

The Humanities Classroom: A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

by *Carlo DaVia*
Lecturer, Fordham University

What is this guide for?

Teaching a humanities course has come to feel like a morally fraught task – and not without reason. Aristotle was sexist, Julius Caesar a genocidal warlord, Richard Wagner an unapologetic anti-Semite, Paul Gauguin an alleged pedophile. The list of eminent thinkers and their vices is long, and lengthening by the day. Should we teachers continue to assign their works? What about thinkers still alive who have been caught up in scandal? Must they, too, be scrapped from syllabi? Even among the thinkers with relatively clean records, many of their works contain content that is morally problematic. Think of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris*, or Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ.”

Steering clear of controversial thinkers and works dodges some moral issues, but it leaves others still unaddressed. There is a growing recognition that many of the humanistic disciplines and their subfields have long been operated primarily by men and on the basis of exclusionary, Eurocentric conceptions of inquiry and knowledge. Other voices have been systematically given less credence or even outright excluded. The result has been some myopic scholarship that fails to acknowledge and reflect the lived experiences of those it marginalizes. It is no accident that Descartes gets frequently taught as the “father of modern philosophy” without any mention of Teresa of Ávila or Elisabeth of Bohemia, two women who profoundly shaped his thought. It is also no accident that the three-volume *History of Classical Scholarship* (1903-1908) by Sir John Edwin Sandys appears not to mention a single modern classicist that is of non-European descent. Faculty have rightly wondered: what adjustments to course curricula will help rectify these wrongs? How can we avoid being complicit in such unjust practices of knowledge production and distribution? Diversifying syllabi has seemed, to many, to be a decent start. But that proposal in turn has elicited concerns that syllabus diversification is a kind of reverse discrimination against the thinkers whose works are now being taught less.

The Humanities Classroom: A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

The moral issues here are complex and come with high stakes, but they are not without precedent. Even a potted history of the American university reveals that the humanities have been perennially beset with moral questions. During much of the nineteenth century, college instruction served the ambitious mission of forming upstanding citizens united by common values (Meyer 1972, 1–31; Rudolph 1977, 39–42). This pietism was subdued to some degree by the rise of the modern research university with its increasingly professionalized departments and their adoption of supposedly value-neutral methods of scientific inquiry. But calls for humanities courses to heed a moral imperative have persisted (Reuben 1996). As soon as humanities departments were formally established, roughly around the turn of the twentieth century (Veysey 1979), Irving Babbitt and the New Humanists defended them as providing moral guidance that the sciences could not. Since then, the contents of humanities curricula have been under almost constant scrutiny, whether prompted by academic debates over things like the Great Books programs, or by political pressures like McCarthyism and the Red Scare. The Civil Rights Movement proved especially influential, in part by spawning gender, race, and ethnic studies programs that turned a critical lens upon the humanities (Boxer 1998; Rojas 2007). Those critiques have shed light on the ways in which the humanities have not only been fettered by the prejudices of its practitioners, but also implicated in many of the injustices committed specifically against women and people of color. Today we seem to find ourselves in a similar moment: the social justice movements that have been pouring into our streets – and in particular the #MeToo Movement and Black Lives Matter – are encouraging us to raise again some important moral concerns about the humanities and their curricula.

This scrutiny of humanities curricula has been intensified by controversies over free speech on college campuses. Cultural and political conservatives have been railing against academics for silencing right-leaning political speech on campus. Organizations like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) are carefully monitoring restrictions placed on campus speech. Even within the halls of the academy there are concerns that students and faculty alike are not welcome to express unpopular views. There is a fear that this climate is cultivating fragile students in a padded echo chamber of liberal elites (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). This all has left faculty feeling themselves to be in something of a double-bind. On the one hand, they are being challenged, on moral grounds, to rethink their syllabi. And yet, on the other hand, any changes to course content are apt to be seen as the further curtailment of free speech. What are faculty to do?

This guide is primarily intended to help faculty sort through these tendentious issues. It offers help not by providing definitive answers as to whether or not certain thinkers or works should be taught, but rather by articulating the pertinent moral issues and then suggesting strategies for navigating them. This should hopefully appeal to faculty, given that many seem committed to the principle that no thinker or idea should be banned from the college classroom – a privileged place for free and open inquiry. Faculty do not take this view to imply that anything can be taught in any old way; the assigned material should be relevant to the course, and the material should be taught with sensitivity. This guide offers some theoretical scaffolding for determining what morally sensitive teaching can look like.

In addition to teachers, students may also stand to gain from this guide. Many of them are attuned to the fact that their fields of study are chock full of questionable thinkers and works, and, as a result, students are unsure as to whether they should still be studying them. They ask, for example: if men like John Locke and Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca were participants in colonial empire and enslavement, why not just shelve them and read someone else instead? This guide clarifies dimensions of such complex questions in ways that can help students arrive at their own answers.

The views expressed in this guide are the result of a multi-stage research effort that aimed to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible within the inevitable time constraints. Research began with dozens of interviews with humanities faculty across a number of disciplines, ranging from philosophy to history, religious studies to East Asian languages and cultures. Interviewees were of diverse backgrounds and career stages, from junior adjunct instructors to professors emeriti. These interviews made evident a set of especially pressing moral issues shared across disciplines. Moreover, the interviews brought those moral issues to life with concrete examples of controversial authors and works and how the faculty handled them. All this information guided a subsequent review of scholarship on the specific moral issues, as well as additional interviews with scholars who authored some of those writings. A great debt of gratitude is owed to all those faculty who have generously contributed to the guide, even if they do not share the views it expresses.

What, then, are the biggest moral issues that humanities faculty and students grapple with? They constellate around three foci:

1. Immoral content in the *work*
2. Immoral behavior of the *author*
3. Moral complicity of the *teacher*

The following sections treat each of these issues in turn. Each section identifies moral wrongs that may result from teaching certain kinds of works and authors (in the broadest sense, and not limited to writing). Immoral content in assigned works risks either causing *serious offense or harm*. By teaching authors who have behaved badly, we above all risk either *condoning their wrongs* or *conferring on them undue benefits*. In addition to these wrongs, teachers also risk *being complicit in unjust epistemic practices*. Each section below explains the nature of these potential wrongs and how they can take place. Suggestions are also offered as to how the wrongs can be avoided or at least mitigated. For example, once we understand the nature of offense, we will see that serious offense can be avoided either by reducing the magnitude of the offense, making it easier for students to avoid being offended, or, at the very least, ensuring that students give prior consent to the offensive content.

Readers can skip to whichever sections speak to their concerns. However, it may very well be the case that one work can raise all three sorts of moral issues. Take *The Reeve's Tale* by Chaucer. Its depictions of sexual violence are troublesome, and they become all the more so when we bear in mind that Chaucer had been accused by Cecily Chaumpaigne of *raptus*, or rape. Things become further complicated by

The Humanities Classroom:
A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

the fact that Chaumpaigne eventually dropped the charge. Does teaching a work like this perpetuate the long-standing injustice of doubting the credibility of women, particularly when they claim sexual harassment or assault? With works of such moral complexity, readers may well benefit from reading all three sections.

1. What if the **work** has immoral content?

Most worries about assigning a particular work to students stem from content in the work that is morally problematic if not downright immoral. But faculty are not troubled by just any immoral content. They do not much hesitate to have their students read about the shooting of Narciso in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, or gaze at the shameless cheating depicted in Caravaggio's "The Cardsharps." The content that really worries faculty tends to be that which threatens to offend or cause harm. This may sound overly protective. Rather than avoiding material that may be uncomfortable for students, should we not instead be preparing them to deal with the unsavory stuff of everyday life? Moreover, how is it even possible for an assigned work to harm a student? How can speech harm?

In what follows we need to say more about the nature of offense and harm, and how assigned works can plausibly cause both. There are, however, some strategies by which faculty can mitigate these risks, leaving open the possibility of responsibly teaching works that possess such immoral content.

