FROM THE EDITORS, TZIPORAH KASACHKOFF & EUGENE KELLY

ARTICLES

XUETAI QI
“Introducing Chinese Students to Western Philosophy: Unique Challenges and Innovative Tactics”

GREGORY BASSHAM & MICHAEL W. AUSTIN
“Popular Culture in the Philosophy Classroom: A Modest Defense”

MORGAN LUCK
“A Conditional Proof for God’s Existence”

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“Grading Examinations in Large Classes”

BOOKS RECEIVED

ADDRESSES OF CONTRIBUTORS

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Welcome to the fall 2008 edition of the *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy*. We are pleased to present four papers of interest to teachers of philosophy.

Our first paper, “Introducing Chinese Students to Western Philosophy: Unique Challenges and Innovative Tactics,” is by Xuetai Qi of Nanjing University of Posts and Communications. Professor Qi, who teaches Western philosophy at his school, contributes some thoughts about the general orientation of Chinese students toward philosophy in general and Western philosophy in particular. “Mainstream Chinese culture,” he writes, “remains Confucian in spirit,” requiring instructors to confront that spirit, work within it, and, by applying the teaching techniques he outlines in this paper, bring the students to the peculiar and non-Confucian categories typical of philosophy in the Western world. The paper concludes with a set of ideas and materials that he uses in the application of his techniques. Professors in this country who work with Chinese students may find Professor Qi’s suggestions both enlightening and useful.

The second paper, “Popular Culture in the Philosophy Classroom: A Modest Defense,” by Gregory Bassham, King’s College (Pa.), and Michael W. Austin, Eastern Kentucky University, is, as the title indicates, an argument supporting the use of elements of popular culture as a means of attracting the attention of young students to the philosophical conundrums that are only partly visible in the movies, television entertainments, and fantasy-books they tend to adore. Against those philosophy teachers who dismiss such material as unworthy of serious consideration and as lacking the gravity that is appropriate for philosophical discourse, the authors argue vigorously, in part, that it is always appropriate to begin the process of philosophy with the unconsidered beliefs and values of one’s audience, and that in fact much of the material the authors use contains situations and conflicts as worthy of serious analysis as the “dying violinist,” “brain-in-a-vat,” and “runaway trolley” scenarios proposed by mainstream philosophical writers. The paper gives many references to philosophical “hooks” in popular culture, but it does not offer an extended description of the authors’ classroom procedures with this material: how it functions in lectures and exams, how discussion about characters and conflicts proceeds, how pop culture is turned into the stuff of philosophy. Perhaps the authors might contribute a second paper to this Newsletter on their pedagogical technique using their material.

The third paper, by Morgan Luck, “A Conditional Proof of God’s Existence,” describes a technique for bringing beginning students of truth-functional logic to a deeper understanding of the nature of conditionals. Every teacher of this material is familiar with students’ initial befuddlement by the notion that “(A → B)” is a true proposition when “A” is false: thus, for example, “If Pablo is a German then Pablo is a European” is true even when “Pablo is German” is false. For students operate with the common-sense notion that statements having the form “(p → q)” are true only when both the statements for which “p” and “q” are variables are true. By analyzing a hypothetical syllogism that purports to prove God’s existence, Professor Luck brings his students to a more sophisticated understanding of conditionality, and to the related notions of validity and soundness, and also to ancillary ones as equivocation and begging the question.

The fourth paper, “Grading Examinations in Large Classes,” by Christine Vitrano of Brooklyn College, presents us with a situation where an instructor is assigned two introductory courses with 150 students each, and two teaching assistants to help with grading. The problems faced were to devise a means for testing that was both adequate and expeditious, and to standardize evaluation such that the instructor and the two assistants could apply more or less the same criteria for determining the grade earned by a piece of student work. Prior to the solution of these problems is the question of course objectives. Professor Vitrano proposes several expected outcomes to her students so they may be clear about what they are to do with the material taught. Each of three examinations contains ten topics for short essays in which the student attempts to apply the critical reasoning skills that are essential for the achievement of the outcomes. Several examples of test questions are offered. Students receive full, half, or no credit depending on the correctness and completeness of their answers. The paper concludes with an appendix in which we are shown students’ responses to one question that were graded full, half, or no credit, respectively.

We always encourage our readers to suggest themselves as reviewers of books and other material that they think may be especially good for classroom use. The names of the other books and materials we have for review are listed at the end of the *Newsletter*. Please remember again that our publication is devoted to pedagogy and not to theoretical discussions of philosophical issues, and that should be borne in mind when reviewing material for our publication.

As always, we encourage our readers to write for our publication. We welcome papers that respond, comment on, or take issue with any of the material that appears within our pages.
The following guidelines for submissions should be followed:

- The author’s name, the title of the paper, and full mailing address should appear on a separate sheet of paper. 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.
- Both electronic and paper copies of papers are acceptable. In the case of paper copies, we would appreciate receiving four copies for our review purposes.
- Authors should adhere to the production guidelines that are available from the APA and that are available from the APA's website.
- In the case of electronic copies, 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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ARTICLES

Introducing Chinese Students to Western Philosophy: Unique Challenges and Innovative Tactics

Xuetai Qi
Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications

Introduction

Teachers from outside China have found that teaching in Chinese classrooms is a big challenge. Almost all teachers from the West have been shocked by the sharp contrast between China and the West in the learning style of the students and the structure of the classroom. This phenomenon is particularly the case when introducing Chinese students to Western philosophy in that its essential nature stands in sharp opposition to Chinese tradition, which forms the foundation of Chinese students’ learning style. While the standard Western teaching style, which is shaped by the underlying educational philosophy that students can and should acquire knowledge and critical thinking abilities via themselves, is of great value in teaching philosophy to Chinese students, actually to students from any background, it does not fit into the unique Chinese learning style. That forms the special challenges for an instructor who wants to be successful in giving Chinese newcomers to it a good understanding of Western philosophy.

Fortunately, based upon my own learning experience when I studied Western philosophy here in China, and upon my experience of teaching philosophy here, I have produced some tactics to meet these unique challenges, which may help reconcile the valuable Western teaching style with traditional Chinese learning and teaching styles. These tactics had been tested and reinforced again during my working together with Dr. Eugene Kelly, an American professor who came to my university to teach an introductory course in Western philosophy to Chinese freshmen enrolled in the collaborative undergraduate programs. Following a detailed discussion of the nature and reasons of the challenges examined from a perspective of comparison between Chinese and Western tradition, this paper presents some innovations in the hope of being helpful to those instructors who are or will be teaching Western philosophy to Chinese students.

What and Why of the Unique Challenges

In this section, I will discuss in some detail what the unique challenges are and why they exist. They include the relative slowness of Chinese students to take the initiative in class, the distinctiveness of learning attitudes of Chinese students, different curricular and learning structure, and special difficulties for learning Western philosophy. Each of these is presented based on the examination of its causes, which are addressed from a perspective of comparison between China and the West.

1) Cultural Reasons for Unresponsive Classes

Western culture has an orientation to individualism and democracy, which form the foundation of all its social systems, including education. Thus, in class, students are considered to be theoretically equal to the teacher, not in learning, of course, but in the fundamental dignity of possessing an equal right to be heard and the moral validity of each person’s beliefs and opinions; they are allowed greater freedom to explore issues. This attitude is a source of their willingness to engage actively in class. In general, they are not frightened to express and share their own ideas with others. However, as we will see, China is very different in respect to these matters.

