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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Tziporah Kasachkoff
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY CENTER, CUNY

Eugene Kelly
NEW YORK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

We welcome readers to the spring 2014 issue of the APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy. In this issue, we present two articles, several poems submitted by a philosophy faculty member, a book review, an informative letter to the editor, and a list of recently published books that may be useful to teachers of philosophy.

Our first article, by Dennis Earl, is entitled “Effective Use of Blogs in Philosophy Courses.” In his article, Earl explains how blogs may be used in philosophy classes to help students improve their skills both in critical thinking and in writing about philosophy. Readers are offered examples of different assignments that Earl uses in three different philosophy courses that he teaches, assignments designed to foster critical assessment of one’s own and one’s fellow students’ positions on particular philosophical questions, and assignments designed to help students produce written work that is both more cohesive and more coherent (criteria he explains in the text of his article). Earl notes the advantages of using blogs, one (of several) of which is the peer review that is afforded by each student’s writing assignment being open to other students’ perusal and critical comment. Earl takes pains in this article to indicate the challenges a faculty member faces in using blogs in the ways he suggests—challenges that are both pedagogical and practical. He helpfully suggests ways that philosophy instructors might meet these challenges.

Our second article, “Imparting Philosophical Values through Online Discussions,” is by Justin Kalef. In this article, Kalef shows how his use of online discussions moves his students closer to his ideal of a “free, rigorous, and fully inclusive philosophical class discussion” than anything he is able otherwise to do. He notes his motivation for using the method that he details and indicates the benefits to be reaped from its use. Additionally, he tells the reader how he selects the questions he uses in his assignments, the criteria he uses in grading students’ work, and how he keeps track of the grades he assigns. A thoughtful and helpful addition is Kalef’s suggestion of ways that his use of online discussion may be used by other philosophy instructors whose course structures are different from his own.

Our third feature in this issue consists of four poems by Felicia Nimue Ackerman, “Professor Superstar,” “Professor Superstar Turns 65,” “Bound for Tenure,” and “Bound for Tenure #2.” With respect to the last two poems, the author has noted, “although some traditionalists seem to think that being a ruthless go-getter is acceptable in men but not in women, some feminists seem to think the opposite.” The publication of the two “Bound for Tenure” poems together would, in her view, “encourage readers to consider their own views on this matter.” On this matter—as on all matters that appear in our newsletter—we encourage our readers to share their views.

Section IV contains Melissa Bergeron’s review of Sarah Barringer Gordon’s The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America. We hope readers will find this review useful if and when considering this book for course preparation and/or classroom use.

In section V, we are happy to publish one of our readers’ comments on, and bibliographical amendments to, an article that appeared in the fall 2012 issue of our newsletter on the teaching of a course on sexual morality. The author of that article welcomes the amendments and clarifies, in a reply letter, what might not have been sufficiently clear concerning the point of including some particular readings in the course described in that article.

Section VI contains our usual list of books received. As always, we encourage our readers to suggest themselves as reviewers of books and other materials that they think may be especially good for classroom use. It is especially useful to receive reviews of materials from philosophy instructors who have used those materials in their own classrooms and so can comment from experience on the merits and/or disadvantages of their use. In reviewing material for our publication, reviewers should bear in mind that our publication is devoted to pedagogy and not to theoretical discussions of philosophical issues.

We warmly encourage our readers to write for our publication. We welcome papers that respond to, comment on, or take issue with any of the material that appears within our pages.

The following guidelines for submissions should be followed:

• The author’s name, the title of the paper, and full mailing address should appear on a separate sheet of paper or, if the paper is sent to the editors electronically, on a note that will not print out within
the text of the paper itself. Nothing that identifies the
author or his or her institution should appear within
the body or within the footnotes/endnotes of the
paper. The title of the paper should appear on the top
of the paper itself.

- Please submit the paper in electronic form. If this
is not possible, four complete copies of the paper
should be sent to one of the co-editors listed below.
Authors should adhere to the production guidelines
that are available from the APA. If you send an article
by post rather than electronically, do not send the
disk on which it was composed. The editors will
request an electronic form of the paper when the
paper is ready to be published. In writing your paper
in electronic form, please do not use your word
processor's footnote or endnote function; all notes
should be added manually at the end of the paper.

- All articles submitted to the newsletter are blind-
reviewed by the members of the editorial committee:

  Tziporah Kasachkoff, co-editor
  The Graduate Center, CUNY
  (tkasachkoff@yahoo.com)

  Eugene Kelly, co-editor
  New York Institute of Technology (ekelly@nyit.edu)

  Robert Talisse
  Vanderbilt University (robert.talisse@vanderbilt.edu)

  Andrew Wengraf
  (andrew.wengraf@gmail.com)

Contributions should be posted to:

Tziporah Kasachkoff, PhD Program in Philosophy, The
Graduate School and University Center, The City University
of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016 or sent
electronically to tkasachkoff@yahoo.com

and/or

Eugene Kelly, New York Institute of Technology, Department of Social Science, Old Westbury, NY 11568 or sent electronically to ekelley@nyit.edu

ARTICLES

Effective Use of Blogs in Philosophy Courses

Dennis Earl
COASTAL CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to show how weblog discussion can be
used effectively in philosophy courses to improve skills in
writing and critical thinking.1 Many instructors incorporate
online asynchronous discussion into their courses already.
From these we can discover the potential for using blogs
beyond mere “discussion” broadly construed, and with this
comes a clearer picture of how to use online discussion
assignments to foster skills typical of philosophy.

My paper is structured as follows. Section 1 outlines the
skills blog assignments may foster. Section 2 surveys
several types of blog assignments. This includes typical
exercises in critically analyzing an argument, and atypical
exercises such as metacognitive exercises and peer review.
I’ll give examples from three different courses: Introduction
to Philosophy, Philosophical Writing, and Business Ethics.
Section 3 addresses various challenges for instructors
regarding blog assignments. I divide the challenges into
(1) pedagogical challenges, for I have found that using
blogs to meet a course’s learning goals is much easier said
than done, and (2) practical challenges, focused mainly on
managing feedback to students.

1. PURPOSES OF USING BLOGS

We assign writing exercises in philosophy courses to
help improve students’ writing skills, critical thinking
skills, and understanding of philosophy. These aims seem
uncontroversial. What of online discussions? The goals seem
broadly the same. Asynchronous discussions are written, so
blogs serve as writing practice. With our prompting, such
as “raise an objection to Descartes’s dreaming argument, or
comment on another student’s objection to that argument,”
we require that the discussion be both critical and directed
at the course’s philosophical content.

When I first assigned blog discussions, the goal was simply
to add more “low stakes” writing to the course (that is,
writing less formal and less daunting than argumentative
essays). I wanted more writing practice for my students
that would be easy on both them and me—easy for them
to write, easy for me to grade (I graded individual posts
and comments pass-fail).2 But I nevertheless designed the
discussion prompts to require discussion of a particular
view, a particular argument or objections to it, or for the
discussion to revolve around applying some concept or
theory to a particular case or scenario. This assignment
thus targets the three general goals stated above. But I also
found that in looking at posts and comments from every
student in the course just prior to each test, I could see what
students understood and what they didn’t. In this way the
discussion serves as a type of classroom assessment
technique.3 There are other purposes blogs can serve, too. If
one assigns formal argumentative papers, a blog can serve
as a place to practice the paper’s components (identify an
argument’s assumptions, offer an objection, etc.) ahead
of the paper assignment itself. Since a blog format is
that of an interactive discussion, students get to practice
the skills of critical discussion. The interaction between
students allows for students them to see different points
of view and practice engaging with each other’s ideas. The
asynchronous nature of an online discussion allows for
students to think much more carefully before participating,
and in my experience I see a much higher quality discussion
online than in a face-to-face classroom discussion.4 In this
way students practice what one might call “real” discussion
itself. This is no small thing, as Brookfield and Preskill point
out. On their view, critical discussion is the foundation of democratic society, and such critical discussion skills are thus essential to cultivate. Even setting that worthy goal aside, blogs offer the opportunity to practice critical thinking, and I see improving those skills as perhaps the single most important goal for any philosophy course.

2. TYPES OF BLOG ASSIGNMENTS (AND EXAMPLES OF PROMPTS)

In any blog assignment, the format typically requires students to make posts of some number and length, and the same for comments on other student posts. Deadlines are each week or at natural topical breaks in the course. Length requirements might be 100–200 words for a minimum, with some specified number of posts and comments during each discussion period.

The discussion prompt dictates the topic. The most natural topic for a philosophical discussion revolves around some argument or position, together with its support and criticism. For example, my students in PHIL 101 might see this topic during our coverage of philosophy of mind:

**Evolution and the mind:** One of our argument extraction exercises asked you about the argument from evolution, an argument in favor of physicalism. It runs like this:

1. If evolution is true, then the mind and mental states are physical.
2. Evolution is true.
3. So, the mind and mental states are physical.

Statement (1) gets its support from the fact that evolution is a theory in science, and science explains things in purely physical terms. For evolution, the explanations come in terms of facts about genetics, past environmental pressures on a population, past population distributions, etc. Since we’re living things with minds, our minds and how they work would have evolutionary explanations too. Why do we like fatty food? Why is the smell of rotting things repulsive? Why is infanticide part of the history of most every human social group in history? Stuff like that gets explained in evolutionary terms, and so it goes potentially for everything else about the mind too. Statement (2) gets its support from the science of the last 150 years.

Is this argument sound? If you think so, consider an objection anyway. If you don’t, then what’s going wrong?