1.1 What if the work risks being *offensive*?

The public bus offers a master class in offensiveness. Fellow passengers do all sorts of offensive things. They eat foul-smelling snacks, blast their music, yammer on the phone, give displays of affection better suited for the bedroom, yell obscenities at the driver and one another, *ad nauseam*. The causes of offense stretch the imagination, but they tend to be of three kinds: they are gross or otherwise repellent to the senses, they are indecent or flouting rules of decorum, or they are simply immoral. Such offensive behavior, even if the offense is unintended, puts the offended in an unpleasant state of mind. The behavior is a nuisance, making it harder for the offended to get on with their ride and day. Offenses range from slight to serious. The more serious offenses tend to be more inconvenient to cope with. Cases of serious offense are unfair to the extent that the offended person is unreasonably inconvenienced. For example, it would be unfair for bus riders to have to bring earmuffs in order to be able to hear their own thoughts over a booming stereo. Buses accordingly have regulations against seriously offensive behavior. These regulations exist because seriously offensive behavior is an injustice, even if it is far from grave one.

Determining what counts as seriously offensive is admittedly thorny. This is because for serious offense to occur, there must be: (i) something gross, indecent, or immoral; (ii) someone who finds it so; and (iii) social norms governing when it is unreasonable for a person to have to cope with what they find offensive. The smell of cooked rice is hardly offensive, except maybe to the person with a severe rice allergy. By contrast, the sulfuric stench of a rice paddy is offensive to many, but probably not to my family, who farms those paddies for a living. It seems reasonable to expect drivers along the highway to cope with the rice paddy smells as they drive by. It is probably unreasonable to expect coworkers to tolerate that same smell coming from the office refrigerator. Even if there are many situations in which

The Humanities Classroom: A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

it is hard to determine if the offense is serious, there are also many other situations in which we are in little doubt.

Serious offense is not the only moral wrong caused by bad behavior. If the behavior is so egregious as to cause a “setback” to the interests of others, then it becomes not just offensive but harmful (Feinberg 1987). This may occur if, say, a bus rider has to inhale second-hand smoke from the cigarette of a fellow passenger. Or it may occur if a rider is verbally abused to such an extent that it severely impacts their mental health. Such behaviors can cause harm, not mere offense. For now, however, we will set aside the issue of harm (until discussion in 1.2) and focus on harmless offense.

In the classroom, students are apt to encounter offensive content. Sometimes the content is gross: media studies courses studying the representation of criminality may show grisly images from television; or art history courses studying shock art may project slides of artwork involving human feces or goldfish put in blenders. More frequently students engage with content that is indecent or immoral: gender studies courses studying sexuality may show lewd film clips; political theory courses exploring free speech may show irreverent drawings of Jesus or the prophet Muhammad; linguistics courses may examine slurs and stereotypes; musicology courses may play songs with explicit lyrics; classics courses reading Roman poetry may come across all manner of vulgarity; philosophy courses on ethics often read arguments concerning hot-button issues like abortion and euthanasia. All this offensive content is not without purpose. Indeed, many teachers see it as their duty to expose students to alternative and sometimes uncomfortable viewpoints. As Cornel West (2000) puts it: “I want to be able to engage in the grand calling of a Socratic teacher, which is not to persuade and convince students, but to unsettle – to unsettle and unnerve and maybe even unhouse a few students.”

But whether intended to unsettle students or not, offensive course content needs to be handled with care. If the content presents a serious offense to students, then the inconveniences of coping with the offense may be so great as to be unjust. Just as it would be unfair for bus riders to be obliged to bring earmuffs to drown out blaring music, so too might it be unfair for students to be required to spend an entire class listening to the most expletive-riddled songs on record (the current winner: “NSFW” by Psychostick, containing over five hundred expletives). It might be similarly unfair for Muslim students to have to endure an entire class showing nothing but satirical cartoons of Muhammad. Even if the pedagogical goals are legitimate, it might be that students are being unfairly called upon to cope with such unpleasant classroom experiences.

When we say that such content might cause serious offense, the emphasis on “might” cannot be stressed enough. This is because the seriousness of an offense depends on several factors (Feinberg 1988, 35):

Magnitude:

The seriousness of an offense depends in part on its magnitude, which is determined by the intensity and duration of the offense. If students in a musicology course are required to listen to music with foul language, we should consider: Just how foul is the language? How unpleasant is the music on account of those explicit lyrics? And for how long must students listen to it?

Avoidability:

The seriousness of an offense also depends on the ease with which it can be avoided. Is offensive music a required component of the musicology course? Or are students given the option to listen to other songs that would achieve comparably well the same pedagogic goals?

Consent:

Lastly, the seriousness of an offense depends on whether or not the offended could have voluntarily agreed to it. The possibility of consent does not reduce the offensiveness of the offense, but only the degree to which the offended are being treated unjustly. In the case of students in the musicology course: Are they given opportunities to consent to listening to music with explicit content? Does the teacher give some form of advance warning, on the syllabus or elsewhere?

The seriousness of offensive course content can accordingly be reduced by any one of these factors. If the magnitude of the offense is reasonably low, or if the offense can be avoided with reasonable ease, or if students are given reasonable opportunity to consent to the offensive course material, then that material is not seriously offensive.

Serious offense can therefore be averted when it comes to most if not all course materials. The magnitude of their offense can be reduced by modifying the manner and duration in which the materials are shown. For music with explicit lyrics, faculty can play just snippets of them, or “radio edit” versions which remove the profanity. For blasphemous images, students can be given descriptions of the images rather than the images themselves. Admittedly, it may not always be possible to reduce the magnitude of offense. A course on Catullus probably could not study his poems with all the vulgarities redacted – indeed, there would be little poetry left. In such cases, serious offense can be prevented by offering alternative materials for those who are likely to be offended. But good alternatives may not always be available, and there may be good reasons for faculty to insist that the offensive content be experienced in its full, unmodified form. For courses with unavoidably offensive content, faculty can prevent serious offense by ensuring that students can freely consent to it.

The Humanities Classroom: A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

There is, however, one notable exception: courses with inescapably offensive content that are part of a required core curriculum. If, say, a student attends a college because it offers financial aid without which higher education would be unaffordable, and if the college has such a course as part of its core curriculum, then it could plausibly be argued that the student does not really have the chance to consent to the course and its offensive content; the student is effectively forced by financial need to take the class. Fortunately, such courses seem to be quite rare, and so we can be confident that with these strategies it is almost always possible to ward off serious offense in the classroom.

These strategies might nevertheless raise some hackles. Why must we cater to the subjective tastes of skittish students? Why should faculty have to constantly monitor the fickle winds of student opinion in order to anticipate serious offenses? These questions find echoes in the intense debates currently being held about free speech on college campuses. But the questions can be answered, and perhaps even their motivating worries assuaged, by considering again the analogy with buses. Bus regulations exist to prevent serious offense and harm, and the regulations intended to prevent serious offense would seem to invite similar worries about their subjective nature. The New York City MTA bus system, by far the largest in the country, expressly prohibits passengers from “conduct[ing] themselves in any manner which may cause or tend to cause annoyance, alarm or inconvenience to a reasonable person” (§1050.7(i)). This is quite subjective. Whether or not bus behavior is seriously offensive apparently depends on whether it causes “inconvenience to a reasonable person,” and who counts as a “reasonable person” is hardly a straightforward matter. It might be objected that such a regulation would compel bus riders to self-censor so as not to risk bothering the most sensitive and prudish bus riders. But any New York City bus rider will attest that the regulation has not had this effect, and it almost certainly never will. Of course, it is in principle possible for the regulation to be abused by a peevish MTA officer who fines every rider they deem remotely irksome. But that would be a problem of regulation enforcement, not a problem with the regulation itself. The same holds true for the aforementioned strategies for dealing with offensive course content. Those strategies might be incorrectly employed due to an unreasonable conception of what counts as a serious offense. But that would reflect a flaw in the application of the strategies, not in the strategies themselves.

1.2 What if the work risks being *harmful*?

Harms differ from serious offenses in both degree and kind. Serious offenses are unpleasant inconveniences that would be unjust for individuals to have to endure. Harms, by contrast, are not merely inconvenient. They are unjust setbacks to the interests of the person harmed. Loud music on the bus can be a serious offense to a fellow rider. But if it becomes so loud as to damage their hearing, then it constitutes a harm.

