In Defense of Doing Philosophy "Badly" or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Imperfection

Alida Liberman
Southern Methodist University

Abstract: I argue that it can sometimes be good to do philosophy badly and that this has important implications for our classroom practices. It is better to engage in philosophy in a mediocre way than to not engage with it at all, and this should influence what learning goals we adopt and how we assess students. Furthermore, being open to doing and teaching philosophy imperfectly is necessary for fighting against rampant prestige bias and perfectionism in our discipline and our classrooms; if we are to expand the canon and diversify our curricula, we must be willing to risk doing mediocre work ourselves and willing to support our students in doing the same. I conclude that we should sometimes be guided in our teaching by an alternative standard of philosophical excellence that is focused not on the quality of the work produced, but on the joy, creativity, and collaboration involved in the process.

Introduction

In my first year as a PhD student, a professor told our seminar that in his opinion, philosophy was only worth doing if you did it *really* well and that anyone who wasn't in the top ten percent or so shouldn't bother trying to write philosophy papers.[1] I was quite distressed by this proclamation. Most worryingly, I was sure that I wasn't in the top ten percent of students in that seminar room, let alone among philosophers more generally; having not yet learned about imposter syndrome, I seriously doubted if I'd ever get there. If my professor was right, what was I doing in graduate school? And why did he think it was desirable—or even possible—to quantify and rank philosophical work (or perhaps philosophers themselves) in such a way?[2] Most importantly, I bristled at the presumption that the value of doing philosophy lies exclusively in the excellence of the outcome that results. Practical considerations about publishing or perishing aside, I believed that the process of working through a philosophical problem or question and developing an argument or possible solution could be valuable even if the resulting paper would not be counted among the very "best."

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I assume that many philosophers share my misgivings and would reject the idea that philosophy should be done only by the crème de la crème or that philosophizing is valuable only insofar as it produces "excellent" results. Furthermore, even people who agree with my professor—i.e., who believe only the very best should attempt to publish in academic journals—might reject an analogous claim applied to undergraduate students or amateurs; perhaps Philosophy 101 or public philosophy should be for everyone, even if graduate school or a career as a professor is not. But I suspect that valuing *outcomes* and a narrow understanding of *excellence* above *process* and *practice* contributes to an exclusionary attitude that seeps into our unarticulated assumptions about who and what philosophy is for, and thereby shapes our professional practices in ways that we may not always be aware of—including who we hire, whose work we read, who we invite to referee papers or give conference talks, what topics we work on, and how we assess ourselves and each other. I worry that similar exclusionary attitudes often creep into our classroom practices as well, even for those of us who explicitly reject the idea that every student must do philosophy extremely well in order to have a worthwhile experience in our classes. How might the assumption that philosophy is only worthwhile if it leads to excellent work influence our pedagogical practices—including what readings we assign, what our course learning goals are, what kinds of assessments we create, and how we connect those assessments to grades? Moreover, what sorts of pedagogical practices would we feel free to engage in—and how might we and our students feel about what happens in our classes—if we abandoned this assumption?

I defend the value of doing philosophy poorly, understood as engaging in philosophical thinking (including reading, discussing, writing, and reflecting) in a way that involves low to moderate levels of skill and results in outcomes (such as arguments, conclusions, or papers) that are of low to middling quality when assessed by traditional disciplinary standards. For example, consider the undergraduate non-major student who adores your introduction to philosophy class, devouring the readings and talking about the ideas with friends, but who—despite putting in effort—never manages to produce A- or B-level work. Consider the lifelong learner who enjoys listening to philosophy podcasts and having lively discussions about them on message boards, but never fully grasps some of the concepts being discussed. Consider, even, the professional philosopher trained in one sub-field who excels in writing in that area and branches out post-tenure to work on a new and very different topic, which they find fulfilling even though they never manage to get their new articles published. These activities do not create "excellent" philosophy. But they do cultivate joy, enliven and satisfy curiosity, encourage self-reflection, and bring people together around a common interest in an inclusive way. I think that philosophizing—understood as the wondering, reflecting, question-asking, and communal discussing that we engage in as

philosophers—is always valuable. What would it look like for our teaching to take this idea seriously, and to focus less on demanding that students create excellent philosophical products and more on enabling students to engage in the process of philosophizing? What would it mean to interpret the excited and engaged student who earns a C as a success rather than a failure?

I am not claiming that we should aim for mediocrity in ourselves or set low expectations for our students. All else being equal, it is better to be good at philosophy than it is to be bad at it. But sometimes all else is not equal, and in such circumstances, I think it can be good to do philosophy badly. The degree of badness that can be considered "good" will depend on what is at stake (e.g., are you teaching a lower-level class of general education students, or are you supervising the dissertation of a job candidate?) and the aim of your philosophical practice (are you a researcher trying to make meaningful progress on a philosophical puzzle, or are you a student or amateur—a lover of philosophy—exploring big new ideas for the first time?). The answers to these questions have important implications for our classroom practices. What unifies the cases I will discuss is that they are situations in which striving for perfection is unnecessary or counterproductive and in which work that falls short of traditional standards of excellence (to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the context) is still worth doing.

I first offer some clarifying remarks to help frame my argument. I then suggest that simply engaging in philosophical reflection can be valuable regardless of outcome and argue that this should influence how we assess students and what learning goals we adopt for general education courses. Next, I argue that being open to teaching philosophy imperfectly is sometimes necessary for fighting against the rampant prestige bias in our discipline and our classrooms; if we are to successfully expand the canon and diversify our curricula, we must be willing to risk doing less than excellent work ourselves and to support our students in doing the same. Finally, I sketch a vision of a philosophy classroom that incorporates an alternative standard of excellence that does not depend solely on the quality of the eventual product students produce but instead focuses on joy and collaboration.