Mainstream Chinese culture remains Confucian in spirit. This spirit is not individualist but collectivist, which is believed to be a necessary condition for social order. It advocates a “vertical” system in which social members act not as individuals, but in the fundamental dignity of possessing an equal right to be heard and the moral validity of each person’s beliefs and opinions; they are allowed greater freedom to explore issues. This attitude is a source of their willingness to engage actively in class. In general, they are not frightened to express and share their own ideas with others. However, as we will see, China is very different in respect to these matters.

Mainstream Chinese culture remains Confucian in spirit. This spirit is not individualist but collectivist, which is believed to be a necessary condition for social order. It advocates a “vertical” system in which social members act not as individuals, but are expected rather willingly to sacrifice personal considerations to collective interests and thus contribute to social harmony. Specifically, those in positions of less authority, or the young, should be respectful and obedient to those of higher rank or greater age.

The consequence for Chinese education is that few Chinese students are willing to expose themselves to public attention in class by, say, responding as individuals to the instructor’s questions. Instead, they have become comfortable with being allowed less personal freedom due to their perceived...
“lower-ranking” status compared to that of the “higher-ranking” professor. Thus, maintaining satisfactory class harmony, practicing obedience, and showing respect to the teacher are expected in accordance with this hierarchical system. Students are not expected to challenge the teacher in any way, even academically. Within this cultural framework, Chinese students tend to accept passively as true what the teacher is lecturing and become highly dependent upon the teacher. The thought of striving after a personal opinion, even if a silent one, seems rarely to occur to them.

There is another distinct characteristic of Chinese culture relevant to Chinese education, known as “mianziz” or, literally, “face.” While it is not easy, if not impossible, to explain “mianziz” in English, it could be loosely defined as “self-respect.” All Chinese are sensitive to “mianziz” and are always trying to “save face.” If they get embarrassed before other people for any reason, they will feel that they have lost “mianziz” and will get badly hurt emotionally. Chinese university students are thus unwilling to respond to the instructor’s questions (unless the instructor calls upon them by name) for fear of losing face.

2) Special Learning Attitudes
While both Eastern and Western attitudes toward university study could be loosely characterized as pragmatic—the preparation of young people for a career—the university systems differ significantly. In the West, students may pursue their studies with emphasis on courses that are relevant to their future careers, even when they are required to take courses in what is called “liberal education.” This inclination toward practical aims is what I would call “long-run” pragmatism. It is deeply rooted in American cultural and educational ideology.

By contrast, Chinese students can be characterized as “short-run” pragmatists, though they also show concern for the long-run realistic goals. “Short-run goals” refer to the pragmatic goals of good grades and accumulated credits, and on the perceived relevance of courses to their career. This realistic or pragmatic approach is especially found in pre-college students in China, but it continues in college students, and is nurtured by Chinese social conditions. Thus, for example, it is very common, yet it still surprises the professor from outside China, that many students will come to her after the first lecture in a philosophy course to ask what kind of things they need to memorize in order to get satisfactory grades on the final examination.

3) Special Learning Structure Due to Exposure to Different Teaching Styles
Western education aims at developing the student’s abilities in critical and independent thinking, which is particularly important in philosophy. To accomplish this goal, it has adopted the American ideas of reconstruction (Dewey), that is, philosophy as process: as inquiry into the “stresses and fractures” of community; of pragmatism; and, more recently, of political progressivism. The general philosophy underlying these ideas is the belief that the learners can and should acquire knowledge and abilities via the process of self discovery. Guided by this philosophy, the standard Western teaching style is as follows. In class, the teacher usually engages students in intensive reading and guided discussion of original philosophy works after a brief lecture on the outline of the philosophical problems in question.

However, in Chinese classes, due to the historical absence of the same ideas, teachers do not adopt the reconstructionist strategy, but teach from a textbook. Instead, the standard teaching method is that they lecture in an extensive and explicit manner in which all things are well organized and explained to students. Everything is made quite clear and detailed in lectures. Many teachers do not attempt to interact actively with students. This teaching method has both strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of this pedagogy lie in the fact that in such a way the instructor can help students to gain a good understanding of lecture points efficiently. The drawback is also clear: the pretense that the text contains all that is needed to know: memorize it!—discourages students from thinking independently and critically. Clarity is a fetish, if it fails to inspire students to reconstruct, think beyond the text, to apply, to grow.

As a result, students in the West have long been accustomed to the reconstructionist teaching style. Typically, the instructor gives a lecture, raises questions for them to ponder, has them read classic writings intensively, and then organizes discussion class. During this process, students are expected to understand the lecture by reconstructing the intuitive logic underlying it. This learning style of Western students is what I would call the “pyramid” learning structure in that they begin with particular questions and end up understanding the larger body of philosophical ideas. In contrast, I would characterize the learning structure of Chinese students as “inverted-triangle.” They like to know the whole picture of the lecture—the content they have to learn—before the teacher gives the details of it. For example, they want to be told in advance the logic underlying the ongoing lesson. With it in mind, they find it much easier to understand the whole thing and are less likely to get lost. This learning structure is so named because it proceeds from the whole to the particulars of some knowledge-content.

4) Learning Difficulties because of Absence of Western Intellectual Tradition
Modern-day Western intellectual tradition has been shaped through the ages. Its basic and distinct elements are the ideas of “rationality,” “morality,” and “scientific method.” These ideas capture the core of Western intellectual tradition. They were first proposed by ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and orators, and were given a new face by the intellectual giants in the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution. Today many other parts of the world have widely adopted some of these ideas, especially the scientific paradigms, but few of them, and certainly not China, have made them the foundation of their cultures. As a result, it is difficult for Chinese students born into and trained by domestic culture to develop satisfactory appreciation of Western philosophy, which itself has shaped the core elements of Western intellectual tradition. Since the latter is alien to Chinese learners, they usually have trouble gaining a good understanding of this totally new subject when being introduced to it for the first time. This causes great challenges for the professor who teaches them an introductory course.

5) A Summary Table of Contrasts
Up to now, I have discussed the main differences between China and the West in many respects related to learning and teaching, and the underlying cultural and intellectual factors. All these contrasts can be summarized in Table 1 below.

Innovative Tactics
1) A New Teaching Formula: Integrating the Chinese Lecturing Method with the Standard Western Method
This teaching strategy is to reconcile the teaching and learning styles between China and the West by utilizing the advantages of both. The “inverted-pyramid” learning structure of Chinese students has the virtue of being content-oriented; it is clear to students what they must learn in order to receive a good grade. But, at the same time, to avoid its disadvantages of sterility and passivity, and thus to echo the philosophical spirit of reasoning critically and originally or personally, the standard Western teaching method, based on the idea of reconstructing the text in the light of analysis and current experience, should also be
The West
Inverted-pyramid
Rationalism, Reconstruction

Table 1. Summary of the logic the instructor is using. By being guided in this way, those in the second step. The questions I raise here serve two functions: the questions the instructor poses here are very different from what they need to do is make sense of the theory by merely following the instructor’s guidance in its logical framework. Compared to the standard Western method of teaching alone, this method can greatly reduce the burden on them and get them to the point more efficiently.