This type of prompt is a “directed” question, where students are told what they’re to discuss. In this case, students are to discuss a specific argument and whether it’s sound. But I don’t find this type of prompt to generate much discussion of the kind we might hope for. (Perhaps it’s because I’ve offered support for the premises already in the prompt, and it’s difficult for students new to philosophy to see an objection here.) Given a choice, students are more likely to participate in something more open-ended and less specific, such as the following prompt from the same course:

**Physical systems that mimic what the mind does:** The mind can do a lot of different things having to do with rationality, calculation, language, memory, “representations” of things external to the mind, and so on. Physicalists (such as Churchland) point to all of the ways machines can mimic those mental capacities, and infer that we have good reason to think the mind is physical. What do you make of this move? We can build lots of things that can do what the mind does. What follows from that?

This topic is more open-ended since it invites students to specify what sorts of physical systems might mimic mental capacities, and also what follows from the existence of such systems. This is less explicitly an “Is the argument sound?”-type topic and more of a “flesh out the details of the argument” topic. We have some examples of physical systems that mimic mental capacities, but how might one construct an argument for physicalism from such cases? What conclusions follow for various types of cases might then be discussed, and the entire exercise involves critical thinking skills. I find much more interaction and much more participation in a topic like this.

I find even more interaction when a discussion prompt invites students to draw connections between a general philosophical issue and their other studies, as in this topic from the same course:

**Our issues related to other things you’re studying:** How does one of our issues in philosophy of mind relate to something you’re studying in another course? It could be a science course, an education course, a business course, or another course from the humanities. Be as specific as you can. The idea is to help you learn in both courses by finding common ground between them. If you’ve come to some conclusion on the issue you’re talking about, offer us an argument for that view.

While this type of topic seems easier for students, it is less of an exercise in critical thinking. I receive genuine arguments from students here, but with less depth than for the topics above. But there are benefits too. Such exercises help “facilitate transfer” (to use a phrase from educational psychology) by way of applying what’s learned in a course to other topics or courses.

A last option in the “typical” topic category is a topic inviting free discussion. The phrasing of such a topic is simple, but note the direction in the following prompt toward argumentative and interactive discussion:

**Free discussion on philosophy of mind:** If you have something to discuss regarding philosophy of mind that doesn’t obviously fall into one of the other topics, post on it here. Commenters, help push the discussion toward some answers, offer new arguments or criticism, or otherwise add more to what we have already.
Despite the second sentence’s direction, I see less argumentative discussion here than in the more directed topics, but students seem to appreciate the freedom to write about what they like. This is probably the most “low-stakes” topic one might offer in an online discussion since there’s very little pressure here—students may write what they like so long as it’s relevant to the course. But such a topic is nonetheless worth including for writing practice, for it provides practice in both critical-thinking skills and basic writing skills, and also allows students to direct their own discussion more freely.

Students may also analyze a case using some specified theory or set of theoretical concepts. The challenge for students is to exercise several higher-level cognitive skills together. Here is an example from Business Ethics, a 300-level course my institution requires of all business students. I use a documentary film on the history of the issue of free versus regulated markets (Commanding Heights, at PBS.org), and students might see the following as a blog topic:

**Is China a counterexample to Friedman’s view?** Ch. 14 of Episode 2 of Commanding Heights includes some interesting things about China. As you probably know, before the 1980s China’s markets were closed to an even greater degree than India’s were before the “permit raj” was abolished. China also had, and still has, a political system that is undemocratic. Individual freedom was, and is, less than we’re familiar with in the West.

Deng Xiaoping, China’s premier in the 1980s, changed half of that. Over time, China was converted to a largely market-oriented economy that was connected with the global economy. The non-democratic political system remained.

This presents a bit of a problem for an important thesis of Friedman’s. He thinks that implementing a free market economic system is guaranteed to lead to a democratic, free society. The political system. Give the people economic liberty, he says, and they’ll get political liberty soon enough. That eventually happened in China. It hasn’t happened in India. It has been over 20 years since Xiaoping implemented various market reforms in China, with tremendous economic results, yet the political system is still repressive and thoroughly undemocratic.

So what gives? Does the case of China show that Friedman’s central thesis is false? Try to rescue Friedman’s view here.

Here we have a historical case and a theory to which it is applied as a counterexample. Students need to understand the facts of the case, a theory, and the method of refutation by counterexample. They then have to consider alternate interpretations of the theory and the case in an effort to save the theory.¹⁰

Of course, there are other ways to incorporate discussion of cases into a blog. One might assign discussion of case studies from textbooks (e.g., in business ethics, contemporary moral issues, or environmental ethics), or instructors might write up their own cases for students to analyze. I’ve done this myself for my Business Ethics course, and I’ve also required students to research and write up their own cases for everyone to analyze.¹¹ I post their cases on the blog as discussion topics, and students then raise issues by way of posts and comments.¹² Having student-generated cases helps to motivate interest (since students get to create some of their own course content) and to keep topics fresh (as I require cases to involve events from the past twelve months).

So far, I have only surveyed blog topics directed at philosophical content and critical thinking skills. But blog topics can be used to build writing skills too. Such an exercise might have students post revisions of something already written, with comments from other students as peer review. In my philosophical writing course (a 200-level course required of our majors), I assigned the following topic as an exercise to help develop skill in cohesive and coherent writing:¹³

(1) Take the passage I gave to you on 9/14 from your own paper #2, and revise it by way of making its sentences more cohesive and the overall passage more coherent.

For cohesion, revise your passage using these two principles from Lesson 4 of W&C:

(a) Begin each sentence with what’s familiar to the reader from what’s already been said—have what’s familiar be the grammatical subject if possible.

(b) Put new and/or complex material at the end of sentences.

For coherence, follow the recipe on p. 42 of W&C. For whole passages:

(a) Have consistent subjects, or a small number of them.

(b) Have a common topic for the whole set of sentences.

(c) Have a topic sentence.

(2) Post the original excerpt from your paper, then paste your revised passage into a comment.

(3) As another comment on the same post, talk us through what you did to improve your original.

(4) For someone else’s revisions, suggest a revision. Put that in a comment on that other student’s revised text from paper #2.

Tasks (1) and (2) are the revising exercises, (3) is a metacognitive exercise (in discussing one’s thoughts during the revising process¹⁴), and (4) is a peer review exercise. Since these are all visible on the blog, students get to see what other students originally wrote, their revisions, and
For it is rare indeed for one
But for
for that thesis, then have another student challenge the
student to assert a thesis, together with a brief argument
ought to inculcate further. 

I have two suggestions. One involves a point I’ve described
above concerning the blog topics one assigns, and the
other involves the assignment structure and communicating
expectations for grading. Topic descriptions can generate
more or less interactive discussion, depending on features
such as the accessibility of the topic, the open-endedness
of the question one poses, the topic’s specificity, and
student interest. My first sample topic description above
asked about an argument for physicalism—the argument
from evolution—and it asked for fairly high-level argument
analysis for PHIL 101 (What objections are there to the
premises? What reply might a physicalist give? How might
the critic reply to the reply?, etc.). Students flock to other
topics when given a choice. The second example asks
students to consider the implications of physical systems
that mimic mental capacities, and this topic generates
much more participation and interaction. Students are
able to cite any number of different examples of systems
that mimic cognition, and there are many inferences one
might think the existence of such things supports or not.
The third and fourth examples above were less directed
at argumentative work and more at having students draw
correlations with other areas of interest (the third example)
and discussing whatever they find of interest related to the
general topic of that part of the course (the fourth example).
More interaction and criticism of each other’s arguments
takes place here than on a topic such as my first example.
The details of the discussion prompt have a great effect on
how much students practice the argumentative skills we
want them to develop.

The topic on China and Friedman’s views involves a case
to be considered in light of a theory. Interaction of the
argumentative sort happens often here, because while
the objection to Friedman is easy to see, there are many
different concerns to raise as to whether the objection
can be sustained or not. One has many options here, and
many of them seem to be accessible from the students’ point
of view. (Perhaps the argumentative tool of objecting by citing
possible counterexamples is more familiar than the tools
one might need for analyzing the argument from evolution.)
Where students generate the content through their own
own case studies, a respectable amount of argumentative
interaction takes place. Perhaps this is due to the students
tending to choose topics that the other students find
interesting, or perhaps the students tend to choose topics
where the issues are accessible to other students. But
whatever reason, student-generated case studies seem to
maximize the chances of fruitful discussion.
Another suggestion is to communicate the expectations for the discussion clearly through venues such as the syllabus, instructions for the discussions, a grading rubric, and the instructor’s own participation. The structure of the discussion assignment itself can maximize discussion of the type that requires the use of critical thinking skills. If we hope to have interactive critical discussion, it might not be best to grade or score posts and comments individually. For if one gives grades for individual discussion posts and comments, and then a course or section grade generated from those individual grades, how does one provide incentives for interactive discussion? We should not demand that each individual post or comment considers other students’ ideas, for we want to allow students to offer new lines of argument or to offer new topics for discussion (as in “free discussion”-type topics). A “real discussion” might include brief questions of clarification or criticism. One might ignore such questions in the grading (which seems wrong if such contributions are valuable) or require that a post have a minimum length if it is to count toward some minimal number of discussion contributions (which discourages short comments).

One answer to this problem is to grade more holistically, with grades and instructor feedback given for whole sets of discussion contributions instead of for individual posts and comments. Compare the grading rubrics in appendices A and B. The rubric in appendix A has pass-fail grading for individual posts and comments, and the rubric in appendix B has letter grading for sets of discussion contributions instead. Holistic grading has the effect of allowing the instructor to include elements of interactive discussion into the grading incentives, and in my experience there is more interaction, more argumentative give-and-take, a more natural flow to the discussion, and more progress on the issue at hand. Holistic grading also solves the problem that students often wait until the afternoon of the due date (I have my due dates late in the evening) to begin making posts and comments. This is discouraging to students who want to have an earlier discussion, or just want to complete the assignment early, and it is discouraging to me in that I simply don’t see much genuine interaction when upwards of 150 discussion contributions are made in 6–8 hours. With holistic grading, one sees a more even distribution of contributions across the discussion period because that expectation can be explicitly specified in advance. The rubric in appendix B describes how one might communicate these expectations.

