

Moving and Looking

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Abstract: There is a way of teaching philosophy as a way of life that is focused on delivering content. It is focused on giving students information about the topic. In this paper, I consider a different way. It is focused on giving students the experience of philosophy as a way of life—in particular, the experience of being in love with wisdom. The main question of my paper is what it might be to teach philosophy in a way that prioritizes giving students the chance to fall in love with wisdom. I do not so much argue for an answer as invite the reader to follow me along a path of metaphor, reflections on teaching philosophy, and quotations.

You are guiding a group to Location. You are a philosophy professor, and it is a group of your students. There is only an hour or two, the time of one class, and the route is so complicated that there is no guarantee of arrival. The route is so complicated that there is the temptation not to bother. It would be easier to fill the time merely with descriptions: less effort, and no chance of getting lost. No chance also of being exposed as an incompetent guide.

What can a philosophy class do?

Teach content. It will soon be forgotten.

Teach skills. Mere skill is no guarantee of benefit.

Teach values. No one likes preaching.

There are only markers along the way. Markers, cairns, scallop shells, but no map of any sort. There is only looking about, spotting a marker, plodding to it, then looking again. You, reader, meet everyone where they are, and then you set off.

Some lives need no introduction. Other lives are mysterious. Other lives are mysterious because what is distinct about them is not observable. It is on the inside. How can a person come to know what it is to live such a life? It is only by experiencing it.

“Transporting a cargo of purple dye from Phoenicia to the Piraeus, he was shipwrecked. On reaching Athens (he was then a man of thirty), he sat down in a bookseller’s shop. The bookseller was reading aloud the second book of Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, and Zeno was so pleased that he asked where such men could be found. At that very moment, fortunately, Crates happened to be walking past. Pointing him out, the bookseller said, ‘Follow *him*’.”¹

Often it is plodding, but sometimes someone sprints ahead, and now the group is dispersed. Often it is plodding, but sometimes someone sits down, and now the group is dispersed. Do you sit down? Do you sprint ahead? There should be an effort to keep the group together, but too much of this and it’s spinning circles.

You don’t fall in love from a description. You need to see the person—to experience him, direct and immediate acquaintance. It is the same with wisdom. How, though, to find it? You do not stand beside wisdom at the public gardens. You do not catch the eye of wisdom on the patio, a smile and then back to your conversation. Wisdom is an ideal, always almost unattainable. How do you experience an ideal? (It seems impossible.)

“But what about you, Socrates?” said Callias. “What are you proud of?” Socrates made a very solemn face and answered, ‘Procurring.’”²

There is only looking about and considering whether *that up ahead* is a marker on the intended route or some other route or no marker at all. Often the best strategy is to go and inspect, but time is limited, and each unsuccessful attempt risks the loss of continued attention. Here it will be helpful if you remember walking the route before, but you are likely to have only a dim memory. You are likely not to have led a group of students along it in the last year, and perhaps never before, perhaps only ever walking it by yourself (and it is a different thing to lead a group than to go solo).

There is physical space, and there is conceptual space. How do you move in conceptual space? You stumble about and hope for the best. You make little inferences, tiny steps, a small shift in perspective now look and see what’s there. You make big inferences, leap and grab, sometimes holding on long enough for support to arrive, a large shift in perspective now look and see what’s there. In the first class, we do area mazes, exercises in geometry, basic conditional logic. In the second class, we observe and describe—a cup, some chalk, a leaf. It is practice in really looking. Now the same activity but with

an abstract object. The reasoning is the movement, but what use is arriving if you do not stop and look? What use is looking if you do not see accurately?

“Establish a strict work schedule, relax your thoughts, and, after a long time, you naturally should find meaning in it. You can’t look for quick results.”³

“The mind is a sensory organ like the eye, and . . . there [is] no aesthetic experience more satisfying than thinking.”⁴

“Although people seem to be unaware of it to-day, the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies.”⁵

Whether *that up ahead* is a marker is a question for everyone. It is likely that you can see farther than the students, farther and with greater clarity, but the students can see too, and they also will have opinions. Occasionally there is disagreement. Often the disagreement about the way forward becomes disagreement about something else. These times can be fun, a sort of sport. But navigating territory goes best when the spirit is collaborative. There is some tension here: not every opinion is equally good, but also the activity is not a competition. We are all looking about. We are all trying to get somewhere.