Let me review my procedure and then give examples of it in action in the appendix. The instructor first gives a summary of how the lecture is to proceed logically. It consists of two things. One is the outline of the philosophical problem to be discussed. The other is the logic of the arguments regarding the problem that are suggested and analyzed by the instructor. This logic serves as an ideal aid for students to focus on and thus understand more easily the body of philosophical theory without requiring the students to figure out intuitively the arguments for it. What they need to do is make sense of the theory by merely following the instructor’s guidance in its logical framework. Compared to the standard Western method of teaching alone, in which students have to work out intuitively the arguments for some hypothesis, this method can greatly reduce the burden on them and get them to the point more efficiently.

It should be noted, however, that the first step, lecturing, does not mean that only lectures are offered, and that there will be no place for questions. Instead, raising questions for students is also important at this lecture stage, although the purposes of the questions the instructor poses here are very different from those in the second step. The questions I raise here serve two functions. One is to fit students’ thinking into the framework of the logic the instructor is using. By being guided in this way, students can easily develop an intuitive understanding of the lecture in question.

Table 1. Summary of Contrasts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>China</th>
<th>The West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Collectivism-oriented</td>
<td>Individualism-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning attitudes</td>
<td>Short-term pragmatic</td>
<td>Long-term pragmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education systems in practice</td>
<td>Exams-performance-oriented</td>
<td>Critical-thinking-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational philosophy</td>
<td>Confucianism</td>
<td>Reconstructionism, pragmatism, progressivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard teaching method</td>
<td>Intensive lecture with less interaction with students</td>
<td>Lecture, intensive reading assignments, and discussion with active interaction with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning style</td>
<td>Inverted-pyramid structure; “quiet” listeners in class; active self-learners outside class</td>
<td>Pyramid structure; actively thinking and speaking in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual tradition</td>
<td>Fixed norms</td>
<td>Rationalism, science-oriented, positivism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The other function of questions is to identify students’ potential confusions, which may arise somewhere in the lecture. These questions should thus guide their attention to the subsequent explanations of them. This is a challenge for the instructor because it may be difficult to identify what might confuse Chinese students in the lecture. After all, asking them directly in class does not work very well because they are reluctant to respond. In addition, the instructor, who has already mastered the material, is less likely to distinguish the difficult from the easy issues, since all things seem “easy” to him. My “rule of thumb” is that all the notions and ideas that are not part of the Chinese intellectual and cultural tradition should be explained to them. For instance, as illustrated in the appendix, I have addressed the possibly unfamiliar concepts of reason and rationality in some detail.

Now the teachers are in a position to develop students’ abilities in critical and independent thinking by engaging them Socratically in questions that touch on the questions central to the lecture. Through well-designed questions for discussion, students are forced to ponder what they have learned and understood in the first-step lecture class. This process may help them develop a deeper appreciation of the human significance of the material, for they are brought to engage critically with it. After the discussion class, students are required to write a paper outlining their own understanding of the problem in question.

2) Combination of Logical and Historical Perspectives in Lecture

While organizing and presenting lectures containing an intuitive appeal to standards of reasoning is of great value in teaching Chinese students Western philosophy, sometimes it is also very helpful to adopt an historical context within the framework of logical method. In some situations, it is not enough for students to appreciate certain philosophical problems; they must grasp how they are tied to an historical context. Every idea has its historical origins, and it gradually develops through history, or is abandoned. The historical method is powerful in assisting Chinese students to understand why-type questions concerning the topic under discussion.

In my abridged lecture notes, given in the appendix, I adopted this perspective when explaining some core ideas on the nature of philosophy. For example, Chinese students are always confused by the “fundamental questions” studied by philosophers. To them, these so-called “fundamental questions” are abstract and practically valueless, for they do not touch on their lived experience. In addition to a straightforward explanation of the importance and usefulness for intellectual training of a scrutiny of the fundamental questions, I explored their significance from historical perspectives by looking at how and why the Pre-Socratics, the first philosophers in the West, began to think philosophically. After having mastered the intentions and significance of, say, their search for “archê” of the universe, and their advocacy of using reason to know the world, Chinese students can get better ideas about what the fundamental questions are and why they have been thought to be fundamental.

3) Strategies to Make a More Responsive Class

As indicated in the second part of this paper, Chinese students in class tend to be quiet due to their cultural upbringing. This is discouraging for the instructor because his mood and teaching performance are undoubtedly influenced by class responsiveness. A quiet class makes the teacher wonder if his teaching has some problems, or damages his confidence in his teaching abilities. The quietness may make the instructor dislike or even get angry with the class. Most troublesome, without negative feedback from the class, the professor may mistakenly believe that students have understood the lecture very well and...
keep going without further explanation of what they have failed

to understand. Either case would have a disastrous impact on
the teacher himself or on the students he is teaching, or both.

I have proposed some tactics to deal with this problem.
The aims of these strategies are 1) to have students report
their response to the lecture at once; 2) to engage them in
active learning; and 3) ultimately, to acquaint them with the
significance of the philosophical problems in question.

The first strategy is for the instructor to stop somewhere in
the lecture to ask students if they have problems understanding
the lecture. Alternatively, she may require students to report it
on paper without their names identified. The latter would be
better for Chinese students, although it is less instantaneous
than the first. The form I have used is the following:

Class Report Form for Introduction to Western Philosophy
Instructor: Xuetai Qi
Student Name (optional) ______________
Student Email (optional) ______________
About what percentage of my lecture have you
understood? ______%
What are the most difficult questions in lecture? __________
What do you want my lecturing to be like? ______________

The second strategy is to design a grading policy that favors
class participation. While this is very familiar and universally
used all over the world, I found it is particularly useful as an
incentive for spurring active class participation of Chinese
students. The fact plays to the short-term pragmatic attitude
that students typically have toward the course.

The final method is to try to avoid an overly serious and
possibly boring lecture. Although it is not wrong at all to teach
seriously in college class, it is a good idea for the instructor to
lecture sometimes in an interesting or even funny manner. A
cheered-up Chinese class is amazingly responsive; students
actively participate in class activities. This is the process I call
“learning by laughing.” One of my experiences is to conduct
the Socratic dialogue between the students and me with an
interesting question: Do you think we should love our own
parents? The dialogue is required to be conducted using the
Socratic Method of rational scrutiny. I served as one participant
in the dialogue, and the students collectively as the other.
First, I required students to challenge freely my arguments
that we should love our own parents. At the second round, I
asked students to give their reasons for their statements and I
challenged them by the method of rational scrutiny. What if your
parents neglect you? What if they are too strict? Throughout the
discussion class, many interesting ideas and counter-arguments
were proposed by both students and me. Students were excited
and were highly devoted to the discussion.

Appendix: Lecture notes on Problem 1. The nature of
philosophy (abridged)²

Aims: This session aims at giving students a thorough
understanding of the nature of Western philosophy. This
problem is of vital importance because it lies at the very
foundation of all subsequent discussions of philosophical
problems, and of thinking philosophically in general. Without
having a good appreciation of it, you will not be able to make
sense of subsequent lectures on other topics in philosophy.

