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Blinded by the Light: A Reflection on the Teaching of Introductory Courses in Philosophy

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I must confess from the outset that I have nothing new to say here. What I do have to say has all been said before, and, no doubt, said better. The same can also be said of my undergraduate introductory philosophy courses, in which nothing new is ever really said. They consist of little more than a rehash of oft-repeated conversations from classrooms, salons, and marketplaces throughout the ages. Nonetheless, I do not apologize for saying these things yet again. Though I am humbled by the recognition that I have nothing to add, I still remain sufficiently unlearned to hold back from repetition.[1]

The justification for such repetition arises from the continued frustration professors often express concerning what they take to be the limited success of their introductory classes. Why aren't our classes opportunities to present the latest philosophical theories, to present our own new and bold theses, to dispute the big questions of existence, the real stuff of philosophy? That they are not such opportunities needs, I take it, no argument. Though somewhat depressing, reality demands that we acknowledge that to expect them to be would be (at least at a small sort-of-state-supported public liberal arts institution like

Potsdam) to set unreasonable goals and expectations for an introductory course in philosophy.

Consider our students: They are, in short, a mass of latent contradiction and tension: a fertile field of potential confusion ready for the harvest. They have absorbed the ubiquitous moral puritanism of our society along with the equally ubiquitous commercialization of sex and violence. They live in the most widely touted democracy in the world, in which oligarchs and corporations compete for leadership and set the social and political agenda. They live in the largest secular and multicultural society in the world, yet retain a puritanical provincialism and a naive spiritualism. They are raised in a world made by science, yet place their hope in psychic hotlines and the power of crystals to heal. They are individualists who just happen to all wear the same brand of jeans. They are moral relativists who are proud to proclaim their allegiance to the universal moral truth du jour. They are already a bundle of confusions and contradictions, though they are also, amazingly, completely unaware of the fact. They take it for granted that they are savvy, skeptical, clever, and informed when their entire educational history up to the day they enter our classrooms has almost certainly been little more than teaching facts to the tests, and has certainly not required subtlety of thought, has discouraged any sort of mitigated skepticism, has impeded cleverness, and has, at best, kept them minimally informed by convincing them to take mainstream commercial media as their sole source of information. Equally amazing is the fact that some of them have actually survived this process, or at least are salvageable.

Our students are also, notoriously, 'unprepared' to engage in college-level work, which is a nice way of saying that they are strikingly uneducated, on the whole. This sad fact alone, combined with the intimate relation that philosophy has to its own history, makes it clear why it would be unreasonable to have particularly high aspirations. One cannot understand the latest philosophical theories without being able to set them in the context of the history of philosophy, something few introductory students are equipped to do. So, too, to properly argue for and defend any of one's own philosophical beliefs ethically entails that one argue them out against competing hypotheses and theories, something that our students are even less prepared to do. Philosophy is a dialectical process, an ongoing conversation, and like other conversations it is tough to pick up the thread when suddenly dropped in the middle of it all. Not that there is any alternative. Still, although like Hegel's non-swimmer on his first attempt, there is no other way to learn to swim than to plunge on in; nonetheless, one should not expect

much in the first few dips—a dog paddle in this context can be pretty impressive. Finally, to properly dispute the big questions of existence, my students would need to have some basic grasp of the process and rules of argumentation, and, alas, I cannot even count on this. So given the latent confusion of my students and their general state of intellectual unpreparedness, aiming to present new and bold theses or opening serious disputations concerning the big questions of existence would be to aim unreasonably high. Does recognizing this condemn the introductory philosophy class to merely rehashing well-worn material along well-trod paths? What might be justification enough to walk yet again over these roads? Does this undermine the whole enterprise? What should we, or can we, reasonably strive to achieve?

Retreating from the clearly unreasonable, one might try to take up a kind of middle ground. Certainly, we might say, students should come away from an introductory course with an understanding of why and how philosophy has been done, an appreciation of the methods and conclusions of three or four diverse thinkers, and improved critical thinking skills. What are the chances of achieving even these modest goals with a significant portion of introductory students? While trying desperately to remain realistic and not give in to the temptations of free-wheeling cynicism, I must still reply that the chances of achieving such goals are slim indeed.

