

TEACHING STATEMENT

Mark Bernier

I agree with Plato, that the end of an education is a whole, complete person. Broadly speaking, then, a liberal arts education should aim to cultivate the mind—to foster autonomy, self-understanding, and reflection, developed against the horizon of culture, art, ideas, and history. As a philosopher, I see my task in at least two ways: first, that I help to provide some of the essential skills needed for critically engaging with the broad intellectual tradition, and second, that self-reflection may be fostered and viewed as inherently valuable. The “life of the mind” is of great importance in our growth and development.

First, and perhaps most importantly, I want to cultivate a love for philosophy. A person’s first encounter with philosophy can be shocking, disorienting, and some students react with high levels of anxiety. After teaching Descartes’ *Meditations*, one student stayed after class to discuss the “Cartesian Circle” with me. He was greatly distressed, and in tears, bordering on being inconsolable. Initially, I thought he was upset over his grade on the exam; but he exclaimed: “I thought Descartes had an answer—but now I don’t know if I’m dreaming or not!” We had a long talk, and now he is minoring in philosophy at APU. Aristotle seems to be right, that philosophy begins with wonder. This is what I want to bring to my students: a sense of wonder at the world and their place in it. Reading the works of great philosophical thinkers often can bring us to have this very experience.

I have been teaching my intro to philosophy class around the theme of happiness and meaning, in order to provide students with a lasting impression of the value of philosophy, as something that connects with their deepest concerns. For many students, this will be their first, and only, exposure to philosophy. Focusing on this theme allows me to more easily relate philosophy to their lives—to reflect on what happiness is, and what conditions must be met to attain it.

Second, I strive to make my class a place of thoughtful discussion, an open marketplace where ideas are exchanged. A great way to learn about and appreciate philosophy is to do it, to engage, and by doing this our eyes can open. Philosophy is an activity—but unlike other activities, I think here we should learn how to *run* before we learn how to *walk*. We slow down when confronted by opposition, which forces us to take stock, to check our reasons and ideas. So I encourage questions and dialogue. Later, after they are invested, students can learn to slow down; but I think the excitement should be allowed to grow.

To help cultivate this philosophical engagement (inside and outside of the classroom), I try

to be as available as I can be for my students. I learn their names early in the semester, and spend time getting to know them. I encourage them to meet me for office hours, to email or even text me with their questions. In the classroom, I give regular quizzes, in order to keep them engaged and to prepare them for exams. Above all, I emphasize respect, not only for me and for each other, but for the philosophers we read—this shows that it is possible to disagree (strongly) with another, and yet at the same time appreciate, perhaps even admire, their view.

Third, I try to cultivate certain skills with my students, namely, becoming clearer thinkers and writers. This involves a number of assignments in the classroom: frequent quizzes, papers, tests, group work, and presentations. I try to ground many of our discussions in the texts of the authors we are examining, to better understand the reasoning, to see how we are to read philosophy: slowly, actively, with space for thinking around the text. I am constantly trying to improve as an educator, and my methods have changed as I have learned.

I have experience teaching ethics (contemporary moral problems), logic, critical thinking, introduction to philosophy, and early modern philosophy. I am ready to teach existentialism, Kierkegaard, philosophy of religion, and other related classes. Furthermore, I am devising a course I am excited to teach, entitled “Hope and Human Flourishing,” which will deal with the topic of hope through philosophy, film, psychology, and literature (see attached outline).

In closing, I would like to share one of my most rewarding experiences as an instructor. I was a T.A. for logic at Texas A&M. One of my students was blind, and I met with him twice a week. He did not attend lectures or discussion sections, since they were of no use to him. We simply had to meet regularly and discuss logic, without the benefit of visual symbols. It was incredibly rewarding to see him grasp symbolic logic, truth tables, and learn deductive proofs—he earned an A, and it was amazing to be a part of it.