call for a recovery of philosophy³ and (2)

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 137.

2. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953, Volume 1: 1925* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 67–68.

3. See “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924, Volume 10: 1916–1917, Essays*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1980), 3–48.

my own experience teaching introductory ethics courses over the past ten years. My aim is to produce what Kierkegaard would call an “upbuilding discourse” in the service of what Dewey would call “true wisdom,” an opening and enlarging of our ways of teaching ethics, so that we may more effectively fulfill philosophy’s precarious promises of good.

While Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism and Dewey’s naturalistic pragmatism are rarely read as allies, I am inspired by their shared emphasis on existence or experience as both the starting point and the end of any philosophy worth its salt; they recognize reflection as both the crucial moment of vision and the persistent temptation. Readers of this volume will not need to be convinced of the value of philosophical reflection, but in the context of teaching ethics, I believe that philosophical reflection can actually be harmful, if it is not yoked to spiritual exercises designed to help us experience philosophy as something that must be practiced in our lives and not merely cogitated in our heads.⁴ Like anyone else, ethics professors often fail to live ethically, but we face a special temptation: the use of academic philosophy as a compensatory shelter from the strenuous ethical tasks of improving ourselves, our relationships, and the world. There is also the danger that we will transmit this disease to our students, convincing them that philosophy takes place in books, not lives; in classrooms, not communities; and in words, not works.

The essay that follows has three sections: (1) a Deweyan pragmatist’s translation of Kierkegaard’s religious insights on Christianity, as a way of life, into ethical insights on philosophy, as a way of life; (2) a brief description of the introductory course that I teach most frequently: Ethics, Happiness, and The Good Life; and (3) a narrative exploration of three spiritual exercises from the course: (a)

4. Making “spiritual exercises” part of an introduction to ethics is no longer common practice, but it would have seemed like common sense to most ancient and medieval philosophers. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995). Martha Nussbaum’s description of the life of a hypothetical pupil across multiple Hellenistic schools provides an especially vivid contrast with the way most students today encounter philosophy. See Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

self-cultivation by means of writing in an Ethics Notebook, (b) an “existential experiment” in which we practice one of Aristotle’s virtues for a week, and (c) a fifteen-hour service-learning component.

Relocating Ethics in Existence: Kierkegaard’s “Worldly Analogy” and Dewey’s Pragmatism

By theoretically exploring the ideal of genuine Christianity, Kierkegaard gained a profound sense of his own practical failings as a Christian. He recognized that as the conception of Christianity becomes theoretically more ideal, being a Christian becomes practically more difficult. Casting Christianity—a demanding way of life that must be practiced in the sphere of existence—into reflection is thus both promising and dangerous: promising because reflection can help one better understand and appropriate a genuinely Christian way of life; dangerous because reflection may perpetually cast being a Christian out of the realm of existence and into the realm of ideas.

When I reflect upon Kierkegaard’s “worldly analogy” with philosophy, I am struck by just how demanding the task of being a wise person is, and I am momentarily relieved to claim only the love of wisdom rather than wisdom itself. But then I think about how this distancing can also be dangerous, especially given the background of a mushy cultural understanding of “love” as primarily a feeling, rather than as something to do, something that puts us to work.⁵ To combat this problem, Kierkegaard sought to “jack up the price” of Christianity,⁶ to present Christ as an ideal prototype whose life must be imitated rather than merely admired.⁷ In a similar way, Kierkegaard’s “worldly analogy” presents Pythagoras as an ideal prototype who founded the strenuous way of life called

5. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

6. Søren Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 3:75–76, 6:72–74.

7. Kierkegaard distinguishes between *admiration* and *imitation* as follows: “Christ continually uses the expression ‘imitators.’ He never says that he asks for admirers, adoring admirers, adherents; and when he uses the expression ‘follower’ he always explains it in such a way that one perceives that ‘imitators’ is meant by it, that is not adherents of a teaching but imitators of a life.” *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 237.

“philosophy” (*not* as someone who began a tradition of metaphysical speculation).⁸

The metaphysics that underwrites the reality of Kierkegaard’s ideals appeals to many of my students who identify as Christian, but, to address a wider audience, I also speak of the reality of ideals in the Deweyan sense that pervades my second epigraph.⁹ I cannot reasonably expect ethical growth from students if I do not earnestly dedicate myself to my own ethical growth, to my own education in a Deweyan sense.¹⁰ Pragmatically speaking, ideals are real to the extent that they inspire and guide conduct. In other words, an ideal is a beautiful possibility that calls us to the personal conviction that we are responsible for realizing it in the twofold sense of thinking it and making it real.