Challenges: Western philosophy is unique among all
academic disciplines, whether in the natural sciences, the
social sciences, or the other humanities. Students who are
used to the sciences and its methodologies, for example,
may well be confused by the special nature of philosophy. Yet
Western philosophy has had deep influence upon the Western
intellectual tradition, although it has no direct analogy to the
Chinese traditions, and is thus unfamiliar to Chinese students.
To deal with these special challenges and achieve the aims above,
I will make some comparisons between philosophy and other
academic disciplines, and then between Chinese and Western
intellectual traditions.

Procedure: I will adopt the teaching formula of “lecturing
containing questions → questions for discussion class, and
paper assignments.” The former is presented in part 1 and the
latter in part 2.

Overview of this lecture⁴

1. Elementary description of philosophy

   1.1 Definition of philosophy
   Contrasts with other academic disciplines
   Detailed explanations of the core words in the
   definition

   1.2 Birth of Western philosophy among ancient Greeks,
   Pre-Socratics
   The pre-Thales way of thinking: tradition, mythology,
   religion
   The Pre-Socratics: from myth to reason in explaining
   the natural world. What was the difference between
   myth and reason? Why is this difference of historical
   significance?

   1.3 Socrates in Euthyphro: Rational scrutiny of beliefs and
definitions
   Presentation of the structure of the dialogue
   Analysis of Euthyphro’s definition of piety
   Significance and contributions of Euthyphro to an
understanding of the Socratic Method

Part 1. Lecture

1. What is philosophy?

   Questions: As I have mentioned earlier, in some sense
   philosophy stands in sharp contrast with other disciplines. The
   question for students is: Based on your experiences of learning
   other subjects, for example, physics, chemistry, history, and
economics, can you describe the common characteristics of
them, and their common methodology?

2. Summary and Comments on students’ answers:

3. Comparison and Definition: Contrary to any other
academic discipline, which deals with questions within a
specific area, philosophy has no subject matter specific to it.
Rather, philosophers ask fundamental questions that range
over all human knowledge. Therefore, unlike other academic
subjects, which have foundational principles needing to be
understood and even memorized by students, philosophy has
no established principles or even basic conceptual structures
common to all philosophy. Instead, its nature is an intellectual
journey of pursuing truth or wisdom based on rational scrutiny.
Furthermore, although no definition of philosophy has been
accepted by all philosophers, we may take the following
definition as our starting-point: philosophy is rational enquiry
into fundamental questions or issues about the world and
human beings so that our beliefs of them can rest upon a firm
foundation by clearing away errors about the true, the good,
and the beautiful in the world.
Students may well wonder about each of the boldfaced terms. Students' questions, I have found, tend to fall into three categories corresponding to each: (1) What kind of questions or issues are the fundamental ones? Are they in fact fundamental, that is, why do philosophers ask these kinds of questions and do they have any value or relevance to human life? (2) What is “rational”? And what is rational reflection like? Is there any “irrational reflection”? Without firm responses to these questions, students will not appreciate the uniqueness of philosophy.

4. What are “fundamental” questions or issues?

Fundamental questions refer to those that lie in the most basic structures of our belief systems. Some examples are the notion of reality, beliefs about good and bad, and the concept of knowledge. Other beliefs are always established based on the views of these fundamental questions.

5. What is it to be “rational”?

The notion of rationality is one of the most basic ideas in the Western intellectual tradition. (Question: Did you ever hear of it in the Chinese tradition? Can you find some analogy to it?) As a way of thinking, rationality means backing up your arguments with reasons. It can be best understood from a historical perspective. I will do so in two steps. In the first step, I present what some of the Pre-Socratics said, and then give specific examples of their thought. In the second step, we will place their thought in their historical context, which I believe is very helpful for you to make sense of their words, and appreciate the process in which they replaced myth, tradition, and religious authority by rational argument and mutual criticism in their efforts to understand the natural world. In Plato's dialogue Euthyphro, you can get a further and better understanding of what rational enquiry is by studying the Socratic Method of arguing in the spirit of rational scrutiny about moral and social questions.

Part 2. Discussion questions and the paper assignments

After we have finished the lecture on the nature of philosophy in part 1, we will have a discussion class designed to develop students' own understanding of its essentials. This class is aimed at engaging students in thinking philosophically, a process of learning by doing. Each student is required to participate in the discussion on one question chosen from the list below. (See the detailed guidelines for the discussion class.)

After the discussion class, students are required to write a paper on the nature of philosophy based on their own critical understanding. (See the details of paper requirements.)

Selected Discussion Questions

Suppose a Chinese “Euthyphro” decided to help a seriously ill peasant who is very poor and cannot afford the medical treatment necessary to save his life. “Euthyphro” then took him to the hospital of which his father is the director. However, his father refused to give the ill peasant immediate medical treatment free. Two days later, the peasant died without medical treatment. “Euthyphro” felt a responsibility to do right and decided to charge his father for his neglectful behavior. “Socrates” met “Euthyphro” who was on the way to court and talked to him about this issue. Develop a dialog between Chinese “Euthyphro” and “Socrates” by applying the Socratic Method of questioning.

Endnotes

1. This paper has been financed by the Research Project of Pedagogical Reforms of the Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications. I am very grateful to Dr. Eugene Kelly for his invaluable insights, from the proposal to write this paper to insightful comments on the draft. Dr. Kelly also corrected many errors in the draft and helped refine it significantly. However, all remaining errors are my sole responsibility.

2. Throughout this paper, the proposed features concerning China and the West should be understood on the general-tendency level, and should not be taken as a detailed characterization of specific figures or doctrines.

3. While Tactic 3 is explained with specific examples in the text itself, Tactics 1 and 2 are followed and illustrated in this appendix.

4. The reason why the overview is given before the detailed discussions of the philosophical question is exactly the “inverted-pyramid” learning style of Chinese students.

**Popular Culture in the Philosophy Classroom: A Modest Defense**

**Gregory Bassham**  
*King’s College (Pa.)*

**Michael W. Austin**  
*Eastern Kentucky University*

**Introduction**

Should we make use of popular culture in the philosophy classroom? Philosophers have a variety of attitudes towards the use of popular culture as a vehicle for teaching philosophy, as well as towards popular culture in general. In this paper, we offer a defense of the claim that pop philosophy can be an effective teaching tool by discussing several of its pedagogical benefits and responding to some common objections to its use in the classroom.

But what precisely are we defending? By “pop philosophy” we mean philosophy that utilizes or analyzes popular culture, not philosophy that is intended for a lay or general audience. Common forms of pop philosophy include discussions that (1) use some element of popular culture—a television show, movie, or band, for example—to illustrate a philosophical idea or issue; (2) explore the philosophy of some particular pop culture figure or art work (e.g., an essay for general readers that seeks to tease out the philosophical assumptions implicit in the Star Wars films); or (3) use some philosophical idea or perspective to deepen our understanding of some aspect of popular culture (e.g., a discussion of “the Zen” of hitting a baseball, or one employing insights from feminist philosophy to explore gender relations in the Narnia films). In this paper, we focus only on uses of popular culture in the classroom where the aim is to teach substantive philosophical ideas, rather than to analyze popular culture. So, what follows is a defense of the use of pop philosophy in the classroom in which elements of popular culture are employed for the purpose of illustrating and clarifying philosophical positions.