Framing the Argument

My claim that it is valuable to do philosophy badly should not be confused with two less controversial claims in the same ballpark, both of which I accept but which are less in need of defending. First, it is obviously instrumentally good to be willing to perform a task badly for a while if this is a necessary step to eventually becoming better. If you are in a supportive environment, overcoming initial failures and learning from your mistakes can build resilience and dedication that may spur greater growth than you would have experienced had you succeeded immediately. For instructors, the experience of having struggled with material yourself may help

cultivate empathy for students who are struggling, which makes it instrumentally valuable. I am arguing that engaging in philosophy in a non-excellent way can also be non-instrumentally valuable. The second less controversial claim is that much conventionally excellent philosophical work appears in untraditional mediums or venues (e.g., YouTube, fiction, film, podcasts) and is about unconventional topics. My claim is not just that we should avoid being overly narrow and elitist when assessing what kind of work meets conventional standards of philosophical excellence—although of course, we should do this! Rather, I am suggesting that we explore the value of doing philosophy that does not meet (and in some cases, does not even attempt to meet) such standards at all.

I am not suggesting that doing philosophy poorly is always a good thing; sometimes, it is quite bad to be bad at philosophy. If the goal is doing philosophy well—whether as a professional, a student, or a hobbyist—then never becoming proficient might be distressing, lower self-esteem, or make a person feel terrible. Poor philosophizing about applied ethical issues or social and political problems can also lead to serious harm to others; the voter, politician, non-profit director, or parent who reasons badly about moral questions might make dangerous or damaging decisions. Of course, it is a major prudential problem to remain unskilled or unable to meet disciplinary standards of excellence if you are pursuing a career as a philosophy professor, just as happily belting off-pitch can be good if you're a karaoke singer but not if you're trying to make it on Broadway. Professional philosophers (including PhD students) also have non-prudential reasons to build deep expertise and strive to offer sharp and nuanced arguments that move debates forward and shed new light on important theoretical and practical problems; most of us are in this field because we think that the work we do is intrinsically worthwhile. However, I think that this is probably not the only valuable way to do philosophy as professionals: it can also be good to spend some of your time thinking about a wacky idea that goes nowhere or attending talks on interesting topics outside of your main area of expertise that are of no use for your own work or that you do not fully understand. And I am confident that cultivating deep expertise and sharp arguments is not the only valuable way for undergraduate students to engage with philosophy.

The Value of Philosophical Reflection

I've long suspected that the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* overstated his case by insisting that the unexamined life is not worth living.[3] Still, I doubt that I have to convince a readership of fellow philosophers that there are major benefits to philosophically examining our lives, our choices, and the world around us. The well-examined life is likely to be richer and more satisfying than the unexamined one; philosophical reflection can help us figure out what matters to us, and why,

and how to best pursue what we care about. Hopefully, examining our lives will also make us more ethically responsive—more aware of our interconnections with others and of how our actions affect those around us in sometimes-subtle ways, and more willing to alter our behavior in light of this.

What about the poorly examined life? Is it better to engage in flawed or slightly muddled philosophical reflection than to not reflect at all? Fully investigating this question is beyond my present scope, but I suspect that the answer is yes. I think that subjecting your beliefs to some critical scrutiny, even if imperfectly, is better than doing nothing. Cultivating a disposition of philosophical reflection seems to be a worthwhile pursuit of intellectual—and perhaps moral—virtue, even if that reflection does not always occur at a high level.

This does not imply that having an imperfect grasp of philosophical content knowledge is always prudentially or morally valuable. For example, having some literacy that falls short of true expertise can enable you to better rationalize to a preferred conclusion, making you more confident in your (false) assessment than you would be without this literacy.[4] The internet troll with a bit of rhetorical skill— say, who knows a handful of fallacies but nothing else about critical thinking—may wreak more havoc in comment threads than someone who cannot wield fallacies as clunky weapons. And an imperfect understanding of how an ethical theory functions might lead someone to be more inclined to endorse an immoral decision than they would be without a (flawed) theoretical justification for their behavior. However, I think the practice of philosophical reflection—of subjecting your beliefs to critical scrutiny and thinking deeply about important topics—is unlikely to lead to these sorts of harms. Engaging in such reflection is intrinsically and often instrumentally valuable, regardless of the results. Especially for undergraduate students (and non-academic amateurs), I think that it is generally better to do philosophy badly than to not do it at all.

What does this mean for our classes? If philosophically examining our lives and the world is a good thing, then cultivating habits of reflection is a worthy learning goal for our students. And if such reflection is valuable whether done well or poorly, then we should not be allocating differential credit based on the results of students' reflections. Rather, we should be assessing the extent to which they are engaging in good faith in the process of reflection, and assigning credit based on completion rather than accuracy. If the value of an examined life lies at least partially in the process of examination itself and not only in the results of such examination, then we should encourage students to put effort into that process and give them credit for doing so. One way to do this is to allocate a portion of the course grade to reflection exercises. This could involve pre-class reflections on course readings, post-class reflections on what students have learned that day, meta-cognitive reflections on students' own reading and learning processes, or personal reflections about how the course content connects to students' experiences

and existing knowledge. However reflections are structured, students should receive full credit simply for completing them. Let assessments of accuracy be reserved for learning activities that serve the goal of comprehension rather than exploration and reflection.