If the existence of an ideal is left unrealized in this double sense—if *either* we fail to thoroughly think through the possibility presented by the ideal *or* we merely think about how to better describe it, while failing to act upon our responsibility to make it real—then we fail to grow, and the ideal is not opened and enlarged through us. This means that if I am to avoid the “unlaborious transformation of existence by dialectic” in the classroom, I must strive to practice and embody the ethical ideals that I reach by the exercise of my intelligence, or I will be unfit to teach my students to do it. I may distance myself from the immediacy of everyday life and conventional mores to reflect on how we should live (a step back), but I must also remember to practice living in a way that is ever more

8. Kierkegaard’s assessment of the primary philosophical significance of Pythagoras is consistent with both Plato’s and Aristotle’s assessments, as explained by Carl Huffman: “For both Plato and Aristotle, then, Pythagoras is not a part of the cosmological and metaphysical tradition of Presocratic philosophy nor is he closely connected to the metaphysical system presented by fifth-century Pythagoreans like Philolaus; he is instead the founder of a way of life.” See Carl Huffman, “Pythagoras,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (summer 2014 edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/pythagoras>.

9. An excellent study of Dewey’s metaphysics that emphasizes the role of the ideal is Victor Kestenbaum, *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

10. See the chapter “Education as Growth,” in John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924*, vol. 9, eds. Jo Ann Boydston and Sidney Hook (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 46–58.

consistent with my reflections (a step forward). Designing a successful ethics course thus hinges on more than preparing the reading list, the assignments, and the grading scheme: it also depends on my own dedication to practicing what I teach, that is, philosophy as an ethical way of life.

Kierkegaard claims that it is a risk to preach because God “pays close attention to whether what I am saying is true, whether it is true in me, that is, he looks . . . to see whether my life expresses what I am saying.”¹¹ Kierkegaard thinks that most pastors have shrunk back from this risk, ceased risking their personal *I*, and become content to merely offer some observations on the text. Because people in the pews are no longer addressed as individual *yous*, they no longer risk themselves existentially in listening. Real preaching and listening are thus abolished as disembodied utterances cease to be of live concern:

Whether I [the pastor] do what I say is none of your concern if only the observation is correct; it scarcely concerns me myself. . . . Whether or not you, the listener, do what is said does not concern me, and scarcely yourself; it is observation and at most it is a question of the extent to which the observation has satisfied you.¹²

I believe this same temptation is present when teaching philosophy. There is a danger that I will existentially step further back from questioning and improving the way I live, even as I become more rhetorically adept and theoretically sophisticated in posing the question “How should one live?” Regardless of whether Kierkegaard’s all-seeing God exists, I have more than 100 students each semester, and many will certainly pay “close attention to whether what I am saying is true, whether it is true in me . . . whether my life expresses what I am saying.”¹³ Like my students, I should risk self-reconstruction in the process of examining my own life and the truths of the philosophers each semester.

If I am *not* risking myself, that is, not striving to more fully appropriate and embody ethical ideals in order to continue becoming the teacher that my students would be wise to truly listen to,

11. *Practice in Christianity*, 235.

12. *Ibid.*, 236.

13. *Ibid.*, 235.

then I am a twenty-first-century incarnation of Kierkegaard's hated "Assistant Professor," who makes a series of disembodied observations on some dead texts and blocks his students from being existentially transformed by the truth. Kierkegaard yearns for more authentic educators: "Precisely this is the profound untruth in all modern teaching, that there is no notion at all of how thought is influenced by the fact that the one presenting it does not dare to express it in action, that in this very way the flower of the thought or the heart of the thought vanishes and the power of the thought disappears."¹⁴

In Deweyan terms, by stripping philosophical texts of their existential power, teachers assume "an attitude of condescension toward existence" and thereby make their courses "uncandid and cheap." It is a risk to teach ethics! Or by logical extension: where there is no existential risk to professor and students, ethics is not really being taught.

Kierkegaard wanted his work to be read as a response to a particular context in which everyone already considered themselves to have completely reached or attained what he understood to be the difficult and lifelong tasks of becoming a genuine self, an ethical individual, and a Christian. The pedagogical problem that drives Kierkegaard's work is something like "How can I get individuals to *become* better Christians if they think they already are *fully* Christian?" or (translated into the problematic that guides my course) "How can I get people (including myself) to grow ethically when we think that our ways of living are basically fine the way they are?" In my course, students encounter both secular and religious ethical traditions, but the difficult and lifelong existential task of becoming a better person constitutes the heart of philosophy in either case, which I demonstrate historically using Plato's Socrates, Aristotle, Epictetus, Kant, Mill, Kierkegaard, and Levinas.

