FROM THE EDITORS

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Our current issue offers readers three articles, four replies to a philosophical query that Steven Cahn posed in the Spring 2003 issue of our Newsletter, and three book reviews.

Our first article, by Nancy Daukas, entitled “Classroom Relativism as a Pedagogical Opportunity,” addresses a classroom situation that almost all of us encounter in one form or another, namely, the refusal on the part of some students to acknowledge that we can ever know anything (including what is right and wrong, what is true and what is false, and what is justified and unjustified) because, it is argued, disagreements about these things are imbedded in norms and worldviews that are culture-specific. It is concluded that since there is no over-arching neutral standpoint from which one can adjudicate such disagreements, these disagreements cannot be resolved. Daukas argues that many students’ expressions of relativism harbor insights, which can be mined and developed in the classroom, thus affording the instructor the opportunity to teach valuable lessons in epistemology. Her many examples clarify the points she makes and suggest ways in which other instructors might benefit from using students’ relativist claims to open up classroom discussion of issues relating to the nature of knowledge and of justified belief.

Our second paper, “Using Blade Runner in Your Introduction to Philosophy Course” by Theodore Cooke, shows how the film Blade Runner can be used to advantage to entice students into thinking about and discussing the question of what, generally, constitutes personhood, what makes a particular person the person that he or she is, and how death and mortality bear on the answers to these questions. Cooke indicates the specific questions he asks of students to help them focus on the important metaphysical issues that the film raises.

Our third paper, by Celia Wolf-Devine, “Teaching Gender Issues—Philosophically,” details a philosophy course that she teaches about gender issues. Wolf-Devine specifies the topics that she thinks essential to cover in such a course as well as her reasons for their inclusion. She also details the goals that, she thinks one should strive for in the course, and she discusses the structure of her course, and—very helpfully—the specific readings that she assigns for each of the topics that she covers. (Those instructors who are thinking of teaching a course on Philosophy and Gender will, we think, find the detailed bibliographical suggestions included here most helpful). In addition, Wolf-Devine takes up the sorts of problems that might be expected to surface in a course of this kind given the sensitive nature of the subject, the inevitable diversity of views held by students on issues relating to sex and gender, and the connection between such issues and fundamental moral, political, and social outlooks. She describes the various pedagogic strategies that she herself employs for dealing with these problems and gives practical, concrete advice to others.

Our fourth inclusion under the heading “articles” is actually a set of four responses to the pedagogic quandary that Steven Cahn posed in the Spring 2003 issue of our Newsletter. (If any reader is moved, upon reading these responses, to write and send in a further response, he or she should feel free to do so.) We include in this issue of the Newsletter three book reviews.

As always, the addresses of our contributors are listed at the end of the issue, as is a list of books that we have received for review. We list the books received recently from publishers that are relevant to the teaching of philosophy. And, 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. If you know of material not listed within our pages that you think would be suitable for review, please write and tell us. (Some of our book reviews have been suggested by instructors who have used certain material and wish to help others regarding its assessment for classroom use.) Please remember, however, that our publication is devoted to pedagogy and not to theoretical discussions of philosophical issues. That should be borne in mind when reviewing material for our publication. (Guidelines for writing reviews for our publication will be sent to all reviewers.)

With respect to articles for our Newsletter, papers are welcome on any aspect of pedagogy, including examination construction, classroom motivation techniques, strategies found useful in teaching large classes or difficult topics, innovative syllabi suggestions, suggestions for novel courses or course arrangements, etc. We also welcome papers that respond, comment on, or take issue with any of the material that appears within our pages. Generally, however, we do not publish papers in excess of 15 pages.

The following guidelines for paper 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. 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.
• Four complete copies of the paper should be sent.
• Authors should adhere to the production guidelines that are published at the beginning of each edition of the Newsletters.

• All material submitted to the Newsletter should be available on a Windows-readable computer disk, but do not send the disk with the submitted paper. The editors will request the disk when the paper is ready to be published. In writing your paper to disk, 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. They are:

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The editors welcome email correspondence concerning possible paper submissions or reviews.

ARTICLES

Classroom Relativism as a Pedagogical Opportunity
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1. Introduction

My most effective class sessions focus on philosophical issues that I develop from students’ own comments. Why this should be so is no mystery: effective teaching requires genuine student engagement; students engage most easily when they see that the topic is directly “relevant” to their beliefs, values, and life circumstances. However, creating opportunities to implement this pedagogical strategy in philosophy courses that are not directly focused on moral, social, or political topics can, of course, be a challenge. When students’ comments do create such opportunities, I believe they should be taken advantage of, even if this requires diverting from the class plan. And opportunities to explore epistemological issues do arise in the course of classroom discussion, when students appeal to cultural relativism. When I have pressed students to support their relativism, the reasons they have offered open doors to discussions of epistemic justification, the relation between relativism and skepticism, and the idea that no single set of judgments has a unique claim to truth.

Some educators and students may consider those epistemological issues to be too abstract and “intellectual” to be “directly ‘relevant’ to students’ beliefs, values, and life circumstances.” I couldn’t disagree more: I believe that discussing epistemological issues is as important to student development as is discussing moral and political issues. Traditional-aged students should be learning to recognize and embrace the responsibilities that accompany autonomous agency; and some of them are epistemic. Just as students become better equipped to develop into responsible moral agents through awareness and understanding of the complexities of moral life, so they become better equipped to develop into responsible epistemic agents through awareness and understanding of the complexities of epistemic life. Further, if epistemic responsibility is a necessary condition of moral responsibility, as I believe it is, the “practical relevance” of epistemology to all aspects of “real life” is undeniable.

The cultural relativism (where “culture” is understood loosely) frequently expressed in the classroom goes something like this:

What is “true for” one culture may not be “true for” another, and there is no objective, transcultural sense of “truth” in virtue of which it would be coherent to say that one body of belief is more correct than another, or is objectively true or false.

This statement folds together several different relativist claims: (a) the empirical claim that beliefs and moral attitudes vary culturally; (b) the normative claim that what one should do or believe depends on the belief system and moral standards of one’s culture; (c) the normative claim that one should not judge the beliefs or values of other cultures by reference to the standards of one’s own culture; and (d) the higher-order claim that judgments (whether descriptive or normative) are not “objectively” true or false, but instead are “true for”
particular cultures. This last claim implies that individuals from different cultural backgrounds may have apparently contradictory beliefs about a particular issue, without either individual being wrong; and that no belief system or set of moral attitudes can be coherently rejected as false or morally reprehensible, because there is no such thing as "absolute" or "objective" truth. Let us call this multidimensional type of relativism relativism in the classroom (RIC).1

2. The relativity of justification

Students often express RIC in a way that implies that, necessarily, beliefs are true. Referring to the members of a culture, they say that their beliefs are "their knowledge" or "their truth"; and so they fail to distinguish between what one takes oneself to know, and what one does know, or between what one takes to be true, and what is true. When asked to explain and support that relativistic stance, students often describe how we behave when pressed to justify our beliefs. They see that, in assessing a given judgment, we in fact rely on what we already believe, and accept it if it coheres well with our already-established beliefs. Working from their initial claim that "even though P is true for us, it is not true for them," then, we arrive at the important epistemic truth that although "our worldview," i.e., what "we" take ourselves already to know, may provide epistemic justification for P, "their worldview" may not support P, and may even support not-P. Thus it may be rational for "them" to deny what it is rational for "us" to believe.2

My claim, then, is that in attempting to support RIC, some student relativists appeal to considerations that imply that justification is "relative" insofar as it occurs against the background of a larger body of unquestioned belief; but they believe that those considerations imply that truth is relative to that larger body of unquestioned belief. Classroom experiences suggest to me that students' shift from justification to truth is often due to a de re/de dicto slip. Notice the ambiguity in the claim that (e) "judgments are accepted as true when they are found to cohere well with one's beliefs." First, take a de re interpretation of that claim: of a judgment that we find to cohere well with our beliefs (and therefore to be justified), we say that it is true. This is clearly correct: when we assess beliefs in "ordinary" contexts, we generally ask whether they are true, but often determine whether we have reason to believe them true. Judgments and beliefs that fit nicely with established views are considered true, and those that conflict with established views are often rejected as false.

Note that this plausible de re interpretation of (e) does not imply that we explicitly define or understand false judgments as judgments that we find to be inconsistent with what we believe, or true judgments as judgments that we consider to be justified. It does not attribute to us any explicit awareness that the beliefs in question do or do not cohere with what we believe. It simply describes how we behave with respect to particular judgments that in fact do or do not cohere well with what we believe, regardless of whether or not we notice that (lack of) coherence. But it is easy to miss that de re interpretation of "we say that a claim is true when it coheres well with our belief system," and instead latch onto a de dicto interpretation. A de dicto interpretation implies that "a claim is true when it coheres well with our belief system," expresses ‘our’ understanding of what it means for a claim to be true. That is, as opposed to a de re interpretation, a de dicto interpretation implies that we believe that justified beliefs are identical to true beliefs.3

My aim here is not to argue against the pragmatist rejection of the distinction between justification and truth. But notice that such a rejection is matter for philosophical discussion only because there is at least a conceptual distinction between justification and truth. That much should be uncontroversial; and that is what I am interested in helping students understand. Only then can they be in a position to begin to appreciate the significance of their assertions of RIC. I hasten to add that the distinction between justification and truth is not a philosophical artifact: it is expressed in "ordinary" circumstances in various ways (e.g., "I think she's wrong about P, but I can see why she believes it"; "it turns out that she is wrong about P, but who could have known?" "Sure, she was wrong about P, but she's not to blame; it was an honest mistake," etc.).

Attention to the distinction between justification and truth helps clear up another confusion that may explain students' pre-reflective readiness to embrace RIC: some students seem to assume that, if we say that a particular view, G, is false, we are criticizing the people who hold that view, and claiming that they are wrong to hold that view, in the sense that they are unintelligent, or irresponsible, or blameworthy. (Hence students tend to defend those believers by saying, "but G was true for them"). Once we illustrate the distinction between justification and truth, the appearance of insult or blame should dissolve. We can acknowledge that beliefs may be justified, and perhaps amazingly clever, even if false. Many students will agree, for example, that although pre-Copernican thinkers were perfectly reasonable in their acceptance of geocentricism, geocentricism is (and always has been) false.

What "relevance" does all this have for our students themselves, they might ask? Students initially see RIC as liberating: it implies that there is nothing wrong with holding beliefs different from those of others. It therefore seems to provide a safe way of expressing individuality and questioning authority: it allows them the "right" to reject the beliefs and values of their parents or their cultures, since, after all, any world view they adopt is "as true as" their parents' views. But now they are in a position to recognize that, instead of facilitating or supporting their quest for autonomy, RIC in fact undermines it: If RIC is true, there could be no reason for students to question, reject, or even critically reflect on, their acculturated belief system. RIC implies that an appeal to one's cultural tradition necessarily provides adequate justification for a belief, since one's cultural tradition determines what is "true for" its members. Hence if students' rejection of authority is to be anything more than adolescent rebellion, then instead of appealing to relativism to justify it, they need to do the hard work of identifying and critically assessing the reasons behind the particular beliefs in question.

It works well to use selections from Descartes's Discourse, along with the first paragraph of the First Meditation, to illustrate this point. Descartes realizes that he has acquired his entire "world view" through acculturation, and, through intense intellectual labor, comes to believe that much of what he was taught to believe is false (e.g., geocentricism and Aristotelian metaphysics). How, then, can he know what he really should believe? The point is this: Descartes sees that, by having accepted his teachers' traditional worldview without question, he may have believed, and may now believe, what he should not believe. He is ready to accept responsibility for his own beliefs: he wants to figure out for himself whether he has good reason to believe what he was taught to believe. This involves taking a normative stance toward (some of) what he was taught to believe: he wants to determine whether continuing to accept his acquired beliefs is the right thing to do, from the point of view of one who seeks knowledge and understanding.

But if RIC is true, then there is no distinction between the point of view of one who seeks knowledge and understanding, and the point of view of one who accepts the traditional belief...
system of one’s culture without question. According to RIC, it is incoherent to suggest that perhaps one should not embrace traditional views if one seeks knowledge and understanding. It is not possible that a seeker of knowledge could be doing the wrong thing by accepting her tradition. If students believe that questioning their tradition provides at least the possibility of greater understanding, they need to give up on RIC.

3. An escape from skepticism

Students sometimes arrive at relativism in attempting to deal with Descartes’s First Meditation skeptical arguments. They recognize that we cannot “get outside our own minds” to determine whether our beliefs about the world are based on illusion rather than perception of reality. Since there is no “objective” point of view from which we can “compare” our perceptions to reality, then if we retain the idea of “objective truth,” Descartes’s dream argument implies that, for all we know, our worldview is false. Students (and others!) tend to recoil from that possibility; RIC offers a way out. They say that Descartes’s dreaming (or deceiving god) possibility could “make no difference” to our lives; as far as we are concerned, “the world” just is “our world,” that is, the world as our perceptual experiences represent it to be.

I have seen some students arrive at the same position through recognizing the possibility of irresolvable fundamental disagreement between the worldviews of different cultures. They recognize that we cannot “get outside our own cultural mindset” to determine who has gotten things right and who has gotten things wrong. They seem to assume that, because we cannot resolve the conflict, there is no fact of the matter about which worldview, if either, is correct. They say that each view is “true for” those who believe it, that the different cultures define “different worlds,” and that there is nothing further to be said about truth in such a situation.

Why would students think that irresolvable disagreement implies RIC? As in the case of skepticism, so here, they seem to embrace the view that where we cannot know the truth, there is no truth to know. The alternative, of course, is to acknowledge the possibility of massive error. Here we need to be sure that students see and understand the choice that they are making, and ask them to support it. When pressed to defend their acceptance of RIC and its implied rejection of skepticism, they tend to say that if we cannot know about something, then it is not part of “our world” or “our reality.” This particular articulation of student relativism is especially frustrating, not only because it begs the question, but because it encourages intellectual laziness and dulls curiosity: it suggests that what we cannot experience is unimportant, that what does not make a difference to our day-to-day lives is “irrelevant,” and that there is therefore no reason to strive toward a broader, more objective understanding of ourselves and the world of which we are a part.