When I first started teaching, I assigned my introductory students reading homework that required answering short questions about the author's argument; students received credit if they answered correctly. I soon changed my approach. Since they were due before class, these assignments were very demoralizing for students who attempted to complete a difficult or complex reading but failed to understand it (and thus didn't receive credit for wrong answers). More importantly, I realized that my main goal was not to get students to read well and draw accurate conclusions. Rather, my goal was for students to simply engage with the reading: it was valuable for them to do their best to grapple with it and think about it before class started, even if they misunderstood the author's argument. What mattered most to me was not the outcome of students' reflections, but that they inculcated the habit of engaging in such reflection. Now, I give students a list of possible engagements and ask them to respond to the text in three ways of their choosing; they receive full credit for doing this, even if they make inaccurate statements about what the author says.[5] Receiving credit for mere engagement separates the value of the reflective process from a traditional assessment of skill, giving students credit for engaging in even poor examination of their lives and the readings. The flexibility this allows for generally leads to good results, as students often engage in deeper, more interesting, or more creative ways than they did with traditional homework assignments (which is an instrumental reason for people focused on outcomes to assign open-ended and low-stakes reflections). Still, I think that this would be worthwhile even if it did not reliably lead to better results, because the practice of grappling with and reflecting on a challenging reading is valuable in itself.

General education students in particular can benefit from this approach. Why should students who have strengths in other areas study philosophy (or any subject) in which they are not skilled, and in which they are unlikely to become proficient? One answer is that this can be good for you. Amy Berg argues that "under certain circumstances, it's prudentially valuable for us to engage in some of our life pursuits badly, with no expectation and/or ambition of becoming good at those pursuits" and "that this kind of prudential value is not easily found elsewhere."[6] This is for three reasons. First, doing things you aren't great at enables you to cultivate the virtue of contentment: to set your expectations low enough that you are satisfied with imperfection, rather than striving for perfection and being continually disappointed. Second, accepting that you will not be good at everything you attempt enables you to live a more well-rounded life; since it is not possible to be excellent at everything, we would miss out on a lot of goods if we only attempted activities at which we

knew we could excel. Third, doing things badly helps you appreciate expertise and how much effort and skill goes into succeeding at a challenging task.

Berg does not apply these ideas to the classroom or university curriculum, focusing instead on hobbies and leisure pursuits. But I think that these arguments could be used to ground a rethinking of the role of general education. Properly framed, practicing philosophy (or other disciplines) in a mediocre way as part of a general education curriculum could have distinctive prudential benefits. A primary justification of general education requirements is that they help students become more well rounded. Yet undergraduate academic culture at many institutions presumes that students should excel at every class, earning an "A" in everything from chemistry to art history to philosophy. Will students become truly well rounded if they feel constrained to take only general education classes in which they expect to produce excellent results and get good grades? Imagine a general education curriculum that focused instead on cultivating well-roundedness, contentment, and an appreciation of expertise—a curriculum that encouraged students to take classes far outside of their comfort zones, with the goal of expanding their horizons and testing out new skills, holding no expectation of getting a good grade or being the best.

For this approach to succeed, we would likely need a radical revision of the role played by grades in general education courses—such as not assigning grades for these classes at all, or making them all pass/fail, or not including those grades in GPAs that are used to competitively assess graduate school admissions or job prospects. Alternatively, we could assign letter grades in general education courses based not on the outcomes of student work but on the process that goes into it, such as whether students have put in effort, explored new topics with curiosity, attempted difficult tasks, improved to any degree (even if the final skill level falls short of competence), and helped to create a positive learning environment. Doing this in a just and fair way would require developing new strategies for measuring and assessing student learning, which might be challenging—although it is also difficult to ensure that traditional approaches to grading are just and fair.[7] Adopting new kinds of course goals might help us to develop novel and creative approaches to assessment and grading.

Short of such a system-wide revision, we might still incorporate such expectations into our individual classes by adopting learning goals that reflect them. Perhaps the goal for general education students should not be to "be able to construct a strong philosophical argument" but to "work on constructing philosophical arguments and assessing others' argument constructions to better appreciate what goes into a good argument." Maybe the course goal that best supports the prudential value of doing philosophy as a part of general education is not "understand complex primary sources" but "grapple with complex primary sources and make progress towards understanding them" or "better understand

secondary sources" or even "engage in philosophical analysis of texts that are not traditionally seen as philosophical." We should of course encourage students to strive to improve and become skilled, and should provide them with the tools they need to do this. However, we should also acknowledge that merely engaging with philosophical texts and ideas is worthwhile. And if there is value to engaging in even mediocre or poor philosophical reflection, we should consider whether we want to develop course goals that aim at engaging in philosophical reflection *simpliciter*, regardless of achievement level.

Pushing Back Against Prestige and Perfection

Perhaps you've also had experiences like the following in your professional life. I approach someone to engage in friendly small talk during a coffee break at a large conference; they immediately scan my name tag to see where I work, and I get the sense that they are using my institutional affiliation as a proxy for whether I am worth continuing to talk to. I am told by various mentors that publications at less venerated journals—or publications about pedagogy, regardless of where they appear—do not really "count" for anything and that it is thus unwise to work on them, especially before tenure. The discipline of philosophy (like many academic and other pursuits) is mired down in the pursuit of prestige. I suspect that these norms strongly influence our assumptions about what kinds of philosophy are worth doing.