The other general challenges of having blog discussions in one’s courses are practical ones. These include managing the feedback to students, and this involves managing grading and the extent of instructor participation. Consider grading first. In my early experiments with adding a blog component to my PHIL 101, I still had to evaluate 9–10 pages of writing per student over the semester. With more substantive requirements for content and argumentation, grammar and mechanics, and style, the burden becomes the same as grading formal papers. If one adds criteria concerned with interactive discussion among students, the grading load could well be higher than that for grading formal papers.

So long as various components of interactive argumentative discussion are to be part of the grading scheme, no solutions to the problem of time seem possible. But one option is to use pass-fail grading. My own scheme for many semesters was a satisfactory-unsatisfactory division, with each post and comment receiving an S or a U. Later I added an S+ category (as a way to earn extra credit) in order to reward excellent contributions and motivate discussion beyond whatever students would identify as minimally required. (See appendix A.) I specified a satisfactory post or comment essentially as a clearly reasoned contribution of at least 150 words with fewer than two “fatal errors.” A fatal error is one of a short list of very noticeable grammatical and mechanical errors (e.g., misusing the apostrophe). I reserved S+ grades for very substantial contributions that exhibited clarity of argument and uniqueness of content that I judged to go well beyond the expected level of discussion. On this type of grading scheme, grading becomes a matter of reading the discussion, scanning for length and errors in the writing, and with an eye for identifying excellent work, and recording the grades for individual posts and comments. The grade for a group of posts and comments is then a function of individual S’s and U’s (e.g., three S’s = 100; two S’s and one U = 80). This cuts down on the grading load somewhat, but the record keeping is still very extensive. I typically have five content sections to PHIL 101 (logic and the nature of philosophy, knowledge, mind, free will, ethics), with five topics per content section, and with students required to make three contributions per set of topics per content section. The spreadsheet for tracking the posts and comments of 75–100 students per semester becomes quite large.

What of evaluating student discussion on the basis of criteria I gave at the outset and in other parts of this paper—namely, criteria tied to the details of argumentative discussion rather than just saying something in at least 150 words? That seems to require holistic grading, or grading in terms of sets of contributions from each student, say over a week’s time or a content section’s time. I’ve experimented with this with some success in my business ethics course; I used this technique to push students to pay attention to other students’ arguments and thus to the discussion and where to take it. (See appendix B for a grading rubric.) The differences between the holistic approach and the scheme of grading posts and comments individually are that critical interaction is explicitly expected, as is ongoing participation (rather than in the final hours before a deadline). Grading is by the standard set of letter grades as well, which allows for finer-grained distinctions than satisfactory-unsatisfactory. While I specify a minimal number of contributions, I encourage short comments if a student so desires, but in exchange for more contributions overall.

In addition to giving letter grades or scores as feedback, written comments and suggestions from the instructor offer additional feedback. For blog discussions graded by individual post or comment, one does not have to comment on every contribution. Making general remarks to individual students on the whole of their contributions seems easiest and most effective, and if one needs to give feedback directed at particular posts or comments, course management systems (such as Blackboard or...
Moodle) allow for this. Written feedback on groups of discussion contributions fits well with the holistic grading scheme mentioned above. One might also provide general responses/remarks to the entire class. Such general remarks might be used to generate further online discussion if one gives such general feedback as a separate blog topic, and this can also save time answering questions about course assignments.

Another kind of feedback comes from instructor participation. But how much? Better to err on the side of more discussion rather than less! The empirical data support this: Instructor “presence,” especially in a course that is completely online, correlates very highly with both students’ and instructors’ perceptions of the effectiveness of online discussion. Of course, one need not answer every student’s question and clarify every student’s misconception, for that would rob students of the chance to learn from their mutual interaction. Brookfield and Preskill’s suggestions for in-person discussions can help guide us here, too. For instance, if a string of student posts defend one side of an issue, instead of the instructor posting an opposing view, she might simply ask the group to say what the defense of the opposing position would be. This practice encourages more higher-level thinking (in this case, considering alternative views undiscussed as yet), and fits with Darabi et al.’s research on various online-discussion formats. One of their discussion strategies, which they call “scaffolded” discussion, includes participation by the instructor or a student mentor that pushes the discussion toward higher-level thinking. So for the instructor to suggest where the discussion should go seems appropriate. The degree of such participation will vary with the course, the institution, and one’s students.

The reader may object that it seems as if I’ve advocated meeting the challenge of managing grading and other types of feedback by having a minimalist grading scheme (pass-fail, or satisfactory-unsatisfactory); however, I’ve also advocated an expansive project of promoting argumentative discussion by having a holistic grading scheme and fairly extensive feedback to students. Can one have it both ways? Can there be a simple scheme for efficient grading and written feedback that also promotes careful, interactive, argumentative discussion?

My own answer is “probably not,” especially if one’s students typically need good feedback to learn and practice the basic components of an argumentative discussion. The simple pass-fail scheme I outlined above is efficient at the cost of some interaction. I don’t see a way to include the elements of the more holistic grading scheme into one in which individual posts and comments each receive a grade. One might give general feedback to each student on the whole of their contributions, but this might not give students an incentive to interact with each other more. Another possibility would be to grade individual posts and comments but have a separate grade for “argumentative interaction” that evaluates more discussion-oriented skills. But this adds another layer of grading for each student. What to do? I take the main lessons of Brookfield and Preskill’s book on discussion to be that authentic and productive student discussion in one’s classes is an enormously difficult to cultivate, but also that the gains for students can be well worth the effort. Asynchronous online discussions can succeed in developing knowledge of content, writing skills, metacognition. But students will not have productive philosophical discussions online without significant work from the instructor.

CONCLUSION
To sum up, I hope to have made some helpful remarks about some purposes and positive features of online discussions that make them not only worth considering as a reasonable course component, but an effective one at meeting broader course goals. I’ve also suggested a number of types of blog topics that I myself have found effective in cultivating student discussion that is both interactive and argumentative. Some of my suggested topics include those directed at developing writing skills—peer review and metacognitive assignments need not be off-limits for student discussion on a blog. My last section offered suggestions by way of meeting pedagogical and practical challenges to blog discussion assignments. This is the “objections and replies” section, as some of the barriers I sense in instructors’ minds to having asynchronous discussions are just the sorts of challenges I mention. I hope to have mitigated those challenges in that section, with the paper as a whole making the case for a broader use of blogs in philosophy courses at all levels.
APPENDIX A: GRADING RUBRIC FOR SATISFACTORY-UNSATISFACTORY GRADING OF DISCUSSIONS
(PHIL 101: INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY)

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<td>Is the terminology of</td>
<td>The post or comment</td>
<td>The post or comment</td>
<td>The post or comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>philosophy used properly and</td>
<td>uses the correct</td>
<td>generally uses the correct</td>
<td>shows an extensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when necessary?</td>
<td>terminology where</td>
<td>terminology where</td>
<td>misunderstanding of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>appropriate, and in</td>
<td>appropriate.</td>
<td>terminology of the course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>all cases.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the reasoning clear?</td>
<td>The reasoning is very</td>
<td>The reasoning is clear, but</td>
<td>The reasoning is extremely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clear, with easily</td>
<td>more support for the point</td>
<td>unclear or unintelligible,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>comprehensible</td>
<td>was appropriate.</td>
<td>or there isn’t any apparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>premises given in</td>
<td></td>
<td>reasoning present at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>support of its thesis.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are the basic rules of writing</td>
<td>The post has one or no</td>
<td>The post has three or fewer</td>
<td>The post has more than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being followed?</td>
<td>fatal errors. [see</td>
<td>fatal errors.</td>
<td>three fatal errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>below]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long is the post or</td>
<td>The post or comment is</td>
<td>The post or comment is at</td>
<td>The post or comment is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comment?</td>
<td>at least 150 words in</td>
<td>least 150 words in length.</td>
<td>under 150 words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>length.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is a fatal error? So-called “fatal errors” are significant errors most any reader would notice, and they should always be avoided in professional writing. I will be watching for such errors and grading accordingly. These are fatal errors:

- misspelled words
- run-on sentences and sentence fragments
- errors using the comma
- errors using the apostrophe
- agreement errors (especially for use of verbs and pronouns)
- mistakes in capitalization

Other mistakes might be counted as fatal too, but these are the main ones to always avoid.
APPENDIX B: GRADING RUBRIC FOR HOLISTIC GRADING OF DISCUSSIONS  
(PHIL 318: BUSINESS ETHICS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions I ask for each set of contributions</th>
<th>Excellent (A)</th>
<th>Good to acceptable (B to C)</th>
<th>Needs work (D to F)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How many posts and comments?</td>
<td>At least 4, perhaps more (and especially if the comments are short)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fewer than 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often are contributions made to the discussion?</td>
<td>Contributions are spread across several days of the discussion period at least.</td>
<td>Contributions are made over just a short period, especially all at the end of the discussion period.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the posts and comments add to the discussion?</td>
<td>Yes, and the points made are all unique and insightful, ideally offering a crucial point that helps resolve the issue at hand.</td>
<td>Yes, the points made add some new content to the discussion.</td>
<td>No—The posts or comments generally just restate earlier points of discussion, or add little that's new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the comments engage critically with other student posts and comments?</td>
<td>Yes, comments are directed at the content and reasoning of the post or with other comments. The comments offer reasonable criticism or consider possible criticism. Comments replying to earlier things you’ve said are especially welcome.</td>
<td>No—Comments offer little or no critical engagement with the post or earlier comments.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the posts and comments show good understanding of the topic at hand?</td>
<td>Yes, and at a level of detail and accuracy demonstrating a deep and detailed understanding of the topic.</td>
<td>Yes, the post or comment demonstrates a competent understanding of the topic.</td>
<td>No—The content shows just a superficial understanding of the topic (or none at all).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are the facts and theories stated accurately?</td>
<td>Yes, and with no errors.</td>
<td>Yes, though there might be minor errors in discussing or stating the relevant facts and theories.</td>
<td>No—There are significant errors in discussing or stating the relevant facts and theories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long are the posts and comments?</td>
<td>Posts: Around 100 words at least (and longer than 300 words is probably too much)</td>
<td>Comments: less than 100 words is ok (especially if it’s a very good point that can be made concisely), but not too short! (If you think your comments are too short, have more of them!)</td>
<td>Most or all posts and comments are simple, short contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are the basic rules of writing being followed?</td>
<td>No fatal errors [see above, Appendix A]</td>
<td>One or two fatal errors per post/comment</td>
<td>More than two fatal errors per post/comment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Portions of this paper were presented at an AAPT group session at the 2013 APA Pacific Division meeting. I thank those in attendance for the productive discussion, especially Justin Kalef and Jessica Katz (the other presenters in the session), and also Andrew Carpenter (for proposing the session). Thanks also to the newsletter’s editors and several anonymous referees for their helpful comments and recommendations.