In response, first, we need to point out that, if there are things or processes we do not know about, then we cannot know that they, or our ignorance about them, make no difference to our daily lives. On the contrary, it is more likely than not, that possessing knowledge that we lack would make an inestimably positive practical difference to day-to-day life. Second, an understanding of the limitations of one’s experience obviously enriches one’s understanding of what it is to be human. I see no reason to assume that such enrichment would not deeply affect how one lives one’s life. Third, we need to point out the arrogance in the “it’s-not-part-of-our-reality” attitude. Do students really think that knowledge that they (or we) lack is not worth seeking? Why should we assume that the limits of our current awareness or cognitive capabilities determine the limits of what “matters”? That we are limited to our own beliefs does not imply that the “important” or interesting features of the world also are limited by them.º

One way to reinforce the point that irresolvable difference does not imply the truth of relativism is to ask students to think about the difference between fiction and history. When two novelists create fictional worlds that are radically different from one another, those differences clearly do not create conflict or disagreement. They simply ‘belong to’ different fictional worlds. But when two historical texts characterize the same society, during the same time period, in radically opposing ways, clearly their differences do create conflict or disagreement. If we ask students to explain the difference between these situations in virtue of which one, but not the other, creates conflict, it will be hard for them to avoid appealing to the fact that history, and not fiction, claims to represent extra-linguistic reality; and therefore that historical texts, but not fiction, must answer to an extra-linguistic standard of truth.

Next, ask them to consider and explain which of these situations—the historical or the fictional—is more like a situation of cultural disagreement, and why. This exercise will allow some differences among cultures to be seen as differences only, with respect to which the question “but which is correct?” is inappropriate and confused. But differences that yield competing assertions about the way things are, emerge as conflicts. In those cases, asking which set of claims, if either is true, will be as appropriate and meaningful as it would be in the case of conflicting historical texts.

4. There is more than one true description of the world

This final ground for RIC tends to emerge when students in the class have taken courses in Cultural Anthropology, and perhaps Literary Theory. Having become attuned to the fact that the “standard Western worldview” is one among others, students (and others) come to see that there can be more than one true description of the world; and they think that RIC follows. It is worth noting that that the issue here is not only cultural or linguistic: no matter how thoroughly we describe something from a particular perspective or at a particular ontological level, there always exist other perspectives (spatial, operational, teleological, biological, chemical, physical, and so on) from which it could be described differently, such that all those descriptions are true, but some may be incongruous or discontinuous with others in such a way as to seem to be in conflict.

One major source of confusion here is that many students treat the idea of “truth” as having significance far beyond the significance it has in its typical use in analytic philosophy, viz., as a property of (some) statements or judgments or beliefs. When we use the expression “truth,” some students think instead of “Truth,” that is, of a single, exhaustive, objective, Ultimate Truth that holds the answers to questions about the source and meaning of life, the existence and nature of the soul and god, the nature and finality of death, and so on. As with the Heraclitean Logos, or Parmenedian One, or Pythagorean tetrakys, the idea seems to be that all there is to know about the universe and human existence is somehow embodied in a single word or phrase or symbol, in this case, the expression “Truth.”

And if one collapses “truth” with “Truth,” the insight that there are countless true descriptions of the same thing generates a contradiction: if there are many truths, then there is no (single, objective, exhaustive) Truth. And if there is no (single, objective, exhaustive) Truth, it seems that those true descriptions are only “true for” those who embrace the relevant points of view.
One confusion at work here is this: as mentioned in a note above, students often do not distinguish between the content of judgments or beliefs, and the states of affairs those judgments and beliefs are about. The idea of Truth embodies this (con)fusion: it seems to be both something that is true, in which case it should be linguistic; and, at the same time, it seems to be an extra-linguistic, metaphysical something (as in the phrase, “if there is such a thing as Truth, . . .,” or “if Truth does exist, . . .”).

To avoid some of the resulting intellectual chaos, it helps to ask students to articulate their questions and points fully without using the expression “Truth.” Say that, for example, part of what they really want to know is whether the creation story in Genesis is accurate. Imagine that the answer to their question is “yes.” It would follow that there is one way that the world came into being, and that creation stories that deny the story in Genesis are false. But it would not follow that there is one, and only one, true description of the process described in Genesis. The inexhaustibility of detail alone ensures that there is no single true description of even the most mundane of things, even from a single point of view. The possibility of different points of view exponentially increases the number of possible true descriptions.

The point is simply that there is more than one possible true description of anything, and that the differences among them may create the appearance that they must be descriptions of different things (or even of different “worlds”). It could be that concepts different from those we possess would allow us to perceive and describe different patterns and connections in the world than our current “conceptual scheme” can accommodate. But that does not discredit the descriptions of the world we construct by means of the perceptual and linguistic resources at our disposal (although it does remind us that they are, literally, partial; and partial descriptions do distort, if taken to be complete). But it does not follow from the possibility of multiple true descriptions of the world that there is “no way things really are,” but only that there is no one way of correctly describing or understanding how things really are. It does not imply that there is no extra-linguistic thing or portion of reality; with its own, mind-independent character, which each true description is of.

5. The unacceptability of RIC

Once the reasons students offer to support RIC have been discussed, and found not to justify RIC, students should be ready to confront RIC head-on. One question to ask them is this: What type of epistemological theory is RIC supposed to imply? In particular, is that theory supposed to be descriptive or normative? Well, its left conjunct says what is true for one culture may not be true for another culture. To avoid the vagueness of the expression “true for,” let us reformulate the left conjunct in this way:

(1) Different cultures may embrace different, possibly conflicting, bodies of belief.

We can leave the right conjunct as initially formulated:

(2) There is no transcultural sense of “truth” in virtue of which it would be coherent to say that one body of belief is more correct than another, or is objectively true or false.

(1) is clearly supposed to be descriptive, and is clearly true. But it is important for students to see that, by itself, it has no implications regarding (2). Now if (2) is supposed to describe ordinary beliefs and attitudes, it is clearly false: people often take their culture’s standard of truth to be “objective”; often assume that where there are competing beliefs, someone has made a mistake; and sometimes judge traditional beliefs other than their own to be “better than” their own, in the sense of being “closer to the truth.” But if (2) is supposed to be normative, it runs counter to students’ motivation for embracing RIC: it implies that standards of truth are defined by a belief system, in which case one should believe what one has been raised to believe. Countercultural views should then be rejected as wrong or false, even when embraced as a matter of deep conscience; it would be misguided to question authority. (Of course, on this interpretation of (2) we also run into one manifestation of the familiar problem of relativism’s incoherence: if ‘our’ culture’s understanding of “truth” requires that what is “true for us” is “objectively true,” then (2) would imply that we should both accept and reject our standards of truth; and that we should, and should not, judge views different from our own to be false.)

At this point there may seem to remain another avenue open to defending RIC, which we should suggest and develop if students do not: that is to claim that RIC is a theory about how things really are, regardless of whether or not it coincides with ordinary attitudes. Further, it possesses the virtue of explaining why it does not coincide with ordinary attitudes: for the most part, people take their culture’s “internal” standards to define what is objectively true. This is just what we should expect, if RIC is true: the fact that different cultures embrace different beliefs implies that different cultures accept different standards of truth. RIC goes on to say that standards of truth are necessarily “internal” to a culture, in which case judging a belief system as a whole to be true or false, or better than another (in the sense of “closer to the truth”), is incoherent. On this understanding of RIC, however, it runs into the familiar problem of self-refutation: RIC claims to be a theory about how things “really are.” But it says that there is no way that things “really are,” and that no view is better than another with respect to questions of truth.

6. Conclusion

My aim has been to argue that RIC can be used to create a constructive context for epistemological learning and growth. But perhaps our overriding responsibility here is to emphasize that a rejection of relativism is not an assertion of our cultural superiority. To the contrary: if relativism is false, then different views of how things are can come into genuine conflict. And when one of those views is our own, we have no reason to simply assume that our view is correct. Contrary to what many students seem to think, relativism does not oppose ethnocentrism, but legitimizes it; an internally consistent rejection of ethnocentric arrogance is possible only given a rejection of RIC. The overall outcome of discussion of RIC, then, should be epistemic humility, including an openness to new points of view, and a willingness to critically re-evaluate one’s most fundamental beliefs and attitudes.6

Endnotes

1. Thus the view I find students to assert implicitly includes, and perhaps entangles, what Thomas Carson refers to as Cultural Relativism, Normative Relativism, and Metaethical Relativism. See Carson (1999) for a careful delineation of the different types of relativist claims students often run together, and for a helpful discussion of how to help students to distinguish them, and their implications, from one another. Also, see Laura Duhem Kaplan (2000) for a response to RIC that advocates designing a curriculum for Introduction to Philosophy courses that incorporates material that will facilitate students’ maturing into autonomous agents.

2. Philosophical discussions of relativism often turn on the question whether standards of rationality vary by culture. I will step around this key question, as it rarely plays a role in students’ thinking about relativism.
3. I find that *de dicto/de re* slips are frequently a source of confusion in philosophy classes, and that understanding the distinction is crucial for developing critical thinking skills.

4. The situation is not quite that simple: in a culture that takes rational argument as a standard by which to assess beliefs and adjudicate conflicts, someone might use rational reflection to discover that a culturally accepted belief is false or unreasonable. Here, again, CR implies that I should believe both *P* and not-*P*.

5. At times, I suspect that there is a much more philosophically interesting issue involved in students’ “it’s not part of our worldview, therefore not real” stance, namely, a tendency toward a pre-reflective version of content-externalism. They often seem not to distinguish between the content of beliefs and judgments, on the one hand, and the extra-linguistic aspect of reality which those beliefs and judgments are about. Perhaps this is because they have no pre-reflective concept of “content” at all. This failure to distinguish between intentional content and states of affairs in the world may generate the confused idea that the extra-linguistic world is constrained by the limits of our beliefs, rather than the idea that the content of our beliefs is constrained by the extra-linguistic world.

6. Many thanks to Lisa McLeod, Jonathan Malino, and Vance Ricks for stimulating discussion of these issues, and invaluable criticisms and suggestions regarding earlier versions of this paper. I am also grateful to editor Tziporah Kasatchkoff for insightful suggestions and gracious encouragement. Thanks also to my 2002 Pacific APA audience, and to anonymous readers, for perceptive criticisms. Finally, I want to thank Guilford College students who have participated in my philosophy classes over the last several years for showing me the insights and serious reflection underlying their adherence to relativism.

**Works Cited**


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**Using Blade Runner In Your Introduction to Philosophy Course**

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The sci-fi thriller *Blade Runner* is a fantastic springboard for generating deep philosophical discussions about personhood, personal identity, immortality, and death.1 I have been showing *Blade Runner* to my undergraduates in my Introduction to Philosophy class for several years now, and the results are tremendous. If you are looking for an interesting way to excite undergraduates about these particular philosophical issues, something you can immediately incorporate into your syllabus yet still be able to use for years to come, look no further; *Blade Runner* fits the bill tout de suite.

Let me explain how I incorporate *Blade Runner* into my class by indicating how issues raised in this film are tied to questions addressed by the major historical figures covered in my Intro class—thinkers such as Descartes and Locke. I will start with some general remarks about *Blade Runner*, and about how I fit the film into my syllabus.

I typically show *Blade Runner* to my Introduction to Philosophy class at about the tenth week, after we have worked through some fairly traditional material (i.e., Plato's *Phaedo*, sections of Aristotle's *De Anima*, Descartes's *Meditations*) and immediately before we spend about two weeks perusing John Perry's text, *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*.2 In *Blade Runner*, traditional assumptions about personhood come under fire, especially our everyday assumption that “human” and “person” are synonymous, interchangeable concepts. I believe it is the combination of the exciting (although sometimes violent) detective-style thriller and Perry’s marvelous and extremely accessible introductory text, which, in tandem, allows my students immediately to sink their teeth into the most basic problems concerning personal identity and immortality. It allows them straight away to begin applying fine distinctions they have just gleaned from Descartes’s *Meditations* and to understand some basic philosophical concepts that are used in Perry's *Dialogue*.

It always surprises me to hear my students say they have really enjoyed grappling with the contemporary issues they have discovered in my course. What is surprising about this comment, which regularly appears in my teaching evaluations, is that my course does not cover any contemporary thinkers (at least not in depth) and most of my assigned texts are classic books about very traditional issues, e.g., mind and body, free will and determinism, and the existence of God. I truly believe it is the film *Blade Runner* which gives my class a “contemporary” feel and compels students to realize that philosophical issues are perennial ones that are just as momentous today as they were centuries ago.

Even though *Blade Runner* was released in 1982, the timeless themes presented in this film keep my students riveted, both to the film and to the issues. Undergraduates are notoriously difficult to please when it comes to showing movies, as they are easily bored with slow-moving plots and out-of-date special effects. But the film’s fast action keeps them spellbound, and the dark and smoky “film-noir” effects, I maintain, lend a “classic” feel to the film. Very few of my 18- to 21-year old students have ever seen *Blade Runner* (in an average class of 30 students, usually only one or two have already seen it). Also, the film features a cavalcade of actors that were fledglings then, but have since gone on to become
huge stars in more popular films that students have already seen—actors such as Harrison Ford (of *Indiana Jones and Star Wars* fame, and *People Magazine*’s 1998 “Sexiest Man Alive”), Daryl Hannah (*Splash, Wall Street, Steel Magnolias*), and Rutger Hauer (*The Hitcher, Partners in Crime*). This may seem like a superfluous factor to consider, and perhaps a bit hucksterish, but often the whole point of showing a film in the first place is to meet the students where they are—at and not where we teachers think they should be. I try to bear in mind a remark Anthony Flew made in the very first issue of *Teaching Philosophy*: “[W]hat as teachers of philosophy we all can and should do is exciting others with what will often be old as well as true, but new to them.”3 If you work *Blade Runner* into your syllabus next semester, not only will you receive rewarding classroom results, but you will not be wasting your time on a “quick fix,” since these excellent results will be easily duplicated for many years to come. I continually use the film and repeatedly get the same great results.

Let me say a bit about the film and explain how several of the film’s key scenes connect to some important issues about (I) personhood, (II) personal identity and immortality and (III) death. I will raise some potential discussion questions after each section.

