TEACHING STATEMENT

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"It is not enough that my devotion to you has not helped me at all, but you are now made the victim of the hatred..." — complains Boethius, with the barbarians standing at the gates of Rome and himself sentenced to death. My students often formulate the very same complaint about studying philosophy! With no jobs around, the economy in crisis, they feel rather in need of some practical skills that would help them in these circumstances. My primary aim when teaching is to help students see why philosophy is both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable, be it wartime or economic crisis.

I help students to recognize three things: first, that certain intellectual skills that philosophy develops in us will be able to serve them in many professions; second, that thinkers long dead are interesting in their own right because they show that our current way of thinking has not always been taken for granted; and third, that philosophy points us towards questions that are of utmost importance to us all.

In order to achieve these goals, I often rely on the medieval format of disputed questions. During a *questio disputata*, a student was asked to consider a question (such as: Are human souls immortal? Does God exist? Do we have free will?), consider a variety of opinions that authors had proposed, present and argue for his own position, and finally refute the objections brought up by his peers or some authority. In practice, for instance, when teaching Descartes's *Meditations* on the question of what the human soul is, I assign students for various tasks (the assignment rotates by each topic as the semester goes on). Some of them prepare some background material on the question, that is, what some important thinkers before Descartes had thought about the same problem. Others are asked to formulate an exposition and argument for substance dualism, based on Descartes's text but possibly amended by their own and other students' arguments, while I present the theoretical context in which these arguments were developed. Still others read Mersenne's and Arnauld's objections to Descartes's argument, and are asked to come up with the strongest objections against substance dualism they can. Finally, those who presented the argument in favor of substance dualism have to respond to the objections to the best of their ability.

None of these tasks is easy, and applying this method means that a lot of material is prepared and presented by the students. I have found, however, that they often learn more effectively from each other than from a plain lecture, and that they regard the knowledge acquired this way more as their own. By this method I can also guide them to attain the three aims I set out at the beginning, as I now turn to explain.

First, we can understand arguments and formulate claims and objections clearly only with practice. At the beginning of the semester we have a logic tutorial focusing on argument forms and various fallacies to facilitate this task. That knowledge, however, becomes active only when the students actually need to put forward a *modus tollens* or recognize a *petitio principii*. By reading classical philosophical texts, being continuously confronted with the

arguments of other students, as well as the need to propose their own ones, students develop a clearer way of thinking.

Second, although most students find reading past thinkers initially cumbersome or pointless, as the course progresses they recognize that once we understand Aristotle, Descartes, or Mill, and engage with their positions, they can become lively and puzzling — especially if they seem to provide a good argument for a position that contradicts our own assumptions. Before starting a *questio disputata* unit, I give a detailed historical context for the author to be discussed, which facilitates this recognition. On the one hand, being familiar with such a context, students often become more interested in the philosophy text itself, especially if that particular context connects to their other interests (such as history, the history of science, theology, or literature). On the other hand, by learning, for instance, that early modern mechanics and the Scientific Revolution play a crucial role in Descartes's overall project just as Ptolemaic physics does in Aquinas's, they start to question whether and how our intuitions and arguments today are influenced by other contemporary disciplines such as cognitive science or quantum physics.

Third, by the second half of the semester students start to see that the questions we have been asking have great importance even in their own lives. Some recognize the value of good argumentation (both instrumental and intrinsic), and think that philosophy can help them achieve it. Others become interested in more specific questions: I have had students after a session on physicalism asking how to reconcile it with their religious convictions; or students who on the contrary became worried about their physicalist convictions in light of Aquinas's arguments. Still others realize when trying to live according to an ethical theory for a few days (an assignment I give to the ethics class every semester as part of their ethics papers) that they make very different choices depending on what ethical principle they choose as their guidance.

Thus, overall, I hope that by the end of the semester, my students who originally raised the "philosophy is not at all helpful" complaint, can answer it on their own. First, by seeing that philosophy has some instrumental value by forming in us the habits of clear thinking. Second, by recognizing that philosophy has intrinsic value by constantly questioning our tacit assumptions. Third, by recognizing that philosophical questions are important questions about the human condition, and by thinking about them we can become better human beings. All of which are valuable even in times of war or economic hardship.