

Going Live: On the Value of a Newspaper-Centered Philosophy Seminar

THEODORE BACH

Abstract: For the last several years I have made the daily newspaper the pedagogical center piece of my philosophy seminar. This essay begins by describing the variations, themes, and logistics of this approach. The essay then offers several arguments in support of the value of this approach. The first argument references measurable indicators of success for this approach. A second argument contends that by “going live” with philosophical concepts, the newspaper-centered approach is uniquely well-positioned to motivate and excite the philosophy student. A third argument claims that the newspaper-centered approach is well-positioned to construct an individualized bridge between the student and the world of philosophy.

To look at the paper is to raise a seashell to one’s ear and to be overwhelmed by the roar of humanity.—Alain de Botton (2010: 237)

1. Introduction

A good daily newspaper, I submit, is both a philosophical playground and a philosophical training ground. To confirm this, grab a copy of today’s *New York Times* (or the *Washington Post*, or the *Chicago Tribune*, etc.), and unfold the front page. Above and below the fold are articles that describe conflicts between individuals, conflicts between individuals and society, conflicts between institutions, and/or conflicts between social groups. What types of conflicts? Many, of course. But in each case, moral principles, arguments, and distinctions—sometimes made explicit, often left implicit—are relevant to both the source of the conflict and its adjudication. It would not be surprising, for example, if human rights, distributive justice, or the value of aggregate utility bear centrally on one or several of today’s top stories. Students of Moral Philosophy and Social Justice would do well to discover and evaluate these philosophical applications.

Next, open to page 2, and observe the advertisements. Why is the model in *that* position wearing *those* items and looking in *that* direction? To make progress on these questions, apply concepts from Feminist Philosophy, Philosophy of Mind, and Philosophy of Aesthetics.

Now, skip to the last few pages of the front page section and discover the editorials, the letters to the editor, and the commentary pieces. Students of logic and critical reasoning would profit by reconstructing these arguments into standard form and making explicit the arguments' premises and conclusions. Then, with an eye open for both formal and informal fallacies, students can evaluate the arguments. While evaluating the content of these reconstructed arguments, students should draw on their broader philosophical knowledge.

Should one skip the Sports, Dining, Arts, and Home sections on the assumption that these sections are devoid of philosophical content? That would be a serious mistake. The coverage in these sections invariably penetrates several levels deeper than the presentation of statistics tables, recipes, and house tours. Rather, we are offered nuanced investigative reporting on a wide range of topics that have included the concussion problem in the National Football League, the ethics and custom of eating horse meat in Moscow, and the impact of gentrification on traditional cultural values in Brooklyn, New York.

For the last several years, and in order to take advantage of this frothy philosophical environment, I have made the daily newspaper the pedagogical center piece of my philosophy seminar. This essay describes and reflects on the merits of that approach. Sections 2 and 3 will explore the logistics of this approach. Section 4 describes several indicators of the success of this approach. In section 5 I advance two less obvious arguments for the effectiveness of the newspaper-centered approach. First, I argue that by "going live" with philosophical concepts, the newspaper-centered approach is uniquely well-positioned to motivate and excite the philosophy student. Next, I argue that the newspaper-centered approach is well-positioned to construct an individualized bridge between the student and the world of philosophy. Section 6 concludes.

2. Logistics with Justification

For philosophy instructors interested in incorporating the daily newspaper in the classroom, several questions immediately present themselves:

- Should I require or just recommend student subscriptions?
- Should students obtain a digital or a print subscription?
- Which newspaper should I use?
- In which philosophy seminar should I adopt this approach?

I do not think that there is a universally correct set of answers to these questions. Instead, much will depend on the nature of your educational institution (i.e., whether you teach at a small liberal arts college, a community college, or a research university), your student population, your region of the country, and what classes

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you are scheduled to teach. For my own part, I require a print edition of the *New York Times* in my Ethics seminar. Below I explore reasons for these decisions.

