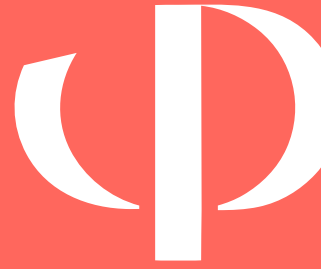


Teaching Philosophy



FALL 2021

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

Teaching Philosophy

TZIPORAH KASACHKOFF AND EUGENE KELLY, CO-EDITORS

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

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The editors of the *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy* are happy to welcome our readers to our fall 2021 edition. We offer you an article, a book review, a challenge for students, and some poems.

The article, "Choosing an Anthology for Teaching Introductory Philosophy," is by Steven M. Cahn. It is directed at young professors who are entering the teaching profession and whose college or university has asked them to handle a standard "Intro" course for which no specific set of readings has been prescribed. Graduate schools of philosophy do not normally prepare their students for teaching and they rarely have on hand bibliographies of introductory anthologies of readings in philosophy, so the new teacher has to go it alone in choosing materials for his or her first semester. After having considered and rejected one possibility (course packs containing the teacher's favorite articles from graduate school), Professor Cahn turns to anthologies or collections of classic and contemporary works (or parts of works) by thinkers in the "canon." He is aware of the difficulties in this approach, but he concludes that a judiciously chosen anthology, where cost and relative difficulty are also considered, is the best choice. The author concludes with a list of anthologies that might fill the bill. The editors would like to add a note of caution: one's first opportunity to teach Introduction to Philosophy is fraught with dangers, one of which is having a classroom of students who are either bored or overchallenged. The teacher would come away from such a disaster questioning his own worth as a teacher. The new teacher should seek input from older philosophy teachers about the average freshman's comprehension level at the college. She should next read over, before the semester begins, each anthology article she intends to assign and develop a strategy for communicating the force and point of each, and then for tying together the selections for each unit so that students can measure their cumulative significance for the topic under question.

Next is a review by Rick Repetti of P. Boghossian and James Lindsay's *How to Have Impossible Conversations*. The book

offers training for instructors in informal logic on how to declaw classroom discussions of "hot button" issues familiar to citizens of our politically and morally polarized society. Professor Repetti writes that the strategies presented in the book assist instructors in "finding ways to respectfully engage students without triggering their defenses, shutting down inquiry, and perhaps intimidating the rest of the class," rather than teaching "weaponize techniques for defeating one's ideological opponent." The end sought is the "restoration of faith in civil discourse."

We then present a short piece entitled "A Free Will Puzzle" by Steven M. Cahn. The puzzle is meant to challenge students to consider how, were they to be given the option of trading the exercise of their free will for a guarantee of their lifelong marital happiness, they would judge the wisdom of deciding one way or the other. (In a postscript from the editors, readers are asked to share the success of their presentation of this puzzle in generating fruitful discussions amongst the students to whom it was presented.

Finally, Felicia Nimue Ackerman offers us some poems that suggest amusing but also deep questions about the teacher-student relationship, the editing of journals, and competition in Academe.

We always encourage our readers to suggest themselves as reviewers of books and other material (including technological innovations) that they think may be especially good for classroom use. Though the names of books and other material that we receive are generally listed in the **Books Received** section of each issue of our publication, due to the present circumstances we have no publications to list in *this* issue. However, as always, readers are welcome to suggest material for review that they themselves have used in the classroom and found useful. Please remember that our publication is devoted to pedagogy, and not to theoretical discussions of philosophical issues. This should be borne in mind not only when writing articles for our publication but also when reviewing material for our publication.

As always, we encourage our readers to write of their experience as teachers for our publication. We also welcome articles that respond to, comment on, or take issue with any of the material that appears within our pages.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

All papers should be sent to the editors electronically. The author's name, the title of the paper and full mailing address should appear on a separate page. *Nothing that identifies the author or his or her institution should appear in the body or the footnotes of the paper.* The title of the paper should appear on the top of the paper itself.

Authors should adhere to the production guidelines that are available from the APA. For example, in writing your paper to disk, *please do not use your word processor's footnote or endnote function; all notes must be added manually at the end of the paper.* This rule is extremely important, for it makes formatting the papers for publication much easier.

All articles submitted to the newsletter undergo anonymous review by the members of the editorial committee:

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ARTICLE

Choosing an Anthology for Teaching Introductory Philosophy

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Here's a common situation. A doctoral student or recent PhD is asked to teach a standard introduction to the problems of philosophy. No single reading list for all sections is in use, so each instructor is responsible for preparing a syllabus.