Harms, as unjust setbacks to interests, are a specific sort of wrong. This is partly because the notion of “interest” here is narrower than that of common usage. As Joel Feinberg explains (1987, 34):

One’s interests...consist of all those things in which one has a stake...These interests, or perhaps more accurately, the things these interests are in, are distinguishable components of a person’s well-being: he flourishes or languishes as they flourish or languish. What promotes them is to his advantage or *in his interest*; what thwarts them is to his detriment or *against his interest*.

A desire to watch a rerun of “All in the Family” is only an interest of ours if we have a stake in seeing the show – if, say, we are avid fans of Norman Lear, or we are media researchers studying the representation of race relations in America, or if we are aspiring comedians looking for material. Interests contribute in some way to our well-being. Our interests accordingly range from basic needs like food and shelter to the projects and commitments around which we order our lives. A setback to our interests is anything that “thwarts,” stalls, or derails the advancement of those interests. However, not all setbacks to our interests are unjust. The tornado that ravages our home is certainly a setback to our interests, but it is not an unjust one. By contrast, an apartheid law depriving us of the right to vote is an unjust setback to our interests, and as such counts as a harm.

Speech, whether in verbal or nonverbal forms of expression, can be harmful. Speech can be harmful because it can both *cause* and *constitute* harm. The following scenario illustrates this distinction:

Suppose that, in a policy-enacting meeting, the CEO of a company says: “Women shouldn’t be promoted to positions of power, because they are just too damn irrational to lead.” Suppose further that when the CEO says this, he thereby enacts a new promotion policy for his company. Since the CEO’s utterance enacts this policy, and since the policy is discriminatory, the utterance constitutes a harm to women. Contrast that case with the very same words being uttered by a disgruntled low-level employee at the very same company. The low-level employee’s utterance may cause other employees to believe that it is permissible to be disrespectful to women in the company, and thus, cause harm to women. But because his words do not enact company policy, his utterance does not constitute harm in the way that the CEO’s utterance does. (Maitra and McGowan 2012, 6)

Speech *constitutes* harm whenever its very expression is harmful, regardless of its effects. When the CEO announces his discriminatory policy, his very announcement constitutes a harm to women. Speech *causes* harm by bringing about harmful effects. If the low-level employee makes the same announcement as the CEO, he does not thereby enact a corporate policy that constitutes harm. But his speech nevertheless causes harm if it encourages male co-workers to disrespect women. Now insofar as course content is a form of speech, presumably it, too, can either cause or constitute harm. How might this be possible?

1.2.1 What if the work can *cause* harm?

Let us first consider course content that causes harm. A principal way in which course content can cause harm is by instilling in students (or faculty) harmful feelings, desires, and beliefs that lead them to do and say harmful things. Consider, for example, all the sexist course content that students are almost sure to encounter. We might worry that exposure to classics like the anonymously written *Book of Changes*, short stories like those featuring Yunion de Las Casas in Junot Diaz's *This Is How You Lose Her*, paintings like Manet's "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe," or songs like Dusty Springfield's "Wishin' and Hopin'," will instill students with sexist feelings, desires, and beliefs. By being habituated to the depiction of women as inferior and subjected, students may come to feel that those depictions are natural and acceptable. They may consequently hold sexist desires and beliefs on the basis of those feelings. If this were to occur, there may be a twofold harm. There would be an initial harm to the student who acquires such feelings, desires, or beliefs – at least so long as their acquisition is a setback to the interests of the student. Here a Socratic argument would be needed to show that such unjust feelings, desires, and beliefs really do harm the soul of the student who comes to possess them. But, in addition to this first harm, there is a second possible harm against whomever the student consequently does or says harmful things. If the student comes to perceive women as prone to hysteria and irrationality, then they may agree with the CEO that women are unfit for leadership positions. Their subsequent behavior in support of the CEO would be harmful to any women unjustly denied promotion as a result.

It is an empirical question to what extent the exposure to course content tends to bring about such harmful consequences. The question, moreover, seems a very difficult one to answer (see, e.g.: Blazar 2018; Kraft 2019). Nevertheless, there are strategies for mitigating this sort of harm. The best of these try to get at the source of the problem by preventing the initial transmission of harmful feelings, desires, and beliefs to students. Some of these strategies will be discussed shortly (in 1.2.2). That discussion will require first explaining how course content can constitute harm. For it is only after identifying the conditions under which course contents constitute harm that we can determine strategies for removing those conditions and thereby preventing the harm from occurring.

Before turning to that discussion, however, we must attend to another principal way in which course content can cause harm: by having adverse effects on the physical and mental well-being of the students. This occurs most frequently through retraumatization: "the triggering or reactivation of trauma-related symptoms originating in earlier traumatic life events" (Carello and Butler 2014). The DSM-V defines a trauma as "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (American Psychiatric Association 2013). The traumatic event can be either directly experienced or witnessed first-hand, or the event can occur to a close family member or friend. This definition has been criticized for being too narrow, but even so, past studies indicate that *over half* of American college students have been exposed to traumatic events, so understood (Frazier et al. 2009; Read et al. 2011). Not all such traumatic events cause significant levels of distress, but many do. Traumatic events can cause people to have intrusive flashbacks and nightmares. They can also cause people to

experience persistent and uncontrollable negative emotions. They are often far from being sources of mere discomfort.

Given the pervasiveness of both trauma among students and sensitive content in their courses, faculty must remain acutely aware of the risks of retraumatization. If a student has been sexually assaulted, reading something like *The Reeve's Tale* may prove quite harmful. In that tale, a young man by the name of Aleyn sleeps with Malyne, the daughter of a miller, and the narrator suggests pretty clearly that his initial sexual advances were made without consent. He later brags of his exploits: "I have thries in this shorte nyght / Swyved the milleres doghter bolt upright." For victims of sexual assault, this is likely to be difficult reading. One student whose graduate thesis was on *The Reeve's Tale* describes the harm caused by engaging with that sort of literary content after she herself was assaulted: "when my professors and classmates would unexpectedly discuss issues of sexual assault in literature, I could not engage with the work. My breath shortened, my attention shattered and then hyperfocused only on the woman's perspective of the sexual assault, and the stakes of any discussion – if I were even able to still participate in the discussion – felt life-or-death" (Waymack 2017, 158–59). The graduate student nevertheless wanted to continue her research; she just needed to pursue it with some caution. Faculty need to support students like her and do their part not only to mitigate the risks of such retraumatization, but also foster resiliency in the classroom.

Strategies for doing so were first developed in order to provide trauma-informed healthcare services for patients with histories of trauma (esp. in Harris and Fallo 2001). That theoretical framework has since been applied to fields outside of medicine. Trauma-informed pedagogy articulates specific principles for trauma-informed care in educational contexts (e.g., Carello and Butler 2015; Davidson 2017). Many of those principles are designed to build relationships of trust and transparency in the classroom so as to ensure the safety and empowerment of students (and faculty) with prior experience of trauma. Other principles offer more direct guidance for dealing with assigned works that may reactivate trauma-related symptoms:

Magnitude:

The risk of retraumatization depends in part on the magnitude of potentially disturbing course content. Faculty should therefore try to minimize the intensity and duration of such content, but without thereby sacrificing their pedagogic goals. How much time in a Chaucer class must be devoted to discussing the sexual relationship between Malyne and Aleyn? If that discussion is pedagogically significant, say, for offering a feminist reading and critique, is it really necessary for students to perform a reading in class that re-enacts the scene?

Avoidability:

Students with histories of trauma should be given the opportunity, if possible, to avoid course content that may reactivate their trauma-related symptoms. Faculty should accordingly try to provide alternative course materials from which students can choose. Do students in the Chaucer class have the opportunity to read and complete assignments about other, less potentially disturbing poems from his corpus?

Consent:

Students should always be given the chance to consent to engaging with potentially retraumatizing course content. Both faculty and course syllabi should accordingly make clear the nature and extent of the potentially disturbing content to be treated. If works like *The Reeve's Tale* are to be assigned, then the syllabus should provide a sufficiently clear description of the potentially disturbing content so that students can understand and consent to participating in the course.