**Pop Philosophy: Some Pedagogical Benefits**

Pop philosophy is, not surprisingly, popular. Most students respond positively when instructors introduce pop cultural references and materials into their philosophy classes. This can have side effects that some instructors (and their department chairs) may regard as desirable: better student evaluations, larger enrollments, more majors, perhaps even some positive press in the local media. But the crucial question is whether it results in better classroom teaching and learning. Can injecting popular culture into philosophy classes produce livelier and more thoughtful classroom discussions, more active learning, increased student motivation, improved class attendance—in short, better philosophical teaching and learning? We believe it can. Here are some ways how:
Vivid illustrations Popular culture can provide examples of philosophical ideas that students find interesting and compelling. References to The Matrix might be used to illustrate Descartes’ evil deceiver argument or Nozick’s experience machine. Ethical dilemmas can be posed by means of examples from the Harry Potter books or the Spider-man or James Bond films. References to Star Trek’s Data or Star Wars’ C3PO can motivate thinking about whether machines can think, or can be persons, or can have rights. Theories of personal identity can be illustrated by discussion of various shape-shifters in the Harry Potter stories, or by Gandalf’s return to life in The Lord of the Rings. Examples of this sort tend to work well because they are interesting and familiar to most students. In addition, as Carolyn Korsmeyer notes, such examples are often less contrived than “farfetched thought experiments about brains in vats, twin earths, and runaway trolleys.”

An effective hook As educational theorists from Rousseau to Dewey to contemporary constructivists have emphasized, teaching is most effective when it connects with what students know and care about. Students are more engaged when they are studying materials they find interesting and relevant, and they learn more quickly and more deeply when they can fit what they are learning into a framework of existing knowledge. Today’s students live in a veritable Platonic Cave of popular culture, flickering with digital shadows and abuzz with electronic chatter. Students are often keenly interested and amazingly knowledgeable (much more than they should be) about various aspects of popular culture. By tapping into these interests, pop philosophy can serve as a springboard to serious philosophical reflection. Moreover, the memorableness of such examples can promote long-term learning. As Fordham University student Alexandra Fernandes said after taking a course on fantasy and philosophy, “What really matters in an education is what you walk away with, what resonates with a student and what they retain for the rest of their lives. If using these modern sources creates a better technique of retention, why not use them?”

Common ground Not only can pop philosophy serve as an effective hook, but it can also help create common ground between philosophy teachers and their students. Many students believe that philosophy is irrelevant to their lives, and often their reasons for taking a philosophy class have more to do with scheduling issues than with the love of wisdom. Given this and other differences that may exist between philosophy professors and their students, it is a good idea to try to find or create some common ground in order to facilitate the beginnings of dialogue in the classroom. As we identify and discuss philosophical ideas that are present in popular culture, our students will come to realize that philosophical issues abound in everyday life, though they were previously unaware of this fact. One danger here is that we must actually be somewhat up to date with the pop culture references that we employ. If we use a reference that is too dated, not only will it be ineffective, but it may contribute (rightly or wrongly) to a belief that many of our students hold: professors (and perhaps especially philosophy professors) are out of touch with their world and therefore have little or nothing to say that is relevant to their lives. Properly used, pop philosophy can forge connections between philosophy teachers and their students, and create some common ground upon which more substantive philosophical discussion can occur. And it is these deeper philosophical concerns that connect us most fundamentally.

Giving philosophy its props As a discipline, philosophy has a public relations problem for several centuries, largely of its own making. Many people think of philosophy as abstruse, dry, and impractical. Students taking their first philosophy course often share these negative stereotypes, making them a tough audience. Drawing on themes from popular culture is a good way for professors to demonstrate that philosophy can be interesting and have meaningful real-life applications. For instance, Raja Halwani’s essay on “Homer and Aristotle” in The Simpsons and Philosophy (Open Court, 2001) does a hilarious job examining Homer Simpson’s moral strengths and shortcomings (mostly the latter). But it also offers fascinating insights into Aristotle’s influential views on human excellence and fulfillment. Similarly, Dirk Dunbar’s chapter on “The Dao of Hoops” in Basketball and Philosophy (University Press of Kentucky, 2007) demonstrates in a very practical way how Daoist thought and practice can improve one’s basketball skills.

Better living through philosophy A major goal of the current pop philosophy movement is to popularize philosophy: to bring it outside the ivied-halls of academia and make its methods, resources, and critical spirit available to all. Like Socrates, advocates of pop philosophy believe that everyone can benefit from living an examined, philosophically reflective life. As Bill Irwin notes, boosting philosophical literacy would improve democratic decision-making and foster critical awareness of the pitfalls of pseudo-philosophy and pseudoscience (astrology, psychics, transformational self-help books, etc.). It can also help those being “amused to death” by popular culture (in Neil Postman’s oft-quoted phrase) to appreciate its illusions and meretricious appeal. In this way, Irwin says, pop philosophy is like a bike with training wheels. Pop philosophy uses popular culture as a means of teaching and popularizing philosophy. But its ultimate goal is to provide students with the skills and the desire to engage in serious philosophical reading and reflection on their own.

Responses to Common Objections Centuries ago, Tertullian asked, “What indeed does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” Many contemporary philosophers have a similar attitude towards the relationship between philosophy and popular culture. There are several reasons for this, which can be cast as objections to the use of pop philosophy in the classroom.

First, there is an objection based on skepticism about the value of popular culture in general. Consider the following from Norah Vincent:

...low culture is infiltrating the scholarly world, a curriculum of aptly “higher” learning in which shallow amusements have no place....This dumbing down of the academy is the ultimate capitulation to the MTV mind...sitcoms don’t belong in the classroom.

We certainly do not want to defend all of popular culture. There is much in it that is trivial or trashy, which philosophers should either criticize or, more commonly, ignore. However, while it is the case that much popular culture has little value, this is not the case for all popular culture. We agree with Vincent that “shallow amusements” have no place in the classroom (except perhaps as cautionary teaching points or welcome respite from intellectual heavy lifting). But the point with respect to popular culture is that it does not entirely consist of shallow amusements. As we have argued, many aspects of pop culture can provide examples, case studies, and philosophical food for thought that can be profitably used in the classroom. Even if a philosophy teacher does not personally approve of or spend time engaging such instances of pop culture, she can still make effective use of them in the classroom. As Irwin points out, Plato both condemns and makes use of Homer, and Epictetus condemns the theater but also employs the metaphor of an actor in a play.
Second, one might be skeptical about the claim that using popular culture in the philosophy classroom improves teaching and learning. While there is no formal study analyzing the impact of pop philosophy in the classroom, our experiences and those of many of our colleagues provide some anecdotal evidence in favor of the view that pop philosophy enhances teaching and learning in the ways we have described. For example, philosopher David Baggett has used the Harry Potter novels in the philosophy classroom, and students have responded positively. One stated, “Learning the philosophy within my favorite books makes it easy to understand the subject of philosophy. It makes philosophy interesting.” Another remarked, “Philosophy is not the easiest subject to understand if you’re not a philosophy major. By using Harry Potter as a backdrop, students can put philosophical thought into Harry’s situations. It’s a win/win situation where the students can’t wait to go to class, and the teacher knows the students are grasping philosophy in ways they never could have otherwise.”

