

Teaching philosophy as a humanistic discipline

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. . . these new duties are not the duties of a solitary; on the contrary, they set one in the midst of a mighty community held together, not by external forms and regulations, but by a fundamental idea. It is the fundamental idea of *culture*, insofar as it sets for each one of us but one task: *to promote the production of the philosopher, the artist and the saint within us and without us and thereby to work at the perfecting of nature.*

(Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator” §5;
his emphases; in Nietzsche 1997, 160)

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1. I believe I can summarise the most general spirit with which I teach philosophy by adopting a slogan famously put forward by Bernard Williams.¹ I strive to teach *philosophy as a humanistic discipline*. In what follows I present my basic understanding of what teaching philosophy at the university level is and why it matters, by unpacking this slogan one word at a time, starting from the last. This document is pitched at a key suitable for my (prospective) students as well as my potential employers and colleagues, some of whom may not have much background in philosophy.

2. “**discipline.**” In one plain sense a “discipline” just means “a subject, a field of study or expertise.” Specifically, an academic discipline is an institutionalised

¹ Williams 2000 = 2006, Ch. 16. The present essay is thoroughly indebted to this and several other works by Williams, including his 1991 = 1995, Ch. 7; 2006, Ch. 17; 2014, Chs. 14, 54, and 71. Also see Moore forthcoming.

investigation into nature, humanity, or the relation between the two.² As such, each discipline is a practice with a history, methodology, and a set of rules for expressing, communicating and evaluating its achievements. (This is not to say that the methodology is unified, fixed once and for all, or that the rules do not change. See below.) In other words, if there is a discipline, there is such a thing as “getting it right” in it, or at least “doing it well” in it.

Philosophy is no exception, and hence there are virtues that one should strive to attain (and vices one should seek to avoid) in studying philosophy: broad knowledge of the lay of the field, including its history; a firm command of the conceptual tools and techniques deployed by its practitioners, including elementary logic and forms of argumentation; clarity and rigour; collaborative and open-minded enthusiasm; critical reflection, courage and curiosity for intellectual explorations; attention to particulars and contexts; imaginativeness in both understanding others and expressing oneself, whether in conversation or in written communication. These qualities are “transferrable,” because they are basic: they constitute the art of thinking, talking, reading, and writing well—a prerequisite for virtually all serious and worthwhile human activities.

Disciplines other than philosophy may well hone some of these virtues, as it were incidentally. Philosophy, however, specifically concentrates on them. For example: what kinds of clarity and rigour there might be; how critical reflection and imaginativeness might be used or abused; why knowledge and understanding are valuable, or whether they are so much as possible; what it is for philosophy itself to be an academic discipline; what its place is, in relation to other disciplines and within a society; why, indeed, there should be such a thing as an academic discipline, or a concerted social effort at making intellectual sense of things—all of these are genuine

² Pure mathematics is a (tricky) limiting case of a sort: it is an a priori investigation not into nature, humanity or the relation between the two, but into objects and relations abstracted therefrom.

philosophical questions, and they matter. For if we human beings by nature desire to make sense of things (as Aristotle suggested),³ and live by trying to make sense of things, then it matters that we do so. But then it matters also that we try to make sense of the very attempt we make at making sense of things. Philosophy as a discipline should foster such human reflection.

3. “**humanistic.**” This brings me to the next word. In the present context, to characterise philosophy as “humanistic” is not to place it in a division within some departmentalising scheme used in universities. It is rather to register philosophy’s fundamental orientation: *the human point of view*.

Philosophy is not *anthropological*, since humankind (its constitution, culture or evolution) is not philosophy’s unique subject matter. In a certain sense, however, philosophy is *anthropocentric*: rather than ignoring the peculiarities of the human point of view—its distinctive concerns, interests, values, limitations, predicaments and aspirations—and by contrast to the natural sciences, which rightly strive to be as independent of such perspectival peculiarities as possible, philosophy ought to begin by acknowledging them. Its task is to examine and understand them, by articulating the ways in which they mediate our engagement with the world and with each other.