These strategies resemble those suggested for mitigating the risks of serious offense (see 1.1). However, because retraumatization is almost always more injurious than serious offense, extra effort must be made to avoid it. To that end, a couple other strategies are recommended:

Warning:

Notices on the syllabus and announcements by faculty at the beginning of the course allow students to consent to working with sensitive course material. But initial notices may be quite distant from the class days dealing with that material. It is therefore prudent to be sure to warn students closer to those class days so that they can prepare accordingly.

Discussion:

If the class is dealing with potentially disturbing material, faculty should acknowledge the difficulty of the subject matter and give students the option to discuss it. As Carello and Butler explain: "Discussing difficult content that has been presented allows students to process, reorient, and regain emotional distance" (2015, 270).

These strategies for trauma-informed pedagogy are emphatically not intended to shield fragile students from having to deal with uncomfortable topics. They are intended, rather, to support students with prior trauma and to help them educate themselves and others about topics they care about. The strategies were initially supposed to help clinicians better understand trauma and provide care for patients coping with it. These adapted strategies help students in their efforts to understand trauma and the ways it shapes not only their lives but also our shared human condition.

1.2.2 What if the work can *constitute* harm?

Course content can constitute harm insofar as speech, whether verbal or not, has the power to constitute harm. Speech has this power because it is performative. After all, we *do* things with words. That may sound odd, but it is quite an ordinary phenomenon. Here are a few examples (Austin 1962, 5):

“I do” – as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony.

“I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*” – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.

“I give and bequeath my watch to my brother” – as occurring in a will.

These uses of speech do not merely describe something with words. They actually do something – commit someone to a marriage, name a ship, will a piece of personal property. If speech acts can do things, they can certainly do harmful things. Consider a few examples of denigrating and derogatory speech:

“Blacks are not permitted to vote.” Imagine that it is uttered by a legislator in Pretoria in the context of enacting legislation that underpins apartheid. (Langton 1993, 302)

An Arab woman is on a subway car crowded with people. An older white man walks up to her, and says, “F***in’ terrorist, go home.” (Maitra 2012, 100)

An exchange at an employee lounge:

John: So, Steve, how did it go last night?

Steve: “I banged the b**ch.”

John: [smiling] “She got a sister?” (McGowan 2019, 110)

All three speech acts constitute harm insofar as they enact unjust setbacks to the interests of others. These setbacks to interest all seem to be forms of *subordination*. That is, they all seem to involve: (i) ranking an individual or group as inferior on prejudicial grounds; (ii) legitimating discriminatory treatment of the individual or group on those same grounds; as well as (iii) actually discriminating against them (Langton 1993, 303). The proclamation of the legislator subordinates Black citizens by ranking them as lesser, legitimating their discriminatory treatment, as well as depriving them of

The Humanities Classroom: A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

their right to vote. The subordinating acts do not need the subordinated persons to be within earshot in order for the acts to succeed. Nor must they introduce new forms of subordination (like a new discriminatory law); sometimes the speech acts instead reinforce existing practices of subordination (like misogynistic locker room talk).

It might be wondered whether the latter two examples really count as genuinely harmful speech acts. Unlike the legislator, it seems that neither the subway passenger nor the employees in the lounge have any real authority to rank others and determine how they are to be treated. The passenger and employees may be *trying* to do so, but they seem to lack the proper standing. Is their speech just inappropriate but otherwise innocuous? Probably not. The reason for this is that it is possible for some conversational contexts to confer speakers with authority they otherwise would not possess. Consider the case of an assertive classroom student:

[A]n elementary school teacher sets the students in her classroom to complete a project. The project involves each of the students performing a different task. Arlo, one of the students, is eager to get started, and generally very bossy besides. In full view of the teacher, Arlo begins to divide up the tasks among his classmates...The teacher holds her peace, and does not interfere. (Maitra 2012, 105)

Arlo acquires authority not because the teacher expressly appointed him, but because she fails to interfere with his initiative. Insofar as other students do not protest, they, too, confer authority on Arlo. His authority, moreover, will last as long as the classroom dynamic continues and nobody protests its legitimacy. The same, it can be argued, holds for the subway rider spewing vitriol, as well as for the two employees and their locker-room talk. So long as nobody else in the subway car interferes and protests the asserted authority of the man, authority is successfully conferred on him. The same seems to hold for John and Steve in the employee lounge. Until John speaks up and objects to Steve's misogynistic language, he implicitly confers on Steve the authority to continue denigrating women – at least in the employee lounge during business hours. This may not be much authority, but it is enough to authorize Steve to keep behaving badly.

The authority speakers possess can be practical or epistemic (Langton 2018). These types of authority allow speakers to do different things with their words. Practical authority allows them to exercise “powers, rights, or influence,” as, for example, in “appointing, voting, ordering, urging, advising, warning,” etc. (Austin 1962, 150). The bossy student who orders around his peers possesses such authority. Epistemic authority, by contrast, allows the speaker to issue a judgment that something is the case. The judgment can assert the truth of a fact or value, as when a jury judges someone guilty, an umpire rules someone out, or a critic gives a film three stars. Such judgments are not necessarily final; sometimes they are only an initial “estimate, reckoning, or appraisal” (Austin 1962, 150). This epistemic authority often grounds practical authority; teachers are conferred practical authority on account of their standing as knowers.

Subordination is far from the only harm that can be constituted by the speech acts of those vested with authority. Speech acts can also constitute harm, for example, by silencing. Silencing typically occurs when a speech act prevents another speaker from successfully performing their own intended speech acts (see McGowan 2019, 143–55). Silencing in this sense is therefore not simply a matter of preventing another speaker from talking, as when the mafioso intimidates a witness by saying, “Nice family. Would be a shame if somethin’ happened to ’em.” Such threats can cause someone to keep silent, but they do not by themselves constitute silencing in this specific sense. A speech act constitutes silencing when it, in its being said, prevents the words of others from having their intended performative force. It occurs when the apartheid legislator enacts a law prohibiting Black people from voting. His words, in their being said in the proper circumstances so as to promulgate law, prevent the ballots of Black people from counting as voting. Their political speech is thereby silenced. Silencing and other such harms are no less serious than subordination, but we will presently focus on the latter. Faculty seem especially concerned about teaching works that discriminatorily devalue and degrade, or at least seem to. But insofar as speech acts share a common structure, the strategies for disarming other forms of harmful speech will be similar to the strategies enumerated below for disarming those that are subordinate.

Before considering those strategies, though, one might reasonably ask: given that texts and other works are literally unable to speak for themselves, can they really constitute harms in the way that living speakers do? They answer is that they can, and for the same reason. Works either already possess a kind of authority, or they are conferred that authority by the teacher (or students) in the course. That is, some works have an authority like the legislator, others like that of Arlo the bossy student. When a work of authority is experienced – either by reading or beholding it – the work expresses a speech act that can be harmful.

The so-called canonical or classic works often already possess authority. Their authority – whether epistemic, practical, or both – has often accumulated over time through their being handed down by tradition as works of import. In any case, the works have a cultural cachet. Think of the *Vedas* or the *Bible*, Shakespeare’s *Othello* or Dostoyevski’s *Crime and Punishment*. Students often already know of these works, even if they have not yet studied them. Insofar as these works are attributed epistemic authority, they are presumed to have some truths about the world to impart. And insofar as they are attributed practical authority, they are presumed to offer advice if not prescriptions as to how we ought to act. This is perhaps more readily evident with religious and philosophical texts, since they tend to be explicitly instructive. But great art and other types of work can do the same. When Rilke ends his “Archaic Torso of Apollo” with the line “du musst dein Leben ändern,” we cannot but read it as an injunction directed towards us: it is *we* who must change our life.

Other works do not already carry with them such authority, but have it conferred by the teacher who assigns them. When faculty ask students to watch Bahman Ghobadi’s “A Time for Drunken Horses,” or look at busts by Augusta Savage, they may not have any familiarity with the works or their creators. But

The Humanities Classroom: A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

by putting it on the syllabus, the teacher already suggests that the works possess a certain credibility; they seem to have *something* to teach. The teacher often affirms the authority of such works by explaining to students their significance.