Moreover, research alluded to by William J. McKeachie shows that students are more likely to remember what they have learned if they relate it to other things that they know and if they talk about it. In her book Tools for Teaching, Barbara Gross Davis notes that research also shows that one way to motivate students is to devise examples, assignments, and case studies that are related to the interests and experiences of students. Given that exploring the philosophical significance of an element of popular culture is conducive to discussion and enables students to relate philosophy to other things that they know and to the experiences that they have in their daily lives, it is quite plausible to think that this pedagogical method does indeed enhance learning.

Another objection to the use of popular culture in the philosophy classroom is that the combination of philosophy and pop culture dumbs down the teaching of philosophy. However, this need not be the case. The aim of pop philosophy is to introduce people who otherwise would not be interested in philosophy to philosophical thought and its relevance for everyday life. Popular culture can also be used quite effectively as a source of examples and illustrations of a particular philosophical theory or perspective. Why not use examples with Homer Simpson, Bono, or Frodo Baggins, instead of the stock philosophical characters Smith and Brown? The objection at issue—that using such texts and illustrations dumbs down a course—would have some force if all that students were required to read were selections from Open Court’s Popular Culture and Philosophy books, or if the focus of a class were on popular culture rather than the philosophy present within it. However, if these books and illustrations are used to introduce students to the thought of a philosopher like Aristotle, and then students are required to actually read The Nicomachean Ethics, it is difficult to see how this dumbs down the course. In fact, it may have the opposite effect, insofar as students are motivated to think more deeply about the philosophical ideas they encounter in the classroom because they are able to make connections between those ideas and other things that they care about.

Fourth, there is the concern that when pop philosophy is used, the focus of the course will be on popular culture, rather than on the philosophy present in it. Students will remember the pop culture reference, but not the philosophical points that it embodies or illustrates. First, it should be pointed out that this is also a potential problem for other examples used in the classroom. For instance, Judith Jarvis Thomson’s widely anthropologized defense of abortion contains some now (in)famous examples, including an ailing violinist, defective window screens, and people seeds. Unfortunately, many students recall the examples but not the philosophical points they are intended to support and illustrate. The same can be said of the use of current events in the classroom, examples from classic literature, or from any other source. However, the proper response to this is not to avoid discussing and analyzing the examples, but rather to do so in a way that drives home the salient philosophical points they are intended to make. The same approach should be taken with respect to pop philosophy. The domination of the example, whether it is Thomson’s violinist or a character from The Office, is a danger that the philosophy teacher should be aware of and counteract by emphasizing the philosophical significance of the example when discussing it in the classroom.

Finally, some students either do not care about or are ignorant of many aspects of pop culture, and so will be lost. Of course, given many students’ abysmal cultural illiteracy today, the same is true a fortiori of examples taken from history, politics, literature, or just about any other subject instructors might wish to draw upon. Nevertheless, sensitivity must be shown here, and so it is wise to draw from a variety of pop culture references throughout the course of the term. Three different publishers now have pop philosophy series, enabling the philosophy teacher to do this. Open Court, Wiley/Blackwell, and the University Press of Kentucky provide a collection of books dealing with television shows, movies, sports, classic and contemporary rock music, and several other elements of pop culture. Moreover, as stated above, pop culture should be used to illustrate and teach philosophical ideas, without dominating the content of the course. Also, pop culture examples can be used in a way that does not require familiarity with the example, if a sufficiently detailed description is given.

Sixth, there is the objection that students should be exposed to elements of culture in the classroom that they are likely unfamiliar with, rather than the ubiquitous elements of pop culture. For example, when films are viewed or discussed in the classroom, philosophy teachers should employ a film that students have not yet seen and would not likely come across at the local cineplex (e.g., Wender’s Wings of Desire or Ratnam’s Nayakan). The objection is that we should try to broaden their horizons by exposing them to such films, rather than discussing Homer Simpson or Harry Potter. We agree that philosophers should seek to expose students to less familiar and more valuable segments of culture when appropriate and pedagogically effective. But, of course, this need not be an either/or choice. Philosophy teachers can use pop culture as well as high culture. For example, one could first introduce existential philosophy through Heather L. Reid’s “The Freedom of the Long-Distance Runner” in Running and Philosophy (Blackwell, 2007) or one of several chapters dealing with existentialism in U2 and Philosophy (Open Court, 2006); then read and discuss Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, and other existentialists in class; and finally analyze the existentialist themes in Bergman’s classic film, The Seventh Seal. In this way, students are shown the relevance of philosophy to common interests such as running or music, exposed to important philosophical texts, and encouraged to thoughtfully interact with a classic and thought-provoking film that most have likely never seen. This type of pedagogical strategy also has the potential benefit of helping students become more discerning judges of culture. As they encounter films with greater depth and more substantive content, students may become dissatisfied with the shallow amusements present in much of pop culture.

Finally, some philosophy teachers may worry that using pop culture in the classroom may give the false impression that philosophy is easy or fun, when, in fact, it is usually rigorous and difficult. Such an impression could be unfair to students who get hooked on philosophy, only to discover later (perhaps after declaring a philosophy major) that they have no real taste
or aptitude for serious philosophy. And it might damage the prestige of individual philosophy departments, or even the profession as a whole, if philosophy as a discipline is perceived as something frivolous or un scholarly.

Several responses are in order here. First, serious philosophy is generally difficult and rigorous, and it would be wrong for philosophy instructors to suggest otherwise. However, what follows is that instructors should be careful not to convey misleading impressions of their discipline, not that pop culture should never be used in teaching philosophy. For, as we have seen, the benefits of pop philosophy in the classroom can be considerable.

Second, not all serious philosophy is difficult and dense. Many of the classics of philosophy, including the early dialogues of Plato, Marcus Aurelius’s Meditations, Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, Mill’s On Liberty, and Nietzsche’s works, are widely read and enjoyed by general readers. Moreover, many well-known contemporary philosophers, such as Colin McGinn, Tom Morris, Martha Nussbaum, and Daniel Dennett, write clearly and engagingly for lay and professional audiences alike. To suggest that good philosophy is never interesting or accessible is not only false but detrimental, as experience proves all too well. How many college-educated people do you know who never cracked open a philosophy book after college because their Philosophy 101 professor made the subject seem dry-as-dust and forbiddingly difficult?

