Teaching Portfolio

Stephen Makin, University of Pittsburgh

Teaching Philosophy

“Philosophy begins in wonder”—ideally. For most students, philosophy begins with a university requirement.

The trick, then, is to try to awaken that wonder. A good philosophy class can do many things: it can teach students the fundamentals of good argument; introduce them to rigorous thinking; help them learn to write well; and familiarize them with historically important currents in Western thought. These things are all valuable; and accomplishing them is itself no easy task. In the end, not every student will learn them to the same degree. But the wonder that comes with encountering a philosophical problem is, I think, within the reach of every student. In teaching philosophy, my goal has always been to try to communicate that wonder which struck me with my very first philosophy class, and which remains, for me, the central attraction of doing philosophy.

Nevertheless, the other skills are important too, and it’s one of the great joys of teaching philosophy to watch students acquire them. The foundation for all of these skills, I think, is the right atmosphere in the classroom. Students come into a semester with very different levels of enthusiasm, and very different expectations about philosophy classes. Some students are more than willing to share their views; others are intimidated. The fundamental thing I try to do in the classroom is to chart a course between two extremes: to try to encourage a conversation among students—without letting that conversation become a free-for-all, or a chance merely to express opinions. Getting students to give reasons for their views; to target their classmates’ arguments, and not merely their conclusions; to understand what constitutes a good philosophical ‘move’, and what is just expressing an intuition; these are the basic skills I try to promote in the classroom. And it is a real pleasure, I can say, to watch students, over the course of a semester, master the basics of philosophical engagement, for this is something they can and do learn.

Part of learning to be a good teacher is, I think, being willing to experiment. Not everything I have ever tried in the classroom has worked. There are of course the usual techniques. Writing complex arguments on the blackboard is invaluable for getting students to invent counterarguments—and to understand their peers’. Taking straws polls on divisive questions encourages participation and engenders debate. Obliging students to give answers in complete sentences does wonders for discussion and comprehension. Other techniques I found more or less by accident: it is remarkable how effective it is, in a large lecture hall with scores of students, where the temptation is to simply lecture, merely to ask a direct question every ten minutes or so. (The effect is something like pulling the fire alarm: everyone is immediately awake.) And there are nicer issues, which are really more art than science: knowing when to cut short a discussion, and when to let it go; how to correct a student without embarrassing her; how to encourage the very best students without giving the impression of favoritism.
But not every aspect of teaching takes place in the classroom. Teaching students to write clearly and intelligently is, for me, another central task of a philosophy class. Being able to write well confers, it is said, certain pragmatic advantages in later life. I suppose that is true; I have sometimes tried to sell things to students in this way. But my own view is that learning to write well is worth doing for its own sake, for the pleasure and the beauty of it, and I try to encourage my students to see things this way too. It is, in any case, a life long task. But real beginnings can be made in a single semester. I have found myself that the best method for improving writing is giving feedback, and so I give a lot of it. It is not always rewarding to grade papers. And making corrections on spelling and grammar; giving suggestions for improved clarity or felicity; meeting with students to review drafts; all these take a long time, and can make an already arduous task that much harder. But I have found it to be worth it: in my experience, nothing improves a student’s writing like concrete corrections and suggestions; however much toil it may involve, there is no substitute for it, and it really does work.

Another challenge in teaching philosophy is trying to reach students who have, or think they have, no interest in the liberal arts. Many of the students in my introductory classes, perhaps most, have been Business or Engineering majors. But philosophy is different from these disciplines, among other ways in having an historical character—in being connected with the broader streams of Western thought and history. I try, in my classes, to give my students some sense of this aspect of philosophy; and to encourage students, who might otherwise regard college as an opportunity merely for learning skills, to have a broader view of the possibilities of an education. It goes without saying that not every student can be reached; and that to accept this task is perhaps to undertake an uphill battle. But in connecting philosophy to its history, and its place in the larger culture, it is possible, I think, to give students some appreciation for those disciplines they might natively regard as ‘useless’.