However fascinating and riveting and beautiful such assigned works may be, not everything they have to say is innocuous. Consider a few seemingly sexist speech acts:

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. (Genesis 3:16, King James Version)

In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence (*Manusmriti* 5.148, trans. by Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith)

Moreover, the relation of male to female is that of natural superior to natural inferior, and that of ruler to ruled. (Aristotle, *Politics* 1254b13-14, trans. by C.D.C Reeve)

If the question is therefore posed, whether it is also in conflict with the equality of the partners for the law to say of the husband's relation to the wife, he is to be your master (he is the party to direct, she to obey): This cannot be regarded as conflicting with the natural equality of a couple if this dominance is based only on the natural superiority of the husband to the wife in his capacity to promote the common interest of the household. (Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:279, trans. by Mary Gregor)

Each of these passages can be interpreted differently, but they nevertheless can all plausibly be read as subordinating women. They all seem to devalue women and legitimate further discriminatory speech. The first two passages seem explicitly to prescribe marital practices that subordinate women, the latter two perhaps only implicitly. Nevertheless, there may be compelling reasons to teach these works. This invites the question: *supposing* these works do, indeed, devalue and degrade women, how would we prevent their subordinating speech acts from being enacted in our courses? How can we prevent women in the classroom from being treated "as if they were in a perpetual state of childhood, unable to stand alone" (Wollstonecraft 1995, 76)?

Speech acts that potentially constitute harm can be disarmed by undermining their success conditions. There are two basic strategies:

Block Authority

One way to disarm a speech act is to delegitimize the authority of the speaker expressing it. Different kinds of authority depend on different sets of norms: the authority of the legislator depends on the legislative norms of that country; the authority of Arlo the bossy student depends instead on the norms of student behavior in a classroom. The authority of the legislator can be blocked by, say, contending that his term has not yet begun, or that he has not been vested with promulgatory powers by the senate body. In the case of Arlo, all his peers will know that his reign ends as soon as they all point out that the teacher had not appointed him czar. These are forms of the “Hey, who do you think you are?” tactic. Whether or not the tactic successfully delegitimizes the authority of the speaker depends, much like the presumed authority itself, on the relevant norms in play.

This very same tactic should, in principle, work for undermining the authority attributed to assigned works. When students in a history course read the racist journal entries of Christopher Columbus, often he and his journals have already been dispossessed of authority; teachers and students share the understanding that they are reading these journal entries as a record of a racist man giving an early articulation of European colonial imperialism. The entries are not so much the testimony of a reliable witness as a piece of evidence for the jury of posterity to consider. Treated merely as evidence, the class puts the subordinating speech acts expressed in the journals under a microscope, like a virus, to be observed and understood rather than inoculated and spread. Because this perspective is almost second nature in history courses, they tend to have an easier time dealing with sensitive content of this sort.

For other disciplines that do not approach works from a distanced, historical perspective, the strategy has to be applied more conscientiously. Teachers in those disciplines likely need to be more explicit about the value of studying certain works in a way that deprives them of the authority necessary for the success of their speech acts. In a film class it should be made clear – as it certainly often is – that the screening of Leni Riefenstahl’s “Triumph of the Will” is not due to its avowed Nazism, but rather due its use of techniques like tracking shots and rhythmic montage that were innovative at the time and still worthy of study today.

Refuse Uptake

Some works may possess a kind of authority that we do not wish to delegitimize, but which nevertheless express content that can be harmful and deserves to be blocked. In these cases, the strategy is not to block their authority but to refuse “uptake” (see Kukla 2014). In order for a speech act to succeed, the audience of the speaker needs to recognize the speech as having its force. When Arlo’s peers heed his commands, they not only acknowledge his authority, but recognize his speech as

The Humanities Classroom:
A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

having its imperatival force. His commands “receive uptake” insofar as the students recognize them as such and try to obey. But uptake is of course not required. A student can also respond, “Waddya mean, ‘Fetch the crayons’? You do it!”

The same holds true for the speech acts of works assigned for class. When we read Aristotle proclaiming that women are naturally inferior to men, the class in unison should say, “What do you mean, ‘inferior’?” Sometimes the uptake to be refused is not what is expressed, but presupposed. Someone tells us: “Even George Lakoff could win” (Lewis 1979). This presupposes that George is not a strong candidate. If we do not accept this presupposition, we can block it: “What do you mean ‘even’?” In general, blocking such presuppositions is central to critique and critical thinking (Haslanger 2012).

When Dan-el Padilla Peralta teaches Cicero’s *Pro Archia*, he encourages this sort of strategy. In that speech, Cicero calls upon the jurors to acquit the poet Archias and consider him a Roman citizen because “he is engaged upon a work which promises to be a glorious and undying testimony to those public perils which [the Romans] have recently faced together” (31, trans. N.H. Watts). Here Cicero is making a claim about who is deserving of citizenship, and Peralta asks his students to reflect on what that claim might presuppose. Is Cicero implying that *only* those immigrants who can contribute such cultural capital are worthy of citizenship? If that is what is implied, students might rightly ask: “What do you mean ‘only’?” There are many such strategies for refusing uptake, and some are nearly as old as Cicero himself (see Konstan 2004).

2. What if the **author** has behaved immorally?

Across the humanities there has been an increasing awareness of the foibles and improprieties of many authors whose works are frequently assigned and studied. These include a number of living thinkers who, at least until allegations and scandal emerged, held prestigious academic appointments and served as prominent figures in their fields. Many of these thinkers, both dead and alive, have produced scholarship that is admired and seemingly free of either harmful or seriously offensive content. Should their immoral behavior influence whether and how we teach their otherwise fine work? How we choose to answer this question for a particular author will depend on how we answer two related questions: First, will teaching their work somehow condone their wrongdoing, perhaps even to the detriment of the person(s) wronged? Second, will teaching their work confer on the thinker undue benefits like financial gain or social status? Let us explore each of these questions in turn.

2.1 Does teaching their work condone their wrongdoing?

When we teach the work of an author who has behaved immorally, we risk condoning their behavior, and that can be problematic for two reasons: we risk not only causing further harm to the victim, but also perpetuating related structural injustices (Archer and Matheson 2021, 33–51). These risks are not always present. Nobody worries about assigning films by Nicolas Cage or Judy Garland just because they committed tax evasion. This is not only because tax evasion is a relatively minor moral infraction. It is also because with tax evasion there is no victim directly harmed by it, nor does it directly contribute to structures of injustice that discriminatorily harm.

There are, by contrast, justified worries about assigning films directed by Roman Polansky, who has been convicted of statutory rape and repeatedly accused of sexual assault. Assigning *Chinatown*, and doing so despite being aware of the wrongdoings of the director, can be disrespectful to those who have been sexually assaulted by the director. It may be similarly disrespectful to other victims of sexual assault, since in assigning the film we seem willing to dismiss or neglect the suffering of victims whenever the perpetrators have enough clout. This, moreover, can lead to the silencing of victims. Victim silencing occurs when the accusations are downplayed or the credibility of the victim discounted. Such silencing has a snowball effect, since it tends to discourage other victims from speaking out in the future. In addition to all these potential harms, in assigning works by Polansky and the like, we also risk perpetuating the very structural injustices that those wrongdoers exploit. Polansky and others have been able to get away with their abuse to the extent that they have largely because of the culture of sexual violence in which we live and the social institutions and practices that make it difficult for women and girls to seek justice. So long as we continue appreciating works by such wrongdoers, we may be reinforcing these sorts of structural injustice.

The Humanities Classroom: A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

These risks are formidable, but they should not by themselves compel us to avoid assigning works by authors with checkered pasts. We need to consider the following factors:

Nature of the Wrong:

How serious was the moral wrong committed by the author? Ernest Hemingway's volunteering to spy for the KGB is hardly as serious as Caravaggio's assaulting a nobleman with a cudgel. Still worse is Norman Mailer's stabbing his wife with a pen – and worse not only because it inflicted greater injury, but also because it sustains societal patterns of domestic abuse. The more serious the wrongs committed by an author, and the more their wrongs are implicated in structural injustices, the more carefully we need to treat their works.