This fixation on prestige is harmful for us as professionals. As Helen de Cruz argues, "prestige bias can result in testimonial silencing (terminology from Dotson 2011) for work in philosophical traditions that is considered fringe or optional, such as philosophy of race and non-western philosophy;" because these traditions are not taken seriously, people working in them may not be recognized as legitimate philosophers (testimonial quieting) or may self-censor and work in other areas because they know that their work will not be well received (testimonial smothering).[8] In an article criticizing the "confusing and irresponsible" advice offered by the Philosophical Gourmet Report to prospective graduate students interested in feminist philosophy, Margaret Urban Walker observes that

> feminist philosophy is predictably unrepresented precisely in the departments at the top of the prestige hierarchy; part of what makes these departments 'prestigious' (alongside, in many cases, the enormous resources of wealthy private and some public universities) is their guardianship of what has long since been entrenched as 'important.' These are, necessarily, your father's 'good' philosophy departments. To pursue feminist philosophy in these contexts, if it is possible at all, is at least discouraging and marginalizing, usually stigmatizing, and sometimes professionally life-threatening.[9]

Prestige bias also restricts who "counts" as a serious philosopher. De Cruz demonstrates that the prestige of someone's undergraduate school strongly correlates with which graduate programs they'll be accepted to and that the prestige of their graduate program strongly influences what kind of job (if any) they will get.[10] In the United States, people of color and of low socio-economic status are seriously under-represented at elite universities, which translates into an under-representation in graduate programs and high-status academic jobs. Kristie Dotson argues that the culture of justification that is widespread in philosophy—understood as "a culture that privileges legitimation according to presumed commonly-held, univocally relevant justifying norms, which serves to amplify already existing practices of exceptionalism and senses of incongruence within the profession"—creates a bad working environment for diverse practitioners, which leads them to leave (or refrain from entering) the profession.[11] It is likely that this culture of justification underlies assumptions about what work counts as prestigious. All of this can lead to a narrow conception of what counts as excellent and bolster the norm that the only philosophy worth doing meets this narrow construal of excellence.

I suspect that a similar valorization of prestige and fixation on the pursuit of excellence can influence how and what we teach in ways that risk harming students, especially those from groups that are under-represented in academic philosophy (including women, people of color, people with disabilities, non-fluent English speakers, and others). Maybe we unreflectively presume that good work is primarily done by those students we antecedently take to be the best—perhaps because they are a philosophy major who already knows how to use idiosyncratic academic terminology, or perhaps because their personality, cultural or class background, and/or gender socialization make them confident and extroverted and thus an active participant in class discussions. Maybe we feel pressured to adhere to the traditional canon or to insist that students read primary sources in introductory classes even if doing so doesn't best serve their needs. Maybe we assign only writing done by "real" philosophers rather than interdisciplinary content or philosophical work by those outside the academy, even if the latter has more direct relevance to students' lived experiences. Or maybe we assume that the only learning goal worth pursuing is writing traditional philosophical essays in an "academic" tone and that students who do not do this well have failed to learn (even if they are deeply engaged in other ways or can express their ideas well using other mediums or approaches).

Making Space for Imperfection in Ourselves as Teachers

How can we move away from such forms of prestige bias (and the constraints they engender)? One strategy that I have encountered outside of the classroom

is separating individuals and their work from markers of prestige. For example, I once applied for a job that asked for anonymized CVs (without the candidate's name or university affiliation) at the first stage of screening. I've also attended a conference in which the organizers purposefully left our institutional affiliations off our name tags, intending for us to focus more on each other's ideas and less on an external marker of prestige.[12] An analogue of this in the classroom would be using anonymous grading. In addition to potentially mitigating (often unintentional) instructor biases, this can be useful in situations in which a halo effect is likely to occur and we may be inclined to be overly charitable towards the work of students that we antecedently judge to be "good" (perhaps because they have already done good work in our classes, or perhaps because their body, dress, or comportment looks like that of a "typical" philosopher) and less charitable towards the work of those we judge to be "bad."[13]

Another key strategy is working to expand and diversify what we include on our syllabi, what sorts of classroom activities we engage in, and what kinds of assignments we give students. Creating a syllabus is a political act: the topics, authors, and approaches that we include or exclude send messages about what we value as philosophers, professors, and people. The way we spend our time in the classroom—and how we ask our students to spend their time doing work outside of class—similarly reflects what we value and what we think is important. As we make these decisions, we should pay attention to how prestige bias perhaps unwittingly shapes our assumptions about what we ought to assign in our courses, perhaps in ways that might be especially alienating or demotivating for minoritized or oppressed students. What assumptions are we making about what kinds of topics and authors count as "real" philosophy and what sorts of activities are philosophically meaningful? What should we be valuing instead, and how can we work to broaden these assumptions?[14]

Fixating on "excellent" performance can prevent us from successfully doing this. If we are to diversify our syllabi, curricula, and classroom activities in a way that supports greater access, equity, and inclusion, we must be willing to stretch ourselves and get outside of our comfort zones, and risk imperfect or unpolished pedagogical performances. How many times have you heard someone (or yourself) say something like, "I'd love to teach philosophy of race, early modern women philosophers, Buddhist philosophy, or some other topic, but I was never trained in it; I don't know enough about it and am afraid I cannot do the topic justice." This, of course, perpetuates the cycle of failing to cover such topics in philosophy courses. In a world in which our universities were better funded and more just, we would be able to broaden our curricula by hiring experts who specialize in under-represented traditions and topics. In the actual world—in which austerity measures, adjunctification, and other political and economic pressures mean that most philosophy departments are not able to make new hires for this (or any other)

purpose—we may not be able to broaden our course offerings in the near future unless some of us are willing to teach material that we aren't fully comfortable with, and in which we may never become truly expert.