I try to infuse my teaching with what moves *me* in their texts, as a way of encouraging students to have their own encounters with these texts and make their own movements. This requires me to subtly bear witness to, testify on behalf of, confess, intimate, or otherwise convey the insights I have won (and sometimes forgotten!) from these texts, but also from my experience. I try not to cross the

14. Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, 1:265.

line into rant, and I routinely encourage alternative readings, but I believe that I am more likely to provoke meaningful student encounters with philosophical theories when I can demonstrate how those theories might bear upon or emerge from my own experiences, when I am risking the personal.¹⁵

The Socratic recognition of one's own ignorance may be the beginning of wisdom (which is why my course begins with the *Meno* and the *Apology*), but this same move can also be the death of wisdom and its love, insofar as knowing the good also involves doing it. Refusing any claim to being wise can serve as a way of practically distancing ourselves from the ethical life that wisdom and its love entail. In contrast, philosophy understood as a way of life calls us to traverse the gaps between our ideals and our behaviors, our ideas and our practices. While it is important for Kierkegaard to consider the ways in which he is *not* a Christian, he must not step so far back that he loses the desire to *become* a Christian—to *practice* Christianity, to *imitate* (rather than merely admire) Christ by performing works of love—a lifelong task.

We can repeat Kierkegaard's religious point in ethical terms: while it is important to consider oneself *not* to be fully ethical (for one often unknowingly or perhaps even knowingly or indifferently does wrong),¹⁶ one must not lose the desire to *become* a better person (which is a lifelong task). Constructing an ethics course that is only a matter of reading texts, taking quizzes, and writing papers may unwittingly extinguish this existential desire in our students. The alternative is not less reading and reflection, but more shifts to writing and practice, so that our reflections on the contours of the world

15. I borrow the phrase "risking the personal" from AnaLouise Keating, who used it to describe Gloria Anzaldúa's "innovative use of autobiographical experience as a tool for community building, knowledge production, and social change." See "Risking the Personal: An Introduction" in Gloria Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000).

16. Kierkegaard claims that Christianity goes beyond Socratic categories when it redefines *sin* to consist of instances in which one knows the right or good yet knowingly does the wrong. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), esp. 14–24.

and the purpose of our lives are yoked to deliberate transformations in our attitudes, actions, and relationships by way of spiritual exercises, or what Dewey preferred to call “experiments.”

Unfortunately, professional philosophers today rarely recognize that reflection can be dangerous, insofar as it can lead us to wholly transfer our struggles from the realm of existence to the realm of ideas. Philosophy courses therefore often excel in producing ad nauseum what Kierkegaard termed the “reflection-qualification,” reduplicating wisdom in the realm of thought alone, when what is called for is the reduplication or embodiment of wisdom in the realm of concrete existence. This is precisely the call Dewey issued to us 100 years ago in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” (1917), and the need is no less pressing today.

Syllabus Course Description for PHIL 1310: Ethics, Happiness, and The Good Life

This course offers an opportunity to improve or even reinvent ourselves through higher education. The first part of our philosophical journey begins with ancient Greek perspectives on ethics that will help us think about what kind of people we are and would like to become. As we read and discuss works by Plato, Aristotle, and Epictetus, we will be following Socrates’ dual philosophical commandments to: (1) know ourselves, and (2) care for ourselves by thoughtfully considering questions of how we should live. Since this course is designed to introduce you to philosophy as a way of life, we will also practice things like virtue and friendship to gain insight into the links between ethics and happiness by experimenting with different understandings of the good life.

Of course, our individual practices of the art of living cannot be separated from the broader values and needs that shape our lives together. In part two of this course, we will consider two of the most important modern philosophical attempts to develop an account of the universal laws or fundamental principles of morality: Kant’s duty-based ethics and Mill’s happiness-based ethics. We then will consider the implications of these two theories, with respect to the global problem of extreme poverty, which is also a concern here in the Rio Grande Valley. By taking up this problem, we will learn to think more concretely about how we must care for ourselves in the

context of an entire world full of others. At the end of this unit, we will write an essay reflecting on our own personal responsibility to people in extreme poverty.

Since many of us are religious and the Judeo-Christian tradition has greatly influenced secular thinking about ethics, the third part of the course will examine the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Levinas, who each develop a religious understanding of our duty to genuinely encounter and love our neighbors. Their perspectives will help us rethink the role that caring for others might play in caring for ourselves. We will end the term with a service-learning project, which will integrate theoretical reflection and ethical practice.