I

The film takes place in Los Angeles, 2019, after the earth is devastated by a nuclear holocaust and our civilization is now colonizing nearby planets. At the start, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), a street police detective, is reactivated by duty by the L.A.P.D. and assigned the task of “retiring” (i.e., destroying) six replicants that have escaped from an off-world colony. A replicant, or “skin job” as they are derogatorily called, is a humanoid, built in the Tyrell Corporation’s laboratories, to be used exclusively for slave labor in these off-world colonies. Six replicants of the Nexus-6 generation have escaped an off-world colony and have returned to earth, hoping to discover a way to shunt their built-in termination date and thereby lengthen their lives. They want more life, but it is Deckard’s job as the ambivalent bounty-hunting detective, or “blade runner,” to “air them out” and destroy them.

Although replicants are not human beings, they look, think, and act just like we do—so much so, in fact, that the only way of distinguishing a replicant from a human is by means of an examination known as the Voight-Kampff empathy test. The “V-K” test, which detects physiological signs of empathy (capillary dilation, blush response, fluctuation of the pupil, and involuntary dilation of the iris), is the only means of determining who Deckard must kill. Deckard applies the test to Rachael (Sean Young), who works for Dr. Tyrell (Joe Turkel), and discovers that, unbeknownst to her, she too is also a replicant. Deckard wonders in disbelief, “How can it not know from here, and contains perhaps the most philosophically interesting dialogues in the film. In one poignant scene, Deckard promises Rachael that he will not kill her on the grounds that she saved his life earlier and that he recognizes the obligation he now has to protect her. This is interesting behavior coming from Deckard, a human, since our normal operating assumption is that moral obligations exist between humans but do not apply to objects like tables or chairs, nor do we ordinarily think that objects have rights which should be respected. Yet Deckard treats Rachael exactly the way we expect humans to treat each other. Moreover, Deckard is falling in love with her.

Here is where *Blade Runner* ties into some deep issues concerning personhood. The fact that Rachael is a nonhuman replicant, but one that Deckard regards as a person, challenges the Cartesian distinction between persons and objects. The facts that Deckard believes he has a moral obligation to protect her, and that he is in love with her, leads us to believe that Deckard recognizes Rachael as a person even though she was fabricated in a laboratory. Replicants are built in a laboratory, while you and I were conceived through sexual reproduction, but besides our difference in points of origin, we are led to wonder whether there is any fundamental difference between replicants and humans, one permitting us to say that the two sorts of beings are categorically distinct. In one scene, the replicant Pris (Daryl Hannah), in an effort to convince J.F. Sebastian (William Sanderson) of her personhood, utters Descartes’s famous cogito argument “I think, therefore I am.” Does it make a difference that this statement is uttered by a replicant, something not begotten but produced in a laboratory? Rachael looks and acts like a human, and she is made of the same type of organic material that humans are made of. Why might we balk at considering her to be a person?

Questions

(1) Deckard distinguishes replicants from humans solely on the basis of minute physiological differences between them, their publicly observable responses to the V-K test. But is “passing” the V-K test a sufficient criterion for personhood? Since each of us observes only the physiological states and behavior of other humans (their facial expressions, bodily movements, speech acts, etc.), yet none of us can think the thoughts of others, nor feel other people’s feelings, how could we even know, strictly on the basis of behavior, whether other humans have experiences similar to our own, let alone whether replicants do? Can I know whether others even have experiences at all? Are there minds other than my own?

(2) In determining whether Rachael is a person, is the type of material she is composed of relevant to the issue? Would it make any difference if Rachael had not been organically composed, but was instead made of plastic and metal, like a computer? Turing’s “black box” example is a useful analogy here. Imagine that a computer and a human are each placed in separate rooms or “black boxes” so that both are concealed from a scientist who poses questions to them individually. If the scientist is unable to distinguish one from the other, based solely on her analysis of each one’s linguistic feedback, she would be justified in claiming that both think at the same level. However, if both think on a par, then, if one is a considered to be a person, should not the other be considered a person as well?

(3) If we are willing to consider replicants like Rachael to be persons only because they appear to have thought and feelings similar to ours, are we justified, on that same basis, in believing that chairs, rocks, and cars are not persons because they do not appear to have thoughts or experiences at all? How could we know for sure that these objects do not think or feel?

II

What is most interesting about replicants is that although they awaken from the laboratory table as fully developed adults, they are nevertheless able to remember childhood experiences—experiences they could not possibly have had because they were never children. The replicant Rachael, for example, is able to play the piano and to remember various childhood experiences, yet these memories of childhood, including memories of having taken piano lessons, cannot possibly be her own since she was fabricated just months ago. This amazing feat is possible, we soon learn, because all replicants, including Rachael, are given “memory implants” at their inception. Rachael’s memories of early childhood piano
lessons are actually memories of someone else’s experiences: they are the childhood experiences of the niece of Tyrell, the owner of the factory that built Rachael. The film does not state explicitly whether it is the actual brain of Tyrell’s niece that is implanted into Rachael (or at least the part of that brain that stores memories), or rather that Rachael has some sort of manufactured duplicate of Tyrell’s niece’s brain. Still, the fact that Rachael has memories of events that she has never actually experienced poses interesting questions that can be parlayed into fruitful classroom discussions about personal identity and immortality.

It is at this point that I tie in Locke’s theory of personal identity. Locke believed, in general, that to be a person is to be able to recall the thoughts and experiences of a being that was conscious in the past, and that a person’s identity stretches only as far back as, but no further than, the earliest thought or experience one can remember. Locke rejected the belief that a person is identical to some immaterial, imperceivable soul. Since a soul, at least in the Cartesian sense of the term, cannot be experienced (you cannot sense your own soul or anyone else’s) it follows that one cannot experience a soul (yours or anyone else’s) to be the same over time. The soul, by definition, lacks the explanatory power needed to account for personal identity.

Locke also rejected the belief that a person is identical to her body, on the grounds that a person’s body can undergo radical changes over time. However, despite these changes one could regard oneself to be the same person. Loss of a limb, for example, does not entail loss of personal identity. Moreover, it is possible that a person could know who she is without any reference to her body. For instance, a victim of a house fire could be burned beyond bodily recognition—burned so badly that she is unrecognizable even to herself. Nevertheless, she could still know who she is by reference, not to her unrecognizable body, but to her own consciousness. While not recognizing her own body, she could still remember being the person who experienced such-and-such an event at some earlier time.

It is not unimaginable that brain transplants could become a wave of the future, and not mere science fiction. Before we scoff at this possibility as so much folly, we should remember just how much progress had been made in the field of organ transplants over the past two decades. If a brain transplant procedure becomes technologically feasible, for moral and forensic purposes who shall we say has survived the operation, the brain donor or the body donor? What criteria could we use in deciding this? Our society emphasizes using the body as a convenient criterion of personal identity, as evidenced by the use of photo I.D. cards and such. What problems are presented when we claim that a person is identical to his or her body?

(2) Perhaps the most interesting problem that Blade Runner poses concerns Locke’s view of immortality, a view predicated on his theory of personal identity. Since according to Locke, both body and soul are quite useless in explaining personal identity, and consciousness alone makes a person, it follows that a person survives bodily death only if, after she dies, her consciousness continues to exist. In other words, a person survives death only if there exists a being in thereafter, which has memories of her thoughts and experiences.

Let us assume, for argument’s sake, that the replicant Rachael remembers the experiences of Tyrell’s niece because she possesses a duplicate or replica of Tyrell’s niece’s brain. Assume also that, while Rachael’s head contains a duplicate of Tyrell’s niece brain, Tyrell’s niece has died and her actual, organic brain has decomposed. Given these assumptions, could we justifiably say that Tyrell’s niece has survived her death? After all, there is a replicant walking around now that thinks and acts just like her and has, ostensibly, all of Tyrell’s niece’s memories. A brain is just a physical object, and it is not inconceivable that in the future we might have the technology available to create something like a duplicate or replica (organic or inorganic) of a person’s brain. Imagine that a replica of your brain was created immediately after you died, one capable of remembering all of the thoughts and experiences you had throughout your life. Also imagine that this replica of your brain was placed into another human’s living body, such that this living human seemed to remember the thoughts and experiences that you had. If this were so, would we be correct in saying that you had survived your own death? Is the replicant actually you? If it is possible that this could happen after you die, is it not possible that it has already happened? Before you answer, keep in mind that if it is possible to create one such duplicate of your brain, then it is possible to create two, three, or a hundred such duplicates. Also keep in mind that identity, in the strictly philosophical sense, means “one and the same.” If you were told that, after your death, a being would exist which would have memories of thoughts and experiences that you have had, would you think that this being was you? Would this “replicant” actually remember your thoughts and feelings or would she merely seem to remember them? In order for you truly to have survived, is it necessary that this future being have actual memories of your thoughts and feelings or will mere apparent memories suffice? What would guarantee that the replicant’s memories are real ones, and not merely ostensible ones? What guarantees that any of a person’s memories are real and not merely apparent?

III

The “director’s cut” version of Blade Runner omits a cheesy, Mickey Spilane-like voice-over that is present in the 1982 cinema release. I prefer to show the cinema version in class, however, because Deckard’s voice-overs in it help students to focus on the issues. Deckard’s soliloquy, as he watches the replicant Roy Batty die, raises basic questions:
I don’t know why he saved my life. During those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody’s life, my life. All he wanted were the same answers the rest of us want. Where did I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got? All I could do was sit there and watch him die.

During the final fleeting moments leading up to his death, the replicant Roy Batty appears unafraid to die—in fact, he seems to enjoy the struggle between Deckard and himself. In one scene, while Deckard clings to the building’s ledge, in fear of falling to his death, Roy asks him, “It’s painful to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave.” Indeed, after Roy “meets his maker” and kills him, and after he realizes that his desire to live longer cannot be fulfilled, he seems to live his life more playfully. I usually refer my class to this scene and then ask them how they think we should live our lives in the face of impending death. Here are some of the final questions I pose to them.

Questions
(1) After Roy dies, street detective Gaff (Edward James Olmos) yells over to Deckard, “She won’t live forever, but then again who does?” His comment refers to Rachael, a replicant, but it is obviously true of us too. How should we live our lives in the face of death? Philosophers have had various, diverse responses towards death. Some feared death and considered it the ultimate evil that befalls us all. Socrates, the “patron saint” of philosophy, welcomed death when it came to him. Socrates believed that, since the sole purpose of philosophy was to prepare oneself for death, it would be absurd, he thought, to prepare for death all of your life only to fear it when it finally arrives. Some philosophers maintain that death is nothing but a dreamless sleep, not to be feared. Still, there are other philosophers who remain indifferent, or downright stoic, about their own death. The philosopher Lucretius (95-54 BC) argued that fearing death was absurd since while we live, death is not; and when death is here, we are not. Does death terrorize you? If so, is it the death of other people that frightens you, or is it your own death which scares you the most? Could thoughts of your imminent death ever be comforting?

(2) If you discovered that you would not survive bodily death, that you would cease to exist after your body died, what effect would this news have on you? If you discovered instead that you will in fact survive bodily death, how would that affect you? Is your happiness contingent upon the belief that you will exist forever? Should it be?

These are just a few of the many questions raised by Blade Runner. Take it from me—this movie is a classroom winner. It is already an established cult classic. If you give Blade Runner a showing in your class, the rewards of enthusiastic debate about genuine philosophical issues will be so great that you will show it again and again and get repeat performances from your students semester after semester.

Endnotes
1. I am grateful to my students for the many insights they have shared with me about Blade Runner over the years, and to Janette Blandford, Martin Harris, Michael Hood, and four anonymous reviewers who made suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

Blade Runner was originally produced in 1982 by The Ladd Company and is now available from 1997 Warner Home Video, 4000 Warner Blvd., Burbank, CA 91522. The film was inspired by, but deviates considerably from, Philip K. Dick’s 1968 science fiction novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996). In terms of philosophical fecundity, the film is superior to the book.

2. Here are my required texts in the order that I use them:
Sometimes we cover selections from Aristotle’s De Anima after we have read the Phaedo. My class views Blade Runner immediately before they read Perry’s book, as most of the connections I draw are to his work.


4. Since my students take Ethical Theory as a separate core requirement in addition to their Introduction to Philosophy, I use Blade Runner to discuss only metaphysical issues, and have not discussed here how the film might be used in an ethics class. However, one issue the film raises is whether it is morally permissible to create replicants suited solely for the purpose of slave labor. This is a timely issue, as we are now closer than ever to having the ability to alter, for better or worse, future generations of humans, through cloning or genetic interventions and therapies. The act of intentionally creating a generation of “lesser” humans to be used merely for exploitative purposes is severely criticized by J.A. Robertson. See J. A. Robertson, Children of Choice (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 171.

For a further discussion of this issue, see also A. Buchanan, and Dan W. Brock, Norman Daniels, and Daniel Wikler, From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and N. Wivel and L. Walters, “Germ-line Modification and Disease Prevention: Some Medical and Ethical Perspectives,” Science, 362 (1993): 533-538. Questions concerning how we are to understand the relationship between creator and creation (e.g., between parents and their children, or between God and humans) are also touched upon in the film and would be appropriate material for an ethics class.
Teaching Gender Issues—Philosophically

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Many disciplines deal with issues to which gender differences are relevant. Sociologists study family structures, lawyers try to figure out whether laws that treat women and men differently are constitutional, and medicine and health care address problems having to do with reproduction. But courses that take gender as their central focus are most often taught in Women’s Studies programs or English departments. Those teaching such courses are, generally speaking, not philosophically trained, and have often been accused (with at least some justice) of being too rhetorical and political in their approach, and as intellectually unserious. Philosophers who offer courses that focus on gender issues usually do so under the heading of applied ethics. Yet gender issues, like many other issues in applied ethics, are also concerned with such theoretical issues as the relative roles of reason and emotion in moral judgment, and with central questions in metaphysics and social philosophy, and even philosophy of religion.

Philosophers have always been interested in analyzing contested concepts that engage deep differences of outlook and evaluation. “Male” and “female” (much like justice) are such concepts. Those who take them to be mere social constructions and those who regard them as categories in a broadly Kantian sense (organizing and structuring the way we perceive the world in deep ways) agree that sex and gender categories are central to our self-understanding. (I shall use “sex” to refer to biological facts and “gender” to refer to what a given cultural tradition makes of these facts.)

The deepest philosophical issue about sex and gender concerns the question of the moral importance of our existence as bodily creatures. Should we view our physical, animal nature—including sex differences and our characteristic mode of reproduction—as a prison from which we must be liberated or a source of biologically grounded norms to which we must conform our behavior in order to live virtuous and happy lives?