Response to the Wrong:

Has the wrongdoer been given a fair hearing and found guilty? Has the wrongdoer publicly expressed genuine regret or sought forgiveness? Does the public condemn the wrong? Has the victim of the wrong been duly awarded adequate respect and appropriate restitution? If the behavior of the wrongdoer is sufficiently condemned, and if the victim has been made whole to the extent possible, then our assigning their work is much less likely to amount to a pardoning of their behavior. Unfortunately, these conditions are rarely met in cases like sexual assault.

Separability from the Wrongdoer:

Does the immoral behavior of the author permeate the work such that the audience cannot but help see the author in it? For those who know Charles Bukowski as the sexist author of "Girl on the escalator," it is hard to read that poem without hearing his voice as the narrator, as if the poem were an expression of his own thoughts. The poem may not itself seem sexist until we hear it intoned by Bukowski and colored with his misogyny. We can have a similar experience watching Charlie Sheen play his sleazy self in *Being John Malkovich*. Admiring Sheen's performance in the film comes with the hazard of condoning the dissolute off-screen personality that his acting intends to portray. That hazard is reduced if we understand the film to be a comedy lampooning Sheen more than valorizing him. But with works like these, it is an open question whether we can appreciate the work without somehow condoning the behavior of the author or actor. For other works, of course, the question is more easily answered. Aristotle's sexism probably does not have much influence on his *Posterior Analytics* and its logical theory of syllogistic consequence.

Suppose an author has acted despicably and with impunity, and we, knowing these dreadful facts, cannot but see his work as moulded by his disreputable character. This seemed to have been the case for the photographer Terry Richardson, at least until much of the fashion industry recently stopped hiring him on account of the mounting allegations against him. But before this backlash, would it have been best *not* to show his work to students? Maybe. It would certainly have been a way to

avoid signaling that we condone his alleged behavior. It is also likely that we could have found other photography to show students without diminishing the quality of the course.

The choice to excise an artist or author from a syllabus can be a noble one even if it will probably do nothing to ensure that justice is served and systemic injustices are rectified. However, we are not morally obligated to make that choice. It seems that we can in good conscience teach the work so long as we make explicit that we do not condone the author's behavior. That requires acknowledging the nature of the wrong and the responses, if any, to that wrong. It also requires identifying what is pedagogically valuable in the work despite our misgivings about its author. So long as these things are made clear to students, it seems that works can be taught without condoning the author's immoral behavior.

2.2 Does teaching their work confer undue benefits?

Teaching the works of immoral authors who are alive brings the added risk of conferring on those authors undue benefits. The benefits are primarily of two types:

Material Gain:

Will teaching the author's work earn them royalties or other income? Help them secure a job or promotion? Will they be more likely to receive non-monetary gifts?

Social Standing:

Will teaching the author's work strengthen their public appeal? Will they at least enjoy greater standing in their own discipline? Will they and their expertise exercise a greater influence on what others think and feel, within their field or among the broader public?

Concerns about undue benefits are not unwarranted, but probably insufficient to justify removing works from a course. The actual financial benefits that the author is likely to receive are negligible (Willard 2021, 57–82; Matthes 2022, 75–98). Many works can be taught in accordance with copyright law and without the author earning royalties; any royalty monies that do get paid out will be scant. Moreover, it is hard to envision a plausible causal story whereby teaching a work to a class of students, especially undergraduates, could somehow influence a hiring or promotion decision on behalf of the author. This is partly because class engagement with an author's work rarely has ripple effects that improve the author's social standing. It is probably the case that the author is already well-known in the field, and perhaps even a public figure. Teaching their work (or not) is hardly going to change that. For such authors, we can still responsibly teach them so long as we make clear, as suggested before (in 2.1), that while the author's behavior deserves condemnation, their work nevertheless possesses

The Humanities Classroom:
A Guide to Free and Responsible Inquiry

pedagogic value. We need to make clear what that value is. We also need to teach the work in such a way as to allow our students to profit from engaging with the work while reducing to a bare minimum the profits for the author. And those minimal profits, particularly in the form of royalties, may very well be justly deserved.

3. How can the **teacher** avoid moral complicity?

Thus far we have been considering moral issues that concern teaching either works with immoral content, or works by authors who have behaved immorally. There are still other issues to be considered. These issues can be present even when the particular authors and works on a syllabus are uncontroversial. These issues have to do with the teacher being complicit in moral wrongdoing that is epistemic in nature; they are ways of doing wrong to people as knowers, as individuals capable of acquiring and sharing knowledge. This sounds abstract and should be made concrete. To that end, let us take up philosophy as a case study. Philosophy, it turns out, has a big problem:

Philosophy as it is practiced professionally in much of the world, and in the United States in particular, is racist in precisely this sense. To omit all of the philosophy of Asia, Africa, India, and the Indigenous Americas from the curriculum and to ignore it in our research is to convey the impression—whether intentionally or not—that it is of less value than the philosophy produced in European culture, or worse, to convey the impression—willingly or not—that no other culture was capable of philosophical thought. These are racist views. (Norden 2017, xix–xx)

The accusation of racism may seem harsh to some, but renaming the problem does not make it any less serious. The problem is really twofold: by teaching only Anglo-European philosophy, philosophy departments are (i) suggesting to students that other traditions of philosophy are inferior, or perhaps not even philosophy at all; and (ii) depriving students of epistemic resources that can help shed light on their lived experiences. The first problem is a version of what is often called *testimonial injustice*, the deflation of the credibility of a person on account of prejudice against them. The second problem is a version of what is often called *hermeneutical injustice*, the prejudicial deprivation of epistemic resources that, if available, would help a person better understand the world and their place in it. These are two forms of epistemic injustice that were first theorized by Miranda Fricker, but have since been developed extensively (see Fricker 2007; Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus, Jr. 2017).

Philosophy is hardly the only discipline to be grappling with these forms of epistemic injustice. Every discipline will be susceptible to them, since every discipline has norms by which it is determined who is a credible participant in its processes of knowledge production and distribution, and it is these participants who give shape to the epistemic resources made available by that discipline. These norms are necessarily exclusionary and limiting. This is because determining credibility in a field is by nature an exclusionary practice, since not everyone is an expert to be trusted, and those exclusions inevitably lead to limitations in the epistemic resources of that field.

3.1 How can the teacher combat testimonial injustice?

In order to offer strategies for how we as teachers can combat our own testimonial injustice, we need to describe the phenomenon in more detail. Recall that testimonial injustice is the disposition to deflate the credibility of a speaker on prejudicial grounds. Fricker (2007, 9) offers a paradigmatic instance of testimonial injustice from Anthony Minghella's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. In that screenplay, Marge Sherwood suspects that Tom Ripley is the murderer of her boyfriend, Dickie. She relays her suspicions to Dickie's father, Herbert, who replies: "Marge, there's female intuition, and then there are facts." This unkind remark discredits Marge as a knower on the basis of a prejudice towards women as lacking objectivity. It is an instance of testimonial injustice and likely indicates that Herbert possesses this epistemic vice; he is disposed to unjustly discredit women speakers on the basis of his prejudicial views about their (in)capacities as knowers.

Instances of testimonial injustice are more varied than this example might suggest. Testimonial injustice often manifests as an unfair dismissing, rejecting, or ignoring of a speaker. But it also takes place when speakers are interrupted or even prevented from speaking on account of their supposed lack of credibility. Sometimes the injustice is motivated by the identity of the speaker; it is on account of Marge's identity as a woman that Herb dismisses what she says. But sometimes the speech is discredited not because of the identity of the speaker, but because the content of the speech is "identity-coded" (Davis 2021). Speech content is perceived as identity-coded when it seems to be relaying or echoing speech from speakers who are prejudicially discredited as knowers on the basis of their social identity. Feminist philosophers of all genders complain of difficulties getting their work published in top-tier academic journals, and, although editorial decisions frustratingly remain a black box, the philosophers cannot help but suspect that the work is deemed of insufficient quality on the basis of its feminist content and methodologies (see, e.g., Haslanger 2008; Jenkins 2014).