NOTES
1. The points below apply equally well to threaded discussions, but I focus on blogs as that is my own preferred type of online discussion assignment.
2. The term “practice” here is intended in the sense used in the education literature. Writing practice includes most any assigned writing targeted at the course goals. Formal argumentative essays are “higher stakes” practice at exercising skills at exposition and critical thinking. Blog posts and comments serve as “lower stakes” practice for the same skills. A 200-word blog post is writing practice, and so is a 20-word incisive question. The term also signifies practice at writing in general, whatever the purpose happens to be. Most of us would agree that students could use more of this.
3. In the sense of Angelo and Cross, Classroom Assessment Techniques.
4. I thus second Carpenter, "Online Discussion," who makes the same observation. I can also say anecdotally that the quality of the student discussion tends to improve as the course proceeds. For a survey of advantages and disadvantages of synchronous vs. asynchronous discussion, and strategies for maximizing the strengths of online discussion, see Darabi et al., “Cognitive Presence in Asynchronous Online Learning.”

5. Brookfield and Preskill, Discussion as a Way of Teaching. For further discussion of what “quality discussion” might be by way of instructor and student perceptions, see Nandi et al., Evaluating the Quality of Interaction in Asynchronous Discussion Forums. For different ways of evaluating the quality of online discussion, see Nandi et al., “Conceptual Framework.” An objection one might raise here and in what follows is that I focus almost exclusively on so-called “higher-level” thinking skills. See Darabi et al., “Cognitive Presence” for recommendations on several “discussion strategies” or formats that I don’t discuss below, such as discussions involving role-playing and debate (both with and without roles). I went with these formats myself, but their results suggest that such discussion formats promote higher-level thinking more than mere discussion prompts without participation from the instructor or a graduate student mentor.

6. One would like to cite empirical data supporting the use of online discussions to improve student learning compared with synchronous classroom discussions and traditional paper assignments. But from my review of the literature, this sort of data doesn’t exist as yet. On comparing the degree to which different types of online discussion assignments build critical-thinking skills, see Darabi et al., “Cognitive Presence.”

7. The argument and its name is from an excerpt from Churchland, Matter and Consciousness. Students would have read the article and had a class day devoted to this argument and others in support of physicalism.

8. The argument is again from Churchland (ibid.).

9. See Ch. 4 of Ambrose et al., How Learning Works.

10. Alert readers may notice that the prompt suggests a misread of Friedman’s view, which isn’t that free markets guarantee political liberty in the long run, but instead that free-market economies tend toward more political liberty in the long run. This is a point well taken, and in fact students have pointed out as much in their discussions of this case. One might also ask what other knowledge students have in hand in order to discuss a case like this. The documentary provides quite a bit, but business students often discuss China’s economy and government in their own courses, and they also may conduct their own research to support their discussion.

11. The idea was from Lang, “Teaching Students,” with the basic idea then applied to having cases discussed asynchronously.

12. A difficulty here is that if each student submits a case, the number of cases grows very large in anything other than a small course. The subsequent discussion then might be spread too thinly across the cases. But one can divide students into discussion groups, and require discussion just of the cases in one’s own group. Or, of some number of required posts or comments, one might assign students to comment or post on a particular case, with freedom of choice in discussing others. Grading and giving feedback becomes very complex too, but I’ll address this further in section 3 below.

13. The terms are from Williams and Colomb, Style (abbreviated “W&C” in the topic prompt to follow). In their usage, a passage is cohesive if its components fit together in the sense that some call “flow.” Two sentences are cohesive if the content of the first sentence hooks up with the next. A passage is coherent if it’s focused on a single topic or argumentative task, and that focus is easy to see. (Compare incoherence with unintelligible. We can’t understand what’s unintelligible. We can understand what’s incoherent, but it’s not easy to do.) An analogy: In a jigsaw puzzle, two connected pieces are cohesive. One piece hooks to the other. When the whole puzzle is complete, we see the whole picture—that’s coherence. Coherence is necessary but not sufficient for coherence.

14. See Ambrose et al., How Learning Works, ch. 7, for discussion of further examples of metacognitive exercises, as well as discussion of the empirical research suggesting the value of such exercises.

15. Brookfield and Preskill, Discussion as a Way of Teaching.

16. What makes a topic accessible? There might be many ways: An “accessible” topic might be one that students have already considered in another course or in their extra-curricular lives, or is in some way already part of their background knowledge. Or, if a topic is unfamiliar, it still might be accessible in that students can grasp it using their existing skills and knowledge.

17. See Walvoord and Anderson, Effective Grading, ch. 7, for other strategies.

18. The term “fatal error” is from Cholbi, “A ‘Fatal Error’ Policy.” My chosen list of fatal errors is in Appendix A. One might of course have looser standards for basic writing skills.

19. Mandernach et al., “An Examination of Online Instructor Presence,” includes a summary of some of the relevant results.

20. Brookfield and Preskill, Discussion as a Way of Teaching.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Imparting Philosophical Values through
Online Discussions

Justin Kalef
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Easy student access to the Internet can be both a blessing and a curse for philosophy instructors. The curse—the ever-present source of student distraction outside and inside the classroom—is often noted.¹ I do my best to ward off that vice by forbidding the use of electronics altogether in my classes. Finding the blessing can be more difficult, as many suggested uses for teaching technologies seem to be either desperate attempts to reach out to disaffected students, or else impersonal means for efficiently handling sections whose enrollments are simply too high for any traditional pedagogical methods. However, eight years ago, at the suggestion of some students, I began to experiment with my university’s online resources. After much trial and error, during which the online-discussion component of my courses moved from an “extra” for keen students to a central part of teaching and evaluation, I tentatively arrived at a formulation that seems to bring students into the practice of doing philosophy more efficiently than my previous teaching methods ever did. Indeed, over the last few years of using these techniques, it has been a routine occurrence for me to come to class to find that my students—most of whom had no prior training or interest in philosophy—have arrived early so that they can continue to pursue in person their previous online discussions. They politely grill A on whether she can legitimately resist B’s objection to her argument, and so on. The first time I saw this happen, I was very surprised. But I soon realized that my online-assignment structure had, without my entirely recognizing it up to that point, moved closer to my ideal of a free, rigorous, and fully inclusive philosophical class discussion than anything I am able to do without the use of electronics.

In this article, I will explain this method in detail. In section 1, I will set out the motivation for my approach. In section 2, I will present the bare mechanics of the method. In section 3, I will discuss some further benefits of using the method, explaining along the way my reasons for some of the structure discussed in section 2. In section 4, I will fill in some finer technical details of the method, showing (a) how I select questions, (b) how I grade the work, (c) how I offer feedback efficiently, and (d) how I keep track of grades for ongoing student work (a surprisingly difficult matter in the free-flowing sort of discussion that the method involves). Finally, in section 5, I will suggest some variations on the method that may fit in better with other teaching styles or course structures.

1. THE BASIC IDEA
Imagine that you are rewarded by the gods with unlimited time, endless resources, and even perfect philosophical abilities, and that you are set the single task of teaching philosophy to a single student as effectively and swiftly as possible. What teaching method would you adopt? If, like me, you hold it to be more important that students learn to do philosophy than that they learn about philosophers, an idealized Socratic approach should naturally suggest itself. You would tempt the student to make some claim on a relevant philosophical topic, and then raise a possible difficulty with the claim, encouraging a response to the difficulty, to which you present another possible difficulty, and so on. Through asking the right questions and raising the right difficulties, you guide the student through as much of philosophy as you please, in as much detail as you please, and the student steadily gains genuine philosophical skill at a good rate.

However, even under perfect circumstances, this idealized Socratic Method has its weaknesses. The difficulties presented to the student must be serious enough that she feels uncomfortable leaving them unresolved, but she must also feel that she has a real hope of overcoming them. She must be kept at just the right level of philosophical tension: too tight or too slack, and she will disengage. It is difficult for an instructor to consistently produce challenges at just the right level to keep the game interesting, and nearly impossible to keep the student from suspecting, through induction, that the instructor will always have a counter to the counter that the whole game is ultimately hopeless. For this reason, it may be easier for my idealized teacher to work with two equally talented students simultaneously. Just as students learning to play chess will have more fun (and may learn more) playing against similarly ranked opponents than against a teacher of master strength whom they know they have little chance of beating, students of philosophy tend to benefit from debating against one another, with the instructor stepping in largely to keep them on track or to help them analyze their games after the fact. True, the two students may find they agree on some topics and have a difficult time arguing from, or even conceiving of, other perspectives. But this can easily be dealt with by bringing in other students. The more students who take part in the discussion, the greater the chance that one of them will be able to mount a defense of an interesting position that others did (and perhaps could) not.