In Part I, I explain the way I structure my course on Philosophy of Sex and Gender, showing how such issues connect with broader philosophical issues. In Part II, I address the pedagogical issues that arise in teaching a course on sex and gender issues, suggesting ways to structure such a course and create an atmosphere that is as open, as relaxed and as conducive to dialogue as possible. My remarks draw on my experience in the classroom—I have taught a course on Philosophy of Sex and Gender for a number of years—and on what I have learned from my struggle to put together an anthology on sex and gender that would fairly represent the various outlooks at work in our current debates and pitch the introductory materials and study questions in an even-handed way.

Part I: Philosophy and Gender Issues

The question of the cognitive role of emotions arises particularly strongly in this area where emotions are strong, complicated, and sometimes in tension with what the person making moral judgments regards as the requirements of rationality. For example, a man might be rationally convinced that bisexuality is the ideal form of sexuality and thus wish to embrace it, but be quite unable to conjure up the appropriate emotional and physical responses to other men. Or a woman might be rationally convinced that her womanliness does not depend on having children but still feel incomplete without a child and succumb, on that account, to what is sometimes called “baby fever.”

No doubt, there are some cases where we would be inclined to trust reason over emotion, as, say, when we discount feelings of revulsion to interracial sex (if we have such feelings) on the grounds that we can find no rational justification for them. But there are also cases where we would be inclined to trust our emotions despite our believing them to be in conflict with reason—as would be the case, for example, were we to trust our spontaneous revulsion toward having sex with orangutans (if we have such revulsion), even, that is, were we persuaded by Peter Singer’s arguments that it is irrational to regard having sex with a member of another species as morally wrong. Are the deep feelings people have about sex/gender issues only obstacles to clear thought, to be screened out so far as possible? Or should we regard them as revelatory of deep truths about ourselves as sexual creatures? I begin the course with a discussion of these sorts of questions.

Consideration of the proper roles of emotion and reason leads naturally to the question of whether there is any validity to the stereotypical judgment that men are more rational than women and women are more emotional than men. In turn, this question points one in the direction of the most pervasive question in the study of sex and gender: the status of male-female differences. Some people find the difference between the sexes a matter of mere “plumbing,” not linked in any deep way with who we are, like the color of our eyes or (more controversially) our skin color. Others, such as Mary Daly, attribute cosmic importance to the difference.

Thinking about what it is to be male or female clearly involves thinking about some traditional metaphysical issues. For example, the phenomenon of transsexualism raises interesting questions about the relationship between mind and body. How are we to make sense of the claim, made by some transsexuals, that they have always felt that they were in the wrong type of body—that despite the fact that their bodies were male (or female), their souls were female (or male)?

Ethical questions about sex, reproduction, and family structure quickly involve us in thinking about social philosophy. To enable students to understand how their thinking about sex, reproduction, and family is affected by their background assumptions about social philosophy, I give them some readings on liberalism and communitarianism (listed below). I also connect these with Carol Gilligan’s concepts of the masculine and feminine “voice” in ethics, arguing that liberal individualism is a social philosophy expressive of the “masculine voice,” while the feminine voice as defined by Gilligan has strong affiliations with communitarianism, and encouraging students to think about the connections between ethical theory and social philosophy along these lines.

Finally, issues in philosophy of religion also come into play when reflecting about gender issues. Whether we come to these issues from a naturalistic or a theistic perspective makes a difference in a number of different ways. It is not just a matter of whether one takes certain behaviors to be enjoined or forbidden by God, or whether God should be understood through gendered concepts such as “Father” or “Mother” (important though these questions are). Human beings characteristically experience a tension between their animality and their humanity, and associate their humanity especially with their moral and spiritual aspirations. And sex is one area of our lives in which we can experience this sort of tension particularly acutely.
Part II: The Course

Goals of the Course

At the start of the class I make it clear that I expect students will disagree both with each other and with me on many issues, and that I anticipate that this will still be the case at the end of the class, but that I hope that whatever views they emerge with, they will at least have learned to understand those who disagree with them, and to seek common ground with them. Not all differences necessarily prove unresolvable, of course; often one can convince others by offering them arguments or reasons that had not occurred to them before, challenging them through questioning, or showing that their presuppositions actually lead to a conclusion different from the one that they assert.

Course Structure and Readings

The course I teach begins with the methodological issue of the proper roles of reason and emotion in thinking about gender issues. I have students read the following: selections from D.H. Lawrence’s “A Propos of Lady Chatterley’s Lover,”28 which defends the importance of the emotions rooted in the body for understanding sexuality, and selections from Janet Radcliffe Richards’s The Skeptical Feminist,9 which defends the importance of reason in thinking about gender issues, and criticizes the anti-rationalist stance taken by some feminists. If one wants to go into these issues more deeply, one might look at Genevieve Lloyd’s The Man of Reason,10 and Janet Moulton’s “A Paradigm of Philosophy.”11

I begin with the story of a transsexual, and have my students read selections from Jan Morris’s autobiography, My Conundrum,12 a reading that raises interesting questions about the differences and connections between sex and gender. We then look at a traditionalist position on the relationship between sex and gender, reading a selection by Anthony Mastroeni, S.J.,13 who argues that it is impossible to have a gender different from the sex of one’s body, and a selection from Stephen Clark’s Man and Woman in Christ14 in which he points out certain culturally universal sex role patterns, arguing that these are in some sense natural or rooted in human nature. Students then read two essays by cultural radicals who regard gender as a social construction not rooted in biology: Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna’s Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach,15 which emphasizes the role of social construction of gender in the most radical way, and Richard Wasserstrom’s Philosophy and Social Issues,16 which argues that an ideal society would be one in which people’s sex was of no more importance for how they were treated—in both personal life and in society—than the color of their eyes. We conclude with a selection from Mary Midgley and Judith Hughes’s Women’s Choices: Philosophical Problems Facing Feminism17 (in which it is argued that although biology does indeed influence our behavior, there is still room for freedom of action), and Roger Scruton’s “Sex and Gender”18 in which Scruton argues for gender as a social construction but one that we cannot and should not eliminate.

Since the topic of sex naturally leads to a discussion of the of the various issues that arise when people interact sexually. I begin this section by describing four different world views (paganism, Manicheanism, naturalism and the Jewish/Christian world view) that underlie the way we think about particular issues of sexual morality. Though the readings in this section do not fall into neat categories, they nonetheless gives students a sense of the multiplicity of views that people may have towards sex. Among these readings are Bertrand Russell’s Marriage and Morals,19 which is a good example of naturalism; Andrea Dworkin’s Intercourse,20 which provides a rather gut-wrenching account of sexual penetration as inherently degrading; Thomas Nagel’s “Sexual Perversion;”21 Richard Mohr’s “Why Sex is Private: Gays and the Police,”22 which argues for the importance of sexual privacy while leaving open the possibility for multiple partners and public sex in designated “gay cruising” zones; and Richard Connell’s “A Defense of Humanae Vitae,”23 which offers a very traditional biologistic natural law argument for the importance of being open to reproduction in sexual activity.

We conclude this section of the course by looking at differences between gay and lesbian culture to help students reflect on the differences between male and female sexuality and homosexuality. We read a chapter of Richard Rodriguez’s Days of Obligation,24 which focuses on Castro Street gay culture, and a section from Arlene Stein’s, Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation,25 which discusses the difference between “old gay” lesbian culture (identified as based on desire) and the “new gay” culture (prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s) which recommends itself as a choice to all women for reasons that are political, namely, as an extension of one’s commitment to feminism. The very last reading in the unit is “The ladder of eros” from Diotima’s speech to Socrates in the Symposium, which emphasizes the spiritual dimension of eros.

Since one of the most important issues that arises from the sexual interaction between men and women is the possibility of reproduction, the class then turns to a discussion of contraception, abortion, and some of the new reproductive technologies. I have students read the following: Sally Tisdale’s article “We Do Abortions Here,”26 about life in an abortion clinic, Thomson’s “A Defense of Abortion,”27 and my own essay “Abortion and the Feminine Voice.”28 Although contraception is not a hot topic in the news these days, discussing it brings out certain important issues with broader ramifications. How closely is the meaning of sexual intercourse connected with reproduction? Should the body be regarded as a machine to be modified to suit the purposes of its “owner,” or should we try to be guided by the body’s immanent norms? Can a sharp line be drawn between contraception and abortion (IUUDs, for example, function as abortifacients), and does widely available contraception lead to more or fewer abortions? Related readings here are Rosemary Radford Ruether’s article, “Birth Control and the Ideals of Marital Sexuality,”29 and a piece by Cormac Burke entitled “Marriage and Contraception.”30 On surrogate mothering, we read a selection from John Roberson’s Children of Choice,31 which presents a utilitarian defense of surrogacy, and two opponents of surrogate mothering: Jean Bethke Elshtain, who presents a communitarian feminist critique of surrogacy in “Technology as Destiny,”32 and Hilde and James Lindemann Nelson’s essay “Cutting Motherhood in Two.”33

Our discussion of reproduction leads naturally to a discussion of family structure. We focus on the arguments for and against the traditional family. Relevant readings on this topic may be drawn from the following: Donald Hatcher, “Why It Is Immoral to Be a Housewife,”34 in which an existential critique of the family is presented and arguments made by Simone de Beauvoir are summarized, and a selection from Sandra Bartky’s, Femininity and Domination,35 in which she argues from a Marxist perspective that women are disempowered in the traditional family by the exploitation of their “emotional labor.” We then turn to Susan Molier Okin’s critique of the traditional division of labor in families in her Justice, Gender and the Family.36 As background to understanding her claim that the traditional family is unjust to women, we read short selections from John Rawls’s Theory of Justice37 and from Michael Sandel’s communitarian critique of Rawls on the family from his Liberalism and the Limits of
Turning to the political arena, we look at two important political movements in the Twentieth Century—the feminist movement and the gay- and lesbian-rights movement. I use concrete issues such as sexual harassment, affirmative action for women, and same-sex marriage to illustrate the theoretical issues, such as (in the case of same-sex marriage) whether or not heterosexuality ought to be viewed as normative and (in the case of feminist projects) whether feminism is a movement for fairness or merely the political pursuit of women’s interests (and if the latter, whether all women are to be viewed as having the same interests).

Readings for this section of the course are: Timothy Murphy’s “Homosex/Ethics,” which argues that there are no morally significant differences between homosexual and heterosexual; Michael Novak’s “Men Without Women,” which argues that there are important benefits to individuals and to society as a whole that are obtainable only by the struggle of learning to know and live with the other sex; Alison Jaggar’s classic essay “Political Philosophies of Women’s Liberation,” which defines four different types of feminism, and Juli Loesch Wiley’s article “Reweaving Society,” which advocates a communitarian sort of feminism which she calls “social feminism.” On sexual harassment, students read a chapter from Catharine MacKinnon’s Feminism Unmodified, and a chapter from Katie Roiphe’s book The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism. On affirmative action, I use Laura Purdy’s piece, “In Defense of Hiring Apparently Less Qualified Women,” and Louis Katzner’s essay “Is the Favoring of Women and Blacks in Employment and Educational Opportunities Justified?” On same-sex marriage, students read Robert George’s “Same Sex Marriage and Moral Neutrality,” and David Cooledge’s “The Question of Marriage.” I also use several essays from Andrew Sullivan’s book on same-sex marriage, as well as his own essay entitled “The Conservative Case for Same Sex Marriage,” from Virtually Normal.

The course ends with discussion of the way in which gender concepts have been applied to a reality transcending the merely human. Thinking about ultimate reality through gendered concepts is not limited to theistic religions of course (consider, for example, the yang and the yin in Taoism), but in my class I focus on the following questions: “Is God properly described as Father?” “Does the practice of calling God ‘Father’ sanction patriarchy, suggesting, perhaps that we should call God ‘Mother’ or something gender-neutral instead?” The readings I assign in connection with the question of gender and ultimate reality are: a selection from Mircea Eliade’s The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion, in which Eliade discusses sky gods (conceived as male) and earth goddesses; the first three chapters of Genesis, Carol Christ’s “Why Women Need the Goddess,” Juli Loesch Wiley’s essays “On the Fatherhood of God,” and “Is ‘God the Mother’ Just as Good,” which defend calling God “father,” and a selection from She Who Is by Elizabeth Johnson. I also include Rosemary Ruether’s “Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature,” Edith Black’s commentary on Genesis, a selection from Susanne Heine’s Christianity and the Goddesses, a piece entitled “Traditional Judaism and Feminine Spirituality” by Tamar Frankiel and Richard Davis’s “Making Inclusive Language Inclusive: A Christian Gay Man’s View.”

Depending on time, class size, and student interest, I think it is valuable to have some discussion of the ways that different cultures view sex and gender and the extent to which these views diverge from our own (though, of course, to be accurate, there is no one view that can be said to be “our” view). I teach a small advanced class, so I have interested students do presentations on other religions at the end.

Some Suggestions for Better Teaching

Students are not only entitled to hear what opposing parties have to say for their positions but also respond best when offered both sides of an issue before being asked to make up their own minds. Readings should not to “wall out” one’s opponents. For example, one should not simply assume that gender differences are socially constructed rather than natural and then proceed to raise the question of how this construction occurs.

1. Get a Sense of Where Your Students are “Coming From”

In planning a class on sex and gender issues, one should begin by thinking about one’s students’ social and cultural background and the pedagogical problems that this might present for the teacher who wants to encourage reflection on what are likely to be emotionally-laden issues. I devote the first day of class largely to asking students the following sorts of questions:

(a) Do they feel comfortable expressing their views on gender issues to other students, not only outside of class but also in class?

(b) Are there perspectives on gender issues that the students feel they have not been exposed to (and would like exposure to)?

(c) What topics are they most interested in?

At the Catholic school where I teach, I have sometimes been surprised to find students saying that they find that people with traditional Christian views feel inhibited about expressing them. I find it helps if you lay out clearly and calmly the reasons that have been given for more traditional positions and the arguments with which one might defend them. Then, seeing their opinions treated with respect, students will feel included and may venture to contribute their own ideas more. Many freshman orientation sessions involve sensitizing students to racial and gender issues, sometimes in a way that puts emotional pressure on students to act and think in ways that have become associated with “political correctness.” Instructors should familiarize themselves with the orientation programs in their colleges and should be aware that students may, as a result of their orientation experience, be unwilling to express their real feelings for fear of being thought to be “bad” people.