Finally, in considering the reactions of faculty colleagues, deans, and so forth, both prudence and fortitude may be in order. Prudence is required because practical considerations such as departmental budgets, turf wars, grant proposals, and tenure applications are important and must be given due weight. But fortitude is also required because, as we know from personal experience, some faculty react strongly to perceptions that their colleagues are dumming down their discipline or “pandering” to the hoi polloi. Such reactions are commonplace and have long been a feature of academic life—think of the way J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were snubbed by many of their Oxford University colleagues because of their success as popular writers. But if, as we argue, using pop culture in the philosophy classroom often means better philosophical teaching and learning, then we believe it is worth doing, even at a price.16

Endnotes
3. This is particularly true of students’ musical tastes, where hipsterism should not be attempted lightly.
4. A point Bill Irwin, editor of Wiley/Blackwell’s Philosophy and Pop Culture series, often makes.
8. The Prescription against Heretics, chapter VII.
10. Irwin, “Philosophy and/as/ of Popular Culture,” 50. Irwin also points out that Aristotle was an advocate of Homer and of going to the theater.
11. There is some other anecdotal evidence that this type of philosophy has a positive impact. When responding to a question at a session of “Authors at Google” on May 7, 2008, about whether using pop culture had a noticeable effect in the classroom in terms of better retention and integration at the end of the semester, Irwin replied (relying on anecdotal evidence): “...it works great. That’s what people tell me, and that’s been my experience” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zKvplBv6vo]. Additionally, I (Mike) used U2 and Philosophy as a supplementary text in the fall of 2007 for an upper-division course dealing with existentialism and postmodernism. I asked the students to complete a voluntary survey near the beginning of the next semester, responding to several statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Out of the twenty-two students in the class, eight responded to my request, though two opted out of the survey because they did not like the book. One statement on the survey was, “the U2 book motivated me to consider the material more than I would have without using this text.” One of the students answered with a 5, and the remaining five responded with a 4 (agree). The final statement of the survey was, “using material from popular culture (the U2 book as well as movies, music, and excerpts from tv) had a positive impact on my overall experience in this course.” All of the students who completed the survey responded to this statement with a 5. I also received the following three unsolicited comments from students related to the last statement on the survey (quotes are verbatim):

“Keep in mind, I’m not a fan of U2. the pop culture references to things i already understood or could be exposed to in class were most effective”
“It helps people to bring it home and understand in their daily life I think”
“How do we understand morals? Not from abstract things, but human experience and expression and you get that from art, movies, books, and music.”
14. At the same time, as Dave Baggett reminds us, often the most effective philosophical discussions occur when the overt focus is on the item from popular culture, not the philosophy—a paradox of modern learning well known to designers of children’s educational software.
15. We owe this point to Benjamin Murphy.
16. Thanks to Dave Baggett, Michael Cholbi, David Hunter, Bill Irwin, Kyle Johnson, and several anonymous referees of this Newsletter for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

A Conditional Proof for God’s Existence
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The following exercise is designed to reinforce your students’ understanding of conditionals. More specifically, it will draw their attention to two different types of conditionals, namely, what they are taken to mean ordinarily (non-truth-functional subjunctive conditionals), and how they are understood formally (truth-functional material conditionals). This difference, as we will discover, has significant implications. For if a student agrees to the truth of a conditional as it is expressed ordinarily, then, were this same conditional to be subsequently incorporated into a formal argument, he might find himself agreeing to more than he bargained for.
You should attempt this exercise only after your students are comfortable constructing truth tables containing conditionals. If they are already able to distinguish between the ordinary and formal sense of conditionals, then this exercise can be used to reinforce this distinction. However, it could be used to introduce this difference, and, if warranted, act as a segue to the so-called paradox of material implication.

Begin the exercise by claiming that in today’s lesson you will prove the existence of God. Before you introduce your argument, however, you should first stake out an important similarity between theists and atheists. Although both disagree on the issue of God’s existence, they do agree on what constitutes God. Both parties agree that God, at least the God of the Book, is construed as being all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. The real disagreement is over whether or not an agent with such properties exists. If your students require further encouragement regarding this point, you can support it by reference to unicorns. “Regardless of whether or not you believe unicorns exist,” you might offer, “surely we can all agree that a unicorn is a horse with a horn.” By the same token, regardless of whether or not God exists, everyone should agree that He is defined, at least partly, as being all-knowing. With this pointed outline, you can now introduce the first premise of the argument.

Given that God is all-knowing, it is safe to assume that, if He exists, He would not believe a falsehood, such as “one plus one equals five.” In other words, it is not the case that, if God exists, He would believe that one plus one equals five. This is the first premise of your argument. It can be symbolized as follows.

1. ~(G → B)

(G = God exists; B = God believes one plus one equals five)

At this point you might have to reiterate that, regardless of whether or not we believe God actually exists, if we all agree that God is, by definition, all-knowing, then it seems we should also agree that it is not the case that if He exists he would believe a falsehood. In other words, we should all agree that premise 1 is true. Note that the truth of ~(G → B) is supported here by adopting the ordinary sense of a conditional. This point should not be highlighted to your pupils, as it is their ability to notice this that is the aim of the exercise. If premise 1 is accepted as true, then you should proceed to outline the full argument.

The full argument should be symbolized as follows.

1. ~(G → B)

Therefore,

2. G • ~B

This argument suggests that if it is true that “it is not the case that if God exists then he would believe one plus one equals five,” then it must be true that “God exists and he would not believe one plus one equals five.” You should remind your students that since we have already agreed on the truth of the premise, then should this argument prove to be valid, we will be committed to the truth of the conclusion.

As the table above illustrates, as the atheist believes that the proposition “God exists” is false, any conditional featuring it as an antecedent will be considered true. This is because formal conditionals are only ever false if their antecedent is true and their consequent is false. So, as the atheist holds G to be false, “G → B” will be true, which means the negation of this conditional must be false. In other words, atheists should not attest to the truth of premise 1. Consequently, although the atheist may concede that the argument is valid, she should not accept that it is sound.

The argument gives the appearance of being good only when we equivocate. That is, adopt multiple senses of a single term or phrase within the same argument. However, in this case, somewhat unusually, the suspect phrase is a logical operator—the operator “if…” When we first introduced the proposition “If God exists then He would believe one plus one equals five,” it seemed false because ordinary language suggests this entails the possibility of something all-knowing believing a falsehood. However, when testing the argument’s validity by means of a truth table, we adopted the formal sense of “if…then.” In actuality, there are three appropriate responses to this argument. It is either invalid (if we adopt the ordinary sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are atheists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), valid but unsound (if we are theists adopting the formal sense of conditionals throughout), or sound but begging the question (if we are theists adopting the
formal sense of conditionals throughout). The simplicity of this argument, doubled with the gravity of its conclusion, provides an engaging forum within which to tease out these differences and solidify your students’ understanding of conditionals.¹

Endnotes
1. In fact, if they did not agree on the definition of God, they could not strictly disagree over the issue of His existence.
2. That is, the God of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.
3. Some may argue that cases of equivocation only occur within a single natural language, not between a natural language and an artificial language with fixed equivalencies. My thanks to a blind reviewer for this point.
4. My thanks to Tziporah Kasachkoff, David Ardagh, Daniel Cohen, Graeme Mclean, and four reviewers for their comments on this paper.

Grading Examinations in Large Classes
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Last year I was assigned two sections of an introductory philosophy course that is required for all undergraduate students. I was told to expect large enrollments of approximately 150 students per class and was assigned two teaching assistants to help with grading. My challenge was to develop a system that would enable us to grade a large number of papers expeditiously. Because I had never worked with teaching assistants before, I was also concerned with standardizing the process of grading so that we were all using the same criteria of evaluation. The system I developed was fast, effective, and easy to use. Let me share it with you.