I use the *New York Times* for at least three reasons. First, the expansive National and International Sections of the *New York Times* offer rich and wide-ranging reporting on events and perspectives from all around the county and the world. Such reporting animates a wide range of belief systems. It is thus a great tool for teaching students the philosophical skill of subjecting their own beliefs to rational scrutiny. Second, the quality of writing in the *New York Times* is generally superb. Students' daily exposure to such high quality writing can have an important effect on the quality of their own writing and critical reasoning. Third, the *New York Times* offers a "*New York Times* in Education" program that both facilitates and financially incentivizes the use of the *New York Times* in the college seminar (see note 2 for more details).

There are several reasons for preferring the print edition of the paper over the digital version. First, because I use the daily newspaper as a source for in-class group work (described below), it is important for students to have a copy of the newspaper on hand during class. On the other hand, if students had only digital subscriptions then they would be forced to use their laptops during class. However, not all students have laptops, and not all instructors encourage laptop use during class. Second, while the websites of many national newspapers have improved greatly in recent years, they arguably continue to fall short of providing the type of comprehensive "news-tour" provided by the print edition. This news tour is made available in part through the printed paper's headlines, multi-page charts, well-positioned photographs, and physically separated sections. More generally, there is now compelling empirical evidence that printed content is often more conducive to learning than digital content.¹ Third, by acquiring a print subscription of the *New York Times* students will receive a complimentary digital subscription. Fourth, I like to instill in my students the attitude that we are a brazen group of philosophers that is willing to tackle head-on the thorniest moral issues of the day—that we are collectively engaged in an investigative project that is unique, rebellious, and vital. The symbol and collective ritual of each of us reading and toting around our printed daily newspaper bolsters this attitude and sense of collective purpose.

I require rather than recommend paper. Having employed the newspaper-centered approach for several years now, I have found that requiring rather than recommending student subscriptions is more effective for getting students to commit fully to the approach. (To ensure that students have subscribed, I ask them to forward me their email confirmation.)

Finally, I adopt this approach in my Ethics seminar. While I think that it would work well in many other philosophy seminars, I have found that ethical concepts in particular are richly exemplified in the daily newspaper. In addition,

the op-ed section never fails to provide excellent daily material for the evaluation of arguments with moral content.²

Despite the above reasons, I would not be at all surprised to learn that an instructor who took a different approach to the newspaper-centered philosophy seminar—for example, an instructor who recommended to her Logic students that they obtain a digital subscription to the *Washington Post*—also enjoyed considerable pedagogical success.

3. Specific Ways to Use the Daily Newspaper in the Philosophy Seminar

This section models specific philosophical uses of the daily newspaper—uses that I continue to employ in the philosophy classroom. As was the case in the previous section, these uses are intended as sufficient, but by no means necessary, routes to the successful integration of the newspaper into the philosophy seminar. Before exploring these uses, it is important to mention two features of my approach. First, students in my newspaper-centered philosophy seminars are not asked to engage the daily newspaper in a philosophical vacuum. Rather, each week students are assigned to read both primary and secondary philosophy texts. I make these texts freely available to students through the course webpage. In this respect, the newspaper-centered activities described below function to bring to life philosophical concepts and arguments first encountered in primary and secondary philosophy texts. Second, students are not required to read the entire daily newspaper! Instead, I ask them to at least skim the daily newspaper and to engage those articles that they find most appealing and philosophically compelling. With these points in mind, we can now examine more specific pedagogical uses of the newspaper.