The overarching aim of this course is to theoretically challenge and practically empower us to become better and happier people by developing a more thoughtful understanding of ethics, happiness, and the good life for ourselves and others.

Practicing Ethics, Happiness, and The Good Life: Three Strategies

My course proceeds chronologically and thematically in three parts: (1) Ancient Philosophy as a Way of Ethical Life and The Care of the Self; (2) Modern Moral Philosophy and The Care of Humanity; and (3) Religion as an Ethical Way of Life and The Care of the Other. Each part of the course is driven by an experiential component that links loving wisdom with practicing ethics and ends with a reflective essay that enables us to articulate and evaluate the impact that philosophical training (both theoretical and practical) is having on our lives.

Day to day, we are responsible for keeping up with the class reading and writing regularly in our Ethics Notebooks, which I present as what Foucault calls a “technology of the self.”¹⁷ I explain that just as we today shape our offline identities by the way we construct our online identities, ancient philosophers shaped who they were by what they read and wrote about in their *hupomnemata*. In other words, they practiced what Foucault called “self-writing” or

17. Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

“the transformation of truth into *ēthos*.”¹⁸ Here’s the syllabus passage that introduces the Ethics Notebook as an experimental practice or spiritual exercise:

For ancient philosophers, the ethical and spiritual tasks of taking care of oneself and others were intimately related to the philosophical commandment to “know thyself.” To practice these tasks, we will engage in the exercise of keeping an Ethics Notebook, a bound paper journal separate from class notes. Think of your notebook as a powerful technological device that you may use to: 1) further develop your own personal reflections upon course materials; 2) explore who you are, as well as what you think ethics, happiness, and the good life are, 3) get in touch with a better version of yourself, 4) cultivate your actions and character in light of these ideas, and 5) keep track of your own ethical and/or spiritual development as the course progresses. Sometimes, I will provide specific topics or questions, but you should write regular entries on anything that relates your own life, thoughts, and experiences *directly* to the course readings, class discussion, and existential experiments.

Over the years, I’ve found that if I can get students to intelligently, earnestly, and habitually write in their Ethics Notebooks within the first few weeks of the course, they will likely remain engaged throughout and develop an understanding of philosophy as a way of life. This requires that I devote considerable class time to explaining the notebook and ensuring that students are properly developing the habit of self-writing. I suspect I will tinker endlessly with how to achieve this, but I have tried providing individualized feedback and guidance on the first few entries, projecting examples from brave volunteers and discussing what is good about them as a class, having students exchange entries, and using anonymized entries from previous semesters’ students as the basis for class discussion. Above all, students must be convinced that keeping the notebook is a valuable exercise, not so much in terms of their grade, but in terms of their self-understanding and self-growth, which means challenging students to develop a deeper and wider sense of the aims of education. To help convince them that the Ethics Notebook is a valuable

18. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 209.

and worthwhile exercise, I let them know that even though I have already earned my Ph.D., I am keeping my own notebook because it constitutes an ongoing part of my education, and I express my willingness to share what I am writing about with them.

One thing that helps students take their Ethics Notebooks seriously is to have them conduct accompanying existential experiments and write about them first in their notebooks and then in more formal essays. Early in the course, I’ve had good results assigning the existential experiment of using Aristotle to better understand and practice virtue (or sometimes friendship) in order to evaluate what effect it has on their happiness and the happiness of those around them. Here’s a snippet from the assignment:

Since “we learn by doing” and “we are investigating not in order that we might know what virtue is, but in order that we might become good,”¹⁹ we will conduct an existential experiment for at least 7 days to explore the relationship between ethics, happiness, and the good life. Each of us will pick one of the three virtues that Aristotle talks about the most (i.e., courage, temperance, or generosity) and experiment by cultivating this active-condition in ourselves and writing about the process in our Ethics Notebooks.

The beauty of the assignment is that it gets us to reflect on the ways we are *not* fully virtuous and what we might do, in order to become more virtuous, thereby inviting us to approach philosophy as a way of life. As Dewey writes, “reflection exists to guide choice and effort.” Even though none of my students would initially use these terms, I believe that they come with at least some inkling of Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* (as opposed to more fleeting, passive, and feelings-based contemporary notions of happiness) or of genuine friendships (as opposed to having 300 “friends” on Facebook). In other words, students have their own experiences of what Dewey characterizes as “frail goods” in their lives that can be substantiated by practicing philosophy. They bring some preexisting sense of virtue and how it can contribute to happiness, in part by making genuine friendships with themselves and others possible. These are the “precarious promises of good that haunt experienced things,”

19. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2002), 22–23.

and my task is to help the class experience philosophy as a way of life that can make good on these promises by way of “thoughtful observation and experiment.”