You can give students the experience of using the sort of reasoning that is central to some variation of philosophy as a way of life. You can give students the experience of identifying what is not fully under their control and then performing therapeutic techniques to get them to be less emotionally vulnerable to it, thereby imparting a small sense of what it is like to live as a Stoic. You can give students the experience of meditating, observing what parades across their mental stage, considering whether any part persists, in an attempt to gain insight into the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. So far, so good, but this is not to give students the experience of philosophy as a way of life. There needs to be the experience of falling in love with wisdom. There is no method here. There is only ever setting the scene, arranging things to make the experience possible.

“Will power, the kind that, if need be, makes us set our teeth and endure suffering, is the principal weapon of the apprentice engaged in manual work. But contrary to the usual belief, it has practically no place in study.”⁶

“We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real.”⁷

There is the temptation to move too quickly. There is the temptation to move too quickly because stopping *really* to look requires silence and an effort of attention, and silence is uncomfortable, and the sort of attention that is waiting and watching, not seeking anything, an activity of being receptive, is difficult and unfamiliar. How do you teach it? You learn algebra by first learning addition. You learn this sort of attention by first learning...

What is it like on the first day of class? Students are excited, curious, eager, nervous, ready and willing to learn. It is always there at the start. If it is ever lost, something has been lost. If it is ever lost, what has gotten lost is a prerequisite. There is no genuine learning without the desire to learn. How do you keep it? You actually think together. You stumble together around conceptual space, clearing the fog (or is it waiting for the fog to clear?), really looking. This is not the activity of rehearsing something. It is not the activity of describing what students might find if they go and look. It is making the trek together. In its best form it is an activity that is immersive. The past and future go out of focus, and the physical world goes unnoticed.

“Simply dedicate yourself to what you’re doing at the moment, don’t think about the past or the future, and you’ll naturally get to this point.”⁸

“Certainties of this kind are experimental. But if we do not believe in them before experiencing them, if at least we do not behave as though we believed in them, we shall never have the experience which leads to such certainties.”⁹

“Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality.”¹⁰

You have arrived at Location, more or less together. You can look back now and see the route that was taken to arrive here, each marker now seen at some distance. You can look ahead and see what might be found in that direction. You can locate yourself in space. What is there *new* to be seen? Perhaps nothing shows up. (Often nothing shows up.)

It is an attempt really to see something. It is an attempt to have a shared experience really of seeing something. It is an attempt, and it is likely to fail. Why? The reasoning is not the difficult part. What is difficult is having the

reasoning actually move the group. What is most difficult is the moment when there is no more moving to be done. You are now in the place where you might catch a glimpse, and all there is to do then is wait and look. How long can you wait and look, no thoughts intruding? How long can you hold the attention of others, waiting and looking, no thoughts intruding? Silence as the hopeful space. Silence as pedagogical practice. In a way, it is all preparation for the long pauses.

“If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul.”¹¹

“The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair.”¹²

“You must train your mental energy if you are to understand.”¹³

“. . . purifications, virtues, and orderings set us on the way to it, the ‘rungs of the ladder’ towards the intelligible . . .”¹⁴

The hour or two is gone. Class is over. Students gather pencil and notebook and drift out of the classroom, some conversation on the stairs, a quick goodbye and then this student is alone, walking across campus, thoughts wandering, and all of a sudden, in a moment, unannounced, some insight.

It is not something that you do. It is something that happens to you.

“Someone actually leaving all learning, up to then having been educated by instruction, settles in Beauty. Up to then he thinks, carried along in a way by the wave of the intellect, and in a way raised on high by it, puffed up in a way, he sees suddenly without seeing how. The spectacle fills his eyes with light, not making him see something else through it. The seeing was the light itself.”¹⁵

Notes

Thanks to Ryan Johnson for his encouragement, trust, and editorial advice. Thanks also to Elena Castellini, Michelle Stoukides, and Willie Costello for their comments, and to Mark Brouwer for a decade of conversations about teaching.

1. Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 7.2–3.
2. Xenophon, *Symposium*, 3.8.10.
3. Hsi, *Learning to be a Sage*, 2.38.
4. Bringhurst, *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*, 101.
5. Weil, *Waiting on God*, 66.
6. Weil, *Waiting on God*, 71.
7. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 88.
8. Hsi, *Learning to be a Sage*, 4.18.
9. Weil, *Waiting on God*, 68.
10. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 87.
11. Weil, *Waiting on God*, 67.
12. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of God*, 89.
13. Hsi, *Learning to be a Sage*, 2.43.
14. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.7.36.8–10.
15. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.7.36.16–20.

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