As academics, we know how to teach ourselves new things. We are also used to learning something new so that we can teach it to others; as Therese Huston notes, non-tenure track faculty and people working in small departments are especially likely to be routinely required to teach in areas outside of their main expertise.[15] But as perfectionist pedagogues, we are sometimes hesitant to go out on a limb if we do not have to. Branching out requires vulnerability; it can be scary, and it is also a lot more work than sticking with the familiar. However, we must not let the perfect be the enemy of the good; surely it is better to teach these topics imperfectly than to not attempt to teach them. This is not to say that it is acceptable to teach non-traditional topics terribly. While it can be valuable for a general education student to think about philosophy in a rudimentary or unskilled way, it violates our professional (and moral) duties as educators if our lectures, pedagogical activities, and assessments do not meet a threshold of basic competency. It is especially important not to misrepresent or caricature marginalized views and the philosophical perspectives of people who are subject to systematic oppression, especially if these views are often uncharitably portrayed in the popular media or cultural imagination. If the only way for you to include a boundary-expanding topic in your class is to teach it very badly, it is better not to include it. This, however, is almost never the only option. For although we cannot expect ourselves to immediately become experts about content areas in which we don't have much background or prior training, most of us are capable of teaching ourselves the basics about new philosophical topics, especially given the wealth of resources that are available to support this.[16] There are also ways to productively approach new topics that do not require deep content expertise—for example, by framing a lesson as a collaborative exploration with students, where you are all exploring a new idea together.

Unfortunately, there are major institutional incentives to avoid attempting this: job retention and promotion often depend on course evaluations and the assessment of our teaching by our (often more traditional and likely more senior) peers. Experimenting with unfamiliar topics could lead to lower student or colleague evaluations. Covering controversial topics related to current events can lead to complaints from students or others, perhaps especially for faculty from marginalized groups who may be perceived as "self-serving" if they cover topics connected to the systems of oppression they face. Teaching controversial topics is also made more challenging by political constraints. For example, as regressive United States state legislatures ban the teaching of critical race theory in public institutions, teaching about race and racism becomes more fraught and challenging.[17] All of this can make it rational to stick to safer ground in our teaching.

We should work collectively to push back against the problematic metrics and policies that disincentivize incorporating new content into our classes.[18] In the meantime, we should support our colleagues in their efforts to branch out and strive to cultivate an attitude of bravery and an acceptance of imperfection in ourselves as teachers. Muddling through a class on a new and unconventional topic can be a good thing, since it means that you are growing as an instructor and pushing back against pernicious presumptions.

Making Space for Imperfection in Our Students

We must also allow for similar experimentation and room for potential failure for our students, which both enables the pursuit of learning goals beyond narrow "excellence" and fosters greater inclusion and access. Even if they have not taken philosophy courses before college, many students are at least somewhat familiar with the dominant traditions in which many canonical philosophical texts are grounded (such as Christianity or social contract theory). They may struggle to wrap their minds around traditions, methodologies, or topics about which they have no prior context or background knowledge. Students may have an especially hard time grappling with unfamiliar topics that are actively resisted in the dominant culture, such as feminism or anti-racism. As a result, students' initial work on such topics might not be as conventionally "excellent" as their work in more traditional areas. To enable students to travel outside of their comfort zones and expand their horizons, we may need to extend a bit of extra grace and flexibility when assessing student work on challenging or unfamiliar topics in particular.

Many students tie their sense of self to their academic performance in ways that make risking failure threatening and stressful. For example, in Spring 2022 I had a student email me about a deadline that he had missed by a few days after the extension I had already given him. He fell behind on his work after missing a week of classes due to quarantining for COVID-19 earlier in the semester, and he anxiously apologized for the "extreme lateness" of his submission, stating that "I know that it does not reflect well upon me as a student or a person" to turn in work so late. I assured him that turning in an assignment late did not reflect poorly on him in these (or most other) circumstances. Still, his attitude was heartbreaking: he had so internalized perfectionism and heavily moralized ideals about work ethic and performance that he feared missing a deadline made him a bad person. A few days later, I met with a student who consistently raised interesting, insightful, and genuinely philosophical questions in her reading reflections. She had yet to speak in class, and I assumed she might be introverted or anxious. One-on-one, she was just as engaged and lively as in her reflections, and we had a nearly hour-long conversation about a range of philosophical topics. Near the end of our meeting, she explained that she hesitated to speak in class because she was afraid of saying

something false or unsophisticated; she didn't want to risk making any errors or seeming like she didn't know what she was talking about, especially in front of her peers.

How can we mitigate such student fears and proactively create a classroom environment in which students feel safe risking poor performances? At a minimum, it's essential to respond well to student comments in class that involve mistakes or implausible claims: for example, you might draw out a closely related idea that is helpful from the student's remark or thank a student for bringing up a very common misunderstanding that you might otherwise forget to address. I also sometimes ask students for wrong answers on purpose (e.g., when brainstorming about possible criteria for a concept, or when trying to list as many examples of a phenomenon as we can). Changing the stakes of a discussion can also help students divorce their sense of self from their performance in class: for example, you might ask students to articulate positions about a controversial topic in a hypothetical way, or ask them to describe what other people might think about a topic. Rebecca Scott suggests that incorporating games in the classroom (such as having students work in teams on a trivia or review game) can make room for students to make mistakes without feeling bad about themselves.[19]

I also try to explicitly disconnect student performance from moral value and to make it clear that course achievement (or lack thereof) need not imply anything about one's personal or academic worth. For example, I usually apply a small late penalty to papers submitted after the (often extended) deadline. But I also emphasize that turning in papers late can be a reasonable decision for which I will not negatively judge students; I tell them that accepting a small penalty can be a rational tradeoff for working on a paper for another 24 hours. When a student fails to turn in a major assignment, I send an email that includes a disclaimer like the following:

> Sometimes students hesitate to submit a paper once the deadline has passed because they are embarrassed to have missed it, or because they fear that a late paper must be perfect (or at least, better than an on-time paper). I urge you not to fall into this trap! People miss deadlines for many reasons, and I would always rather you write something than nothing. If you turn in no paper, you'll get zero percent. But if you turn in anything— even if it is not your best work—you'll get more credit than that.