Following this reasoning, it seems that a group of twenty or thirty students would have some advantages over a group of one, two, or three. Moreover, a larger group of engaged philosophical amateurs tends to have more fun and to generate a positive group identity. However, as every experienced instructor knows, larger class sizes generally bring with them a number of problems that counteract these benefits. Among these problems are the following:

(a) Discussions in larger classes tend to be hard to follow because the dialectic is so disjointed. A speaks, then B presents a point irrelevant to A’s, then C presents a short speech that turns out to have nothing to do with the topic of discussion, then D tries to respond to A which E mistakenly attacks as responding to B’s point, followed by F commenting on some unrelated part of the readings that he thinks was connected to C’s weird monologue, etc.

(b) Since only one person can speak at once, some students may have to spend a great deal of time waiting to make their point, and if the point is an
interesting and relevant one that happens to be
tangential to the main thread of discussion, it may be
given short shrift.

(c) It is difficult to prevent a subset of students from
dominating the conversation, which requires (or
allows) others to take a back seat and miss out on the
class discussion.

(d) Because of (c) students who need the most personal
attention from the instructor tend to get the least in
the classroom setting.

Fortunately, online resources like Moodle, WebCT, or
Blackboard allow for a way to reap the benefits of large
discussions without these problems through the following
features:

- Discussion threads are kept separate and students
can jump in exactly where they want to with the forum
structure making clear who is responding to whom;
- Everyone can contribute at once, so there is no need
to wait before joining a discussion;
- Everyone can be encouraged—and actually
required!—to participate to whatever extent the
instructor pleases, so there is no way to hide behind
others; and
- Students whose comments show the most confusion
in understanding a particular idea or technique can receive ample personal attention from the instructor
without having the more advanced students wait
impatiently for the main thread of discussion to
continue.

The main idea behind the method is to use these resources
in a way that satisfies these four desiderata.

2. THE METHOD IN OUTLINE

In the evening after the final class of each week, I post
one or more topical questions under new headings on our
online forum. Over the course of the term, I post some
twenty or thirty questions. Students have the opportunity
to post answers to as many questions as they like as often
as they like, to object to other students’ posts, or to defend
their own posts against objections. They may address either
new or old topics, as they wish. Students receive a grade of
up to ten points for each posted answer (“post”), another
grade of up to ten points for each objection to another
student’s post, and still another grade of up to ten points
for each defense of an earlier post. Their final grade on the
online component of the course is the sum, out of thirty
points, of their highest grade on a post, their highest grade
on an objection, and their highest grade on a defense. They
are permitted to respond to the same question, object to
the same post, etc., more than once.

The central requirement for these contributions is that
each initial post must answer the exact question set,
and each contribution of any kind must do some original
argumentative work (presenting an argument, improving
an argument, objecting to a premise of an argument, and
so on).

Some students have a tendency to repeat themselves
needlessly or to include nonessential information in their
contributions (perhaps out of habit, after years of puffing
up their writing to meet minimum word counts). These
longer, rambling submissions frequently kill discussion
threads as other students do not want to wade through
the bog, and risk losing points by missing a relevant
argument. This problem can easily be avoided by using a
low maximum word limit. In particular, I have found the
following standards to be effective:

(1) Contributions are recommended to be at least
150 words long, but there is no penalty for shorter
contributions that make their points effectively. I
recently gave an A+ to a twenty-seven-word objection
that simply devastated the post to which it responded.

(2) A contribution between 150 and 300 words is
standard. Contributions between 300 and 350 words
are permitted, but will be analyzed closely for style. If
I am able to rewrite such a contribution with even one
less word without loss of meaning, the contribution
loses a point (two points if I can demonstrate that the
same thing could have been said within the specified
count of 300 words).

(3) Contributions above 350 words automatically lose
two points, and every word beyond the 350th
is immediately deleted from the forum. I do not
consider the deleted sections when grading such a
contribution.²

With these measures in place, the pace of discussion
remains lively and students learn the useful art of concise
writing.

A crucial point is that all contributions to these discussions
must be original. A contribution that merely shows that the
student has perfectly understood the readings, lecture,
class discussion, and online discussion up to that point
is eligible for only a low D grade (50 percent) at best. Of
course, this means that if two students make the same
point in the same thread, the first one can earn a high
grade while the second will be lucky to pass. This, it turns
out, can effectively motivate students to contribute to the
discussion early and check in on it regularly.

Students receive feedback on an ongoing basis (more
on this below). They are welcome to use suggestions
contained in my feedback to improve the quality of later
contributions. If they do, then they do not receive credit for
any ideas I offer them (though they do receive credit for the
original way they develop those ideas). To give students a
fair shot at an original contribution, instructors using this
method must develop the habit of keeping silent for a time
and providing just enough hints for students to find the
best response themselves.

3. SOME FURTHER BENEFITS OF THE METHOD

In addition to ensuring that all students engage in
philosophical dialogue and making the dialectic of large-group discussions more perspicuous and educative, the method has some additional benefits.

First, students come to view philosophical debates as emanating from their own concerns and disagreements rather than from writings of long-dead thinkers. The new questions that appear each week are largely based on debates students initiate with one another (or with me) in class, and are correctly seen by the students as a continuation of those conversations.

Second, the practice of engaging in genuine philosophical disagreement in a moderated setting for essential class credit encourages personal growth rather than mere dialectical skill. Last year, for instance, I taught an introductory course in which a fundamentalist Muslim student had a heated online debate with a liberal atheist student. I made clear in my comments on the thread that, while their debating energy was admirable, the participants were not making their points very effectively. The arguments both sides presented, as I showed, were rather weak; moreover, they were letting sarcasm and insults do the work for them, which was philosophically unacceptable. The realization that they would not earn good grades for this sort of work, together with each student’s conviction that he was right, prompted both of them to refine their arguments more carefully, ensure that they had taken the time to understand one another charitably, and see whether there was a decisive move that could be made against the best version of the other’s position or argument. While those students never resolved their disagreement entirely, they began to relate to one another in a respectful and friendly way in class and even to try defending each other’s views against third party attacks. Both students told me personally later on that the philosophical friendship that emerged between them, in itself, made the course a memorable and important one for them. An online forum can not only bring about these discussions between students who might never otherwise engage with one another. It can leave room for the various parties to reflect a while before answering in haste (particularly when they know they will be graded on the quality and care of their answers).

Third, allowing students many chances to write short assignments, with only their best assignments counting toward their final grade, makes it possible to hold them to a higher standard. With several rounds of critical but encouraging feedback, I have had many more, initially marginal, students develop strong skills in philosophical writing and reasoning than in earlier, essay-oriented courses.

Fourth, adopting the method greatly reduces the need to worry about plagiarism. Since the topic questions to which the initial posts respond are generally developments of idiosyncratic class discussions, and since the objections and defenses are responses to specific points raised by others in class (none of which can be repeated for a grade higher than 50 percent), students seldom see much point in trying to copy others’ work. Also, the inevitable irrelevance of contributions plagiarized from outside sources makes them very easy to spot. Moreover, since the questions, posts, and objections are different in each section, dishonest students have little to gain by trying to resubmit the work of students from other, earlier, sections.

Finally, the method makes grading far more enjoyable, beneficial, and interesting for the instructor. In grading these short submissions, the instructor cannot help but enter into the dialectic herself, sometimes discovering surprising resources for her own research in the process: students entering a dispute for the first time can often raise unusual objections that require a response that, once stated, can have unforeseen, fascinating, and important philosophical implications. Moreover, the work to be graded at any time is diverse. This makes it easier for graders to keep more focused and interested than they would be in, say, grading through a stack of twenty-five essays on Descartes’s first argument for dualism.

4. LOGISTICS

I turn now to the details of using the method, which I group under four headings: (a) asking the right questions, (b) grading, (c) giving feedback, and (d) recording grades.

4A. ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

When there has been a lively class discussion on some particular point, or when a student has made a point in class that seems particularly controversial (even if the other students did not immediately pick up on this), a question preceded by a brief preamble that clarifies the nature of the tension is likely to provoke student interest. For instance: suppose that a student in class argues for religious agnosticism on the grounds that there is no empirical evidence for God’s existence one way or another but that there is no time to explore this interesting suggestion in class because the day’s class discussion topic is the problem of evil and that the thread of conversation never returns there. A good online question could be made of testing the principle “One should always be agnostic where there is no empirical evidence one way or another on some issue” and asking whether students are satisfied with what the principle would say about invisible Spiderman (who is just like the comic book character except that he acts in secret and is invisible). Such questions tend to provoke interesting revisions or defenses of the original principle, motivate other students to find clever counterexamples to the new versions of the principle, and so on.

Other good questions can come from various sources. An article in the newspaper that touches on the topics discussed in class can stimulate a good, refreshing discussion. (For example, have students follow a link to an article about a protest and pose the question “Are the protesters justified? Defend your answer.”) Interesting class discussion topics that the instructor didn’t find time to introduce are another natural source of questions. Students can even be lured into debating a research idea of professional interest to the instructor, if that idea can be articulated clearly enough to be easily understood by the students (which is a useful exercise for the instructor, of course).

Among the more difficult questions posed for the students, it is useful to include a sprinkling of questions that have a clear and definite answer that middle-range
students would be expected to discover after a few days of investigation/discussion. The satisfaction of refuting a bad argument or of recognizing a fallacy that has already been discussed in a different context tends to be an exciting reward for student work and helps bring out the fun of philosophy while forestalling the objection that philosophical debate never establishes anything. Once these "puzzle" questions have been solved, the instructor should clearly note this by changing the title of the thread and indicating in a final post that no further points should be posted on the topic unless a student can find a way to revive the debate after, say, the devastating response of Student X.