On the other hand, there are upper level classes, filled largely with philosophy majors. Such classes offer their own challenges and their own rewards. Of course it is wonderful to be able to introduce students to more subtle regions of philosophical thought; and to be able to take for granted that the students are there because they enjoy philosophy. But it is also a challenge, I think, to find material, and an approach to it, which is (what is easy) authentically sophisticated, without being (what is hard) just too difficult. Upper level college students are college students all the same, and one has to tailor the material appropriately. This is sometimes easier said than done. But when it is done, it provides pleasures all its own: I have been lucky enough to have some terrific students, who have surprised and impressed me with their responses to genuinely challenging material.

Finally, there is the wonder. There is no one method or trick for accomplishing this. But there are many partial methods. Part of the trick is finding a way to connect philosophical questions with issues students are likely to be familiar with. Part of the trick is finding a language that students can understand and engage with. But part of it, too, is bringing a certain enthusiasm to the material, communicating one’s own, genuine interest and, yes, wonder. And I like to think that this is something that I do in the classroom.

Teaching class is my favorite part of every week. Not every class is a success; not every lecture works. But I have never stopped enjoying it, nor trying to become a better teacher.
PHIL 0300-1170: Introduction to Ethics
Instructor: Stephen C. Makin (1425 CoL)
Meets: Thursdays, 6-8:30 p.m., CoL 252
Office Hours: Office Hours: M/W 11:00 a.m.-12 noon
Email: scm18@pitt.edu

Overview
Courses in Ethics ask questions about right and wrong: what are we morally required to do? Is there something unethical about eating meat? Is abortion morally permissible? Our course begins further back. Where, we would like to know, do these moral rules ‘come from’? Are moral requirements in some way ‘subjective’? Or do the same rules apply to everyone? We’ll be looking here at the relationship between God and morality—which turns out to be more complex than one might think; and at just what it might mean to be a subjectivist about ethics. These questions lead us on to further ones: what are we saying, anyway, when we say something is wrong? Are we stating facts? Or doing something more like expressing our attitudes? We address these questions, and just what they mean for ‘objectivity’ in ethics, in the next part of the course. Next, we’ll take a look at three very different attempts to make systems out of ethics: Utilitarianism; Kant’s rule-based system; and something called ‘Virtue Ethics’. Each system has its merits, and each has its problems; we’ll give them all their fair shake. At last we turn to some practical questions, applying what we learned in the first parts of the course. We’ll take a look at some compelling arguments for conclusions that might surprise you; and finally ask ourselves a broader question: What is the good life, anyway? How shall we live?

Required Texts: Williams, Morality: An Introduction to Ethics

Although we’ll be reading this text in its entirety, many of the readings for this course will be found on the course website as .pdf’s. These papers should be printed and brought to class each week. The website can be found at http://www.pitt.edu/~scm18/, where you’ll also find this syllabus, and other course materials.

Grading:

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Papers
Paper topics will be distributed two weeks before the paper is due. Late papers will be accepted with a penalty. Extensions for papers will be granted only for serious reasons. You should consult your instructor (me!) about an extension in advance of the due date. The penalty for plagiarizing a paper is non-negotiable failure for the entire course.

Exams
All exams will be administered in lecture. Do not be late on an exam day! Generally exams will consist of both short answer questions and essays.

Participation
In order to achieve full participation credit you must: (1) attend class regularly; (2) come to class having carefully done the reading; (3) willingly contribute to discussion in recitation in an informed and intelligent way. In addition: you will be asked every week to turn in a short summary of, and an objection to, the week’s readings. Be prepared to defend these objections—and your summary—in class. Good faith efforts, shown through sweat and earnest attempts at improvement also count towards your participation grade.
Optimistic Schedule:

**Week 1:** Introduction

**Week 2:** God and Morality

**Week 3:** Relativism, Subjectivism, Moral Skepticism

**Week 4:** Relativism, Subjectivism, Moral Skepticism
Readings: Williams, *Morality*, pp. 3-37

**Week 5:** Meta-ethics: Cognitivism & Non-Cognitivism

**Week 6:** Meta-ethics: Cognitivism & Non-Cognitivism
Readings: Ayer, “Critique of Ethics and Theology”

**Week 7:** Meta-ethics: Cognitivism & Non-Cognitivism
Readings: Foot, “Moral Beliefs” (*First Paper Due*)

**Week 8:** Normative Ethical Theories

**Week 9:** Normative Ethical Theories
Readings: Mill, selections from *Utilitarianism*; Smart, “Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism”

**Week 10:** Normative Ethical Theories
Williams, “Utilitarianism,” (*Morality*, pp. 82-98) (*First Examination*)

**Week 11:** Theory & Practice
Readings: Singer, “All Animals Are Equal”

**Week 12:** Theory & Practice
Readings: Nagel, “Moral Luck”

**Week 13:** Theory & Practice
Readings: Foot, “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect” (*2nd Paper Due*)

**Week 14:** Coda: The Good Life
Readings: Plato, selections from *Republic*; Nozick, selections from *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*

**Week 15:** Second Examination
PHIL 0440: Minds and Machines (Spring 2011)
Instructor: Stephen C. Makin (1425 CoL)
Lectures: M/W, 10-10:50 a.m., 00G23 PUBHL
Office Hours: M/W 11:00 a.m.-12 noon
Email: scm18@pitt.edu

Overview
Our course will be centered around the following question: How can we understand the mind as a part of a mechanical world?
In trying to answer this question, we will be asking others: Can the mind be understood as a kind of machine? If so, what kind? And if not, can the very idea of minds be squared with a modern, ‘scientific’ outlook?
Our course is split into two sections. We will begin by looking at three, historically important theories of mind from the 20th century, and the distinctive answers they gave to our operative question: logical behaviorism, identity theory, and functionalism. The last of these inspired some attempts to make good on the analogy between the mind and computing machines, and we turn to these next. Is the mind a kind of computer? We will be reading some classic papers that have argued for just this conclusion. But such theories have come under fire from a number of directions, and we turn to these criticisms next. Could a machine really ever feel anything? Could it engage in genuine thinking?
In the second half of the course, we turn to some specific attempts from the field of Artificial Intelligence to build genuine thinking machines. Picking up a thread from the first half of the course, our question will be: What is thinking? Can it be reduced to the mere manipulation of symbols? We will examining, in turn, the classic AI program, which argued something very like this; a successor program known as ‘connectionism’, which has some interesting virtues of its own; and finally, we look at some more unorthodox versions of AI, which claim we should do away with the idea of representation altogether.
This course will not answer our operative question. But hopefully you will discover just how interesting this question is; and find some tools for tackling it.

Required Texts: Haugeland, Mind Design II (hereafter MD2)

Although many of the essays for this course will come from this text, several others will be posted as .pdf’s. They can be found, along with this syllabus, and other course materials, at http://www.pitt.edu/~scm18/.

Grading:
Papers
Paper topics will be distributed two weeks before the paper is due. Late papers will be accepted with a penalty: one-third of a letter-grade for each day the paper is late. Extensions for papers will be granted only for serious reasons. You should consult your TA about an extension in advance of the due date. The penalty for plagiarizing a paper is non-negotiable failure for the entire course. Your paper will be graded by your TA. (See below for due dates.)

Examinations
All exams will be administered in lecture. Do not be late on an exam day! Generally exams will consist of both short answer questions and essays. (See below for Examination dates.)