Many students who have previously taken courses on sex and gender will have taken them through Women’s Studies programs, so again it helps to be aware of the approach taken in such courses at one’s school, since this will affect the expectations students bring to the class. Sometimes, such courses give students the impression that gender issues are the territory of women and that men have no right to have opinions about them, and it is important to counteract this right at the start, by making all students feel welcome, and communicating to male students that I am genuinely interested in their perspective on the issues. For gender-related issues have important effects on men, albeit effects that (typically) differ from those experienced by women. Men, for example, often experience feelings of powerlessness, anger, and guilt in the wake of an abortion, and I find that opening up the question of whether fathers should have a say in the woman’s choice to abort always triggers a lively and thoughtful discussion.
I do not distribute a full syllabus at the start of the course because I want first to get a sense of where the students in that particular class “are coming from.” Instead, at the end of the first class session, I have the students in the class write down the questions that they would like to have answered during the course.64 It is only after the midterm by which time the students have written two short papers, one in which they take and defend a position on the question of whether Jan Morris was a man or a woman, both before and after surgery,64 and one that indicates which of the four worldviews discussed in the Sexuality section of the course most closely approximates their own—that I hand out the syllabus for the rest of the course in detail. Depending on the eagerness and willingness of students to do presentations or engage in class debates, I schedule those in, devoting three or four 1 and 1/4 hour sessions to them.

2. Respect the Consciences of All Students
It is particularly important to allow students the freedom of conscience to hold their own opinions about gender issues because they have in all likelihood been subjected already to strong emotional pressure to conform to certain views (be they religious or “politically correct”) and a philosophy course should provide a clear space in which to think out their own views. All too often they are paralyzed by the fear of offending anyone and want to give everybody what they want. So they fear to form their own opinions clearly at all. One thing that helps is to draw a clear distinction between what it means to form an opinion (which is good) and how this is different from going around indiscriminately expressing one’s opinions in wounding ways (which is not good). Trying to placate everyone lest you be thought to be a bad person is a habit of mind that stifles philosophical reflection. For example, questions like what sort of family is best for children, or whether a male to female transsexual has in fact become a woman, should be answered on the basis of evidence and philosophical reflection, and not on the basis of whether or not someone will feel offended if we were to assert that some form of family other than the one they are living in would be more in the interests of children, or question the claim of the postoperative transsexual to be a woman.65

I make it clear that I will proceed on the assumption that all my students are basically well-intentioned, even if in need of assistance in sorting out and thinking about the issues under discussion. In discussing issues such as sexual harassment, for example, one should try not to focus on egregious examples of male misconduct, but rather get students to talk constructively about how men and women can communicate better about their preferences and intentions. It may be desirable to have students initially discuss what they think constitutes sexual harassment in same sex groups,66 and then have them share with the entire class what they concluded in their groups. Structuring discussions this way helps bring to the surface all sorts of—sometimes unacknowledged—cultural expectations (for example, that in regard to sexual matters men should be a bit persistent and women should not say “yes” too quickly). Making views, expectations, and habits of thought explicit helps both men and women students achieve some distance from their own perspective and so helps towards alleviating what could otherwise become too adversarial a discussion about appropriate sexual behavior.

3. Be Careful about Labels; Discourage Crude or Inflammatory Language
Using labels to describe the various positions that people may take on gender issues is almost always misleading (and sometimes insulting). For example, “liberal” and “conservative” are virtually useless. Especially, one should be careful not to present favored and disfavored views using value-loaded language by referring, for example, to favored views as “progressive” and disfavored ones as “reactionary,” or by referring to defenders of certain gender roles as “sexists” or to feminists as “women’s libbers.” As much as possible, one should strive in the classroom to use descriptions of positions that those holding them would accept, and encourage students to do the same.

Furthermore, avoiding in oneself and discouraging in others the use of graphic, crude, or inflammatory language will help keep the emotional temperature of the classroom down. Even when some of the readings employ words like “f**k” (as Andrea Dworkin does), it is not good to permit their use in the classroom. On the other hand, it is not good to retreat into highly abstract language about “persons” and “relationships” while overlooking the concrete physical reality of sex. Although one may think, as I do, that Camille Paglia67 goes too far in the direction of making explicit the dark, irrational, and atavistic side of sexuality (such as fantasies of vaginas with teeth, for example), omitting the atavistic and primal side of sexuality is not a good idea if one wants students to acquire a balanced perspective of the full spectrum of different views about sex that people actually have. In discussing abortion, likewise, it is essential to appreciate the physical facts—in particular the facts about fetal development and the concrete details about how abortions are performed—in order to engage responsibly in moral reflection about it.

4. Encourage Students to Explore Moderate Positions
To encourage nuanced thinking, students ought to be weaned away from thinking that every question admits of only a “yes” or “no” answer. On the abortion issue, for example, there are clearly positions other than just “pro-life” and “pro-choice” that one can take. Indeed, any number of compromise positions between these two extremes is possible, and if one separates clearly questions about morality and questions about what the law should be, then the number of different positions that one might plausibly argue for regarding the permissibility of abortion becomes even greater. Students, however, should be discouraged from too quickly just “splitting the difference” on every issue and trying to satisfy everyone as this often results in incoherent thinking.

5. Get Students to Think Concretely about the Implications of Views
One technique for getting students to integrate what they are reading into their everyday lives is to get them to imagine in concrete detail just what it would be like to live in a society where some writer’s ideal society were realized, how living in such a society would be different from the way they lead their current lives,68 and whether they would like to live in such a society. I use this technique to help them think more clearly about Okin’s ideal of a genderless society, or Wasserstrom’s nonsexist society.
Techniques for Structuring Discussion

In my class on Sex and Gender, as in all my classes, I use a combination of lecture and discussion. To encourage discussion, I do the following:

First, for all the assigned readings, I hand out, in advance of the assignment, two types of study questions—those that direct students to the most important points in the text so that they can be sure to focus on what is important, and those that require them to do one of the following: connect the reading with their own lives, indicate how one of the authors of a different, previous, reading assignment might respond to the salient points made by the author of the current reading, take and defend a position regarding a particular issue discussed in the reading, or formulate a thoughtful question about the issue under discussion in the current reading.

Second, I often use the following technique: I divide students into groups of between 4 and 6 people, designating one student in the group as the “spokesperson.” I give each group a question or set of questions that it is to discuss and then report its answer(s) back to the class. I usually allow students to group themselves with others sitting near them, but sometimes vary this by having students count themselves off consecutively and then have all the 1s sit together, all the 2s sit together, all the 3s, and so on. This has the advantage of breaking up “cliques” of students who already know each other and might be less likely to work seriously as a discussion group. As mentioned above, occasionally I set up the groups segregated by sex. I allow each group 10-15 minutes, but monitor the groups so that I can shorten the time if they are finished beforehand or extend it if the students find they need more time. I give members of the groups the following instructions:

(a) Students in each group are to try to come to agreement concerning the answer to the question put to the group, but if at the end of the allotted time members are still in disagreement, the group should present both majority and minority reports. The spokesperson sketches the “majority” answer, but students who disagree with that answer are encouraged to speak in their own voices explaining why they disagree. (This helps the instructor know what some individual students think and allows reference back to what they said at some later point.)

(b) Members of each group should be careful not to come to an agreement too quickly. If they find they all do quickly agree on some position, then someone in the group should adopt the position of “devil’s advocate” and try to counter the arguments made in favor of the agreed-upon view.

(c) Groups that present later than others are encouraged to refer back to what earlier ones have said or compare their ideas with those already voiced.

Although it is often preferable to have students defend views that they actually hold (since people have a hard time defending a position in a debate if they do not agree with it), I suggest that for especially sensitive topics, it is best to form debate groups by having the students in the class count off by twos with the 1s assigned to take the “pro” side and the 2s the “con” side. This sometimes helps both to distance the debating students from their own feelings on the topic (that is, if they are assigned a position other than their own) and to avoid students’ taking personally the arguments for positions that run counter to their own (since every student in the class knows that the positions argued for are ones that have been “assigned”).

Distinguish Clearly Between Moral and Legal Questions

Distinguishing between moral and legal questions and recognizing that the issues of legality and morality can, at least sometimes, be separated, often helps students more easily to engage in dialogue with those who disagree with them. They need to realize, for example, that a person could think homosexuality is morally all right and still believe that the law should not recognize same-sex unions, and that the question of what the law should be on abortion is in part a prudential judgment about what Americans will be prepared to accept. Thus, students who disagree on the morality of a given sexual issue might still be able to agree about what the law should be—a fact that might bring opposing parties closer together.

Help Students Make Sense of Their Feelings

The problem of integrating emotional responses and rational reflection is especially hard when sexual issues are under discussion. Abortion and gay and lesbian issues usually trigger strong emotional responses, but “gut” feelings can crop up as well during discussion of many other gender issues. (One striking example of this occurred the semester I had predominantly male students in my class. In discussing the case of a male to female transsexual, one male student who was trying very hard to be tolerant and accepting of the person’s choice, suddenly blurted out “Do whatever you want, man, but don’t cut it off!”)

When discussing homosexuality, one must be especially careful that students who have feelings of repulsion toward such practices not express them in raw terms since it is not at all unlikely that some of the students in the class are gay or lesbian. But of course the instructor should encourage students not merely to become aware of their feelings (which they usually are, in any case) but to think about why they have the feelings they do. Students should be encouraged to take a hard look at what it is about the acts in question that they find disturbing.

One useful exercise when treating sensitive topics of a sexual nature—it works especially well for the question of the morality of abortion—is to ask students to explain, leaving their own opinions aside, what they think the strongest arguments are on both sides, writing the arguments on the board. When discussing homosexuality, one must be especially careful that students who have feelings of repulsion toward such practices not express them in raw terms since it is not at all unlikely that some of the students in the class are gay or lesbian. But of course the instructor should encourage students not merely to become aware of their feelings (which they usually are, in any case) but to think about why they have the feelings they do. Students should be encouraged to take a hard look at what it is about the acts in question that they find disturbing.

Endnotes

1. I would like to express my thanks to Phil Devine for his help at every stage of the writing of this paper.
4. This expression is used by Shulamith Firestone in The Dialectic of Sex (New York: Bantam, 1971).
5. Mary Daly holds not only that the difference between the sexes is cosmically important but also that the male sex is “inherently evil.” See Mary Daly, Outercourse (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992).
7. The whole notion of “masculine voice” and “feminine voice” in ethics is, I realize, highly controversial, and has been questioned from a number of different directions. The anthology, edited by Eva Feder Kittay and Diana...
59. Edith Black, commentary on Genesis, In Sex and Gender: A Spectrum of Views.*

60. Susanne Heine, Christianity and the Goddesses (London: SCM Press, 1988).*


62. Richard Davis, "Making Inclusive Language Inclusive: A Christian Gay Man’s View." An earlier version of Davis’s essay appeared in a newsletter of The Parsonage in San Francisco in the 1980s, and was rewritten for Sex and Gender, op. cit. Or you can just cite it to our volume since it was extensively re-written.

63. I keep these questions, and often use one or more of them as essay questions for the midterm.


65. The way in which philosophical reflection can come into conflict with emotional and political pressures was brought home to us during the copyediting phase of our book. The copy editor informed us that it was Wadsworth’s policy to refer to postoperative transsexuals using pronouns corresponding to their chosen gender, and not, more ambiguously as he/she (as we had done), because they (the transsexuals) found the latter offensive. This was something of a problem, since the philosophical question we wanted students to ponder was whether the transsexual whose story we were reprinting had in fact become a woman after the hormonal and surgical treatments, so we did not want to beg the question either way.

66. I focus on harassment between peers, and do not go into legal issues, though some instructors may wish to do so.


68. Even granting that it is hard for those whose imaginations were formed in the world as is to imagine a different world, the exercise can still be valuable for its potential to lead students to become more self-conscious about the ways that gender shapes their lives—their dress, their hobbies, their hopes and dreams, and their conception of who they are.

**Replies to Steven M. Cahn’s “The Ethics of Teaching: A Puzzle”**

**Truth or Consequence? A Response to Steven M. Cahn’s “The Ethics of Teaching: A Puzzle”**

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While cases I and II differ significantly, I believe a teacher ought not to directly contest Paul or Patricia’s beliefs concerning God or an inaccessible uncle, respectively. My reasons for such discretion in both cases differ somewhat.

The Difference between Cases I and II

The verifiability of Cases I and II differ substantially. The qualifier in Case I, “inaccessible region of the world,” is supposed to mitigate this difference by making it impossible to verify the uncle’s existence with a face-to-face encounter.

But the “inaccessible” region of the world in which the uncles resides apparently was not always inaccessible—otherwise the uncle could not have gotten there. To speak of an uncle living in an “inaccessible” part of the world does not make much sense, unless one assumes that the region once was accessible but since has become inaccessible for, perhaps, geological, or political reasons. Did anyone visit and return from this now inaccessible region while the uncle was living there but before it became inaccessible? If so, would it not make sense to check with this visitor about the existence of this alleged uncle? None of these scenarios is imaginable with respect to Case II.

Furthermore, the qualifier “inaccessible” fails to mitigate the difference between the uncle and God in other ways. If Patricia’s uncle has “considerable resources,” would it not be reasonable for Patricia to expect a visit from her uncle, say, at her wedding day? Perhaps a letter congratulating her for some accomplishment the uncle is “mysteriously” cognizant of? If he fails to do such things—on what basis does she continue to believe that he cares? It seems important to Patricia not only that this uncle exists, but that he cares. But on what basis can we say (or Patricia continue to believe) that the uncle cares if he undertakes no obvious action to demonstrate his caring? 1

In other words, it may be possible to convince Patricia her uncle actually does not care despite the fact it might be much harder to convince her that he never, in fact, existed.

In sum, the belief both that the uncle exists and that he actually does care should be empirically verifiable in ways that the existence of God and God’s caring is not. Patricia has a legitimate demand to expect certain evidence—old photographs, an address, letters, etc.—that would not be available with respect to God’s existence, as well as to expect a range of actions undertaken by the uncle on her behalf if she is reasonably to continue believing he truly cares.