Kevin Hermberg offers excellent advice about how to develop a course environment in which "taking risks or seeking challenges (e.g., offering interpretations that might surprise people in the room, suggesting an example before one knows for certain it will work out well, and so on) is not only tolerated but encouraged."[20] Hermberg's aim is fostering inclusive pedagogy by cultivating a growth mindset in students, which states that academic success depends not on innate talents but "upon the degree to which we believe we have the capacity to cultivate our intelligence and grow our abilities to accomplish that task."[21] He suggests that "nearly everything

we do as instructors, mentors, and advisors can be put to the service of fostering a growth mindset," including highlighting how even the best philosophers make mistakes and build on the work of others, focusing on formative assessment that aims at articulating strategies for improvement, and framing moments of frustration as moments of growth.[22]

Pushing back against the idea that success depends on innate talent is also a strategy for fostering greater inclusion. Sarah Leslie et al. surveyed experts in thirty science and humanities fields about the importance of field-specific abilities (understood as a "special aptitude that just can't be taught" and that is essential for success) in their disciplines.[23] They found that high field-specific ability scores were strongly correlated with low representation of women and African-Americans, which are both groups that are often stereotyped as having low levels of innate talent. Philosophy—which has a disproportionately low percentage of women and an extraordinarily low percentage of Black people—scored highest of all the disciplines surveyed in holding field-specific ability beliefs.[24]

Classroom assignments that focus on the value of difficult work and learning through failure can foster growth mindsets while rejecting the presumption that students must be perfect performers or innate "geniuses." Hermberg suggests allocating five percent of the course grade to students' "heroic missteps" or productive failures; students receive credit for making valiant attempts that do not succeed, writing "a short reflective essay in which they remind me and, more importantly, themselves of their heroic missteps or productive failures, what they learned from the missteps (if there were any), and how they would score themselves on that intellectual risk-taking aspect of the semester."[25] Similarly, Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue's writing textbook articulates the value of difficulty. They offer a number of strategies for shifting students' attitudes towards challenging texts and tasks, including "difficulty papers" in which students are asked to "identify and begin to hypothesize the reasons for any possible difficulty you might be experiencing as you read" the assigned text; samples of these difficulty papers are shared with the class and spark a discussion that moves students from "judging a difficulty as a reader's inability to understand a text to discerning in that difficulty a reader's incipient awareness of the particular 'demands' imposed by the language/structure/style/content of a text."[26]

Ultimately, we must be willing to sometimes risk doing philosophy in a mediocre way as instructors if we are to diversify our classes, and we should support our students in doing the same. This is necessary for fighting against the unjustified prioritization of only those topics and methods that are seen as prestigious and the subsequent valuing of only those students who are able to master these topics and methods. Learning to love imperfection will help us to value the practice of philosophy in an expansive way that avoids fetishizing excellent outcomes and allows for productive failures and flawed attempts to do something new.

The Joyful Classroom: A New Standard of Philosophical Excellence

I have argued that philosophy is often worth doing even when it doesn't produce excellent results in the conventional sense. What might a philosophy class look like that was focused less on producing excellent outcomes and more on engaging in the joyful and collaborative process of philosophical thinking, reading, reflecting, and writing?[27] I'll approach answering this question via an analogy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I became involved with Plague Mask Players, a theatrical company that hosts a virtual performance series of Zoom readings of Shakespeare and other classical plays.[28] The traditional approach to casting and performing Shakespeare tends to be narrow. Actors audition for roles, which they usually receive only if they already have extensive training and experience in Shakespearean acting. Historically, most roles went to white people, although thankfully this is no longer the norm. However, conventional casting still means that the largest and most interesting roles usually go to men and to people who fit a certain "look" (e.g., casting only thin, young, conventionally attractive, non-disabled actors as love interests).

Plague Mask Players takes a different approach. Instead of holding auditions and allocating roles based on perceived talent or "fit," company members volunteer to be part of a reading, and roles are assigned in random or democratic ways without regard for race, gender, age, body type, experience, or presumed skill level.[29] There are no directors or rehearsals, and actors prepare their own performances (often with elaborate DIY costumes, props, and Zoom backgrounds). The company is volunteer-run, and everyone participating does so for the pure joy of it. During readings, we use the Zoom chat to keep up a steady stream of encouragement as we highlight what we like about each other's performances.

The open-ended casting, supportive community, and low stakes of the readings—which are free and put no one's professional reputation on the line—make space for risk-taking and experimenting with unconventional (or even downright strange) character choices. This has led to the creation of some excellent art, with new and imaginative interpretations of traditional characters, and actors giving impressive performances in roles they would never normally have a chance to play. It has also led to some choices that were less successful, and to some scenes that were less expertly done than they might be had a casting director assigned the strongest actors to the biggest and most challenging roles. But as I see it, the point of the performance is not to create a maximally good final product: it is to tell stories together, have fun, and support each other's art, with wonderful products usually (although not necessarily) emerging as a result. As a cast member, I underwent a shift in attitude that reflected this underlying aim. When I first started participating in readings, I focused primarily on performing well: I wanted to impress the other actors so that I would be suggested for good roles in the future, and I was worried about whether I could keep up with people

with much more training and experience than me. After working with Plague Mask Players for a few months, though, my focus changed: my main goal became enjoying myself and inhabiting whatever role I was given in a creative way. I was no longer worried about seeming impressive; instead, I mainly wanted to entertain my fellow company members, who had become my friends and who I was now in community with.