If some of the questions are rather technical, it is particularly important to have others that would be immediately accessible even to someone who has understood relatively little of the course so far. The availability of such questions encourages the less talented students to overcome their fears and get their feet wet, so to speak. To be fair, students answering these simpler questions can be graded slightly less leniently, on the grounds that they have not attempted the most difficult tasks. This general rule can be explained in advance, so as to motivate the more ambitious students to try the more difficult questions.

4B. GRADING
As mentioned above, a great benefit of the method is that it makes it possible to hold students to very high standards and then to help them meet those standards. I warn students in advance that they should expect very poor scores at first while they get the hang of it, but inform them that my final class averages tend to be reasonably high for those students who regularly put in solid work and use my feedback to improve. No matter how clear and painstaking I am about what I am looking for, the first submissions of about half the students will be incoherent, clearly unoriginal, irrelevant, or unconcerned with argumentation. Anything like this receives a grade between zero and one point (out of a possible ten points), and some students post three or four submissions before they earn a point greater than one. I have found that accompanying these very low F grades with clear instructions on how to improve and reminders (both private and public) that many students who begin on this bad footing end up doing well can help restore the students' sense that they can learn to do the work effectively. When hard-working students succeed in moving from low Fs to Bs and As, their pride and increased commitment to the course is palpable.

Unoriginal contributions—those that merely repeat what has already been said in the text, the lectures, our class discussions, or previous contributions—earn five points at best. Students can also lose up to three points for bad grammar or weak proofreading (or more points if the errors are so serious as to leave it unclear what the student is trying to say at any point). Students are advised to treat every contribution as a piece of craftsmanship. After a few strong contributions that lose points for proofreading errors, frustrated students often become obsessed with checking and double-checking their work. Since students spend most of the term trying to improve their grades, work that is graded no higher than previous work is as useful to their overall grade as no work at all—a point they tend to recognize very early on.

It sometimes happens that particularly strong students, in their zeal to earn perfect tens, spend days prowling online and waiting for weaker students to make an error that they can definitively refute before anyone else catches it. When students develop the habit of doing this particularly well, I generally make positive note of it by awarding these students tens. These more advanced students are then free to focus on other course activities, while the up-and-coming students still in the game are left in an environment more conducive to their development.

In a large class with several submissions from each student, it can be time-consuming to privately notify each student about each of her grades. In such cases, I generally let students know that I will only notify them about grades that improve their overall scores.

4C. GIVING FEEDBACK
Feedback on these forum contributions is best given publicly. In the discussion threads themselves. This serves two purposes. First, all students are able to benefit from the instructor’s response, not just the student who submitted the work in question. Second, the instructor’s work becomes much more efficient this way: instead of clicking through to a private message to each student, the instructor can simply read through a thread of discussion and comment on a range of new comments in a single post.

At first, some students may feel anxiety or embarrassment at having their work critiqued in public. I have always been able to overcome this fairly easily by doing two things: First, I ensure that everyone receives critical feedback early on, no matter how good their answers are. Second, I offer my criticisms very gently and constructively, accompanying them with praise where appropriate. Even where there is nothing to praise, it is possible to mention a post in a constructive manner (e.g., “This looks interesting, but I’m not sure I can make out what you’re saying. Perhaps you could paraphrase it?” or “I don’t yet see how this relates to the question. Could you please make that clearer?”).

Of course, one must never publicly disclose the grade any student has received on his or her work. Offering feedback in this context is similar to moderating and participating in a class discussion. While other students might sometimes glean from your response to a student’s comment whether you think the comment a good one, there are so many such comments in a course that you can safely engage in discussion without worrying that your criticism or praise of a particular point will reveal the student’s overall class participation grade. However, while critical feedback should be gentle, it must not sacrifice clarity. The central aim of any feedback should be to help the student figure out how to write a better post, and feedback that fails to show how to do this can leave students frustrated. At the same time, it is best to resist the urge to correct students’ elementary blunders immediately. Where possible, this should be left as low-hanging fruit for other students looking for ways to fulfill their objection quota. In general, any comments or
feedback you make that could have been made instead by a student should be left as work for the students.

Of course, some views or arguments are liable to tricky refutations that students at the level of the course in question may be unlikely to see for themselves. If enough time has gone by without anyone coming up with a refutation, then it can be helpful to provide the first half of the refutation, and leave it to a diligent student to discover and present the coup de grace.

In general, it is best for instructors' comments on student contributions to appear five to ten days after the contributions have been added. Jumping in earlier can rob students of an opportunity to make the same point, though it is useful to intervene early on when a discussion is going off track for some reason. Two weeks, on the other hand, is too long for a student to wait for constructive feedback. Also, if a student makes a problematic post that is ignored by everyone else, I provide an objection of my own in about one week's time to give that student something to work on.

Occasionally, it may be necessary to intervene in a needlessly hostile exchange between students, in which sarcasm and empty rhetoric take the place of careful argumentation. In these cases, I have found it best to avoid a moralizing tone and instead to point out that the vitriol of the exchanges diminishes their objective philosophical worth by substituting vitriol for careful argument. This can often be a good learning opportunity for those who are accustomed to using bluster in place of reasoning.

4D. RECORDING GRADES

Special data-recording challenges arise when students have unlimited opportunities during the term to improve their grades with later assignments, and when there is a delay of roughly a week between the appearance of a student contribution to the blog and its evaluation. In order to keep track of which submissions have been graded at any given point, I have found it most efficient to use a series of diagrams on a large sheet of paper, one diagram for each of my topic questions (blank flipchart paper is particularly good for this purpose). I begin each diagram with the question number in a circle, and I add one spider-like “arm” to this circle for each original student post. At the end of each arm, I write a P (for post), followed by the first name of the student and the date of submission. Objections to that student's post are added in side-by-side beneath the post on my diagram, marked with an O. Defenses to those objections appear beneath and are marked with a D. If an exchange goes beyond a student’s defense of her post against an objection, I label the further contributions with alternating Os and Ds. Dates are added afterward to keep submissions from being confused. In this way I am always left with a complete map of the student contributions to the blog, all in blue or black pen. When I assign a grade to a contribution, I write in the score out of ten in red pen. Submissions whose defects prevent them from receiving grades are noted in my diagram with a red dash. In this way, I can easily use the diagram to check what score each student has received for each submission, and (very importantly) I can always tell from a quick glance at the dates of unmarked contributions when they are due for feedback from me. For instance, here is how I would record an exchange in which Alice posts on Question 5 on November 6, Bianca and Carol raise objections on November 8, and Alice defends her post against Bianca’s objection on November 9:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Post Score</th>
<th>Objection Score</th>
<th>Defense Score</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jake Alvarez</td>
<td>HLL</td>
<td>O – Bianca (Nov. 8) 8.5 points</td>
<td>O – Carol (Nov. 8) 10 points</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P – Alice (Nov. 6) 6 points</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for keeping a running total of each student’s score, I leave three spaces in my grade book: one for posts, one for objections, and one for defenses. I use a simple system of tally marks to record each student's initial score under each category. After the initial scores have been entered, the only changes needed are the addition of tally marks when the student’s score improves.

(If, say, Jake has earned five points on his first post and has not yet attempted an objection or defense, the tentative state of affairs would be recorded in my grade book as follows:

5A. THE WORKSHOP

Students are required to submit, privately, a short assignment of 150–300 words every second week. An online discussion forum is set up as a sort of workshop for students to develop these assignments, and the instructor contributes helpful critiques to the various threads of the discussion forum every few days. It is made clear to the students that regular use of the discussion forum is likely to increase their scores by several points each week. Also, half the course's participation grade can be given for contributions to the forum. Students can be given some questions to answer for the two-week period, but are also invited to submit anything that makes an argumentative contribution to the in-class or online discussion. Hence, any of the argumentative work done on the forum can be translated into a short assignment.

This variation reduces students' ability to follow others' work and learn from others' mistakes, and it also restricts when and how often they can make submissions. However,
it helps less self-disciplined students avoid falling behind, and it keeps the grading work consistent for the instructor. In a recent experiment with an introductory ethics section of about thirty students, I found that a total of roughly two or three hours per week giving suggestions in the forum gave plenty of developmental help to all the students who desired it while the actual grading and commenting could straightforwardly be accomplished within less than twenty-four hours of the submission deadline. My students had until Saturday at midnight every second week to submit their assignments by email—no late submissions were accepted. On Sunday morning, I would compile all thirty-odd assignments into a single document, two or three assignments per page, print it up, and cut the sheets of paper as needed. I then set to work grading and commenting on the slips of paper. Since this was never more than fifteen pages of grading work, it was always a straightforward matter to have it completed early on Sunday afternoon, and the students were pleased to have assignments they submitted in the middle of the weekend returned to them on Monday morning. This approach is also pleasant for instructors, since the entire pile of grading work gets completed before it can become a source of stress. An important downside to this variation is that students lose the ability to submit several bad posts for marks before they begin to count. To mitigate this problem, I demand that all students try a "practice run" in the first week, which I grade as harshly as I deem appropriate (often with a few scores at one or less out of ten), combined, of course, with helpful suggestions. I then spend some time in class going over the sorts of problems noted, reassuring the students that they are on the right track for success so long as they pay attention to the critical comments. The remaining six short assignments count for marks but the lowest score is dropped from the total (which is out of fifty rather than sixty). In this way, students have two "free passes" while trying to find their way through trial and error.

5B. THE HYBRID

This is similar to the previous variation, except that—as in the original method—the final submissions every two weeks are public and the comments on the discussions can be open for all to examine, if the instructor wishes. This time, a second forum for discussion is set up. The first forum is designated for practice, and the second is designated for marks. Students can make as many submissions as they like to the practice forum, fine-tuning their arguments and objections. But every second week, each student is required to submit one (and only one) post, objection, or response to the other, graded forum. The instructor gives helpful ongoing commentary on the practice forum, and gives final comments either on the graded forum or privately on slips of paper, as desired.