Participation
In order to achieve full participation credit you must: (1) attend both Lectures and Recitations regularly; (2) come to Recitation having carefully done the reading; (3) willingly contribute to discussion in recitation in an informed and intelligent way. Good faith efforts, shown through sweat and earnest attempts at improvement, also count towards your participation grade.
Optimistic Schedule:
(Texts in brackets are supplementary—non-required, but useful—papers)

Week 1: Introduction
Wed. Jan 5 (no reading)

Week 2: Logical Behaviorism
Mon. Jan 10 Descartes, *Meditations I, II, and VI*;
(http://www.wright.edu/cola/descartes/mede.html)
Ryle, “Descartes’ Myth” (.pdf)
Wed. Jan 12 Putnam, “Brains and Behavior” (.pdf)

Week 3: Identity Theory
Mon. Jan 17 MLK Day, no class
Wed. Jan 19 Smart, “Sensations and Brain Processes” (.pdf)

Week 4: Functionalism
Mon. Jan 24 Putnam, “Psychological Predicates” (.pdf) [Block, “What is Functionalism?”]
Wed. Jan 26 Putnam, “The Mental Life of Some Machines” (.pdf)
[Putnam, “Minds and Machines” (.pdf)]

Week 5: Mind as Machine: Sapience
Newell & Simon, “Computer Science as Empirical Inquiry” (*MD2*)
Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction, §1; ch. 5, §§1-7
(http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-contents.html)
Wed. Feb 2 Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” (*MD2*)

Week 6: Intentionality
Mon. Feb 7 Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs” (*MD2*)
Wed. Feb 9 (no new reading)

Week 7: Intentionality (cont.)
Tues. Feb 14 Dennett, “True Believers: The Intentional Strategy and Why It Works” (*MD2*)
Wed. Feb 16 Kirk, “Sentience and Behavior” (.pdf) (First Paper Due)

Week 8: Sentience
Mon. Feb 21 Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (.pdf); Dennett, “Quining Qualia” (.pdf)
Wed. Feb 23 (no new reading)

Week 9: Mid Term
Mon. Feb 28 Exam Review. No Reading Assigned
Wed. Mar 2 First Examination (no reading)

Spring Break

Week 10: Skepticism about GOFAI
Mon. Mar 14 Dreyfus, “From Micro-Worlds to Knowledge Representation”
Wed. Mar 16 (no new reading)
Week 11: Skepticism about GOFAI: The Frame Problem
Mon. Mar 21     Dennett, “Cognitive Wheels”
Wed. Mar 23     (no new reading)

Week 12: Connectionism
Mon. Mar 28     Churchland, “On the Nature of Theories” (MD2)
Wed. Mar 30     (no new reading)

Week 13: Connectionism
Mon. Apr 4      Rosenberg, “Connectionism and Cognition” (MD2)
Wed. Apr 6      Fodor & Pylyshyn, “Connectionism and Cognitive Architecture” (MD2)

Week 14: NFAI
Mon. Apr 11     (no new reading)
Wed. Apr 13     Brooks, “Intelligence without Representation” (MD2) (Second Paper Due)

Week 15: NFAI
Mon. Apr 18     Braitenberg, “Vehicles”
Wed. Apr 20     Exam Review, no reading assigned

Exam Week:       Final Examination Time TBD
Philosophy 0440: Minds & Machines (Makin)
Putnam, “Brains and Behavior”: a quick summary

Putnam means to argue against the logical behaviorist thesis that the language of mental events and processes can be *translated* without loss into talk about behavior, actual and potential.

Putnam’s arguments:

1. ‘Pain’ (and other mental terms) is like ‘polio’ (and other disease terms): although, at some point, we didn’t know the *underlying cause* of polio, nevertheless it would be wrong to say that polio means ‘such-and-such symptoms’; ‘polio’ means: ‘whatever is causing such-and-such symptoms’.

   **Logical Behaviorist Reply:** the meaning of the term has changed; before the pathogen was discovered, ‘polio’ did indeed mean ‘such-and-such symptoms’; only *now* does it mean ‘the pathogen causing such-and-such symptoms’

   **Rejoinder:** taking such a view would compel us to say that, e.g., scientists who said ‘I believe polio is caused by a virus’ were *wrong*, since, as a matter of fact, not all such cases of such-and-such symptoms were caused by the polio pathogen; some were caused by other things! We’d have to say the same of scientists who said ‘I believe this is not a case of polio’, when all the symptoms were present, for (on the proposal) *showing such-and-such symptoms* just did mean *having polio*.