I dream of creating a philosophy classroom that takes a similar approach: one that aims not at producing "excellent" outcomes but at cultivating curiosity; at having fun and pursuing what brings you joy; at taking risks and experimenting with new ideas; at testing your limits and getting outside of your comfort zone; at cultivating a community and building each other up as we praise each other's successes and heroic missteps. Ideally, this would involve a group of students who are independently motivated to study philosophy for the love of it, without the external pressures and anxieties that come from worrying about numerical grades factored into a GPA that impacts future work prospects and that can turn the classroom into an agonized space. We would cover topics that we thought were important and that students found exciting, working together to practice constructing philosophical arguments and critiquing ideas. We would strive to develop a supportive environment in which we praised each other for our successes and supported each other in taking risks. If these risks resulted in heroic missteps, we would learn from our mistakes. And we would know that these mistakes were worth it, because putting aside the pursuit of perfection is the cost of doing something new and exciting. Hopefully, students would undergo a similar shift as I did as a Plague Mask Players cast member: from worrying about performing well to focusing on having fun, learning new things, attempting challenging tasks, and creating a less agonized, more joyful classroom community.

I suspect that such a classroom would lead to excellent work in the conventional sense—to strong arguments, insightful papers, mastery of course content, robust engagement with challenging sources, and the development of concrete and transferrable skills. Still, even if it didn't, I think we would have achieved an excellent result. For I think that the goals I have been articulating—such as creating joy, satisfying curiosity, and supporting each other as you engage in deep thinking about a complex problem—are themselves a kind of philosophical excellence. A student earning a C who is excited about the material and eagerly contributes to class discussion is excellent in this sense and has achieved something valuable. I see these goals not as competitors to or replacements of conventional outcome-focused standards. Rather, they are important supplements to conventional goals that are always worth pursuing—and that are in some contexts the most important goals to pursue.

I saw a glimpse of what this sort of excellence looks like in practice when I took over as the faculty advisor for my university's Philosophy Club in Spring

2022. About a dozen interested undergrads—some of them upper-level philosophy majors, but many of them first-years or non-majors—gather on the lawn for an hour each week to talk about philosophy, simply because they love it. Students choose their own topics and drive what is usually a very wide-ranging discussion, while I do my best to hold back and let them take the lead. Philosophy Club is a joyful space, where people engage in excited, freewheeling conversations, asking each other big questions and testing out offbeat ideas. Could some of these ideas and arguments be stronger or more sharply refined? Of course—especially if I went into "teacher mode" more often by redirecting tangents, pointing out flawed reasoning, and spending a lot of time framing debates. But would this make the club's practice of philosophy more excellent? I don't think so: the point of Philosophy Club is not to create the strongest possible argument. The participants are happy, curious, and supportive, and thus doing work that is excellent in its own right.

Instead of making Philosophy Club more like a traditional class, perhaps we should try to make our classes more like Philosophy Club. How might we incorporate this alternative metric of excellence into our undergraduate (and especially general education) courses as an explicit learning goal for which we assess students? Institutional constraints and disciplinary norms push strongly against this; it's hard to imagine convincing a department chair or hiring committee (let alone a dean or a curriculum committee) that students have excelled in your class because they had a lot of fun, broadened their horizons, and helped each other. My idealized vision of a classroom full of intrinsically motivated learners freed from worrying about their GPAs is admittedly unrealistic. However, I think that if we are brave in our risk-taking, supportive of each other as faculty, and imaginative in how we engage with our students, we can find ways to pursue alternative forms of excellence even in the imperfect present—to risk our own "bad" pedagogical performances as we experiment with unconventional learning goals, teaching strategies, and methods of assessment that encourage our students (and ourselves) to experience joy, build community, cultivate curiosity, stretch their limits, and learn to stop worrying and love imperfection.

Notes

1. Admittedly, I may have misunderstood the scope of his argument: perhaps he was offering purely prudential advice and suggesting that, given the abysmal state of the academic

job market, it was unwise to attempt to pursue a career as a philosophy professor unless you were exceptionally skilled. This would still be distressing, as it falsely assumes that hiring decisions are meritocratic such that all and only the "best" people get tenure-track jobs—when of course, being among the top 10% of philosophers (assuming we can sensibly even make such a ranking) is neither necessary nor sufficient for finding stable employment in academia.

2. My professor's remarks also seemed to reflect the widespread presumption among philosophers that success in the field requires a certain degree of fixed, innate, raw talent; see Leslie et al., "Expectations of Brilliance."

3. The claim seems exclusionary: not everyone has equal access to the leisure time and resources to engage in serious self-reflection, and surely your life can be worth living even if you are in a context that makes examining it burdensome (or psychologically impossible). It also seems elitist: there are many things that can make for a good life, and a life of purposeful blissful ignorance can surely contain many of them.

4. For example, Kahan et al. found that among U.S. adults, "greater scientific literacy and numeracy were associated with greater cultural polarization: Respondents predisposed by their values to dismiss climate change evidence became more dismissive, and those predisposed by their values to credit such evidence more concerned, as science literacy and numeracy increased," because people were employing "their knowledge and reasoning capacities to form risk perceptions that express their cultural commitments" ("Tragedy of the Risk-Perception Commons," 1).

5. The list includes comprehension (identifying an author's thesis or summarizing their argument), asking questions (whether for clarification or curiosity), making connections (to what you already know or to a new context), offering criticisms of the argument (or replying to a criticism on behalf of the author), describing realizations you had during the reading (did you change your mind about anything? how did the reading make you feel?), and creative engagement (such as creating a meme, drawing, poem, or tweet about the reading, writing a sample discussion question, or giving a "hot take").