Withdrawing a bit further, perhaps I might hope that in five or ten years my students will look back on their foray into philosophy with a solid understanding of at least a handful of issues of central philosophical concern, the intellectual desire to pursue others, and the kind of critical engagement required by an active citizen. But this is still wildly optimistic. Perhaps these latter goals might be reasonable for those who pursue extended study or a major in philosophy, but, even then, it is only the best and the brightest who will come anywhere near achieving them.

So what can one reasonably hope to impart in an introductory philosophy class? Having held the dragons of fantasy at bay and, I hope, equally avoided the pits of cynicism, I have come to believe that the best method of introducing students to philosophy is to promulgate confusion. That is, I set out to make difficult and confusing what was before deemed untroublesome. My goal is to create, disseminate, share, and foment confusion. We might call this a process of active unlearning.

Preposterous, one might say. What kind of a discipline, particularly when introducing itself, would pursue such seemingly irrational ends? What kind of a professor professes confusion? Isn't our purpose, as teachers, to shed light on the obscure and misunderstood: to make clear

and help to order the chaos of our experience? I do not deny that these are noble and admirable goals. We should enlighten where we can, but to teach we must understand. If you are like me in this respect, there is much that we do not understand. Across our various disciplines and areas of expertise we all have much light to shed, yet we also all find ourselves on occasion, at least, blinded by that very light. We spend much of our time dazed and confused (and if we didn't, many of us would seek other means of employment!). The life of the mind is not placid and clear, it is a "buzzin' bloomin' confusion." Introducing students to that confusion and modeling for them the ways of negotiating that confusion, I am arguing, is a responsible and reasonable goal. Perhaps even noble as well.

The idea is a very old one, however, and again I must confess that I have little or nothing new to add to it. But ideas do not have a shelf life, and even if pushed to the back and ignored, forgotten, or eclipsed by some new and improved reworking of the old product, they are as good as they ever were, and cannot reasonably be dismissed merely on the basis of their age. Thus, predictably, unimaginatively, unoriginally, but I hope not unhelpfully, I suggest we take a look at Socrates.

Plato's Socrates famously asserted, "wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else." (*Theaetetus*, 155d). The context of the passage suggests wonder, not, for example, over the mysteries and beauty of the natural world, or even of the moral world, but rather wondering of a purely intellectual variety over some rather obscure 'logical' (strictly, I suppose, epistemological) puzzles. Theaetetus expresses his 'wonder' (*thaumas*) over how it can be that three seemingly self-evident principles can conflict when applied to certain common cases in experience.[2] And the terms of his expression are equally revealing, for he says, "I often wonder like mad what these things can mean; sometimes when I'm looking at them I begin to feel quite giddy" (*skotodineo*: to feel dizzy or vertigo) (155c7–8). Now giddiness is not a state normally associated with the experience of the wonders of nature and art. It is much more naturally associated with another psychic state also commonly associated with the name of Socrates—namely, *aporia*, the state of being at a loss, confused, or perplexed. Plato portrays the historical Socrates as engaged in conversations about moral issues that always, without exception, end in *aporia*; that is, without having answered the fundamental question that the inquiry set out to answer. This is certainly explicable by reference to Socrates' profession of ignorance, but this still leaves room for us to see in it a clear pedagogical end as well.

Socrates' all-too-evident failure to get answers to the questions he pursues, to educate himself, is itself ironically transformed into an opportunity for his interlocutors to educate themselves: to come to see puzzles and difficulties where before there were none. Socrates is, as Meno suggests, constantly in danger of being "driven away for practicing sorcery" (*Meno*, 80b8) for carrying on in this way. Socrates' goal is moral improvement, both his own and others. But he first has to get them to see that there are moral difficulties at all, get them to appreciate that, echoing Nietzsche, thinking about morality might be difficult and dangerous. And to this end he sows confusion, *aporia*. For millennia, for the receptive reader, at least, he has provoked wonder in the form of confusion and perplexity.