   **[But note:** this may be a doubtful argument; must we really decide between the two meanings of ‘polio’, when deciding what scientists ‘really meant’?...]

Conclusion: just because we find out about some thing, call it ‘X’, by way of a cluster of symptoms—and only by way of those symptoms—that doesn’t mean that ‘X’ *just means* or *just is* ‘such-and-such cluster of symptoms’. On the contrary: in the case of both diseases and mental items, the word in question refers to the *cause* of the symptoms (behavior).

2. Not only is pain not *definable* in terms of behaviors, there is in fact *no necessary connection* between pain and pain behaviors—even of the kind that says, “*Normally*, people in pain show such-and-such pain behavior.” For: it is conceivable (not contradictory) to imagine a world of super-spartans who suppress all pain-behavior, but nevertheless tell us that they’re in pain.

   **LB reply:** but their-telling-you is itself a pain behavior!

   **Rejoinder:** Ok, then imagine a world of super-super-spartans, who don’t even *tell us* when they’re in pain.

   **LB Reply:** why should we believe of such people that they’re in pain at all?

   **Rejoinder:** Well, imagine we have some sort of *brain-scan* technology, and we read the thoughts of these s-s-spartans, which are, roughly, “Oh god this hurts! Better not show it!” *That* is anyway conceivable; which shows that there is no contradiction in imaging a world where pain doesn’t normally cause pain-behavior; which shows that pain is *not* necessarily connected to pain behavior....

   **[But note:** we still nevertheless have to talk of *suppression* (of pain-behavior) here; is that significant? Then too: are these s-s-spartans in ‘normal’ conditions? Is it not still true, in one sense, to say, “Normally, people in pain evince such-and-such behavior”?...]
Can morality take any form? Can just any system of approval and disapproval be a form of morality? That seemed to be a consequence of a the ‘non-cognitivist’ view we examined last week. A further consequence seems to be that ethical argument will often run aground very quickly: Smith defends his action by saying that it had some quality—call it ‘Q’; Jones doesn’t see that being-Q is any reason to do anything. But here, the argument stops: each party just has his own system of approval and disapproval.

Foot thinks this is all nonsense. In particular, she targets two ‘assumptions’ of the non-cognitivist view which she thinks can’t be right:

(Assumption 1) Someone may, without logical error, base his beliefs about value entirely on premises which no one else would accept as evidence
(Assumption 2) Someone may reject a statement which everyone else regards as evidence for some moral claim, because it is not evidence for him.

(Today we focus on Assumption 1.) Foot thinks that there are limits on what we can approve and disapprove of. And that therefore there are limits to what we can give as a reason for approving or disapproving of something. But her claim isn’t about human psychology—about what, as a matter of fact, people find themselves able to approve of. Her claim is supposed to be conceptual: whatever you feel about some (say) action, it can’t be moral approval unless that action has certain qualities.

She starts with some analogous cases, to get our intuitions going. (Remember that the following is only an analogy; the real argument comes later!) Take, e.g., pride. Can we feel pride in anything? Well, isn’t pride just a feeling that we have towards something? No, says Foot. Not every warm, glowing feeling is pride. Can you feel pride in the ocean? You might get a warm, glowing feeling. But it wouldn’t be pride: pride, says Foot, is ‘internally connected’ to things like ownership and achievement. Whatever it might feel like to you, your feeling can only be called ‘pride’ if it’s directed at something you owned, or achieved, etc.

--NB: maybe Foot’s criteria aren’t quite right; we can feel pride about, e.g., our children, and it might be a little funny to call them ‘achievements’ (or ‘possessions’). But this wouldn’t knock down Foot’s point: we still can’t feel pride about just anything; it still makes no sense (e.g.) to feel pride in the ocean. And this isn’t just a fact about out psychology. (As though we might try to feel pride in the ocean, but keep failing.) One upshot of this line of thought is that you can’t recognize pride just by concentrating on the feeling you have. That’s an interesting thought.--

Objection: No Limits. “Look, Foot, maybe you’re right: maybe pride is connected to achievement, and so on. Still, a man could feel pride in just anything—so long as he believed he owned everything!