6. Berg, "On Being Bad," 1.

7. For example, Daryl Close ("Fair Grades") argues that "grading should be impartial and consistent" (370) and "based on the student's competence in the academic content of the course" (380); certain common grading practices (such as grading on attendance, grading on a set curve, assessing deportment or effort, or exempting students earning As from the final exam) violate these principles and are thus unfair. Others (e.g., Immerwahr 2011 and McCrickerd 2012) disagree, arguing that grades can be appropriately used as motivators to increase student learning.

8. de Cruz, "Prestige Bias," 276.

9. Walker, "Reflections," 237.

10. de Cruz, "Prestige Bias," 264–266.

11. Dotson, "How is This Paper Philosophy?," 6. Dotson takes diverse practitioners to "refer to notoriously under-represented populations within western, academic philosophy"; diversity thus includes "not only racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, and ability diversity, but to

also include diverse approaches to philosophy, Eastern, applied, engaged, fieldwork, field, public, experimental, literary approaches, etc." (5).

12.   This was only partially successful, since the first question most people asked each other when starting a conversation was "where are you?" However, it helped me realize the extent to which I was paying attention to affiliation on name tags and (despite myself) making immediate judgments about who I was talking to on that basis.

13.   See Malouff, Emmerton, and Schutte, "Risk of a Halo Bias." I'm not suggesting that anonymous grading is always appropriate; if students are completing multiple stages of a scaffolded assignment, or reflecting on their personal experiences, anonymous grading may be impossible or counterproductive.

14.   See Shen-yi Liao's post on *Daily Nous* ("How is This Course Intro to Philosophy?") about teaching an introduction to philosophy course structured around language, knowledge, and power, which did not include any of the topics or authors that are often covered in a traditional intro to philosophy course. While the course was well received, some students pushed back on the idea that the course "counted" as philosophy. The comment section is illuminating, as some of Liao's fellow philosophers adopt a similar attitude: while many comments are supportive, others are extremely negative, with some commentators accusing Liao of engaging in professional misconduct or attempting to indoctrinate students. One commentator was also "a little bit troubled by the amount of non-philosophical material—a popular film, a review of it by a novelist, some podcasts and radio shows, etc." on the syllabus.

15.   Huston, *Teaching What You Don't Know*, Ch. 1.

16.   Huston's book, *Teaching What You Don't Know*, is an excellent general guide. There are also philosophy-specific syllabi and lesson plans aimed at making it easier to diversify a syllabus and learn about under-represented areas, including The Deviant Philosopher (https://thedeviantphilosopher.org/), Diversifying Syllabi (https://diversifyingsyllabi. weebly.com/), the Diversity Reading List (https://diversityreadinglist.org/), the History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps podcast (https://historyofphilosophy.net/), and the APA Diversity and Inclusiveness Syllabus Collection (https://www.apaonline.org/members/ group_content_view.asp?group=110430&id=380970).

17.   Part of the problem is that the legislators criticizing critical race theory use the term to refer to a huge range of views, many of which are uncharitable caricatures and most of which diverge from the ways in which academics understand the term. See Ibram X. Kendhi's discussion ("There Is No Debate") of the how people talk past each other when talking about "critical race theory." For a map of laws targeting the teaching of CRT by U.S. state, see https://www.chalkbeat.org/22525983/map-critical-race-theory-legislation -teaching-racism.

18.   There are also strong independent reasons to resist these policies. For example, student evaluations are deeply flawed measures of teaching success: they reflect gender, racial, and other biases, and they can be a better measure of how many people received high grades or what the workload was than whether students have learned a lot. In a meta-analysis of one hundred articles about bias in student evaluations, Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman found that "women and other marginalized groups do face significant biases in standard evaluations of teaching" with "the effect of gender is conditional upon other factors" such as whether instructors conform to traditional prescribed gender roles (Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman,

"Evaluating Student Evaluations of Teaching," 1). And we should fight back against bans on teaching critical race theory because they violate academic freedom, infringe on free speech, and discourage students from grappling with the realities of racism. The fact that overreliance on teaching evaluations and critical race theory bans may also disincentivize people from diversifying their syllabi is another reason to oppose these policies.

19.   Personal conversation with Rebecca Scott during an American Association of Philosophy Teachers "Talking Teaching" Session on "Games and Play in Philosophy Classes." February 28, 2022.

20.   Jacquart et al., "Diversity is Not Enough," 112; this is a co-authored article in which each author's primary contribution is clearly distinguished.

21.   Jacquart et al., "Diversity is Not Enough," 111. For more information, see Dweck, *Mindset*.

22.   Jacquart et al., "Diversity is Not Enough," 112.

23.   Leslie et al., "Expectations of Brilliance," 262.

24.   Leslie et al., "Expectations of Brilliance," 264. I follow the authors in using "African-Americans" as a category when discussing survey data, as their results do not specify how the category is defined (e.g., whether this includes Black international students enrolled in U.S. universities).

25.   Jacquart et al., "Diversity is Not Enough," 113.

26.   Salvatori and Donahue, "Elements of Difficulty," 9.

27.   For a beautiful articulation of what this sort of classroom might look like, see Gay, "Dispatch from the Ruins." Gay describes his creative writing class, in which his primary goal is "making beautiful shit together." He automatically grants all students As (to free them from worrying about grades) and focuses not on mastery and doing things "right"—abandoning the standard workshop format in which student work is critiqued by peers—but on encouraging students to care for each other, share their dreams, and collaborate on wild and creative projects together.

28.   See https://www.plaguemaskplayers.org/virtual-series.

29.   Methods of assigning roles include using a random name generator, surveying the cast about who they think should play each role, and "domino" casting in which person A casts person B, who casts person C, etc.

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