5C. THE UPPER LIMIT

Instructors who want to ensure that they are not overwhelmed by student work while keeping to the freer submission timing of the original method might try limiting the total (or weekly) number of student contributions. But with fewer possible submissions, it becomes less reasonable to hold students to a very high standard. Grades should be adjusted accordingly.

5D. THE GRAMMAR GAME

In my experience, students tend to enter university today with astonishingly poor grammatical skills. While I insist on proper proofreading (or at least steady improvement) from my students, I am wary of spending too much of class time teaching grade-school grammar. I tend to keep these discussions short and refer students to various accessible books and websites on the subject. I stress the need to learn to write correctly by deducting up to three points out of ten for proofreading errors, which helps motivate students to improve. However, this seems to reinforce a negative student attitude toward grammar: students stand to lose points for bad grammar but not to gain any points for good grammar.

To resolve this problem, I have recently devised a new technique that could reduce my grammar-editing workload while allowing students who learn their grammar a chance to gain some free points. Students have the option of correcting one another’s grammatical errors. A student who catches another student’s mistake earns half the points that the other student loses for having made the error. However, students who make erroneous grammatical corrections lose a half-point for each mistake. Introducing a competitive element into proofreading might help make the study of grammar more fun and appealing while leaving the instructor’s time freer to focus on the philosophical issues.

If this technique were combined with the Hybrid, students could choose between helpfully correcting one another’s grammatical errors in the practice forum and waiting to earn points for pointing out the errors in the graded forum. Since the total number of points awarded to those making corrections will always be half or less of the total number of points lost by others, students will be better off following the general policy of always making friendly corrections in the practice forum. The course of action that students wind up choosing can lead to useful in-class discussions in courses that deal with game theoretical topics.

5E. THE METHOD AS PROVIDING A QUALIFYING ROUND FOR ESSAYS

Instructors without institutional requirements for specified writing components may rightly wonder about the merits of longer essay assignments. Most students have a difficult time writing a good paragraph, and some appear unable to compose a coherent sentence. Without preliminary work on these skills, it is unsurprising that their work on essays of well over a thousand words should be so generally disappointing. Typically, they take an idea that could be set out plainly and completely in a few sentences, stretch it out with careless circumlocutions, and surround it with enough rambling and repetition to satisfy the minimum word count. Having spent the time writing it, students seldom seem to have much time left over to fine-tune it. Moreover, it is difficult to see why most of them will ever need to learn to write at such length: business proposals, emails, letters to the editor, and so on tend to be read more enthusiastically when they are brief.
Still, it is doubtless true that some students—those who have already learned to write shorter pieces and are considering postgraduate study, for instance—have much to gain from writing a fair-sized essay and receiving detailed feedback. The problem is that carefully grading and providing detailed feedback on a good essay tends to take much more time than is generally available when an instructor is faced with a stack of some thirty papers, most of them fairly substandard and burnout-inducing.

One way to solve this problem is to give students the option of two grading schemes. In the first, the final grade is calculated on the basis of quizzes/exams, online forum submissions, and class participation; in the other, an essay is written in place of some of this work. To write an essay, however, students first need to earn a grade of, say, nine points or higher on two forum submissions. If they succeed in doing that, they are invited to present a proposal for an essay (typically, this proposal will be an extension of one of their forum contributions). If the proposal is accepted, then the student may submit a rough draft of a paper up to two weeks prior to the due date for the essay and receive grades on the rough draft. If not enough time remains in the course, the student only has the option of submitting a final draft. The student may choose at any point to revert to the other grading scheme. This allows all keen and well-prepared students the option of writing an essay and should leave the instructor plenty of time to engage meaningfully with the student’s longer work. Students who are not as well prepared, or less motivated, are taught the most valuable foundational skills for essay writing through learning to finely craft their shorter submissions.

For those instructors whose institutions compel them to solicit longer essays from all students, I still recommend using these shorter forum contributions as a starting point. Though it may seem like more work, in my experience it takes less time to grade an essay that has been informed by an engaged, online discussion with the writer’s peers and whose core ideas have been clearly formulated in an earlier, short piece of two or three hundred words.

NOTES


2. I am indebted to the outstanding teacher Michael Devitt for showing me the pedagogical effectiveness of low maximum word counts on regular short assignments. According to Michael, he learned the technique from his daughter Kate (who developed it while teaching at Rutgers).

3. Still, I should add that I have tried these methods in a course on early modern philosophy, with promising results.
Bound for Tenure #2
Felicia Nimue Ackerman
BROWN UNIVERSITY


She cultivates all the right people.
She's in with the cream of the crop.
She calibrates every encounter.
She's making her way to the top.

She's proud that she's swiftly becoming
A shining success at her job.
She feels like a model for women
And not like a go-getting snob.

BOOK REVIEW

The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America

Reviewed by Melissa Bergeron
U.S. MILITARY ACADEMY, WEST POINT

The "new constitutional world," as Sarah Barringer Gordon calls it, begins in 1943 with the finding in Gobitis v. Minersville School District, a case involving two school children, Lillian and William, who object on religious grounds to participating in ceremonies pledging allegiance to the flag. This was not the only occasion, Gordon explains in The Spirit of the Law, for members of the Watchtower Bible & Tract Society to appeal to the court.

Judge Rutherford, the charismatic leader of the Watchtower at the time of Gobitis, a lawyer by trade, observed firsthand how the court could function as an instrument to limit the activities of religious communities. The Jehovah's Witnesses had been on the losing side of various "open air" preaching cases. But Rutherford's combative nature (no doubt aided by his inclination to view suffering for his faith as an opportunity to be embraced) led him continually to seek support from the courts, eventually turning the tables on those who had been successful in limiting the Witnesses' practices, effectively "using the Devil's weapons against the children of darkness" (110). This, Gordon argues, is a watershed in our constitutional evolution, as citizens, in particular people of faith, begin turning to the courts for protection, seeking refuge in "the spirit of the law," increasingly successfully.

Gordon's thesis is complex and nuanced, at times almost excessively so. It is, in some respects, like a Russian novel: extraordinarily involved but (given sufficient patience and tenacity) rather gratifying. This is no throwaway quip. It is complex enough to make me doubt that it would be appropriate for almost any undergraduate course, probably including advanced upper division seminars. To give a sense of the scholarly heft at issue, the chapters (save for the introduction and epilogue) average about forty dense pages each with over two hundred notes per chapter, seventy-eight pages of endnotes in total. This is not gratuitous citation. The argument is sweeping and involved, and one must canvas a fair amount of research in order to follow the narrative and to absorb the case she makes.

As Gordon herself notes, "the richer and more textured world described here can be appreciated only when seen from more than one vantage point," which involves shifting from history to law to politics all filtered through various religious traditions.

It is intellectually demanding. I would not attempt to use this in an undergraduate course if only for fear that students could not reasonably be expected to track the subtle but significant cultural changes of the seven or so relevant decades while also sustaining the close attention required to follow the legal developments central to Gordon's case. Indeed, The Spirit of the Law doesn't defend a thesis in the straightforward manner analytic philosophers might prefer. It sometimes has the character of intellectual tourism, which is not meant pejoratively, but it is nonetheless more challenging for neophytes.

The central conceit of The Spirit of the Law is that the "new constitutional world," which might well be in twilight, has been a clash between the technical understanding of the law (on one hand) and the intuitive draw of the lay person (on the other), who turns to the law "more attuned to [his] own constitutional claims than to the niceties of legal doctrine" (212). Whether it is the Gobitis family's objection to the salute, the Salvation Army's faith-based commitment to "open air service," religious objections to military service, mid-twentieth century debates over religious and secular education, calls for religious freedom in prison, or the fight by liberal clergy for gay marriage, it is the "liberating potential of a constitutional text" that is so distinctly American, Gordon insists, not the more erudite legal scholarship to emerge in response to these struggles and the populist rights-talk that characterizes them (119).

It is a provocative proposition. In the wake of their inability to define "religion" in sufficiently rigorous conceptual terms, the court seems poised instead to scupper any serious treatment of religion clause cases, evidenced (some argue) by the confounding and inconsistent Supreme Court rulings of late: the nostalgic and rather naive intention to "recover an older approach to the free exercise clause" (Employment Division v. Smith, 1990) and recent rulings contrary to several anti-establishment precedents (Agostini v. Felton, 1997; Mitchell v. Helms, 2000; Hein v. Freedom from Religion Foundation, 2002; McCreary County v. American Civil Liberties Union, 2005; Van Orden v. Perry, 2005) (210). It is hard to see how the court might be construed as attempting serious consideration of the proper application of the religion clauses in the light of these seemingly contrary, undisciplined rulings—in particular, McCreary and Van Orden, which Gordon suggests offer directly contradictory decisions regarding the permissibility of apparently sanctioning specific
scriptural matter in official state capacities (issued, no less, on the same day in 2005). For all the worrisome instances of nonperformance by the court, Gordon offers a less dire prediction, an “angle that hasn’t been extensively explored in legal opinions, religious writing, or scholarship but is revealed in the history of religious life and litigation in the decades since 1940,” the advent of the new constitutional world (214). The lived constitutionalism epitomized by religious practitioners seeking redress in the courts has given rise to an unexpected socio-religious phenomenon in which “cooperation across faith traditions in attacks on one or another aspect of the law of religion is now so common that it is hardly noticed” (215). Lines of otherness, one might say, are drawn differently, uniting as often as dividing otherwise disparate religious traditions. And that is an intriguing observation, the evaluation of which requires taking up the various perspectives Gordon announces at the outset.