The inexperienced teacher is apt to plan the course by choosing favorite articles that were discussed in graduate school and making these available online or having the bookstore collect them in a course pack. An obvious difficulty with this approach, however, is that materials appropriate for a graduate seminar are not likely to suit the needs of beginners. If this concern is not taken seriously, then one semester of implementing the plan will clarify its inadequacy.

Furthermore, the online or course pack options are not as free of technical difficulties as might be supposed. After all, the bookstore needs to obtain permission to reprint any copyrighted material, and the resultant fees, sometimes large, will be passed on to students in the price of their course pack. As for placing copyrighted material online, the process needs to be carried out within a variety of legal constraints that may require consultation with the school's general counsel's office.

Is another choice available to instructors? Yes, but it is unlikely to have been mentioned in graduate school, where thinking about such matters is at best neglected or at worst disparaged. An available option is to use an anthology in which readings are grouped by topic and drawn from historical and contemporary sources. Undergraduates thereby become acquainted with major issues, read important past and present writings on each subject, and think through controversies for themselves.

Although the numerous introductory readers differ in many ways, they all contain fifty to a hundred selections, plus a variety of pedagogical features, including introductions, study questions, bibliographies, a glossary, an index, and so on. Importantly, each collection reflects not merely the preferences of its own editors but input from numerous instructors around the country whose names are usually listed in the acknowledgments. Such assistance from those who have taught the course in institutions large and small is an invaluable resource for editors. Why not, then, have a look at their work? I have heard at least three reasons for not doing so.

First, anthologies can be expensive. True, and if the cost of a text is prohibitive, it should not be used. Yet collections at a reasonable price are usually available.

Second, anthologies contain more material than can be covered in a single course. Again, true, but the anthology displays the breadth of the subject, and students can easily explore topics of interest that the instructor might have bypassed, whether from lack of time, interest, or familiarity with all the articles. An anthology thus frees students from the perspective of any single instructor.

A third concern is that no anthology contains the exact readings any instructor wishes to assign. Granted, but one or more collections are likely to fit the teacher's preferences, offering most of what is wished as well as unexpected material that may work well. Thus, the only reasonable way to decide whether an anthology might be an effective choice is to view its contents. Blanket rejection

of all possibilities, sight unseen, is unjustified and most often stems from unfamiliarity with current options.

In addition, obtaining review copies of these books is simple and cost free. Any instructor can email the leading textbook publishers and request their introductory anthologies. Publishers, hoping for an adoption, will be pleased to provide the books. (Incidentally, graduate departments would provide a valuable service for their students by obtaining the most widely used readers and making them available for review.)

Each anthology should be checked not only for price and coverage but also for the difficulty of the readings. The same philosophical issue can be approached through either relatively simple selections or far more complex ones. While a demanding book may be appropriate for a sophisticated audience, assigning overly difficult readings to students unprepared to handle them is a common cause of classroom distress. Admittedly, studying philosophy is challenging, but why ask students to read materials that few, if any, can understand?

One important guideline in selecting any book is never to adopt one that has not been examined personally. For students on a tight budget to be asked to buy a book, then be told later that it doesn't contain the right materials, is, to put it mildly, annoying.

On an autobiographical note, my first teaching assignment fifty-five years ago was leading discussion sections of introductory philosophy at Dartmouth College. Our anthology was the then preeminent collection, *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy: Readings from Classical and Contemporary Sources*, edited by Paul Edwards and Arthur Pap. Edwards was immensely gifted as an anthologist, and the sections of the book for which he was responsible, those titled, "Determinism, Freedom and Moral Responsibility," "Body, Mind, and Death," "Moral Judgments," and "The Existence of God," are models of ingenious editing. Unfortunately, the book was never updated after 1967, but its structure has been adopted by many of the numerous collections that have appeared since then.

I myself have been involved with four such coedited books. They are *Reason at Work: Introductory Readings in Philosophy* (Harcourt Brace), edited with Patricia Kitcher, George Sher, and Peter Markie; *Philosophical Horizons* (Wadsworth/Cengage), edited with Maureen Eckert; *Philosophy for the 21st Century: A Comprehensive Reader* (Oxford), with associate editors Delia Graff, Robin Jeshion, L. A. Paul, Jesse J. Prinz, Stuart Rachels, Gabriela Sakamoto, David Sosa, and Cynthia A. Stark; and *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings from Past and Present* (Oxford), edited with Tamar Szabó Gendler and Susanna Siegel.