First, we start each class discussing articles from that day's paper that demonstrate the ethical principles that we are currently studying. At the beginning of the seminar, I take the lead in this ritual—a ritual that also provides me the opportunity to model for students how best to discover and analyze philosophical applications in the daily newspaper. This means that, prior to each class, I will have read the newspaper with an eye out for articles that fit current class topics. Fortunately, there are always such articles—indeed, often there are too many to choose from! To get a better sense of how this might work, consider a few examples. When the class topic was abortion, we once started class by discussing the article “Complex Science at Issue in Politics of Fetal Pain.”³ I briefly sketched the main points of the article and then asked students: “Do these findings support the positions of Warren, Noonan, or Thomson? Why or why not?” When the class topic was Mill's “On Liberty” and legal paternalism, we began one class by exploring an article from that day's paper on expiring regulations for the printing of plastic guns.⁴ After sketching the article, I asked the class: “Do you think that an advocate

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of Mill's harm principle would support such regulations? Why or why not?" After class, I make sure to add a weblink in the course webpage to the target article (recall that students' print newspaper subscriptions provide them digital access as well). Once students get the hang of these applications, they often take a leading role in their discovery and discussion.⁵ It is worth mentioning that this instructional use of the newspaper requires both consistency and dedication; it is was less successful during a semester when I applied it unevenly. Also, I have found it helpful to stick to a time limit (5–10 minutes) for these beginning-of-class discussions.

A second method for integrating the newspaper in the philosophy seminar involves using that day's paper as a vehicle for in-class group work. I require students to bring that day's paper to class. (An aside: As a philosophy instructor, it is always great and occasionally goose bump-inducing to walk into a classroom and find students reading, gesturing toward, and discussing together the day's news stories.) The main reason for this requirement is that students will have their papers on hand during those classes in which we engage in newspaper-focused group work (at least 50 percent of classes). How do I determine when and how the newspaper will be used as a source of group work? When I read the paper each morning before class, I am alert to any articles, letters, or advertisements that will facilitate group work that is both fun and productive. For example, when the class topic is argument reconstruction and argument evaluation, I have found that it is highly effective to have students work in small groups in order to reconstruct and evaluate arguments from that day's editorials or letters. When the topic is rule utilitarianism, it is highly effective to have students work on an article that describes a recent law (or proposal) and then ask them to evaluate the probable consequences of that law from that perspective of the principle of utility. For example, this past semester several student groups used rule-utilitarian principles in order to evaluate an article reporting on Colorado's recent legalization of marijuana.

A third use of the *New York Times* involves short student presentations at the end of each class. At the beginning of the semester, students are asked to pick an article that they find morally compelling. The only restriction is that the article must be published between the start of the semester and the date of their scheduled presentation. I ask students to achieve four things through their presentation. First, they are briefly to explain the article to the class. Second, of the many moral principles, concepts, and arguments covered up to that point in the seminar, the student should explain which are most explanatory of the issue described in the target article. Third, they are asked to take a stand on the article's target issue and to provide an argument that advances their own moral perspective on the issue. Fourth, they are asked to take questions, comments, and criticisms from the instructor and class-members. This might sound like a lot to do, but once students get in the rhythm of the class they typically complete this sequence—and often complete it with flare, creativity, and analytic precision—in five to seven minutes.

4. Does this Approach Work?

Now that we have a sense of both the logistics and methods involved in using the newspaper-centered approach to the philosophy seminar, we would do well to pause and ask whether this approach is effective. In crude but accurate terms, the answer to this question is: “it certainly appears to be a very effective approach!” I say “appears” because there is scant empirical evidence about the pedagogical use of newspapers generally, and to my knowledge there is no empirical evidence about the pedagogical use of newspapers and current events specifically in the philosophy seminar. On the other hand, and as the instructor of at least a dozen seminars that employed the newspaper-centered approach (as well as dozens of seminars that did not employ this approach), I have access to various indicators of success and failure. It is partly on the basis of these indicators, described below, that I feel strongly about the pedagogical value of the newspaper in the philosophy classroom.