Socrates always began his examinations by asking a question about something he had reason to believe the person with whom he was speaking might know about. Inevitably, they would reveal in their answers that they knew less than they let on. Of course Socrates' standards may have been set unreasonably high, but they are conducive to sowing confusion, and thus serve a distinct pedagogical end. The other Socratic gem, from the *Apology*, is the claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Taken literally (as it must be, though rarely is), this is a rather harsh claim. For when we unpack what Socrates means by examining one's life, it will appear that most of my students' lives are not worth living, and some of the rest of us might bear it heavily in mind as well. For it precisely means that a worthwhile life requires that one be constantly checking up on one's beliefs, particularly one's moral beliefs, subjecting them to a kind of eternal recurrence of cross-examination. This few manage to achieve (arguably, Socrates himself may well have failed), but for the majority of undergraduate students the question is not one of the constancy of their examination, but of its ever having begun at all. All I can hope to accomplish in one short semester is to get them to see that there is a way of living that involves dedication to such questioning.

To achieve this end, I become a Proteus, now defending the plausibility of Descartes' arguments, then that of his critics, weaving a maze for those interested enough to puzzle their way through. They don't follow, of course, and I don't really mean for them to. Simply opening the door and letting them look into the labyrinthian passages is shock enough, like that suffered by the prisoners in the cave who first turn to face the wall on which images of the real are paraded. The more engaged among them ask questions, pursue ideas, and I support those ideas, help them think through them, or show that they are insupportable. Whether we are discussing Cartesian dualism, Sartre's conception

of freedom, the morality of abortion, or the limits of our First Amendment freedoms, this is critical thinking in action, the give-and-take of reason and argument. They are having it modeled for them and a few actively take part. But this is more active unlearning than active learning. Their conceptions of things are more often undermined than they are supported. In a straightforward way, they leave the classroom knowing less than when they entered.

Lest I be misunderstood, it is important to point out here that confusing is not simply 'problematizing' in the postmodern sense, since it must clearly imply that there is truth to be found. It is true, as so often put forward by the postmodernists, that things are much more complex and ambiguous than they may seem. And certainly it does our students good to come to appreciate this. But to conclude from this that truth is relative would be a classic non sequitur. Nonetheless, many students will interpret the give-and-take of arguments, the demand for vigilant skepticism and for open-mindedness to be evidence for their crude relativistic views. Part of the task, then, is to get them to see that this doesn't follow. To put them on the road, at least, to coming to see for themselves that this is precisely the sort of inference about which they should be skeptical and which requires reexamination.

To return, predictably, to Socrates, it would be wrongheaded to conclude from the fact that his conversations (charitably so-called) always end in *aporia* and therefore the real lesson we are meant to draw from them is that there is no truth about the matter being discussed. Indeed, Socrates himself spends time addressing this wrongheaded conclusion in the *Phaedo* and warning his listeners about the dangers of what he calls "misology" or hatred of argument.

> "You know," he says, "how those in particular who spend their time studying contradiction in the end believe themselves to have become very wise and that they alone have understood that there is no soundness or reliability in any object or in any argument, but that all that exists simply fluctuates up and down as if it were in the Euripus [a violent and variable current] and does not remain in the same place for any time at all" (90b9).

Yet it would be pitiable, he goes on to say, for such people to place the blame on the arguments or on reason itself, rather than on themselves or their own lack of skill. Pitiable, because they would thereby deprive themselves "of truth and knowledge of reality." Thus, "we should not allow into our minds the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it; much rather we should believe that it is we who are not yet sound, and that we must take courage and be eager to attain soundness" (90e1).

In short, nobody said discovering the truth would be easy. Indeed, it requires hard work, perhaps the work of many lifetimes. Nor can it simply be handed from one individual to another. They must come to make it their own, and thus they, too, must work themselves to it (not surprisingly, one theme in operation in Plato's *Meno*). These points, although they are old hat, are received like foreign delicacies by our students. They live in a quick fix, value meal, Cliff-noted, and Internet-referenced age. They expect truths to be delivered to them, preferably via multimedia. What, after all, are they paying their tuition dollars for? This is an attitude that has been reinforced, in almost all cases, by twelve years of public schooling, and which will continue to be reinforced by many of their undergraduate classes.