Combating epistemic injustices is challenging because the prejudices underlying them are not easy to uproot. There are, however, a few strategies that can help us in our efforts to assign works and teach them in ways that avoid perpetuating testimonial injustice:

Identifying Signs of Credibility Deficit:

We must be on the lookout for evidence that certain knowers are suffering from credibility deficit on account of identity-based prejudice. Is there any indication that certain social identities are being deemed less reliable or authoritative in our discipline? Are there certain topics or methodologies that are identity-coded such that they, too, seem to be less respected and valued? Between 1990-2011, women represented about 26% of published articles on JSTOR, but only 12% of the philosophy articles were published by women (J. D. West et al. 2013). This discrepancy is not decisive evidence that women philosophers are unfairly deemed less credible, but it certainly raises questions. We should be willing to raise similar questions about apparent inequities on our own syllabi. Are certain identities

of thinkers, or certain identity-coded topics, underrepresented without justification? Is there even a single “non-Western” philosopher assigned in a class on ethics, a field which has not been exclusively tilled by Europeans? By diversifying our syllabi, perhaps even at the risk – and reward – of teaching beyond our expertise, we can at the very least indicate our commitment to a more just distribution of epistemic credibility.

Charitably Presuming Credibility:

As producers and distributors of knowledge, teachers cannot but partake in some form of disciplinary gatekeeping. We almost certainly would not assign Feynman’s lectures on physics for a course on modern American literature. We would not do so because those lectures are simply irrelevant to the course topic. That said, we should make extra effort to be ecumenical in our gatekeeping. We should be hesitant in saying things like: “That’s not literature!” or “That’s not philosophy!” No doubt, some things are not literature or philosophy, but with fuzzier cases we should proceed on the charitable assumption that those works and the thinkers who produced them have something to contribute. There has been a growing trend in philosophy to see literature, and analyses of that literature, as philosophically rewarding. This is the sort of trend we ourselves should promote in our own fields. For the same reason we should also remain open to interdisciplinarity, a practice which sometimes receives little more than hollow praise. But credibility distribution is not a zero-sum game, and keeping disciplines porous is another way to charitably presume credibility.

Acknowledging Prejudice:

The previous two strategies should be motivated by the recognition that we ourselves inevitably bear prejudice, and that our prejudices are apt to lead us to contribute unwittingly to testimonial injustices. Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013, 278–92) argues that prejudices are not always bad. They are, rather, the background operating assumptions that we need in order to make sense of the world. We are only able to approach a particular work and expect it to have a particular meaning because of the operative prejudices we possess. Some prejudices are confirmed by our engagement with the work; other prejudices, by contrast, turn out to be false and so impede our understanding and appreciation of the work. Many of those false prejudices only become apparent to us when our understanding falls short and we struggle to figure out why. If we are equal parts diligent and lucky, we will discover that a background prejudice of ours has gotten in the way. It is these illegitimate prejudices that we must always strive to eradicate, and that task is an unending one. Faculty and students alike must be reminded of this.

These are by no means the only strategies for resisting testimonial injustice. They are only strategies specifically geared towards counteracting testimonial injustices that we as teachers are liable to commit.

3.2 How can the teacher combat hermeneutic injustice?

Recall that hermeneutic injustice occurs when knowers are unfairly deprived of epistemic resources that, if they had those resources at their disposal, would better understand the world and their place in it. Epistemic resources are resources that enable us to acquire and exercise knowledge. Those resources include, but are not limited to: “language to formulate propositions, concepts to make sense of experience, procedures to approach the world, and standards to judge particular accounts of experience” (Pohlhaus, Jr. 2012, 718).

The story of Carmita Wood illustrates hermeneutic injustice and the harm it can cause. Carmita Wood had worked for several years as an administrator in the nuclear physics department at Cornell. During that time, she experienced repeated unwanted advances from a male faculty member, and this caused her so much anguish that she eventually quit her job. When she quit, she was denied unemployment benefits because she was unable to explain what she had endured and why it compelled her to resign. Lawyers came to her defense and took up her appeal for unemployment benefits. Local organizers, after realizing that many of them had endured similar experiences, decided to plan a speak-out. Karen Sauvigne, one of those organizers, recounts their struggles to find the right name for this awful experience they shared and wished to protest against:

Eight of us were sitting in an office of Human Affairs...brainstorming about what we were going to write on the posters for our speak-out. We were referring to it as “sexual intimidation,” “sexual coercion,” “sexual exploitation on the job.” None of those names seemed quite right. We wanted something that embraced a whole range of subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviors. Somebody came up with “harassment.” *Sexual harassment!* Instantly we agreed. That’s what it was. (Brownmiller 1999, 281; cited in Fricker 2007, 150)

These women suffered from hermeneutical injustice insofar as they lacked language with which they could readily name the wrongs done to them and seek redress for those wrongs. Similar stories lie behind the coining of terms like “impostor syndrome” and “mansplaining.”

Like testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice must be resisted, and that is no small feat. In fact, hermeneutic injustice is probably even more difficult to overcome because it demands a “second-order change” (Dotson 2012, 30). Combatting testimonial injustice enacts first-order changes insofar as the distributions of credibility are reassessed in light of the operative concepts and norms of a discipline; those concepts and norms themselves can remain intact. In philosophy, combatting testimonial injustice need not change the standards as to what counts as good philosophical work, but only which people are deemed better or worse philosophers. When combatting hermeneutical injustice, by contrast, it is those very concepts and norms of the discipline that need to be reconsidered, modified, and expanded. This requires something of a revolution in the discipline. In the case of philosophy, it requires expanding beyond the tradition of Anglo-European philosophy and

its particular research programs. This is no doubt ambitious. What sorts of strategies can help us as teachers to combat hermeneutical injustice?

Identifying Signs of Interpretive Disadvantage:

We must do our best not to overlook signs that knowers, both in and outside of our classroom, are at an unfair interpretive disadvantage. Are there discipline-related questions that a minority of scholars are grappling with? Are there discipline-related questions that a minority demographic in the general population is struggling to answer? An affirmative answer to either question indicates that people are having difficulty interpreting some aspect of reality, and we should not rule out the possibility that those difficulties are caused by hermeneutical injustice.

We can look again to philosophy for a clear-cut example. In corners of the public sphere as well as in smaller academic circles, we can find people asking the philosophical question of what it is to be a woman. This is a particularly pressing question for members of the trans community, including transgender, transexual, and trans* persons (Bettcher 2017). It is pressing because presently both they and the cis-gender communities in which they tend to live often do not yet have adequate conceptual resources to understand and support all trans experience (Fricker and Jenkins 2017). It is these sorts of struggles for intelligibility that we should be on the lookout for.

Helping Develop Epistemic Resources:

We should support any efforts to overcome interpretive deficits, even if we cannot be sure that hermeneutical injustice is their root cause. This means doing our level best to endorse or even, when appropriate, to participate in the norm-shifting inquiries in which the needed epistemic resources are being developed. Those inquiries often yield operative concepts that better articulate the very phenomena that hermeneutical injustice has rendered insufficiently intelligible. When these concepts do, indeed, better articulate the previously obscured phenomena, we should try to incorporate those concepts into our own ways of thinking and talking. We should, moreover, assign works employing those concepts when they are relevant to our courses. Even if we are not aware of such works, we at the very least can diversify our syllabi in order to increase the likelihood that the works assigned might provide epistemic resources that we or our students have unjustly lacked.

Acknowledging Prejudice:

As with testimonial injustice, an important part of combatting hermeneutical injustice is reminding ourselves and our students that bad prejudices are difficult to make visible, and that we may be failing to do our part in developing epistemic resources for those who unjustly lack them. Virtue demands vigilance.

4. Conclusion

The foregoing has attempted to articulate and clarify some of the most pressing moral issues that we faculty face in our humanities courses. These issues constellate around the immoral content of certain works, the immoral behavior of certain thinkers, as well as the risk of moral complicity in certain forms of epistemic injustice. Suggestions were made for avoiding each of these moral wrongs. Those suggested strategies should help us teach responsibly most if not all works, so long as they are relevant to our courses. While there may be cases in which it is best not to teach a particular work to students in a particular course, none of the moral issues discussed in this guide should compel us to completely ban a thinker or their work. If we read Martin Heidegger's political thought as little more than Nazi apologetics, his writings may become irrelevant to a political science class surveying foundational texts in modern political theory. But interpreting Heidegger's works in that way may also make them fitting for a class on fascism and its ideological underpinnings. In short, there seems to be nothing that in principle cannot be taught in a college classroom provided its relevance to the course. Inquiry can be both free and responsible.