There are at least five indicators. First, I observed a slight but clear uptick in my quantitative student teaching evaluations after I adopted the newspaper-centered approach. Second, numerous students flagged in their qualitative student teaching evaluations that they enjoyed and profited from the seminar’s use of the *New York Times*. (Several of these comments singled out the in-class presentations as particularly helpful.) Third, during informal discussions with students over the past several semesters, numerous students have expressed to me how much they enjoyed the newspaper-centered approach. Fourth, colleagues who have served as peer evaluators for my Ethics seminar have praised the seminar’s incorporation of the *New York Times*. Fifth, based on an informal comparison of student performance, students in Ethics classes that employed the newspaper-centered approach performed better on exams and essays than did students in Ethics classes that did not employ the approach. While none of these measures offer the type of empirical rigor that might be required for publication in a top scientific journal, they nonetheless are collectively suggestive of the merits of the newspaper-centered approach.

5. Additional Arguments for the Pedagogical Value of the Newspaper-Centered Philosophy Seminar

In this section I offer additional arguments and explanations for the value of the newspaper-centered approach described in sections 2 and 3. These explanations go beyond the more platitudinous observations that the contents of the daily newspaper demonstrate philosophical and particularly ethical principles. They also buttress the empirical claims made in section 4.

5.1 The Excitement of “Live” Philosophy

The first explanation is that students benefit from demonstrations and applications of philosophical concepts when those demonstrations and applications are perceived as “live” rather than “taped.” What do I mean here by “live” versus “taped?” Begin with this distinction as it is found in the context of the delivery of television broadcasts. Media and advertising executives are well aware that, all things being equal, viewers have a preference for live TV (sporting events, *Saturday Night Live*, certain variety shows, etc.) over taped broadcasts aired at a later time. Consider, for example, the success of NBC’s 2013 live broadcast of “The Sound of Music Live!” Like many other viewers, I would likely not have tuned in were this a taped broadcast. I was attracted specifically to the program’s property of being “live”—so too, presumably, were many of the other 18.6 million viewers. Also like many other viewers, I continued to view this broadcast despite its often fumbling and awkward presentation.⁶ Next consider how some sports fans will wake up at unusual hours in order to watch a live sporting event even if they can view a taped version of the same sporting event at a later (more natural) hour and in an informationally controlled environment.

What explains this appeal of live television? One explanation is that perceiving the outcome and process of a program as indeterminate—as not decided in advance—enhances excitement. Vosgerau, Wertenbroch, and Carmon (2006) conducted several studies that support this claim. They found that viewers prefer content when they perceive that content as indeterminate. They found that this perception of indeterminacy generates greater excitement. I submit that something similar occurs when students engage in a newspaper-centered philosophy seminar. Such seminars “go live” with philosophy and as a result they are uniquely well-positioned to generate student excitement. Traditional seminars, on the other hand, are less likely to generate excitement to the extent that they are perceived as “taped.”

Let’s unpack this difference. Traditional seminars often deliver content through textbooks that are pre-packaged with philosophical examples and applications. Also, instructors of traditional seminars may use various in-class examples and applications in order to model philosophical concepts. In both cases, students are likely to perceive such philosophical applications as scripted off stage or plotted in advance for some specific learning effect. In both cases, students can get the sense that the philosophy has already happened ahead of time and somewhere else and that they are just catching up. This is not ideally exciting for philosophy students: someone else was the philosophical pioneer, and they are just tourists.

While there are various techniques for making the traditional seminar one in which students are producers and not just consumers of philosophy, the newspaper-centered philosophy seminar is uniquely well positioned to do just that—to facilitate student excitement and involvement. In the type of newspaper-centered philosophy seminar described in sections 2 and 3, the philosophical applications cannot be planned in advance because they have not yet occurred in real time. Indeed, the very

way in which the class does philosophy depends on what has happened in the world in the last twenty-four hours! Students learn that the philosophical applications are “hot off the press,” happening in real time, and there to be discovered. Here, the philosophy is live, indeterminate, and exciting.