**How Teachers Should Treat Cases I and II**

In both cases, a teacher should not confront directly what Patricia or Paul believes, but for different reasons.

Though I would be rather skeptical about the existence of an “inaccessible” but existent and caring uncle if Patricia were unable to answer questions like “Which continent is he closest
to? ‘What did he do before he moved out of the country?’ ‘Have you seen an old photograph of him?’ I would also suspect that Patricia’s parents had some reason for telling her such a thing. Either they told her because it is true that the uncle exists (and they would be in a better position to know this than I) or, if it is not true, they told her for some other undisclosed reason they consider legitimate.

Assume, however, that I knew she did not have an uncle—say, her parents told me they had lied to her about the uncle precisely to inspire her, to give her “renewed strength” and hope. Perhaps I would try and convince her parents to disabuse her of her mistaken belief, but I would not myself directly try and disabuse Patricia of this mistaken belief. First, why would Patricia believe me over her parents? Second, I would not want to invite a direct confrontation with the parents who have their reasons, good or bad, for keeping her in the dark. In other words, trying to contest her belief directly would be ineffective, foster a defensive stance on the student’s part, and perhaps result in a confrontational relation with both the student and her parents.

Nonetheless, if Patricia has not yet become suspicious of the alleged uncle’s existence, or (if he does exist) that he cares for her, I would hope that through the study of philosophy she would herself come to doubt and question these claims, in particular, given the lack of evidence for her parents’ assertions. But I should not tell her outright that her uncle does not exist, and I certainly would not tell her that he does not care. I can only try and cultivate in her both a more critical, questioning attitude towards her beliefs (including but not limited to—her belief in her uncle) as well as make clear to her the kind of evidence/support that one would want to have and that one would expect there to be if it were true that she actually does have such an uncle who cares for her.

The same can be said for Paul’s belief concerning God’s existence—except here, there is no possibility of my having certainty that Paul is right or wrong. God’s existence is notoriously unverifiable. I cannot imagine conditions under which it would be verifiable. I can only try and give Paul a greater sophistication and context within which to hold his belief: knowledge of other conceptions of God besides his own; an appreciation of the difference between reason and belief; an exposure to the classical proofs of God’s existence—except here, there is no possibility of my having certainty that Paul is right or wrong. God’s existence is.

Some questions have to be answered, ultimately, on one’s own. My goal as a philosophy professor is to try and give the students a sense of which questions can have “true” and “false” answers, which cannot, and why. Such an attitude does not encourage relativism—that one opinion is as good as any other. The key is to show students that while there may be no one right answer when it comes to certain topics or issues, there are more and less effective and convincing reasons for certain classes of beliefs. Certain beliefs are capable of certain kinds of proof while others are not. Teaching philosophy, especially to undergraduate nonmajors, is about analyzing questions: both the “perennial” questions that we, as finite beings, ask of ourselves and our world, as well as the more technical and specialized questions that have arisen in the course of trying to answer the big questions. I strive to give students a sense of what it is about ourselves and our world that invites such questioning and wonder. How students take up the invitation to examine their most cherished and personal beliefs is not for me to decide.

Conclusions
To sum up, Cases I and II are not analogous, despite the attempt to make them so. Of course, the main point posed by the puzzle is whether—as teachers—we are obligated to try to convince students of what we take to be true, even if the consequences of learning “the truth” might be difficult or disappointing for them.

With respect to Case I, to try and convince Patricia directly that her uncle does not exist or does not care would be meddling too much in the personal/family business of my student. Were she to ask my opinion, I would give it. Her even asking my opinion might indicate the extent that she has some doubt about the matter.

With respect to Case II—it would be rather presumptuous of a philosophy professor to try and actively convince her students that a belief in God is false. Even if the professor does get some students to relinquish that belief, what good is this supposed to achieve? Can they be any more certain of the truth of their atheism simply because Professor X or Jean-Paul Sartre thinks similarly? In what way have we made them more “mature” or “self-reliant” if they have essentially abandoned one authority figure (e.g., parents) for another (e.g., professor/philosopher)? (And here I would be somewhat reluctant to divulge my belief and my reasons for holding it even if Paul asked me. It would depend on when and where Paul asked me (for example, during class, in office hours, etc., the reason he was asking me, and the kind of person I took Paul to be.)

Endnotes
1. Here, I would refer the reader to Nel Noddings’s analysis of the various obligations involved in the caring relationship in “Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral Philosophy” (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984). One general obligation of the caring-one in the caring relation is to undertake some action on behalf of the cared-for. In the absence of such action, it is legitimate to question the extent to which the caring-one really cares for the cared-for.

2. Cahn’s puzzle apparently assumes the correspondence theory of truth—that a belief is true if it accurately depicts a subject-independent reality—so by “true” and “false” here I mean true and false strictly with reference to the correspondence theory. Of course, alternate theories of truth, (e.g. the pragmatic), have been developed precisely to cover those cases in which the correspondence theory does not help us, either because we cannot access the “reality” we want to know, or because that “reality” is—as yet—indeterminate (e.g., the future).
Reply to Steven Cahn’s “The Ethics of Teaching: A Puzzle”

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In “The Ethics of Teaching: A Puzzle,” APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy 2:2 (Spring 2003), Steven Cahn poses a pedagogical puzzle about analogous students: Patricia believes a resourceful, influential uncle watches over her from afar (“Uncle”), and Peter has a similar belief in God (“God”). Which beliefs enable them “to deal with life’s problems and achieve worthwhile goals.” Cahn then poses the following: If we believe Uncle or God does not exist, ought we to try to convince Patricia or Peter? Do Uncle and God differ and, if so, ought we to treat them so?

Here, (i) substantive issues (e.g., belief justification, evidential versus pragmatic belief) inform, (ii) pedagogical and dialectical ones (e.g., whether and how to challenge Uncle but not God). There is some substantive asymmetry between Uncle and God, but there are reasons for treating them equally, though some versions of God belief ought to be treated differently.

(i) Substance. The puzzle suggests equal reasons to challenge both beliefs, for both appear equally; (1) only indirectly supported (by trusted testimony); (2) intertwined within a supportive network of beliefs and activities that form a meaningful narrative; (3) protected against falsification by ordinary means; and (4) pragmatic, since they enable Patricia and Peter “to deal with life’s problems and achieve worthwhile goals” (id.).

Though Uncle and God appear analogous in these ways, they are disanalogous in three ways:

(a) Testing Complexity. Whereas Patricia can ask around to test Uncle (as some do with Santa), Peter’s tests may be constrained by a well-worked-out (faith-requiring) system of answers of kindred theists, or it might lead him to a study of philosophy or other religions, or to listen to those who have conquered powerful reasons to doubt, such as Holocaust survivors. Variation in types of testing for God is great, and depends on the believer: compare a Tibetan monk, a student of Talmud, the child of an interfaith marriage raised to believe in generic theism, etc.

(b) Range of Role. Though both beliefs appear to have equal pragmatic value, Uncle’s role in Patricia’s belief system is fairly local, but God’s seems global. It is doubtful that Uncle imbues Patricia’s life with the same all-encompassing (supernatural, ethical, and narrative) value as God may (e.g., some highly orthodox belief involves complex philosophical supports, say, in Talmudic scholars or Tibetan Buddhists).

(c) Psychological Impact. In the strongest God cases, belief revision will wreak havoc; in the case of causal God belief, however, challenging Uncle and God will likely have equally justified impact, akin to challenging other pre-reflective beliefs (e.g., in karma, lucky streaks, an afterlife, etc.). Though maximally extensive God belief is exceptional, most cases of God belief are analogous to Uncle and ought to be treated so.

(ii) Pedagogy. Belief is truth-orienting, but also plays pragmatic roles, e.g., making ethical, existential, and/or narrative sense of experience, promoting survival, preserving cultural wisdom, etc. It is therefore Procrustean to think facially pragmatic beliefs demand evidential challenge.1 The instructor on a mission to revise facially pragmatic beliefs errs. The more “user-friendly” instructor plays midwife to the student’s emerging awareness of the process of belief, of both major dimensions of belief (evidential and pragmatic), and of how they interrelate. My experience with students is that they are resistant to frontal evidential assault on their facially pragmatic beliefs, but receptive to impersonal meta-issues such as evidentialism versus pragmatism. Exposure to general issues empowers them to challenge specific beliefs when discursive process is central, rather than belief content. If what drives class discussion is an attempt to weed out belief contents not in evidentialist vogue, then the dialectical atmosphere is not likely to be supportive, but intimidating. Even ideally, nobody wants to feel like Euthyphro.

Some philosophy teachers play the role of belief therapist well, but, unlike most therapy patients, most students do not actively seek—and so resist—belief therapy. A skilled psychotherapist need not confront a patient’s neuroses with unqualified truthfulness, but indirectly guides patients to the degree they are capable of growth. A skilled belief therapist, too, is guided by the notion that growth in wisdom involves less change in belief content than it does in dialectical process. Paying heed to these caveats, one ought to treat God as open to scrutiny. I often review half the semester’s issues around God (epistemic, ontological, axiological), since it is a philosophically rich issue with which many students—theists, atheists, and agnostics alike—already identify. How far the dialectic proceeds depends largely on group dynamics.

I establish a supportive environment with a belief project: Students are asked to write down a philosophical belief they have together with their reason(s) for it (i.e., an argument), and to volunteer to discuss them with the class. I preface this project with a lecture on the differences between (competitive) rhetorical debate and (cooperative) rational dialectic, and then I begin the project by presenting an argument of my own. As dialectical “do’s” and “don’t’s” emerge; I note them (e.g., the straw man fallacy, the principle of charitable interpretation, trivial objection, attacking the illustration, change of subject). I use the first week of the course for such Socratic work with the examples (many are analogues of Uncle, e.g., karma, occasional precognition, lucky charms, the protective spirit of a deceased loved one, etc.). This exercise empowers students through hands-on experience doing philosophy with their beliefs, assists them with the transition into discursive speech, and helps me to quickly sense the caliber of the group.

Though I begin all my courses with this project (and have not had a single course in which God is not brought into the discussion), it is ideal in the introductory philosophy course. There, subsequent assignments revolve around discussion of the meta-issues found in such readings as the Euthyphro hypothesis of beliefs relative to consistency and other criteria of cogency (Socratic method), the Apology (differences between ignorance, opinion, knowledge, and wisdom), Radhakrishnan’s “Personal Experience of God” (multi-dimensional meaning of religious experience), William James’s “The Will to Believe” (pragmatic versus evidential rationality). Charles Peirce’s “The Fixation of Belief” (grounds of inquiry, bases of belief revision, falsifiability as an epistemic virtue, etc.), and, among others, Descartes’ Meditations (belief error, belief unreliability, and the need for criteria for knowledge). In my last such course (one of the most successful), there were bright students of
diverse backgrounds for whom fideism is not a theory, but a way of life. While I doubt belief revision was immediate for many, I think the processes that lead to it were engaged on such a level as to have lasting value in their lives.

Conclusion. My answer to Cahn’s puzzle is that it should be put to full pedagogical use: Let students answer it! Ideally, as students’ analogues of Uncle invariably arise in the belief project, inquiry is directed through casuistic treatment of the examples, encouraging students to extract and gather assent to implicit principles. Once these are on the board, so to speak, Cahn’s puzzle would be explicitly introduced, and the students encouraged (with the aid of instructor silence and related pedagogical aids) to draw, embrace, and/or resist the inferences, and to bounce these off of each other, thus answering the puzzle for themselves. Their more developed inferences, and to bounce these off of each other, thus endnotes

1. For an opposing view, see, e.g., Jonathan Adler, Belief’s Own Ethics (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).
3. Plato’s Apology in Grube (supra).

Response to Cahn’s Puzzle of the Benevolent Uncle

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1. Let me couch my response within the wider domain of the ethics of belief, which entails the development of a certain type of virtuous person, the verific person.
2. The verific man or woman is one who is disposed to gathering evidence in such a way as to make it highly probable that he or she will have the best justified beliefs possible. The rational faith of the verific person is that the more justified a belief is, the more likely it is to be true. A verific person loves truth both for its own sake and for its instrumental value (Jesus said, “the truth shall make you free”).
3. A fuller defense of the ideal of the verific person would show that there is a broad ethics of belief impelling us to seek to tailor our beliefs to the amount of evidence available for any proposition.
4. Our task as philosophers is to be models of verific persons and to challenge our students to become such as well. When we learn to value the truth (or having the best-justified beliefs available), the problem of Patricia’s Uncle is set in a broader moral context.
5. When Patricia, the verific person, revisits the proposition about her Benevolent Uncle, she will tend to believe or disbelieve in that proposition according to the evidence available to her. This is really no different from what goes on when children cease to believe in Santa Claus. For me that belief once brought great comfort and inspiration, but, though I experienced some sadness in its loss, I, like millions of other children, learned to live gracefully without that belief.
6. We should not assume ahead of time that there is no evidence for the existence of the Benevolent Uncle. Maybe Patricia receives financial help from a man who signs his name to the checks. True, the checks could be made out by her parents or some other party who wants her to believe in the “Uncle." There are many explanations for the checks. But the bank honors them, and they pay for Patricia’s tuition costs. So the bottom line is that the belief has a practical payoff.
7. Suppose Patricia sees the evidence for and against the existence of the “Uncle” pretty well-balanced. So on purely epistemic grounds, she must withhold judgment. Still she may live in hope that the better story wins out, that her “Uncle” exists. For the verific person, in many situations, hope may be a more appropriate epistemic attitude than belief.
8. Applying all this to Cahn’s second point (II), we could conclude that verific religious people should proportion their belief-states to the evidence available, but where the evidence is ambiguous, there may be room for hope where belief is not warranted.
9. Regarding Part III, of course, the magnitude of the belief differs in the two cases, belief in God being the kind of belief that is deeper and far more extensive in its implications for other beliefs, one’s whole worldview. But the principles of seeking to have evidence for our beliefs and becoming a verific
In our profession, at least in principle, if not always in practice, we put high premiums on empirically defensible truths or the search for truths, on the power and reliability of autonomous reasoned judgment—essentially the same values expressed by Paul Kurtz in his Secular Humanist Declaration: the conviction that “ethical judgments can be formulated independently of revealed religion.” Because of this conviction, “secularists deny that morality needs to be deduced from religious belief or that those who do not espouse a religious doctrine are immoral . . . [T]heir goal is to develop autonomous and responsible individuals, capable of making their own choices in life based upon an understanding of human behavior.”