I have also undertaken a couple of introductory anthologies on my own. Only a few years ago I edited *The World of Philosophy: An Introductory Reader* (Oxford), now in its second edition, which includes not only standard analytic materials and Western historical texts but also writings reflecting Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Arabic, African, South American, Chicano, and Native American sources. Yet

judging from the comments of colleagues and reactions of students, my most successful attempt has been *Exploring Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology* (Oxford), originally published in 1999 and now in its seventh edition. The topics covered are reasoning, knowledge, mind, free will, identity, God, moral theory, moral problems, society, social justice, art, the meaning of life, and Asian outlooks. The collection combines clear recent essays with influential historical sources, and many of the articles have been edited to sharpen their focus and enhance their accessibility. While an unfortunate feature of most introductory anthologies is their focus on the work of men, one-third of the contemporary essays in *Exploring Philosophy* are authored by women. Overall, I have been pleased to hear from various instructors that even students not drawn to philosophy have found the book engaging.

In sum, instructors may suppose that deciding on an appropriate text is not worth much time or effort. The opposite, however, is the case. For success in the classroom depends not only on the quality of teaching but also on the content of readings. An unwise decision on the materials to be studied can undermine student interest, while an appropriate choice can be a boon to learning.

(This essay is a revised and expanded version of an article that appeared on the [Blog of the APA](#) on May 9, 2019.)

BOOK REVIEW

How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Very Practical Guide

Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay (New York: Lifelong Books, 2019). 248pp. \$16.99. ISBN 978-0738285320 (paperback).

Reviewed by Rick Repetti

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How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Very Practical Guide (hereafter "the Guide") offers a highly researched set of theories, principles, guidelines, strategies, examples, and lessons designed to enable the reader to engage in difficult conversations with anyone on any topic. While it is written as exactly what its subtitle suggests, namely, "a very practical guide," the Guide is, in my view, an ideal, practical, auxiliary text for informal logic, reasoning, critical thinking, and even political philosophy, debating, and public speaking courses, for reasons which should become obvious shortly. Philosophy instructors in the increasingly incredibly polarized universe of discourse in which we find ourselves in the current political climate can benefit from teaching its many excellent theoretical, practical, strategic, and intuitive principles, illustrative examples, and insightful analyses.

One example of the many virtues of the Guide is that it manages to speak charitably even about dogmatic ideologues, explaining that in such cases what is typically

behind this sort of “epistemic closure”—when beliefs are closed to new evidence—are deeper moral values and issues of identity, a theme running throughout the book. The authors explain that when individuals’ beliefs are held independently of evidence, the reason is usually that they think holding those beliefs makes them a good person—they *believe in belief*, as Dennett put it—so their loyalty to the belief represents their sense of themselves as good people. This charitable analysis promises to make it easier to view dogmatic individuals more compassionately, and thus to engage their underlying values in less of a confrontational manner, opening up the grounds under which their currently closed beliefs may become amenable to reason and evidence. While this perspective toward the dogmatic might seem naïve, the authors back up this analysis with examples of its success, explanations therewith, and solid empirical research about the relationship between epistemic closure, identity, and values. Philosophy instructors may benefit from finding ways to respectfully engage students without triggering their defenses, shutting down open inquiry, and perhaps intimidating the rest of the class.

Each chapter in the *Guide* is presented as a necessary training stage for the chapters to follow, and the authors are repeatedly emphatic about readers not trying the more complex techniques until they have had significant experience and developed substantive skill levels with the previous chapters’ techniques. This structure lends itself to using this text as the primary text in an informal logic, critical thinking, or practical philosophy course, particularly for those instructors who, increasingly, strive to make philosophy not merely relevant, but more practical, living skills-cultivation-oriented (as was most original or ancient philosophy: tools for a philosophical way of life).

As a real training manual, the *Guide* offers pithy, memorable names for its techniques. “Golden bridges,” for example, are statements that help lessen the risk of triggering your conversation partner’s defense mechanisms—note even the de-escalating nature of “conversation partner,” as opposed to “opponent”—as well as lessen the fear of losing face and/or lessen the likelihood of polarization. Examples of such statements are: “everybody makes mistakes”; “this is a very complicated issue”; or “we are all trying to figure out what’s best here”; “we are doing the best we can, given what we believe.”

Another technique that the authors suggest is to ask one’s conversation partners to place their confidence in their belief claim (or yours) on a scale, with 0 representing no confidence in its truth and 10 representing absolute certainty in its truth. Depending on the confidence rating offered, one can then follow up with more pointed questions that might provide clues as to the interlocutors’ epistemological situation relative to that belief. For example, if they claim maximal confidence—a 10—the instructor can then ask them why it’s not 9.9, that is, what is it that pushed it from 9.9 to 10, why they don’t have any doubts about it at all, or what it might take to lower their confidence to 9.9. Conversely, if their confidence in a claim is very low, you can ask them what it would take to raise it. Such questions open a path to the evidential supports of the belief, and/or

the lack thereof. These are excellent strategies for moving the dial with incorrigible, dogmatic minds.