5.2 Philosophy as Personally Relevant

In part due to our culture’s current obsession with business, social networking, and all things digital, it is a challenge to get the introductory philosophy student to grasp the relevance and importance of philosophical thinking. Making matters worse, many students harbor a stereotype that philosophy is an antiquated discipline—that its relevance is mostly confined to a time when togas and long white beards were norms of fashion.⁷ Of course, this stereotype is wrong: philosophical reasoning and the mastery of moral concepts are instrumentally valuable to the contemporary student’s ability to set and reach goals. But how can the philosophy instructor combat the various social and psychological forces that conspire to construe philosophy otherwise?

One particularly effective technique, I submit, is the adoption of the three-prong instructional use of the daily newspaper as described in section (3). This is because that approach incentivizes students to discover personalized pathways between philosophical concepts, on the one hand, and the world, on the other hand. The feature of the seminar that best fosters this type of individualized engagement is the in-class presentation requirement. As soon as students receive their newspaper subscriptions, they begin exploring the daily paper with an eye toward articles that they find both personally and philosophically compelling. Students quickly discover that their interests show up frequently and that they can use philosophical instruments to better understand those interests. Here are two examples. One student who enjoyed celebrity gossip gave a presentation on an article that described paparazzi who took pictures of Prince Henry while he partied in a Las Vegas hotel.⁸ She argued that, according to Kant’s Categorical Imperative, such invasions of Prince Henry’s privacy could not be justified and that the paparazzi had treated Prince Henry merely as a means. Another student who had an interest in boating gave a presentation on an article that described a couple who had embarked with their one year old and three year old on a dangerous sailboat voyage.⁹ When the couple could not cope with dangerous conditions and the infant became ill, the family required a very expensive rescue from the Coast Guard. This student considered how competing principles of distributive justice would judge this use and function of taxpayer money. There are countless similar examples. They show how, by training with the lens of the daily newspaper, students can learn how to discover philosophical reflections of themselves in the world around them.

6. Conclusion

This article sketched one approach to what I have been terming the “newspaper-centered philosophy seminar.” This approach is not a one-size fits all; several variables can be adjusted and toggled in order to meet the distinctive needs of a given philosophy seminar. Nonetheless, several reasons make clear that the general approach is promising. In addition to exploring several quasi-empirical indicators of success, I offered two theoretical arguments that showed how the proper instructional use of the daily newspaper can stoke student excitement and also build an appreciation of the personal relevance of philosophical investigation.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Carr, *The Shallows*.
2. Here are a few comments on the more specific logistics involved in using this approach. The *New York Times* makes it easy to set up one’s philosophy course so as to include the daily newspaper. As of this writing, the “*New York Times* In Education” webpage (<http://nytimesineducation.com/?campaignId=474Y8>) provides weblinks to various subscription options for students and instructors. These options include Monday–Friday subscriptions, on-campus delivery (e.g., the bookstore), and off-campus delivery (the paper is delivered to students’ residences daily no later than 6:30 a.m.). In addition, the *New York Times* currently employs local Education representatives who can assist in setting up one’s course with the *New York Times*. Once the instructor (or representative) has loaded the relevant information about the seminar into the online form, a weblink is made available that will take students directly to the form for signing up for the daily newspaper. The cost to the student to obtain a Monday–Friday print subscription to the *New York Times* for a fifteen week semester is approximately sixty dollars. Perhaps it is also worth mentioning here that if at least ten students in your course subscribe to the newspaper, then you will receive a complimentary subscription to the *New York Times* for the duration of the seminar.
3. Belluk, “Complex Science,” A1.
4. Peters and Schmidt, “Law Limiting Plastic Guns Set to Expire,” A1.
5. In order to incentivize such voluntary discussion contributions I often remind students that I count them towards their participation grades.
6. See, e.g., Stanley, “‘Idol,’ Meet the Trapps,” C2.
7. This stereotype is brought nicely to its comedic extreme in Monty Python’s “The Philosophers’ Football Match,” http://www.openculture.com/2010/07/the_monty_python_philosophy_football_match.html
8. Burns, “Prince Harry,” A9.
9. Medina, “2 Tots,” A1.

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