

## Teaching Statement

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Would you plug into a machine that could give you any life experiences you desired? Would you stay plugged in for the rest of your life? I begin *Introduction to Ethics* with these questions from Robert Nozick. Most students react strongly. However, when asked to explain *why* they would or wouldn't plug into the machine, those same students often struggle to articulate an answer.

My students are often bright and curious, but many of them lack the skills they need to articulate and think critically about what they believe. I begin my introductory course with Nozick's thought experiment to show them that, though they often have strong convictions about what they believe, they don't always have an understanding of why they believe it or whether they should continue to believe it. My primary aim in both introductory and advanced courses is to equip my students with the skills they need to be both critical and careful thinkers.

I encourage students to use the writing process as a tool for thinking through difficult problems. I assign weekly writing responses in which students take a position or raise a worry about one of the readings for the week. The responses give me a sense of the students' understanding and what problems they are most interested in, and they give the students an opportunity to think about the problem before we discuss it as a class. I also design assignments that ask students to think about the same problem in different ways. Students then develop and deepen their ideas over time. In *Introduction to Ethics*, I first ask students to write a short 2-3 page paper in which they explain and support their own decision in Nozick's thought experiment. I challenge them to be open to changing their mind if the process of writing the paper convinces them that they ought to decide differently. For their next assignment, I ask them to apply that same thought experiment to two of the theories studied and to explain which decision they think those theories would best support. The second paper provides an opportunity to think through the practical implications of important moral theories and develop their own ideas about what matters.

I also equip students to learn from great thinkers by teaching them how to closely read a challenging philosophical text. As a teaching assistant for a course on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, I worked with Tyler Burge to help students build an understanding of Kant's terminology. We read difficult passages as a class and methodically tracked how each claim in the passage connects to Kant's larger project (see my handout on analytic reading skills included in this dossier). The students gradually developed an understanding of what Kant's questions are and, at the same time, how he plans to answer them. Students who initially found Kant's *First Critique* inaccessible were gripped by his account of how we can have substantive knowledge that's not justified by sense experience, and they began to see why Kant had to answer that question before he could tackle the problem of freedom. Students learned that paying careful attention to the details of a text is critical to understanding the larger philosophical problems it addresses.

Teaching students how to approach challenging philosophical texts has disciplined my own research. After working with students on Kant's *First Critique*, I began to read Kant's ethical writings in a new light. I connected Kant's discussion of the idea of freedom in *The Groundwork to the Metaphysics of*

*Morals* to his view of the mind, and in particular, to his view that ideas shape the way we think. My work with students has also deeply influenced my approach to other philosophical problems. For example, working with students on Kant's suicide example formed the foundation for my thinking about the morality of procreation. On Kant's account, we are prohibited from committing suicide for the sake of self-love, not because ending a life is always wrong, but because self-love is not the right kind of justification for ending a life. I then thought, if some reasons are the wrong kind of reason for ending a life, then there may also be a wrong kind of reason for *creating* a life. My current work is a development of the idea that one acts wrongly if one procreates for the wrong reason—an idea born out of my work with students on Kant's *Groundwork*.

My own research is, in turn, a springboard for my teaching. The next time I worked with students on Kant's *First Critique*, for example, I ran an honors section in which we also read parts of Kant's *Groundwork*. I introduced students to Kant's account of morality as it relates to his project in *The First Critique*. In my upper division *Medical Ethics* course, I used Kant's suicide example to motivate his claim that we should treat people (ourselves included) always as ends, never merely as means. As a class, we applied his view to issues like euthanasia and the genetic enhancement of one's offspring, contrasting it with a utilitarian account of morality. Incorporating my research into *Medical Ethics* gave both me and the students an opportunity to think through the practical implications of Kant's suicide example and, ultimately, how his moral framework bears on the moral treatment of medical patients.

I enjoy teaching philosophy because of this collaboration with the students. There isn't a sharp distinction between doing philosophy and teaching philosophy—they are often one and the same. I do my best to present ideas and views that I find interesting and important, but I also encourage students to develop their own ideas. The dialectic of the class depends on their contributions as well as mine, and that dialectic shapes both the student's views and my own.