While I find the thesis intriguing, some of the anecdotal evidence and historical analysis presented—both as to the problem and its consequences—is at times less than compelling. Gordon seems confused about the power dynamic assumed in the separation of church and state when she offers this rather curious analysis:

RCFM [Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry] rejected the idea that religious objections to marriage equality should receive any kind of deference. Individual religious organizations would have no viable cause to object to same-sex marriage equality, RCFM argued, because none would be “forced to perform any civil marriage.” [. . .] For a group of clerics to say directly that their own religious interests in marriage were “subordinate” to government interests, however, was to embrace a remarkable and powerful devolution of power from religion to the state. (202)

This is in response to the RCFM’s insistence that “religiously-based interests are and have always been separate from and subordinate to the law with respect to civil marriage” (201, emphasis added). But this verges on tautological. The claim that religious attitudes to civil matters are secondary (even subordinate) to the legitimate demands of the state is hardly controversial. Indeed, it is necessary for common life in a diverse society. The defining tenet of liberalism is that the state should exercise as little power as possible while maintaining good order, leaving individual citizens free to pursue (or not) whatever religiously based interests they fancy. Religious practitioners can coherently adhere to the standards and traditions of their faith while also acknowledging that this does not justly license to force such standards on fellow citizens who do not share the same worldview. If a religious tradition—a voluntary organization—wishes, on scriptural grounds, to insist on the satisfaction of standards not publicly scrutinized or shared, it has that prerogative. The state does not.

A citizen who is a voluntary member of a religious tradition—a Catholic, say—can consistently believe that divorce is a sin (at least for Catholics) and also believe that it would be wrong for the state to force this standard on all citizens. The state must demonstrate to accepted public evidential standards the grounds for withholding certain social goods from some subset of the citizenry. Yet Gordon seems to suggest that a person of faith is somehow deluding himself (or, worse, is inadequately faithful) should he render entirely unto Caesar civil marriage, thus limiting the scope of religious institutions’ power over practitioners with respect to their voluntary submission. It should be obvious (as clearly it was to the RCFM) that religious interests must be subordinate to the law, because the law is the space all citizens share, and not by choice. An individual must be free to leave the church, and this is possible only if he is free to shed all of its demands; in this way he seeks refuge in the state, and the state can provide this safe harbor only if it has sovereign authority. Not since the writings of John Locke has this been a controversial assumption.

Citing one of Justice O’Connor’s more memorable lines (McCready)—“Those who would renegotiate the boundaries between church and state must therefore answer a difficult question: why would we trade a system that has served us so well for one that has served others so poorly?”—Gordon runs through a short list of violent episodes stemming from unpopular court rulings in which citizens were not served well by the system, generating an unflattering portrayal of the Supreme Court (215). On Gordon’s analysis, the court all too often kowtows to popular opinion and, of late, simply refuses to consider seriously religion clause cases when it is clear that the public, as a whole, simply can’t be appeased (211). There is a good, albeit unexpected, by-product, though: the strange interfaith bedfellows that, of necessity, spring up in the wake of court failures.

In the final assessment, Gordon places enough hope in this, the “real value of the new constitutional world,” to grant O’Connor’s point: our system is, after all, better than alternatives, just not for the reasons that people think. That analysis, it seems to me, is hasty and at places tendentious.

Whatever one makes of the conclusion of The Spirit of the Law, the discussions leading up to it are intriguing and thought-provoking and the scholarship is rich and abundant. Anyone interested in the intersection of liberty, religious practices, and law would do well to read this monograph. It is, however, perhaps too specialized and diffuse for use in undergraduate courses.

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Points to Consider: Thoughts Raised by Kasachkoff’s Article

Dear Editors,

The following are some points I wish your readers to consider in response to Tziporah Kasachkoff’s article, “Teaching a Course on Sexual Morality” [APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy 12:1 (Fall 2012)]. In that article, Kasachkoff details the syllabus she uses for the course and indicates the following as one of the course’s topics:
“The source of normativity in sexual activity, desire and relations….” Under this topic several readings are given, one of which is: “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics: On the Regulation of Birth: Humanae Vitae (Encyclical Letter of Pope Paul VI, 1976).

I wish to distinguish between two documents so that readers of the course syllabus (as presented in the above-referenced article) will not confuse them. One document is “The Encyclical Letter ‘On the Transmission of Human Life’ of Pope Paul VI,” which is known by its Latin title Humanae Vitae (the first two words of the Latin encyclical). This document was published on July 25, 1968, and deals specifically with the ethics of sexual reproduction. The document is available online (for free).

The second document is the “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics” of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). This document is known by its Latin title Persona Humana (the first two words of the declaration in Latin) and was published on December 29, 1975. It deals with the place of sexuality generally in the life of the individual. This document is also available online (for free).

To readers who are interested in the issues raised by either of these two documents, I recommend the following two more recently published books: John Paul II’s book, Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body (Michael Waldstein, trans., Boston: Pauline, 2006) and Catechism of the Catholic Church, originally published in 1992, in part as a commemoration of the opening of the Second Vatican Council (October 11, 1962). The Catechism addresses issues of morality in general and sexual morality in particular and constitutes a more current expression of the teaching of the Church than the other two sources cited by Kasachkoff. The text of the Catechism is available online (for free). Over the last twelve years, I have taught (with varying degrees of success) the content of these books to audiences as varied as high-school students (14–18 years of age) and couples preparing for marriage (18 and older).

Besides the above, two secondary sources I wholeheartedly recommend are John S. Grabowski’s Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics (Washington, DC: CUA, 2003), and Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation, and Defense by William E. May, Ronald Lawler, and Joseph Boyle (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2011).

I am cognizant that Kasachkoff does not teach, nor was she writing about, courses in Catholic ethics per se. But her references to Humanae Vitae and Persona Humana, as well as the question (raised by Nils Raahut in his article, “Teaching Philosophy of Sex and Love” in the same issue of the Newsletter) “Can a person who is sexually abstinent, like a Catholic priest or a nun, lead a good life or is he/she missing something essential in human flourishing?” did catch my attention. As a student of philosophy (and theology), I am impressed that the co-editor of the APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy would even consider the teachings of the Church on sexuality as important to discuss and teach in a philosophy course on sexual morality. No doubt, some would give consideration to Church teachings only for theological reasons (or perhaps following the promptings of grace). Still, since there are people in the world (hopefully many) who take seriously the teachings of the Church regarding sexual morality, and because these teachings of the Church are both widely known and have a certain coherence, it is worthwhile to consider, as Kasachkoff does, these teachings as worthy of philosophical reflection and discussion.

Father John Arthur Orr
Holy Ghost Catholic Church
111 Hinton Avenue
Knoxville, TN 37917

NOTES

1. Pope Paul VI was then the Bishop of Rome and did confirm the veracity of the teachings and ordered them to be published. But observing the principle of subsidiarity, the teaching is proper to the CDF.

2. My reasons for recommending this book are as follows: (1) as Archbishop of Krakow, Poland, Karol Wojtyla advised Pope Paul VI regarding Humanae Vitae; (2) the text was most probably written after the publication of Persona Humana; (3) the content of the book was delivered as part of the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church during the course of weekly catecheses given by the Bishop of Rome over the course of several years (1979–1984); (4) finally, the foundation of the international campuses of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family, headquartered at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, use the Theology of the Body as a basic text. A free version of the initial translation in English is available online.

3. See in particular paragraph 1749, which deals with the morality of human acts, paragraphs 1750–1754, which deal with the sources of morality, and paragraphs 2331–2400 and 2514–2533.

Author’s Reply

Both as co-editor of this newsletter and as the author of the piece referred to, I am happy to have John Arthur Orr’s response and elaboration of the relevant bibliographical references.

The writer is certainly correct that although I include in my Sexual Morality course readings about sexuality drawn from Catholic sources, my course on sexual morality is not a course (even in part) on Catholic ethics per se. The writer expresses surprise that I consider the teachings of the Church on sexuality as worthy of discussion in a philosophy course on sexual morality. My inclusion of the Church’s teachings on sexuality is not based on any theological considerations. It is rather that I believe it important for students taking the course to reflect on the meaning of, and relationship among, several notions that figure prominently and find clear expression in Catholic views on sexual morality, most especially the notions of “nature,” “sexual responsibility,” and moral acceptability.

One often finds arguments on sexual morality that appeal to what is “natural,” “unnatural,” and/or “perverse” as a basis for moral judgments regarding specific sexual conduct, though the notion of what is natural and unnatural is often left vague and even obscure. (I have found my students quite adept at indicating various ways, many of them fairly plausible, of interpreting what nature decrees, and whether
conduct deemed unnatural is or is not also to be judged as morally perverse.)

There is much to be fruitfully discussed concerning the determination of what counts as natural and unnatural behavior (specifically in this context, sexual behavior) and how this determination should or should not be the basis of appraisal of that conduct as morally permissible or impermissible. This topic has a very long history, one that pre-dates Christian teaching: Aristotle, as well as the Stoics, viewed what is natural as having normative significance.

I believe we should consider—and evaluate—various views on this topic, as well on others that are germane to the topic of sexual morality. That some of these views are to be found within literature that is also of theological significance to some believers should not be a bar to our considering those views as meriting serious philosophical reflection and discussion.

LIST OF BOOKS RECEIVED

BROADVIEW PRESS


Yaqub, Aladdin M. An Introduction to Logical Theory, 2013.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS


HACKETT PUBLISHING COMPANY
Boys-Stone, George, and Christopher Rowe, eds. and trans. The Circle of Socrates: Readings in the First-Generation Socratics, 2013.


HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS


PROMETHEUS BOOKS


THE ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHING GROUP

Wong, Ovid. An Instructor Primer for Adjunct and New Faculty: Foundations for Career Success, 2013.

WESTVIEW PRESS