

## Teaching Statement: Christopher Johns

I love studying philosophy. It is the only activity that both satisfies and drives my curiosity. And I love teaching it, because I get the chance to show students how important and fun it is. When I walk into the classroom, I feel I am on a mission to engage their curiosity—to engage their natural desire to know.

I think most philosophy teachers would agree that the distinct value of studying philosophy lies not in acquiring information, but rather in improving one's native ability to think. I think the best way to promote the latter is to show students how to read closely and reflectively. It is important, however, first to establish an enjoyable, conversational environment. For example, suppose we must examine Aristotle's initial claim for why we need friends: "Life is perception; and knowledge is its end."<sup>1</sup> What's the argument? Well, I just might begin by talking about worms—those bare, squirming, forms of life, possessing a dim form of perception—but possessing life and knowledge nonetheless, sufficient to carry out their decompositive duties. Small beginnings perhaps—but! Don't we *all* start off as squirming, jiggling, masses of perception, striving for more than simply survival, endeavoring to surpass our present level of knowledge? Well, that's why we need *friends*, because friends are sources of perception and knowledge! And while I would not normally compare my friends to worms, I've often found that if we can loosen up without losing the thread of thought, critical thinking becomes more effective, memorable, and bearable. As Aristotle also said, "those who work with pleasure show better judgment and greater precision."<sup>2</sup> Pleasure, it seems, paves the way for learning—like a worm does ... a fun worm.

At some point, when serious close reading is in order, I maintain the conversational mode, but with a more definite sense of direction. This means reading passages out loud, stopping frequently to ask questions about meaning, context, and overall significance. I try not to tell students *what* the passage means—but instead show how to discover what it means. I ask them to speak to each other, rather than only to me. For example, suppose we need to "unpack" a brief paragraph of turgid and impenetrable prose, from who else but Kant:

"The practical necessity of acting according to the principle of duty does not rest at all on feelings, impulses, and inclinations, but only on the relation of rational beings to one another, a relation in which the will of a rational being must always be regarded at the same time as legislative."<sup>3</sup>

Passages like this are known to make even the well-trained philosopher weep. For most students, they are a nightmare. But a directed conversation might go like this:

What does 'practical necessity' mean? Does it mean, simply, 'needing to get things done'? Or is Kant saying that we must act a certain way? Well, why? And what is this "principle of duty"? Any ideas? In any case, this "practical necessity" doesn't depend on feelings, but on "the relation of rational beings to one another." Is Kant saying that feelings are not rational? How can he say this? And what does 'legislative' mean? Right—law making—and what is characteristic of a law? That it applies to everyone—good. So, is Kant saying that to act rationally is to act in a way that applies to everyone? What makes that *rational*? And what sort of law is this supposed to be? We need to

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<sup>1</sup> A paraphrase of *Eudemian Ethics*, 1244b24, trans., Anthony Kenny (Oxford 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1175a30, trans., J.A.K. Thomson (Penguin Books, revised 2004).

<sup>3</sup> *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans., James W. Ellington (Hackett, 1981), p. 40.

understand the force of this “necessity.” Why *must* we act according to this “principle of duty?”

It’s a start! The point is that to begin to understand a difficult, unfamiliar text we must slow down and ask a lot of questions, try out some answers, and pursue several paths to see where they lead. The goal, at least at first crack, is to gain enough understanding to discuss whether we agree or disagree with the text. I emphasize that this sort of dialectic is useful for making sense of *any* unfamiliar text, philosophical or otherwise—including making sense of unfamiliar *people*, because it encourages listening and sympathy. It encourages curiosity, open-mindedness, and helps overcome fear—not the least, the fear of reading Kant.

Of course, there are times when straightforward lecturing is in order, when students need the historical and intellectual context to make the matter lively and relevant. Here, too, I maintain the conversational mode. My main objective is to be clear and orderly, yet relaxed and spontaneous. So, while I follow a prepared outline of main points, I’ll address any question that happens to arise. I often illustrate the matter by relating it to current events, such as the war in Syria and the plight of its refugees. When teaching Greek philosophy I might show photos of the historic sites where these events took place; or I may show clips from movies, such as when Odysseus cries out to Poseidon, “what do you want from me?” (Answer: “I want you to suffer!”) For Descartes, I’ll set up a virtual fireplace and melt some wax. During discussion, I’ll arrange the chairs in a circle so that everyone can see and talk to each other. I occasionally put students into small groups so they can work out a passage together. In general I try to convey that the matter at hand, however abstract, relates to a much larger, continuous, and concrete conversation.

I understand that some students are uncertain of themselves, reluctant to speak and easily intimidated. My experience teaching students from a variety of racial, religious, and economic backgrounds, in dynamic cities like New York, Chicago, and Beirut, has made me acutely aware of the complex difficulties with which many students struggle outside the classroom. It has also made me aware of perspectives I had never considered, nor previously considered valid. I’ve learned to listen to my students. I’ve learned that patience, kindness, humor, and a sympathetic ear are much more conducive to learning than negative criticism. I provide clear, strict, but fair grading criteria, along with constructive criticism, so that students understand exactly what I expect from them and how to improve. I try to ensure that all students feel that my class is a safe place to be themselves and to be more than themselves.

Most of my students say that I make philosophy fun, but also that I make it human, that I bring it down to earth and make it matter to them. They say they learn to write and think better about matters of great importance to them. This is really, really important to me. I want them to be better. I want to fuel their desire to know. I want to live in a society of friends of curiosity, of seekers of perception, knowledge, and life. I think of philosophy as *fun with a purpose*,<sup>4</sup> as preparation for the serious business of life.

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<sup>4</sup> The official slogan of the magazine, *Highlights for Children*.