It should go without saying, however, that this guide does not address every relevant moral issue. Here is one issue not explicitly raised: cultural appropriation. What is it and when is it bad? What might count as an objectionable instance of cultural appropriation? (quick hunch: it involves taking cultural materials in a way that involves serious offense, harmful disrespect, an exploitation of the vulnerable, or an unfair denial of opportunity; see Tuel 2021; Ferracioli and Shpall, unpublished ms) Would it be cultural appropriation for a white, European, male scholar to build a career researching and teaching, say, Latin American literature or African art history? (another hunch: no, so long as he did not offend, disrespect, exploit, and so forth)

This guide also does not profess to consider every possible strategy for navigating the principal moral issues that it does address. Here is one unmentioned strategy: redaction. Why not just redact harmful content whenever feasible? Why not just remove the racist slurs from *Of Mice and Men*? And is there a meaningful difference between types of redaction – between, say, removing slurs from literature and playing radio edit versions of songs? These questions are tricky because they appear to depend on a host of factors, including the nature of the content (e.g., a one-off slur versus full-canvas portrait) and the purpose for which the work is being assigned (e.g., as historical document or work of art). There is much more theorizing to be done before we endorse a strategy like this. This guide has tried to provide scaffolding from which such pedagogic work can be done.

If this guide has one fundamental insight, it is that we should resist asking a question like: should we cancel Aristotle? Posing the question this way is unhelpful because it does not pin down what the real concerns are. Are we troubled by the work itself, its author, its role in unjust epistemic practices, or some combination thereof? Without clearly diagnosing the moral issues troubling us, we are liable to arrive at hasty, muddled conclusions about what works to teach. We are also liable to employ inappropriate strategies for responsibly teaching the works we deem worth assigning.

However helpful this guide and its pedagogical strategies prove to be, there will always remain difficult cases for which sound judgment is indispensable. We must remember, then, that when we apply our foregoing strategies in order to decide on a difficult case, the judgment we arrive at “may yet be unwise, or properly criticized as ‘wrong,’ but it cannot be ‘illegitimate,’ in the sense of applying an inadmissible kind of reason” (Feinberg 1988, 46). We consequently may not be perfect teachers (or students), but we must find consolation in trying to be morally principled ones.

5. Works Cited

-
- American Psychiatric Association. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>.
- Archer, Alfred, and Benjamin Matheson. 2021. *Honouring and Admiring the Immoral: An Ethical Guide*. New York: Routledge.
- Austin, J.L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bettcher, Talia Mae. 2017. "Trans Feminism: Recent Philosophical Developments." *Philosophy Compass* 12: n/a. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12438>.
- Blazar, David. 2018. "Validating Teacher Effects on Students' Attitudes and Behaviors: Evidence from Random Assignment of Teachers to Students." *Education Finance and Policy* 13 (3): 281–309. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00251.
- Boxer, Marilyn Jacoby. 1998. *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Brownmiller, Susan. 1999. *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Carello, Janice, and Lisa D. Butler. 2014. "Potentially Perilous Pedagogies: Teaching Trauma Is Not the Same as Trauma-Informed Teaching." *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 15 (2): 153–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2014.867571>.
- Carello, Janice, and Lisa D. Butler. 2015. "Practicing What We Teach: Trauma-Informed Educational Practice." *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 35 (3): 262–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059>.
- Davidson, Shannon. 2017. "Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide." Education Northwest. <https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/trauma-informed-practices-postsecondary-508.pdf>.
- Davis, Emmalon. 2021. "A Tale of Two Injustices: Epistemic Injustice in Philosophy." In *Applied Epistemology*, edited by Jennifer Lackey, 215–50. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dotson, Kristie. 2012. "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33 (1): 24–47. <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.33.1.0024>.
- Feinberg, Joel. 1987. *Harm to Others*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1988. *Offense to Others*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ferracioli, Luara, and Sam Shpall. 2022. "Scepticism about Cultural Appropriation." Unpublished manuscript.
- Frazier, Patricia, Samantha Anders, Sulani Perera, Patricia Tomich, Howard Tennen, Crystal Park, and Ty Tashiro. 2009. "Traumatic Events among Undergraduate Students: Prevalence and Associated Symptoms." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 56 (3): 450–60. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016412>.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fricker, Miranda, and Katharine Jenkins. 2017. "Epistemic Injustice, Ignorance, and Trans Experiences." In *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, 268–78. Routledge.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2013. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 2nd ed. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Harris, Maxine, and Roger D. Fallot, eds. 2001. *Using Trauma Theory to Design Service Systems: New Directions for Mental Health Services*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2008. "Changing the Ideology and Culture of Philosophy: Not by Reason (Alone)." *Hypatia* 23 (2): 210–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2008.tb01195.x>.
- . 2012. "Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground." In *Resisting Reality*, 446–77. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, Katharine. 2014. "'That's Not Philosophy': Feminism, Academia and the Double Bind." *Journal of Gender Studies* 23 (3): 262–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2014.909720>.
- Kidd, Ian James, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., eds. 2017. *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. New York: Routledge.
- Konstan, David. 2004. "'The Birth of the Reader': Plutarch as a Literary Critic." *Scholia: Studies in Classical Antiquity* 13 (1): 3–27. <https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/EJC100251>.
-

- Kraft, Matthew A. 2019. "Teacher Effects on Complex Cognitive Skills and Social-Emotional Competencies." *Journal of Human Resources* 54 (1): 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.54.1.0916.8265R3>.
- Kukla, Quill [writing as Rebecca]. 2014. "Performative Force, Convention, and Discursive Injustice." *Hypatia* 29 (2): 440–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2012.01316.x>.
- Langton, Rae. 1993. "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (4): 293–330.
- . 2018. "The Authority of Hate Speech." In *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Law, Volume 3*, edited by John Gardner, Leslie Green, and Brian Leiter, 123–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, David. 1979. "Scorekeeping in a Language Game." *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8 (1): 339–59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00258436>.
- Lukianoff, Greg, and Jonathan Haidt. 2018. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Maitra, Ishani. 2012. "Subordinating Speech." In *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*, edited by Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan, 94–120. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Maitra, Ishani, and Mary Kate McGowan. 2012. "Introduction and Overview." In *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*, edited by Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan, 1–23. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Matthes, Erich Hatala. 2022. *Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGowan, Mary Kate. 2019. *Just Words: On Speech and Hidden Harm*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Meyer, Donald Harvey. 1972. *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Norden, Bryan W. Van. 2017. *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pohlhaus, Jr., Gaile. 2012. "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of 'Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance.'" *Hypatia* 27 (4): 715–35.
- Read, Jennifer P, Paige Ouimette, Jacquelyn White, Craig Colder, and Sherry Farrow. 2011. "Rates of DSM–IV–TR Trauma Exposure and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Newly Matriculated College Students." *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 3 (2): 148–56. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021260>.
- Reuben, Julie A. 1996. *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rojas, Fabio. 2007. *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Rudolph, Frederick. 1977. *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Tuvel, Rebecca. 2021. "Putting the Appropriator Back in Cultural Appropriation." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 61 (3): 353–72. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayab010>.
- Veysey, Laurence. 1979. "The Plural Organized Worlds of the Humanities." In *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1920*, edited by Alexandra Oleson and John Voss, 51–106. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Waymack, Anna. 2017. "Teaching de Raptu Meo: Chaucer, Champaigne, and Consent in the Classroom." *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 53 (1): 150–75. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2092&context=mff>.
- West, Cornel. 2000. Booknotes: The Cornel West Reader C-SPAN Booknotes. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?154711-1/the-cornel-west-reader>.
- West, Jevin D., Jennifer Jacquet, Molly M. King, Shelley J. Correll, and Carl T. Bergstrom. 2013. "The Role of Gender in Scholarly Authorship." *PLoS ONE* 8 (7): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0066212>.
- Willard, Mary Beth. 2021. *Why It's OK to Enjoy the Work of Immoral Artists*. New York: Routledge.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1995. "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects." In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and a Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints*, edited by Sylvana Tomaselli, 65–303. Cambridge University Press.