The *Guide* goes into the technique of introducing scales in great detail, and it does the same with dozens of other techniques, offering many illustrative real-life examples¹ as well as a vast amount of supporting research and evidence, much of it from cult deprogrammers, hostage negotiators, professional epistemologists, social science studies, and, appropriately, a vast body of literature on communication psychology in general and difficult conversations in particular.

The *Guide* manages to convey a spirit of a shared sense of aspirations toward evolved modes of being with others, understanding them, and sharing ideas with them in fruitful conversations as opposed to, say, teaching weaponized techniques for defeating one’s dialectical opponents. It goes without saying that these perspectives and the content that they frame can be invaluable in the Socratic mode of pedagogy employed daily in our classes.

This last fact brings up another virtue of this text: the authors make several remarks explicitly designed to encourage in their readers—not only by their own well-crafted verbal examples but by explicit advice—the use of non-combative language. They encourage responding to points with which one disagrees with “yes, and” instead of “but,” as these sorts of uses of language are less likely to trigger polarizing psychological effects. The book is loaded with these sorts of ideas, and many examples of them are deployed by the authors themselves.-

Because the *Guide* advocates ways in which we can all engage in difficult conversations, it implicitly endorses the traditional liberal value of free speech.

The *Guide* begins with an introductory chapter overviewing the rationale and structure of the book, with advice about how to use it, followed by seven more chapters loaded with well-scaffolded strategies that make for a smooth, insightful, and at times uplifting read. Structured as a course, each chapter begins with a list of main techniques that will be covered in that chapter, followed by a section on each such named technique. The *Guide* has an extensive bibliography, an index, as well as hundreds of notes not merely referencing these materials, but explaining them and guiding the reader to follow up on the claims and strategies offered in the text.

How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Very Practical Guide is a must-read for anyone who enjoys, or wishes to enjoy, being engaged in difficult discussions with people who hold what appears to be (at least initially) a difficult position. I think that if most or even many of us on both sides of the present political and cultural divide were to not only read this book but, like me, to reread it while practicing its advice until mastering most of it, that alone could turn the tides, restore faith in civil discourse, and depolarize our country. The *Guide* is sorely needed, and highly recommended.

NOTE

1. Many of these examples come from their own experience, a good number of them depicting their own failures that could have been avoided had they known or remembered these techniques at the time.

POETRY SECTION

Felicia Nimue Ackerman

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A TALE OF TWO PHILOSOPHY STUDENTS

Elinda livens up my class,
Her fervor all aglow,
But never fears to take a pass
By saying, "I don't know."

Eugene will not admit a doubt;
No way will he demur.
He's frantic to increase his clout.
Why can't he be like her?

ADVICE TO STUDENTS

Philosophy won't make you rich.
Philosophy won't make you wise.
But if it's your passion, don't switch.
Delight in your cognitive highs.

ADVICE TO JOURNAL EDITORS

Be careful whenever you choose
The people to write your reviews.
A reader can hardly depend
On critics who favor a friend.

A TALE OF TWO PHILOSOPHY CAREERS

Behold the unstoppable Greg.
Where there's a round hole, he becomes a round peg.
Behold how he fits with the team.
His path is unswerving; he rises like cream.
Behold Larry still down below.
Does Greg make him jealous? He doesn't quite know.

CHALLENGE

A Free Will Puzzle

Steven M. Cahn

THE GRADUATE CENTER, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Here's a hypothetical case that may prove useful for class discussion or as a topic for term papers.

Suppose you are seeking a person to marry but have been unsuccessful in finding a satisfactory partner. Then you learn of a matchmaker named Quinn who has an extraordinary record. Every one of hundreds of persons who has come to Quinn for guidance is happily married to the individual Quinn recommended. The one condition for using Quinn's service, however, is that you are obligated to marry sight unseen and not divorce the person Quinn names. Is availing yourself of Quinn's service the reasonable course of action? Does doing so imply that finding happiness may be more valuable than exercising free will? Does morality require that you not relinquish responsibility for such a decision?

From the editors to our readers: It might be useful for fellow teachers of philosophy if you would comment on student responses to the presentation of the above case in your own classroom. Alternatively, or in addition, comments on the case from your own perspective would also be welcome.

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