We are, of course, quite entitled to take these values seriously in the conduct of our own professional and private lives. Indeed, this set of convictions is often the chief attraction which draws individuals to careers in academic philosophy in the first place. But not everyone is equally comfortable traveling through life in this particular boat, and none of us is possessed of so much life experience that we can be supremely confident that such a modus vivendi is the only one worth pursuing. The unexamined life may not be worth living, but over the millennia, human beings have crafted a variety of different ways to examine their lives.

It is undoubtedly true that, to the extent that we do take these values seriously, our belief in their importance will inevitably be conveyed, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtly, through our teaching as well. We live in a larger cultural climate which frequently exhibits overt hostility to this humanist perspective, and that hostility invites, even demands, some kind of defense of secular humanist tenets from those attracted to them. But the response can be equally hostile, and consequently equally unconstructive. To see how this happens, it is helpful to examine a case outside the classroom setting in some detail.

During the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign, Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Democratic vice presidential candidate, achieved some notoriety by expressing the view that: “George Washington warned us never to indulge the supposition that ‘morality can be maintained without religion.’”5 Lieberman was referring in particular to a passage from Washington’s Farewell Address to the Nation, in which Washington advised: “let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

Lieberman’s and Washington’s remarks both give expression to a lack of confidence in the autonomous reliability of humanist tenets, but they do so in very different ways. Washington is writing in the intellectual context of Enlightenment deism, and conveys a view not dissimilar from that of David Hume who, through his character Cleanthes in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, suggests that the social value of organized religion “is to regulate the hearts of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience.”6 But Hume then distinguishes between the motives of morality and justice, on the one hand, and the socially valuable influence of religion, on the other, adding that religion’s only enforces the motives of morality and justice, it should not be confused with those other motives. Morality is conceptually independent of religion for Hume, even if its effective exercise in practice may be heavily psychologically dependent on the salutary effects of organized religion. Similarly, Washington appears to be conceding that “the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure” may provide some individuals (those of suitable cognitive predisposition?) with the conceptual apparatus sufficient to lead moral lives without the additional benefit of religious...
instruction, but that we cannot reasonably hope that such “refined education” will be sufficient to secure the good behavior of the unwashed masses, those far more numerous minds of a different structure which compose the material from which a national morality might be forged.

When we recall the account Hume develops in the *Treatise* and the *Second Enquiry* concerning the positive and universal moral influence of “natural sympathy,” he actually seems to embrace a somewhat more optimistic view of human nature than Washington’s, allowing for the possibility of widespread (albeit narrowly directed) moral sensibility even in the absence of the influence of organized religion, while acknowledging that religious instruction and beliefs can certainly help to reinforce the innate fellow-feeling which gives rise to moral sensibility in the first place. Lieberman, on the other hand, heads in the other direction, toward the quasi-theocratic civic republicanism of anti-federalists like Benjamin Rush: “The only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in religion. Without this there can be no virtue.”

Like Rush, Lieberman apparently believes that moral education is impossible in the absence of religious inspiration. In the same campaign speech cited earlier, Lieberman went on to declare that:

> Without biblical traditions, from the Ten Commandments to ‘the compassion and love and inspiration of Jesus of Nazareth,’ it could never have been written, and wouldn’t have been written, in our Declaration of Independence, ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’

This rhetoric is very much of a piece with Rush’s claim that: “By renouncing the Bible, philosophers swing from their moorings upon all moral subjects… It is the only correct map of the human heart that ever has been published.”

Judging at least by his remarks on this occasion, Lieberman, like Rush, appears to be suggesting that moral principles and sensibilities are born of religion, and have no independent existence. Moreover, right-minded moral principles are available only through the Judeo-Christian religious tradition in particular. Lieberman seems every bit as militant on this score as Rush, going on to assert that “the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, not freedom from religion.” This is, of course, quite false as a legal doctrine, given both the language and spirit of the free exercise clause of the First Amendment, and given the U.S. Supreme Court’s more or less consistent interpretation of that language in numerous cases. A more charitable interpretation of Lieberman’s remark would be to treat it as a bit of cultural anthropology: the U.S. Constitution has not the power to undo what Lieberman regards as an intractable feature of the human condition: a true and moral perspective cannot be achieved in the absence of the inspiration and motivation provided by organized religion.

If pressed, I imagine that Lieberman (but probably not Rush), would enlarge his catalog of religions with a proper moral compass to include Islam and Mormonism, as other “people of the book,” but I doubt that he would be prepared to extend the same latitude to more culturally alien religions. Even if Lieberman might be somewhat less religiously parochial than Rush, he certainly shares Rush’s pessimism about the value of autonomous reasoned judgment. Lieberman, and many like-minded people, clearly have no patience with the secular humanist conviction that ethics is an autonomous field of inquiry independent of revealed religion.

This brand of epistemological skepticism, however, is only part of the hostility expressed by mainstream faith-based popular culture toward post-enlightenment secular humanism. In addition to its importance as the proper foundation for moral education, revealed religion is also alleged to provide the only adequate source of moral motivation. For Calvin and a host of like-minded Reformation Protestant thinkers, and also for many contemporary proponents of Christian, and other, faith-based moralities, human beings cannot confidently be expected to behave in accordance with moral precepts in the absence of fear of divine wrath. Only when confronted with the stick of divine retribution, and the carrot of eternal salvation, can human beings reasonably be expected to behave themselves. Recognition of the intrinsic value of living in accordance with moral precepts, on its own, cannot be expected to ensure compliance with those precepts. Fear of certain retribution for noncompliance is also required.

This is, of course, a deeply pessimistic view of human nature which, in Christianity in particular, can be traced back at least as far as Pauline and Augustinian doctrines of original sin. It is a view which still overtly informs much of evangelical Protestantism today, and lurks always in the background of “mainline” Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Ironically, it is also a view which informs the perspective of a variety of theorists of human nature who are usually regarded as enemies of organized religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Consider, for example, the case of Critias, Plato’s uncle, notorious as a leader of the Thirty Tyrants in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War. In his play, *Sisyphus*, Critias characterizes religion as a pragmatically cynical response to anti-social behavior in which: “Some shrewd man… found for mortals the fear of gods, thereby to frighten the wicked should they even act or speak or scheme in secret… [because] even if you plan in silence some evil deed, it will not be hidden from the gods.”

The only difference between Critias and contemporary theocratically inclined religious believers has to do with their respective views about the etiology and intrinsic validity of religious belief. Their views about its social effects and about human nature in the absence of religion are virtually identical. Secular humanists are as repulsed by this set of convictions about the nature of human motivation as they are by the epistemological skepticism that would deny human beings the capacity for discerning a path to human flourishing and spiritual development in the absence of divine assistance. Consequently, humanists like Kurtz tend to dismiss organized religion, at least in its traditional Western forms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), as expressive of a set of attitudes as pernicious as those of Critias: “Promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful. They distract humans from present concerns, from self-actualization, and from rectifying social injustices.”

Possessed of a particular conception of God’s omniscience, Western religious believers often feel compelled to deride human cognitive capacities as woefully inadequate to provide any guidance in the achievement of human flourishing. Possessed of a particular conception of God’s omnipotence, Western religious believers often feel compelled to deride human motivational structure as woefully inadequate to ensure that human beings will voluntarily choose to live moral lives. Humanists regard both doctrines as not only false, but harmful, because they discourage the kind of individual human creative endeavor which humanists regard as the true road to both individual and collective human flourishing.

Kurtz and like-minded people do not stop, however, with a critique of what they regard as the moral pessimism inherent
in many traditional Western religious groups. They also counter with their own substantive views about the human condition. The passage quoted above, for example, continues as follows:

Modern science discredits such historic concepts as the ‘ghost in the machine’ and the ‘separable soul.’ Rather, science affirms that the human species is an emergence from natural evolutionary forces. As far as we know, the total personality is a function of the biological organism transacting in a social and cultural context. There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body. We continue to exist in our progeny and in the way that our lives have influenced others in our culture. 

Note how this language is just as metaphysically autocratic, just as uncompromising, as that of any rigid religious fundamentalist. Applied to either of Cahn’s hypothetical students, it suggests that a good shaking is in order, to snap them out of their dogmatic slumbers and put them on a path in which they will each take responsibility for their own lives, rather than assign that responsibility to divine or avuncular providence. It is, I suggest, this attitude, fairly widespread in our discipline, which induces us to take Cahn’s puzzle seriously.

Humanists like Kurtz do try to moderate the impact of passages like the one just quoted by arguing that they are merely advocating that we bring a kind of open-minded rationality to bear on our assessment of the human condition and what to do about it:

Morality that is not God-based need not be antisocial, subjective, or promiscuous, nor need it lead to the breakdown of moral standards. Although we believe in tolerating diverse lifestyles and social manners, we do not think they are immune to criticism. Nor do we believe that any one church should impose its views of moral virtue . . . or legislate them for the rest of society. As secular humanists we believe in the central importance of the value of human happiness here and now. We are opposed to absolutist morality, yet we maintain that objective standards emerge, and ethical values and principles may be discovered, in the course of ethical deliberation. . . . It is possible for human beings to lead meaningful and wholesome lives for themselves and in service to their fellow human beings without the need of religious commandments or the benefit of clergy.

While responding here to charges of uncritical ethical relativism, often leveled against secular humanists by their faith-based antagonists, Kurtz is also expressing the idea that his opponents should not be overconfident about the validity of moral conventions sanctioned by traditional religious beliefs, or dismissive of the intrinsic value of human life here on earth. The implication, of course, is that the secular humanists are both the more tolerant and the more visionary group. When confronted with such condescension, it is surely both understandable, and even reasonable, that traditional religious believers would counter that they, too, are not without creative resources. It is also understandable, but not so reasonable, that they would come to regard humanists who place so much faith in their own cognitive capacities, who are so quick to dismiss “promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation” as “illusory and harmful” distractions “from present concerns [and] from self-actualization,” as agents of the Anti-Christ.

Why should humanists be so quick to dismiss religious inspiration as a potential source of human flourishing? And why should religious fundamentalists be so quick to dismiss humanist claims about the possibility of self-actualization in the absence of divine guidance? We are not so far removed today from Michel de Montaigne’s famous condemnation of religious intolerance in late sixteenth-century Europe, comparing his European compatriots’ behavior with reports he had received of canniblistic practices among the indigenous residents of Brazil by pointing out that “there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, . . . than in roasting and eating him after he is dead.”

As I observed earlier, theist and humanist alike, we should none of us be so confident that our preferred path through life is the only one worth pursuing. So long as there is no clear evidence that Patricia’s guiding belief in her uncle’s benevolent oversight appears to be doing her any obvious harm, we should not presume that it must be doing her harm simply because it does not square with what we are convinced must be true.

There is, of course, the last question with which Cahn left us: Is Patricia’s case significantly different from Peter’s? One might argue, I suppose, that Peter at least has the benefit of participating in a larger social network of like-minded people who may themselves be committed to a religious perspective that has a long history, one likely therefore to exhibit at least some proven value for human flourishing. Patricia, on the other hand, is afflicted with an idiosyncratic and what appears to be almost certainly false belief, supported by no such larger social network (apart from her parents, who were, in Cahn’s account, the original authors of this bit of personalized mythology). Does she not run the danger of having this tenuous belief system come crashing down around her one day, with devastating psychological consequences?

The answer to that last question, of course, is “yes.” But it does not follow from that liability that we should disabuse Patricia of her belief in her uncle today. After all, anybody can lose their faith, including even the secular humanist’s confidence in the scope of human cognitive capacity and the inspiring possibilities of self-actualization. We are all in that boat with Patricia. We might regard her particular faith as a singularly peculiar way of giving form to a kind of individualized spiritual identity, but who is to say that is such a bad thing? In Habits of the Heart, a seminal sociological study of the impact of individualism in contemporary American culture, Robert Bellah discusses a similarly individualized conception of spiritual identity through a short series of quotations from an interview subject to whom (for the sake of privacy) he assigns the disguised identity of a young nurse named “Sheila Larson.” Through Sheila, Bellah has coined an expression for a theistic counterpart for Patricia’s secularized religious individualism. In Sheila’s words: “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way; it’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.”

“Patricianism” could easily be like Sheilaism in the sense that it could be a radically individualistic religion, and not simply a radically individualistic psychosis. Although Bellah does express some concern that self-made spirituality such as Sheila’s could prove to be nothing more than a form of self-absorption and fear of commitment to other individuals as part of a larger community (a theme of concern throughout Habits of the Heart), he also acknowledges that Sheilaism has at least some elements of traditional religiosity. Quoting Sheila again, her personal faith imbues in her a set of recognizably spiritual motives: “It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think he would want us to take care of each other.” It is easy...
to imagine Patricia drawing similar, potentially psychically beneficial conclusions from the inspiration of a benevolent uncle watching over her.

Bellah also worries that this minimalist religiosity could prove too impoverished to serve as a guiding perspective for a lifetime of experience and activities. Why should we think so? There are certainly people who muddle along, perhaps not very satisfactorily, with considerably more diminished spiritual sensibilities, and others who wind up embarking on what appear to be quite profound voyages of spiritual self-discovery, beginning only with similarly spare resources of personal spirituality. Religious individualism can provoke quite serious soul-searching.18 There is nothing to prevent the same from happening to Patricia through her secularized version of Sheilaism, and we should probably not be so presumptuous as to assume otherwise. We are all, in the end, not so very different from Patricia, and it is useful to remember that fact when dealing with the religious views of our students, whether they are sectarian, individualistic, secularized, or even downright peculiar.