Confusion as the end or goal they find to be, well, confusing. It is not facility of mind they have been encouraged to develop. Thus, active unlearning should for some of us be a goal, if only because it is so rare and yet so necessary. It takes on more importance in the teaching of some disciplines precisely because it is so rare in others; because it challenges the educational norms students have been raised within, and, perhaps most important, because it is so alien to the corporate mentality, and hence to the dominant ethos of our age. Only from the point of view of an authoritarian, political/corporate culture can questioning the status quo, sowing confusion, be seen as harmful. But so it is seen today, as it was in Socrates' day. We have no less, and perhaps much greater, need of a gadfly today than Athens did 2,500 years ago. And the place for such gadflies in the diffuse and massive society that is contemporary America is not in the marketplace, but in the university.

In Socrates' day the market was a place where people could mingle and explore ideas together. Today the market actively seeks to thwart the exchange of ideas and to discourage the sowing of confusion. The market, as has often been noted, does not merely seek to supply our wants, desires, and needs; more than ever it creates those wants, desires, and needs, and seeks to homogenize them at the same time. The market is perhaps inescapable; we are all consumers. But as consumers we require the tools supplied by active unlearning to keep from being manipulated by the market. And the area of our lives as consumers in which we now are in need of the most active, critical thinking and skepticism is in our role as citizens. As the political process becomes more and more a matter of marketing a product, democracy itself becomes endangered by the dearth of critical thinkers, of gadflies, and by the legions of those who have only learned and never unlearned.

And though many, myself included, are heard to bemoan the quality of the students who now enter our classrooms, this decline of quality is directly correlated with a larger percentage of the general population who now go on to pursue an undergraduate degree. Jackson Lears has noted that "professors are constantly berating themselves and being berated for withdrawing into the insular world of scholarship, for not connecting with the real world. The real world is right in front of us, in the classroom; it is composed of students, 99 percent of whom have no intention of entering the academy themselves. They are a non-academic audience; they require us, however implicitly or imperfectly, to become public intellectuals." (2000, 22). As teachers working in a small state university, we know all too well that the real world is right in front of us. We are all public intellectuals, whether we like it or not. Certainly, directing the light where we can is required of us, but so is making certain that our students, our audience, are blinded by the light as well, introducing them to the kind of *aporia* Socrates radiated. The opportunity being presented to some of us is to spread confusion far and wide, to get our students, a sizeable portion of the adult population, thinking about issues they had never even imagined could be troublesome or difficult. It is, admittedly, arguable whether even this can be achieved in a few short weeks, but it is our obligation, as public intellectuals as well as active citizens, to at least try. And when my students come to me at the end of the semester and tell me that they are now more confused than ever about what they do and should value, I can take comfort in knowing that I have attained some small measure of success.

Notes

1. In part this is because I maintain that some things are worth repeating, even if only in a rather shoddy way. Socrates suggests in the Phaedo that there are some beliefs of such importance that they should be reinforced by repetitively working through them "as if it were an incantation" (114d5). As I understand this claim, Socrates is comparing the belief to the product of the incantation, and the incantation itself represents the giving of reasons, the premises of the argument. Hence reinforcement, in this case, is equivalent to reexamination. The belief he is reexamining there, of course, is the belief in the immortality of the soul.

2. The principles are:
   1. that nothing can become greater or less, in bulk or in number, while remaining equal to itself.

   2. that if nothing is added or taken away from a thing, it can neither increase nor decrease but can only remain equal.
   3. that it is impossible for a thing to ever be what it was not before except through a process of becoming what it was not before.

These principles cause problems when applied to common cases. So I, who haven't grown or shrunk an inch (i.e., have neither increased nor decreased) will soon be shorter than my eldest son; as the fifty cents in my pocket is larger than the twenty-five cents in my daughter's pocket and also, without having changed at all (while remaining equal to itself) is smaller than the ten dollars in my middle son's billfold. That is, these seemingly self-evident principles run into difficulty when applied to what we might now call "relational" properties. This is, of course, the kind of problem only a philosopher might wonder about, because only a philosopher might try to find a problem where others see only self-evident principles.

References

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