

Teaching Statement

Jacob Tuttle

My approach to teaching philosophy has benefited from the example of several mentors in my field. But one of my most important role models as a teacher is not a professional philosopher. Julia Child's television program, *The French Chef*, introduced ordinary people to the intimidating subject of French cooking. With patience, grace, and good humor, she showed viewers that, if they were willing to master a few fundamental skills, they too could cook French food. Like cooking, philosophy can be an intimidating subject for beginners. Students often approach deductive arguments, historical texts, and writing assignments with trepidation. One of my most important aims as a teacher is to help students overcome these fears, and show them that they too can do philosophy.

Like any discipline, philosophy requires the mastery of a few fundamental skills. Perhaps the most important of these is the ability to evaluate an argument. My lectures are typically structured around one or two arguments from the day's assigned reading. I make a point of working through these arguments with the students, checking to see whether their premises support their conclusions, and whether there is good reason to accept those premises. In order to stimulate class discussion, I aim to focus students' attention on premises that are especially controversial. I've found that offering vivid or humorous examples is an effective way of drawing students into a controversy. Questions such as, 'Would *you* go into Nozick's experience machine?' usually get an enthusiastic response.

I'm also aware that much of a student's learning takes place outside the classroom. For this reason, I believe that my decisions about which texts to read and which writing assignments to give are as important as my decisions about what to say in class. Because I think a good deal can be learned by grappling with a difficult text, I don't shy away from assigning challenging material (whether historical or contemporary) if I think it's appropriate for a course I'm teaching. I've learned that students generally appreciate a challenge, as long as they're given enough guidance to prepare them to tackle it. To provide this guidance, I make myself available for students to discuss their work in person and via email, often commenting on successive drafts of the same paper or essay answer. And I'm always looking for new strategies for illuminating course material. For example, in the last few semesters, I've assigned study questions to accompany primary texts in some of my courses, and positive feedback from students has convinced me that this is worth doing in other courses as well.

Teachers often remark that what they find most satisfying about their work is the opportunity to instill in their students a passion for their subject. One of my own proudest moments as a teacher was when, after an especially difficult session on Scotus's theory of individuation, one student proclaimed 'I love Scotus!' But as exhilarating as such moments are, what motivates me more than anything else is the belief that my teaching and mentorship can have a positive impact on my students' lives. I realize that most of my undergraduate students won't pursue careers in philosophy. Indeed, many of them will not even major in the subject. Nonetheless, through my teaching I have the opportunity to play a part in their developing skills such as critical thinking, careful reading, and lucid writing, that will stand them in good stead throughout their lives. Moreover (and more importantly, in my view), teaching philosophy offers me the opportunity to expose my students to ways of thinking that can broaden and deepen their outlook on the world, enrich their character, and help them to lead more fulfilling lives.