With these experiences under their belts, students are in a much better position to write thoughtful formal essays, breathing life into the first part of a prompt that might otherwise give rise to disembodied and unengaged papers:

1. Explain the basics of Aristotle’s philosophy (especially when it comes to what virtue is, how it’s acquired, how it’s related to happiness, and how it’s related to friendship).
2. After (or while) you explain the basics of Aristotle’s philosophy, explain how your active engagement in the existential experiment of practicing one of Aristotle’s virtues while writing in your Ethics Notebook has shaped your understanding of virtue, happiness, and/or friendship.

Part two of the course compares what Kant and Mill think about ethics, happiness, and the good life. As we work through deontological and utilitarian frameworks, we pivot back to the concrete, practical, and personal by reflecting on the problem of extreme poverty as it exists both locally and globally (reading and discussing essays by Peter Singer and Onora O’Neil), and we write essays that address these questions: “What is *my* personal responsibility to people living in extreme poverty? Why?” This ensures that our examination of the categorical imperative and the greatest happiness principle poses some risk to the way we actually live, by demanding a personal response to an enormous problem that most people would prefer to believe is not their problem (unless they are in extreme poverty themselves).

In contrast with the way that part one of the course begins with the self and part two begins with the universal, part three begins with the particular: the neighbor or the Other, whom students encounter during their fifteen hours of service-learning, which the syllabus describes as follows:

Your service-learning project in this class will be to reflect upon ethics, happiness, and the good life as you serve your *neighbors*, i.e., community members who are *not* your friends or family. This will place you into learning situations where you will encounter

new people and have experiences that would never occur in a classroom, but that are nonetheless crucial for considering the issues that we will raise in class.

While many service-learning methodologies require considerable infrastructure and tend to link students up with nonprofits, my methodology prioritizes face-to-face interaction (with Levinas in mind) and reduces institutional mediation. I encourage students to think about (1) who their neighbors are, (2) what kind of help their neighbors might want or need, and (3) what kind of service they might be particularly interested in (or good at) providing. This works particularly well given my institutional context: we are a commuter campus (less than 4 percent of students live in university housing), so students do not live in a university bubble. They come to campus still immersed in a world of personal, familial, and community needs (over 90 percent are from the region and roughly 80 percent receive need-based financial aid).

One aim of the course is to help students develop the *phronēsis* to navigate these frequently competing demands, which is why the locus of inquiry and praxis expands from self to friends/family to humanity (or the wider community) but then contracts back to the face-to-face level of the individual neighbor or Other, and ends where it began: with the self that has hopefully grown in the process. Some students end up serving with nonprofit organizations or helping out at a school, nursing home, or other service institution close to where they live. But many students end up simply knocking on their neighbor’s door (sometimes for the first time!) and asking them if they could use any help. This reorientation—whereby we change our existential mode from ignoring almost everyone around us unless we need something from them to keeping an eye out for others whose needs we might be able to meet—is the reorientation sought by Kierkegaard and Levinas, whom we study in the final part of the course.²⁰ And although we do not read Dewey, this reorientation

20. The course’s study of Kierkegaard begins with the previously mentioned chapter from *Practice in Christianity* that distinguishes between imitation and admiration of Christ (or any other exemplar of the good life). We then read two chapters from *Works of Love*: “Our Duty to Love the People We See” (which focuses on the work of loving our family members and friends) and “You *Shall* Love” (which focuses on the work of loving our neighbors).

undoubtedly plays a role in the practice of democracy as a way of life, both social and individual.²¹

Concluding Personal Note

To sum up, *becoming* wise in the context of an ethics class is a matter of loving wisdom by practicing ethics, and it is crucial that we learn this lesson ourselves, so that we stand a better chance of teaching it to our students. Since my reading of the philosophical tradition (especially Plato's *Meno*) leads me to believe that this lesson is not something we learn once and for all but rather something that we must perpetually recollect and practice, I aim to not only do all of the readings with my students, but to maintain my own Ethics Notebook, conduct the existential experiments, and engage in the service-learning. This helps me remember that philosophy is a way of life, not just a subject that I teach.

V. Teaching the Teacher

21. Dewey's reflections on democracy as a way of life are scattered across many of his works, but a good place to start is "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us" in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953, Volume 14: 1939-1941, Essays*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 224-30.