I: Course Objectives and Assessment
The learning objectives for the course were for students to: (1) Acquire an understanding of the classic and contemporary philosophical literature, (2) Improve critical thinking by developing skills of explaining and examining philosophical theories and arguments, (3) Be able to show that issues can be regarded from multiple viewpoints, and present reasons for error ought to be distinguished, but I have found no meaningful and consistent way to do so. This system eliminates the problem of having to guess how much the student understands, and it ensures multiple graders are all using the same scale. Since there is only one score for all partially correct answers, all students are graded fairly and consistently.

Given the large size of the classes, I decided not to assign papers but rely instead on two in-class exams and one cumulative final exam. Most of the students taking this course had no prior experience with reading or writing philosophy. In a class this large, we could not give students the individual attention they would need in order to produce good philosophy papers. In my experience, the best papers come from having the students write multiple drafts, but that is not feasible in a class this size. I was also concerned with the possibility of plagiarism. The readings in our text are widely discussed on the Internet, and I was not confident that we would not be able to detect whether the work was the student’s own.

Each exam had ten short essay questions with multiple parts that can be answered in a short paragraph. I prefer short essay questions to multiple choice exams because multiple choice exams do not demonstrate whether students have developed the critical reasoning skills that are characteristic of philosophy. My concern with multiple choice exams is that the student will be able to memorize facts without challenging her analytic abilities. Essay style questions force the student to think about the material she has learned and apply it in new ways.

II: Sample Exam Questions
The questions on the exam are drawn directly from the readings in their textbook, which form the basis of my class lectures. Any student who could answer these questions correctly would have demonstrated philosophical understanding of a sort I expect from introductory students. Here are three sample questions.

(1) Consider the following argument:

P1: If John is a lawyer, then John is rich
P2: John is rich
C: John is a lawyer

Is this a valid argument? Why or why not? Be sure to provide a full explanation for your answer.

(2) Present one proof for the existence of God, and then discuss one objection to that proof.²

(3) Use Kant’s supreme moral principle to evaluate the morality of prostitution. What moral judgment would Kant reach? Be sure to explain fully how you apply Kant’s moral principle to this issue.

III: Grading the Exams
The next problem was deciding how to grade the exams.³ What method could I use that would avoid charges of “subjectivism” and be transparent to all involved?

I decided to grade on the following scale. Each question received full, half, or no credit. A student received one point when her response was entirely correct, meaning she provided a complete and accurate answer to each part of the question. She received ½ point when her answer was only partially correct, meaning she answered part of the question incorrectly or her answer was incomplete. She received no credit when her answer was simply incorrect. Therefore, each question received one of three possible scores: 1, ½, or 0. The grader could read through each question quickly and easily gauge whether the response was completely correct, partially correct, or incorrect.

On this grading system, all partially correct answers (whether due to incorrectness or incompleteness) will receive the same score, ½ point. One might object that these two reasons for error ought to be distinguished, but I have found no meaningful and consistent way to do so. This system eliminates the problem of having to guess how much the student understands, and it ensures multiple graders are all using the same scale. Since there is only one score for all partially correct answers, all students are graded fairly and consistently.

Let us return to the three sample questions to see how this system can be applied. Question (1) asked the students to evaluate whether a particular argument was valid. The textbook contains a formal definition of validity as well as examples of valid and invalid arguments. A student received full credit for question (1) if she correctly identified the argument as invalid and gave some explanation for why it is invalid. If the student identified the argument as invalid, but she failed to provide any explanation, she received ½ point. If she misidentified the argument as valid, she received no credit.

For question (2), the students read several articles containing proofs for the existence of God, including one by Ernest Nagel, who discusses the cosmological, ontological, and teleological proofs along with objections. They also read selections from Aquinas’s Summa Theologica and Descartes’ Meditations. The student received full credit if she presented one of the proofs along with an objection to that proof. If the student failed to
answer both parts of the question (she presented a proof but left out the objection) or if her presentation was incomplete, she received only partial credit. The student who failed to present a proof received no credit.

Question (3) asks the student to use Kant's categorical imperative to evaluate the morality of prostitution. The selection in the textbook from Kant's *Groundwork* discusses two formulations of the categorical imperative, and students could use either one to answer this question. To receive full credit, I did not require a verbatim statement of either formulation. Rather, I wanted to see that the student could use the categorical imperative to reason through the morality of prostitution. Full credit was given to answers containing a moral judgment about prostitution and justification of that judgment. The student received partial credit if her description of the categorical imperative was incomplete or partly inaccurate. If the student simply declared that Kant would regard prostitution immoral without any justification, she did not receive any credit.

One benefit of adopting this system is that it provides the instructor flexibility in determining the letter grades students receive. After grading each exam, I make a list of all the possible grades (ranging from 10 to 0). I assign A's to the two highest scores (10 and 9.5) and work my way down by two's until I reach the lowest score. I do not curve my exams, and I use this scale regardless of how the scores are distributed. I generally end up with a full spectrum of grades, ranging from A's to D's.

However, my system also lends itself to curving. Let's imagine the instructor has given a difficult exam, and the highest score was an 8, with the majority of students scoring in the 4-5 range. This instructor has two options: she can stick with the standard scoring I presented above or she can recalibrate her scale, awarding an A to the student scoring an 8, and working down from there. This system leaves the instructor flexibility in cases where such grade distributions occur.

When I give back the exams, I write the schema on the board. I tell students to make sure each question has received a grade (1, ½, or 0) and that the points have been added correctly. Any mistake can be easily identified and suitably adjusted. When I review the exams in class, question by question, I ask a student who received full credit to read her answer aloud. Students who received partial credit can thus recognize what they did wrong, and as a result, the class showed rapid improvement from the first exam to the second.

I have found only one problem, and it can be dealt with easily. Some clever students leave a large amount of space between their responses to questions. As I review the exams, these students fill in the correct answers in the blank spaces. Subsequently, they question why they didn't receive full credit, because their answers are entirely correct. The first time this tactic was used, I thought I had made an error and overlooked the correct answers. Only later did I realize what had actually happened. My solution was simple: while grading the exams, I put a red line through the blank spaces between or after questions, thus preventing students from filling in missing responses.

In conclusion, I've found this system to be a fast and fair way of grading large numbers of exams and one that ensures that multiple graders adhere to the same standards.

Appendix

(2) Present one proof for the existence of God, and then discuss one objection to that proof.

**Full Credit:** “The teleological proof says the universe is so complex, everything fits so perfectly. If you found a watch on a deserted island, you would assume it is made by an ‘intelligent’ being because it is so complex. Therefore, the universe too must have a first designer. The objection is that there is already a perfectly good explanation for the way things are: EVOLUTION! Species have simply been building off one another for millions of years, becoming more complex. The ‘proof’ does not conclusively prove the existence of God.”

**Half Credit:** “One proof for the existence of God is the ontological view, which is since God is defined as being who possesses every perfection and assuming that to exist is more perfect than not to exist, it follows that God, a perfect being, must exist.”

**No Credit:** “The ontological argument illustrates the existence of God as omnipotent and perfect being. Since God is perfect, he created the universe and Earth. God created man to have free will and be rational beings. The flaw of their argument is that God allows pain and suffering such as evil. Evil can be in the form of suffering and natural disaster. Man questions the creation of God as being omnipotent since evil is allowed in this world.”

**Endnotes**


2. See Appendix for examples of student replies to this question.

3. I thank Steven Cahn for helping me devise this schema.

**BOOKS RECEIVED**


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