Can knowledge be analysed in terms of true belief and some extra? What changes can one undergo while remaining the same person? What is the relation between morality and desire? These and many other philosophical questions are often considered in a speculative vacuum, but they should not be. The student should always be encouraged to reflect on the point of involvement from which a given question may be seen to arise, as well as on how different outlooks may give rise to very different questions, or invest very different questions with the sense of urgency and importance.

³ *Metaphysics* 980a22.

To be sure, the human point of view has itself evolved, and is always open to further development, in all manners of ways. Having reflectively questioned some of its peculiarities, philosophy may then propose to discard, transform, or (as the case may be) continue to embrace any of them, so that in attempting to do so we may hope to live more excellently as the human beings we are. A humanistic discipline is a humanity's attempt to make sense of—and to come to terms with—itself.

Understood in this way, philosophy has a particularly important connection with history and the arts, including Classics and criticism. For these neighbouring disciplines in the humanities take as their objects so many and diverse testaments to and expressions of just such peculiarities as I just suggested philosophy should be concerned to articulate and make sense of. What is the mind? What is art? What is justice? These are philosophical questions, but one has no chance of addressing them adequately without understanding something about the actual history and sociology of the sciences, fine arts and crafts, and various polities.

Wittgenstein considered using a line from *King Lear*, “I’ll teach you differences,” as the motto for his *Philosophical Investigations*.⁴ One might say that philosophy aims to cultivate and sharpen one's sensitivity to differences: that things might have been different from how they actually have been; that they can be different from what they now are. History and studies of different cultures provide the best way to be reminded of this important truth in philosophy—the radical contingency and the precariousness of the human point of view we are beholden to.

4. “a.” Discussing the three questions raised in the title of Gauguin's famous painting, *Where do we come from? What are we?,* and *Where are we going?,* Williams remarks: “there is no hope for answering the last question unless we have some ideas for answering the first two . . . the most basic justification of the Humanities as on-

⁴ Monk 1990, 536-7

going subjects is that our insights into the first two questions essentially involve grasp of humane studies, in particular because the second question involves the first.”⁵

Philosophy is, then, in one important sense continuous with other humanistic disciplines in a way in which it is not with natural scientific disciplines.

This is not at all to say that in studying philosophy one can ignore the practices of the sciences and their deliverances. Far from it. For if the humanities and the sciences mark two camps, they are necessary complements to each other, neither one to be annexed by the other. The sciences require the kind of understanding that the humanities pursue, in designing experiments, making observations, interpreting data, drawing conclusions, and applying them. The humanities in their turn require the body of knowledge that the sciences provide, if only to recognise the natural conditions we must always begin with and stay true to. Many a philosophical fantasy about, say, intention and reasoning, artistic creativity, or implicit bias, may be debunked by scientific discoveries. At the same time, it is often with the kind of perceptiveness and critical acumen the humanities cultivate that various latent conceptual confusions in some scientific studies on these matters are revealed, and the ethical, political, educational—that is to say, human—significance of the objects of scientific enquiry is elucidated.

It is essential, then, for the student of philosophy to be keenly aware of the fact that philosophy is only one among the constellation of academic disciplines, although it may indeed be a peculiar one. It is *a* discipline. As such, in philosophy, open-minded interdisciplinary dialogue is always to be encouraged; scientism, or servile imitation of the natural sciences, and complacent (and anyway untenable) presumption of philosophy’s being “the queen of the sciences” are both always to be rejected. Philosophy is nowhere and everywhere: there is no such thing as the problem of *pure* philosophy; only, everything gives rise to philosophical problems. Accordingly, training

⁵ Williams 2014, Ch. 54, p. 270.

in philosophy should aim to produce a swarm of gadflies: free, bold, and incisive, prodding humanity all over, students of philosophy should help humanity to face itself, so that it may stand up to reflection, so that it may make sense of itself, as well as the world it finds itself in.