Reply: The objection is true, but it’s no threat to Foot’s view. Perhaps some lunatic could believe he owned everything, and so feel pride in it. But this fellow is making a factual error (a point that will be important later); and if we could show him the error of his ways, he would either stop having his feeling; or keep having it, but be forced to admit it isn’t pride.
–But in any case, our target is elsewhere: we want to know about a different feeling (attitude): moral approval. (But keep the analogy in mind in what follows.) Foot’s thought is that something similar is true here. Can we morally approve of just anything? How about taking a bucket of water out of the ocean? Crossing your hands over each other? We might think these things are cool or fun. Maybe (for whatever reason) we even get a special feeling whenever we see someone do such things. But could that feeling be moral approval?

Well, pride was ‘internally connected’ to ownership and achievement. What are moral approval and moral disapproval ‘internally connected’ to? Foot’s suggestion: human well-being and human harm. To call some action, or trait of character, or whatever, good, is to say that it promotes human well-being. To call it bad is to say that it causes human harm. And if this is true, then Assumption 1 must be wrong: I can’t justify my claim that (e.g.) what he did was good, just by saying, “Well, what he did removed some water from the ocean!” I can like that sort of thing; maybe I get my jollies from it; but I can’t morally approve of it.

**Objection: No Limits II.** “Ok, Foot, I see your point: moral approval is connected to human well-being. Still, Jones could morally approve of (say) walking around trees counter-clockwise. All we have to do is suppose that Jones believes that such actions promote human well-being: perhaps he thinks that walking this way will help cure cancer.”

**Reply:** This objection concedes the central point. Jones may indeed have a bunch of crazy beliefs. But now his claim—“This is good!”—is vulnerable to the facts. Once we show him, e.g., that walking around trees counter-clockwise doesn’t cure anything, he’ll have to give up his moral approval.

One upshot of these reflections is that moral argument might not run aground so quickly after all. For, if the game is showing what is good for human welfare and what isn’t, then we seem to be in the realm of perfectly ordinary, perfectly tractable facts.

Thus Foot. But can this be right? It does seem a little surprising. After all, if things were this easy, how could there be all the deep disagreements about ethical matters, that we seem to find in ordinary life? Consider:

**Objection: No Limits III.** “Alright, Foot, it’s true: moral approval is indeed connected to human well-being. But that means that facts about what we can approve are exactly as elastic as facts about what human well-being consists in. And settling the latter questions will be none too easy. After all, suppose I hold that chastity is an important part of human well-being, or that the ascetic life makes a better man; and suppose you deny it. How can we settle this matter? Isn’t it, in fact, true, that people in different ages, and different lands, have held radically different views about what human flourishing looked like? And do we have any clue just what would persuade them otherwise? And if ‘human well-being’ is this elastic, then it turns out that people can morally approve of just about anything after all!”

**Reply:** [left as an exercise for the reader]

*(Next Time: Assumption Two; more arguments against non-cognitivism)*
Below is a summary of my teaching evaluations. I have much more detailed data, available on request (evaluations on specific aspects of classroom performance, student comments, &c.).

Classes for which I was a Teaching Assistant:

- Logic (Fall 2005)
- Introduction to Ethics (Spring 2006)
- Philosophical Problems (Fall 2006)
- Political Philosophy (Fall 2007)
- Social Philosophy (Spring 2008)
- Concepts of Human Nature (Fall 2009)
- Introduction to Ethics (Fall 2011)
- Introduction to Ethics (Spring 2012)

Classes for which I was an Instructor or Lecturer:

- Introduction to Ethics (Spring 2010)
- Introduction to Ethics (Summer 2010)
- Minds and Machines (Fall 2010)
- Introduction to Ethics (Summer 2011)
- Introduction to Ethics (Summer 2012)