Endnotes
4. George Washington, Farewell Address to the Nation (Consortium Book Sales, 1999), 22. Also available in full text on various web sites, e.g., http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/washing.htm. Washington delivered this speech in 1796, for the purpose of declining to pursue a third term.
5. David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, edited by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), Part 12, 82. Hume’s Dialogues, although initially composed much earlier in his life (around 1750), was not completed until 1776, the last year of his life, and arranged by Hume (in his will) to be published posthumously, in 1777. I am unaware as to whether Washington ever read Hume’s work in particular (which seems unlikely), but the view expressed in this passage was certainly “in the air” in late eighteenth century America.
6. I am referring here to Hume’s contention that natural sympathy is most efficacious when directed toward family members, friends, and near acquaintances, while much more attenuated when applied to more distant people.
8. Supra, note 3.
10. Supra, note 3.
This is an important and timely book. According to the Census Bureau, Latinos/as now comprise the single largest group of people of color in the United States. It is estimated that in fifty years, 1 in 4 Americans will be of Latino/a descent. Yet Latino and Latin American philosophy is hardly taught in American philosophy departments to the extent that Asian or African thought is. Part of the reason for this difference is the lack of textbooks in translation with crucial introductory writings. Until now, teachers of Latin American thought have had to cobble together their own course readers from out of print editions and obscure journals, sometimes at significant cost to students. Nuccetelli and Seay’s book goes a long way toward making Latin American philosophy a more accessible area of study for an English-speaking audience.

The book immediately transports the reader into a different frame of reference. Both the inside front and back covers are illustrated with maps of South America, Spain and North Africa, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean all in Spanish. Inside, the book contains all original writings that provide an outline of the history of ideas in Latin America from the Pre-Columbian era to the present. It is therefore appropriate for undergraduates with little or no philosophical background, making it useful for disciplines such as history, ethnic studies, or literature and language studies. Yet each chapter contains writings that deal with topics in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and political philosophy, making it a good textbook in an introduction to philosophy course using Latin American sources.

Chapter One examines the question whether there was such as thing as philosophical, as opposed to mytho-religious, thought among the Maya and Aztecs prior to the arrival of European conquerors. It contains a selection from the work of famous Mexican Aztec expert, Miguel Leon-Portilla, who argues that the ancient Mesoamericans were developing sophisticated metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical systems that rivaled the complexity of the Pre-Socratic thinkers. This chapter could easily be used as a resource for a discussion about the nature of critical thinking in general.

Chapter Two presents the debate about the morality of the European conquest and the treatment of the indigenous that occurred in the sixteenth century between Juan Gines de Sepulveda and Bartolome de las Casas, among others. The literature surrounding this issue is important because it is, in some sense, the first modern European attempt at formulating a notion of universal human rights. The debate about the Conquest also gave Europeans the opportunity to clarify and critique their notion of just war theory.

Chapter Three introduces the reader to the work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the seventeenth century Mexican nun who defied Church authority to assert the right of women to be educated. Sor Juana’s tragic story (she was forced to submit to the Church and give up her library and studies) provides an example of the struggle of colonial Latin Americans to develop adequate understandings of their own reality in the New World, based in empirical study and observation, which sometimes clashed with official Church dogma in Europe.

Chapters Four and Five continue along this line, examining how Latin American intellectuals and statesmen, such as Simon Bolivar, José Rodo, and Leopoldo Zea, have attempted to re-examine and reformulate the notions of liberal democracy, civilization, and scientific method from a New World perspective throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Chapter Six deals with the issues of wealth, poverty, underdevelopment, and globalization in Latin America. It contains important selections from the work of Cuban national hero José Marti, Peruvian socialist theoretician José Carlos Mariategui, and Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff. The readings raise questions about the historic relationship of the United States to Latin America. As the Americas become more integrated through globalization, how can Latin America develop to avoid become a client of the North Americans? This question has preoccupied Latin American intellectuals for over a century. The debate enables American students to be able to reflect on the role of the United States as a global superpower.

The final chapter offers the reader a glimpse into an area of Latino/a and Latin American thought that is perhaps the most fruitful at present: the examination of the meaning of Hispanic/Latino ethnic and cultural identity. Selections from Francisco Romero and José Vasconcelos construct theories of history, culture, and race that try to locate the unique contribution of Latin America to the evolution of human civilization. The book concludes with a selection by Jorge Gracia that notes the obstacles and barriers Latino philosophy and philosophers still face today in American academia.

Even though this book is a valuable resource in introducing Latin American thought to American philosophers, there are some glaring omissions. The only selection by a woman is from Sor Juana. This might give readers the impression that women have not written anything of philosophical substance since the Scholastic Era. Contemporary women’s issues in Latin America are discussed, but by a man: noted philosopher Enrique Dussel. Feminists in Latin American have long been critical of Dussel for some of his early views on abortion, gender roles within the family, and women’s liberation. He has changed some of his ideas in recent years, but the selection here comes from that controversial period in his thinking.

A similar problem arises when considering the contribution of indigenous thought to Latin American philosophy. The only indigenous authors are found in the first chapter from the Pre-Columbian era. But indigenous people are talked about, analyzed, lauded, and criticized throughout the readings. In other words, it is clear that indigenous populations are significant components of the New World reality that many of these authors are trying to articulate. But they are continually talked about as objects rather than subjects within that reality. Miguel Leon-Portilla and Earl Shorris, in their recent work, *In the Language of Kings* (Norton: 2001), present Latin American indigenous literature from the Pre-Columbian era to the present as a continuing and evolving tradition. Perhaps a future edition of Nuccetelli and Seay’s textbook could take a cue from this effort and include more contemporary voices of women and the indigenous. Or perhaps reference could be made to some of the sources in the helpful bibliography that address women and ethnic voices in more detail.
Philosophy and Living

Reviewed by Eugene Kelly
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Philosophy and Living offers a long and leisurely tramp through the history of philosophy. Most of its forty-eight chapters are directed to the chief figures in that history, but some chapters are dedicated to discussions of schools of philosophy, such as Logical Positivism or Averroism or Stoicism. Some parts of the book are given to the task of characterizing entire historical periods, such as early Christianity or the Reformation.

The author has given himself an immense task. He has carried it out admirably. Ralph Blumenau comes to this large task from history, for he served in the History Department of Malvern College. He now teaches at the University of the Third Age in London, one of many such academies in England and Australia intended for the edification of senior citizens, rather than for those pursuing professional degrees. To this end, he offers a book that is a pleasure to read: lucid, unpretentious, with a minimum of scholarly apparatus. He shows a constant concern for the coherence of his material and the integrity of his theme, philosophy and living.

Blumenau treats his material evenly, and, despite the immense amount of information he offers, presents his material with admirable accuracy. The ancient world is given ninety pages, the medieval period sixty-five, the twelfth century 123; Kant is given twenty pages, Sartre nine, Mill four, Aristotle fourteen. Brief chapters, or parts of a chapter, discuss relatively minor figures such as Vico, Bayle, and Isaiah Berlin, or nonphilosophers such as Jung, Petrarch, and Newton, thinkers chosen for their continuing relevance to today’s philosophical issues as the author conceives them.

Three editorial devices support Blumenau’s desire for coherence and integrity. Asides set in a different typeface frequently break the main text, and offer critical reflections upon practical and moral issues, or extensions of the ideas under discussion to extraphilosophical issues. Some of the material in the asides, the author tells us, was derived from tape-recorded debates with his students. These asides are also reminders of where similar issues had been or will be encountered in the book as personal problems of philosophy. Footnotes, appropriately at the bottom of the page, contain clarifying material. Other notes refer the reader to the pages in which the present issues were discussed, so that the reader can easily pick up the trail of an issue as it passed through the works of other thinkers discussed in the text. The main text shows a great interest in the evolution of human thought, a fact that demonstrates the closeness of life to philosophy. Just as the issues that concern thinkers and the strategies these thinkers devise to resolve them evolve with the changing patterns of history, so too do the foundational beliefs of individuals undergo change as the individuals grow and learn new things, and as the new interests that engage their thought turn their attention to new matters.

Blumenau has mastered much of intellectual history. This reader found few outright errors or misstatements of the views of the philosophers he presents, or of the nature of the problems they were addressing. No doubt, many of those problems are simplified by Blumenau in the interest of his purposes, especially in his account of contemporary thinkers. No doubt also this results occasionally in generalizations that add little to our enlightenment. In introducing the existentialists, for example, he writes, “Heidegger believed that, properly understood, death can add to the meaning of life, whereas Sartre believed that it showed up life’s meaninglessness.” One may wonder how to introduce a student to philosophy without forcing him or her to struggle with the original texts, where, in this case, Heidegger slowly unfolds his hermeneutics of “existence towards death.” Blumenau’s presentation of Spinoza’s Ethics gives a clear summary of the purposes and conclusions of that great book, but very little of the understanding that can only arise from struggling with and through Spinoza’s axioms, definitions, lemmas, and proofs of theorems. His narrative makes the material seem simpler and, perhaps, more contemporaneous than it really is.

The book ends with a narrative description of philosophical bibliography, most of which are available from publishers in the United Kingdom, and with an adequate index of persons and topics.

An Introduction to Non-Classical Logic

Reviewed by David B. Martens
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Priest states that “The major aim of this book is to explain the basic techniques of non-classical logics.” (xv). I think the book does achieve this aim. However, both Priest’s statement and my assessment need some elaboration, or if they are to be solely understood. The reader who rests content with a glance at the title might leave with the mistaken impression that the book is, or at least aims to be, both easy and comprehensive.

Let’s first consider the coverage of the book. Priest seems at pains to dispel the impression that the book is comprehensive. He says: “The subject of non-classical logic is now far too big to permit the writing of a comprehensive textbook, so I have had to place some restrictions on what is covered” (xiii). But he explicitly sets aside only free logic and quantum logic, leaving the impression that his book still aims to be fairly comprehensive. So, is the book then an introduction to the logics that are not classical, or quantum? The trouble is that the phrase “non-classical logics” has no definite and precise meaning, beyond “logics that are not classical logic.” To be sure, “classical logic” does often mean something like “[the] theory of what is logically correct [that] was developed by Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and others” (xiii). (Compare Susan Haack, Philosophy of Logics, 1978, 152–153.) But should we then count the theory of types as classical, and monotonocity as classical, too, so that axiomatic set theories and non-monotonic logics are non-classical logics? Perhaps so, but those contrasts do not seem to fit the classical/non-classical contrast that Priest has in mind. Alternatively, “classical logic” often just means “the logic that people normally learn when they take a first course in formal logic” (xiii). But then it is a toss-up whether theories of identity and definite descriptions count as classical or not, and traditional syllogistic logic surely must count as non-classical. Again, this seems to miss Priest’s intention. I think, in fact, that the best way to understand the general coverage of the book is by ignoring its title and instead attending to Priest’s clear statement that “the book is restricted to propositional logic” and, “Within propositional logics, I have also restricted the logics considered here to ones [i.e., to some]
which are relevant to the debate about conditionals (“if . . . then . . .” sentences) (xiii, xiv). In the eleven main chapters, the book covers classical (Frege-Russell) propositional logic and the material conditional, normal and non-normal modal logics and strict conditionals, conditional logics, intuitionistic logic, many-valued logics, first degree entailment, relevant logics, and fuzzy logic. In other words, the descriptive phrase “non-classical logics” in the book’s title effectively means something like “selected formal treatments of conditionals.”

Now let’s consider the level of the book. In what sense is the book an “introduction”? There are two distinct issues here: the sort of preparation students should have before beginning the book, and the focus and depth of the book’s treatment of the material it covers. From what was said above it should be clear that the book, which is relatively short, surveys a lot of material, most of it quite advanced. Priest is clear that “This book is not meant to provide a first course in logic” (xiv). But what should students have learned in their first course in logic? Priest says, “I assume that readers are familiar with the classical propositional calculus, though I review this material fairly swiftly in chapter 1” (xiv). And he provides, in a four-page “Mathematical prolegomenon,” brief explanations of “some simple set-theoretic notation” and of “the notion of proof by induction,” which he says it is “not necessary to master...before starting the book” (xvii). Priest thus gives the impression that no more preparation is needed than a very basic course in propositional logic. This seems optimistic. Were I to use Priest’s book as a primary course text, I would strongly recommend to students that they have had a fairly substantial course in first-order predicate logic with soundness and completeness. As for the issue of focus and depth, Priest is clear that the emphasis is on “the basic techniques,” where the techniques he has in mind comprise possible-worlds semantics, tableau methods in proof theory, and proofs of soundness and completeness (xv). To be sure, Priest also provides, throughout the book, brief discussions of philosophical issues with which the various formal topics engage, and there is a page or so of historical and bibliographical discussion toward the end of each of the eleven main chapters and in the very short twelfth chapter. But the firm emphasis of the book is on explaining the formal techniques mentioned above.

Summing up, the book is an explanation of techniques of possible-worlds semantics, tableau methods in proof theory, and proofs of soundness and completeness, by means of a survey of selected formal treatments of conditionals and attendant philosophical issues, and pitched for students who have had a substantial course in first-order logic. As such, the book is appropriate for use as a primary text in a graduate- or upper-level undergraduate course devoted to formal techniques of the sorts mentioned, as a supplementary text in a graduate course on topics in conditionals, or as an addition to the library of anyone who teaches or does research in these areas.

Priest’s style is terse but clear. There are a few exercises at the end of each of the eleven main chapters. There are a bibliography, index of names, and index of subjects at the end of the book.

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**BOOKS RECEIVED**

**Harvard**

**Princeton University Press**

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Feminist Interpretations of Niccolò Machiavelli
Edited by Maria Falco

In recent years Machiavelli has come to be seen as a republican and a proto-liberal by some mainstream political theorists, and as an obfuscator of traditional values and ideologies, including gender roles, by feminists and non-feminists alike. The contributors to this volume, grappling with questions about the position of women in political society, investigate whether or not Machiavelli was truly a misogynist and a proto-fascist or instead a proto-feminist and a democratic republican. Among the themes they explore are the implications of such dichotomies as virtù, the public and the private, nature and reason, ends and means, functionality and the common good, as well as the importance of the military to the socialization of citizens, particularly women, in civic life, and the social construction of gender. Some of the contributors even consider the possibility that Machiavelli’s approach to ethics provides a special insight that feminists, and women generally, might explore to their benefit.

Besides the editor, the contributors are Wendy Brown, Jane Jaquette, Donald McIntosh, Melissa Matthes, Vesna Marcina, Martin Morris, Cary Nederman, Andrea Nicki, Mary O’Brien, Hanna Pitkin, Arlene Saxenhouse, John Shin, R. Claire Snyder, and Catherine Zuckert.

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tant contribution to contemporary debates in political theory and feminist theory.”

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Aside from the editors, the contributors are Kathryn Pyne Addelson, Louise M. Antony, Richmond Campbell, Lorraine Codde, Jane Duran, Maureen Linker, Phyllis Rooney, and Paul A. Roth.

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