5. “as.” I have described the core of what I take teaching philosophy to involve, by way of offering a picture of what (simply) doing philosophy involves. Although I am deeply committed to it, this conception is, again, only one among many possible ones. Philosophy need not be understood, studied and taught *as* a humanistic discipline. The word “as” indicates that there are and will be alternative conceptions of philosophy. Indeed, I take it that the humanistic conception of the kind I have suggested above is currently not at all widely held, not even among professional philosophers. Some firmly believe that philosophy should be as much like the sciences as possible; others believe that it should just give way to the sciences completely. These people would teach philosophy accordingly (or not at all, in the latter case).

If that is the current state of play, so be it. It belongs to the nature of philosophy to be in this way open-ended; it is essentially contestable—and not surprisingly so, since the human point of view from which it is pursued is essentially contestable. At any rate, I strive to enact my own conviction in practice, whether commenting on students’ work, conversing with them in tutorials, leading a discussion with a small group, or lecturing to a class. Given what I have said philosophy involves, a successful teacher is one who engages the students to think for themselves, themselves engaging with the questions and arguments they are provoked to come up with, as well as the ones they are introduced to. In other words, such a teacher would teach the students to philosophise, by philosophising with them.

That is the ideal I strive after. I pay attention to the details, stylistic as well as argumentative, taking things as slowly and scrupulously as necessary. I stop to take questions and make sure the students are following. I encourage students to ask questions (not just to me but to each other), apply arguments, develop ideas, and take chances. I avoid display of false authority and shallow gimmicks (although this does not mean I resist using technological devices—I do use them as necessary). And I am not afraid to reveal my own struggles, because genuine philosophical questions *are* difficult, and one thing one ought to convey in one's teaching is precisely their difficulty, along with their peculiar power to rivet the mind.

In this connection, the word “as” in Williams's slogan bears a further emphasis: it registers the fact that the conception put forward here is an interpretation—indeed itself a piece of philosophy. Philosophical reflection on the nature of philosophy is an obligation of every serious philosopher, and it is an important part not just of philosophising, but also of teaching philosophy. Kant notes many times in his lectures that *learning* philosophy is only an imitation, and what matters is *to learn to philosophise, on one's own*.⁶ I wholeheartedly agree with Kant. It follows that the best and the only genuine way to teach students how to philosophise is to philosophise oneself—with them.

6. Teaching philosophy as a humanistic discipline, in the sense I outlined above, is a worthy undertaking on its own. But it's not just because of this that I love teaching philosophy; it is also because, given what I said in the last section, teaching and research at their best can mutually enhance each other, and be integral and indispensable parts of scholarship. I always try to learn from my students as much as I teach them. What philosophy is and might be, as I suggested, is itself a philosophical

⁶ E.g. the *Dohna-Wundlacken Logic*, Ak. 24: 698; *The Jäsche Logic*, Ak. 9: 25; notes taken of these lectures are collected in Kant 1992.

matter of great importance. But whatever else it is or might be, it is a human collaborative endeavour, and above a certain level there is no reason that the student-teacher relation should always be intellectually asymmetrical.

Pleasure is what attends the experience when one does something well. It follows that philosophy should be enjoyable, especially when pursued together, as it properly is. This is another important truth that I try to convey in my teaching. Here I follow Paul Grice:

doing philosophy ought to be *fun*. . . . it is no bad thing if the products of doing philosophy turn out, every now and then, to be *funny*. One should of course be serious about philosophy; but being serious does not require one to be solemn. . . . getting together with others to do philosophy should be very much like getting together with others to make music: lively yet sensitive interaction is directed towards a common end, in the case of philosophy a better grasp of some fragment of philosophical truth.⁷

Although Grice primarily has in mind interaction with one's colleagues, there is no reason why the same remarks should not apply in the context of teaching philosophy. The "common end" of the one learning to philosophise and the one teaching the former how to do so is what the Germans call *Bildung*: cultivation of all that makes us human, an informed, realistic, and clarified sense of who one is, where one comes from, where one is headed, and what one might yet become—which possibility it is the prime unending task of philosophy to explore.

(2323+111 words)

⁷ Grice 1986, 61-2.

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