Teaching Statement

As an undergraduate, I was lucky enough to have wonderful teachers who introduced me to some of the knottiest questions of philosophy, showed me how to think deeply and rigorously about them, and, most importantly, to see both that thinking about these questions is worth doing and that *I* could do it. Now that I am a teacher myself, I want to give my students the same thing that I had when I was in their position, and I consequently regard teaching as one of the most important—and rewarding—parts of my work as a philosopher.

I have three high-level goals around which I organize my teaching. The first of my three goals is simply to help students develop the confidence and the motivation to do philosophy—inside the classroom and out of it. My second goal is to give students an understanding of a meaningful range of important philosophical questions, views, and arguments surrounding the course topic. Finally, my third goal is to help students develop a range of important content-neutral critical skills which I think of as a philosophical toolkit. The relevant skills include the ability to read difficult texts with comprehension; the ability to understand, explain, and evaluate arguments and claims from these text orally and in writing; the ability to formulate, present, and defend one's own views; the ability to engage fruitfully in philosophical discussion and debate with others; and the ability to think through novel cases and issues in a philosophical way. Developing these skills is, in my view, essential if students are to become people who can navigate, and productively participate in, an open, democratic society.

When I design my courses, my focus is always on giving students the structure and support required to realize these goals. In particular, I design my courses to help students build skills and understanding over time without getting overwhelmed. For example, most students in introductory courses are not used to having to critically engage with and challenge course material. I therefore

generally begin by having them practice these skills with low-stakes classroom activities like they-say-I-say exercises in which students have to identify a possible objection to a claim and then a response to that objection. Next, I have them do quizzes and short assignments which require, at least in part, some degree of critical engagement with particular arguments and ideas (by identifying plausible objections, for instance). Finally, I give them a larger assignment that is primarily focused on this sort of critical engagement, as well as another essay which combines critical and expository elements.

In the classroom, I emphasize active learning. While lectures play an important role in my classroom, I make sure to balance them with a range of small-group activities meant to push them to practice the skills I want them to develop and to engage with the material in an active and collaborative way. In any given class, I might ask students to discuss and answer a set of review questions, complete the they-say-I-say exercise I mentioned earlier, or analyze a particular passage. Beyond these small-group discussion activities, I also structure my lectures in order to leave space for class-wide discussions. I have found that emphasizing discussion in this way also keeps students invested in the material and the course by making them feel like active participants rather than passive receptacles for information. More mundanely, it also helps keep students alert and focused. Since the classes I have thus far taught have primarily been long, evening classes, this is something I think about a lot!

For my major assessments, I primarily rely on a mixture of in-class essays and exams, shorter quizzes, and take-home writing assignments (depending on the course). Some of my assignments are meant test effective understanding of the course material and critical skills, particularly the ability to evaluate and critically engage with arguments. Others require them to *apply* the ideas and arguments we have been discussing, and philosophical thinking more generally, in different ways. For instance, in my intro to ethics I had my students select an ethically difficult scenario or problem from a story (either a news story or a fictional story) and write a short paper analyzing it.

With my assessments, I try to provide my students with detailed feedback which engages with their work in a meaningful way. For smaller courses, I also generally require students to meet with me and discuss their papers in order to give this feedback in a more direct way. Since these meetings require students to understand and answer questions about what they wrote, it is a useful way of discouraging AI plagiarism. Indeed, this is one of the measures that has allowed me to keep using take-home essays in some classes.

Deeply engaging with student work also serves to show my students that I take their work seriously, which makes them see it as more than just another essay they have to turn in to get a grade. Indeed, part of what made me want to start studying philosophy as an undergraduate was a professor who took my work seriously in this way. This approach to feedback reflects my more general approach to getting students engaged. I frame my courses so that students see themselves as participants in a series of ongoing philosophical dialogues—with me, their classmates, and even the philosophers we are reading. Furthermore, I work to make students feel that it is worth participating in these dialogues: that their contributions will be taken seriously and that we can all make progress on figuring out what to think. I have had a great deal of success in creating student engagement with this approach. To give an example I am particularly proud of, in the ethics course I taught in the spring, I had several students who would regularly stay behind at the end of a two-and-a-half-hour class—one that ends at 8:30—to ask questions about the material and about other philosophical issues!

Teaching, like philosophy, is always a work in progress. I have been quite successful thus far in my teaching—I regularly receive strong student evaluations, and I was recently nominated for my university's graduate teaching award (the Baranger prize)—but I am always looking for ways to further develop pedagogically. I am in the process of completing an optional certificate in pedagogy offered by my university and I previously attended a seminar on teaching philosophy for graduate students organized by the American Association of Philosophy Teachers. Furthermore, I regularly reevaluate,

and if needed revise, my pedagogical practices to ensure they are aligned with my overall goals. To give a concrete example, I want students to leave my classroom with the ability to read and comprehend difficult texts. When I first began teaching, I would simply assign such texts with the assumption that students could work their way through the texts and that this practice would serve to hone the relevant ability. However, many students found this quite daunting and did not do the reading or did it without getting much out of it. Thus, I now dedicate class time to discussing how to read philosophy and working with students to break down difficult passages in class, and supply them with reading guides for harder pieces.

I think this kind of reevaluation and adaptation is particularly important in light of the emergence of generative AI. Last summer I worked as an intern for the GAINS program, an initiative in Pitt's School of Arts and Sciences focused on AI in higher education, which gave me an opportunity to think about how we should approach this issue. Like many of us, I worry about students using AI tools to offload important cognitive work. I have thus developed several measures to prevent inappropriate uses of AI on my core assignments. I have also written (in blog form) about responsible ways to use AI detection in the classroom. However, I think that AI also has promise if used in a thoughtful, critical way, and I have been working on developing assignments that encourage students to use AI in this way, including AI-assisted Socratic dialogues.