Welcome To My Philosophy Class

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Lecturer Wayne Buck has written a letter to his students explaining what philosophy is, and how to do it.

Note to the reader: After teaching introductory philosophy courses for several years, I realized that many students immediately get off on the wrong foot, struggling with the material much more than they need to. Discussions with those students revealed that they often bring several common assumptions about what philosophy is into the classroom. I wrote this letter as a counter to those assumptions, making suggestions about how to approach the challenges of reading and writing philosophy. Inevitably, imbedded in these suggestions is a certain view of the nature of philosophy. Whether this stance on the nature of philosophy is correct or incorrect, the suggestions in the letter have had the practical result of noticeably improving how well students do in the course.

Dear Student:

Welcome to my philosophy class. You are approaching a strange subject, and I wish to alert you to some of its peculiarities. My remarks are meant to warn off some, make others apprehensive, but to help the majority grapple with the course.

First, philosophy is not an easy subject. In fact, it is rather difficult. This is true even for introductory courses. You will have to apply yourself to a degree matched only in science or mathematics courses. Despite rumors to the contrary, reading and writing about philosophy is not like reading and writing about novels or poems or the movies. Nor is writing philosophy an expression of one's feelings or ideas about life. Philosophy consists of a series of problems and investigations into those problems. One attempts to solve each problem by making claims which purport to be true, and by backing those claims with arguments.

Philosophy is akin to science in this respect. It is also like science in that it asks about the nature and functioning of various things. However, the two disciplines are concerned with quite different questions regarding these things, and this difference is what makes philosophy and its problems so peculiar and difficult. As scientists, we want to know, for example, what gravity is and how it operates; or what blood is

made of and how it functions in the body. As philosophers, we ask more fundamental, and hence more abstract, questions. We want to know, for example, what a person is, and how persons are different from machines or other animals; or we want to know what knowing itself is, and how it is possible to know anything at all.

Many of the difficulties in understanding and doing philosophy come right here, at the beginning. Because we are rarely confronted with explicit philosophical problems in everyday life, it is hard at first to grasp their distinctive character. Sometimes, it is hard to see that there is a problem at all, or to appreciate the problem's importance. I hope the three problems I have chosen for the course – the nature of science, the essence of a person, and the morality of torture – are particularly accessible in this regard. I think you will find each part of the course interesting, and I hope that at least some of it will be entertaining. Just because philosophy is often concerned with serious issues does not mean it cannot also be playful.

The course will nonetheless be difficult and at times frustrating, as is the case with philosophy generally. I will ask you to think in a way that is 'unnatural'. Most of you will do philosophy badly – at first. Indeed, there is a certain injustice here, since from the beginning I will ask you to do things you cannot be reasonably expected to do until the course is over. (Perhaps in this respect philosophy is like life – no one is really prepared to 'do' life well until it is mostly over.) This is the paradox of learning any skill, however. A swimming instructor teaches you by demanding that you swim at the very beginning – he simply allows you to swim badly and then helps you correct your mistakes.

Some advice on how to study philosophy may therefore be in order. First, reading philosophy.

Philosophy articles and books cannot be read as you read a novel or a newspaper article. You have to study each book or article, re-reading it several times. You must dissect its contents using your own unique intelligence, and then put it back together in a way that gives you personally a clear and distinct understanding of its arguments. The author must be interrogated – forced to admit to the hidden assumptions in his arguments and the flaws of his reasoning. At the same time, you should bend over backwards to give him the benefit of the doubt, to see your objections as potential misunderstandings of what he means. If you find a mistake in the argument, you must do your best to patch it up for the author and make his case as strong as possible – especially if you disagree with the argument. For only if you can imagine how the author would respond to your criticism can you be assured of not misunderstanding him or of not overlooking a point in his favor. So reading a philosophy text is an activity. Make outlines,

mark up the page with comments and questions and doubts, read from the middle, from the end – from the beginning, even – and discuss it with your classmates or philosophically-minded friends.

Second, writing philosophy.

A philosophical paper, article or book consists of four things: claims, arguments for those claims, remarks to the reader explain ing where the argument stands at the moment, and remarks about where it's going next. Always keep the reader in mind. Be sensitive to how your words will strike him, the confusions he is liable to, and the natural objections that will be raised to your arguments. Understand very clearly what it is you are trying to say even before you write it down, and be sure your words capture your meaning exactly. Precision and clarity of expression are categorical imperatives for writing philosophy: you are trying to communicate subtle points. Above all, provide justifying arguments. It is not enough to make claims. It is not even enough to make true claims. You must support your assertions with clear, explicit, convincing arguments. However, proving your conclusion also demands presenting and criticizing the plausible arguments against you. Unless you have both presented a good argument for your position and shown how the arguments against it are flawed, you have not established your case.

Unfortunately, it is next to impossible to learn to read and write philosophy by listening to lectures in a classroom. In class I will explain the substance of each reading and reconstruct its argument in a clearer and (inevitably) simpler form. I require my students to read each book or article before class. In class they should take careful notes, then go back and analyze the piece in earnest, using the notes as a guide to the author's purpose and the development of his argument. This puts the students in a good position to convincingly argue their own beliefs.

I help my students to learn to write philosophy by requiring a preliminary draft of every paper. I read and comment extensively on this draft and then hand it back, to be used as the basis for the final version of their paper. However, for this procedure to work, the drafts must be taken seriously. They must be written as full, complete papers, not as outlines or sketches. I grade them as 'Acceptable' or 'Unacceptable', and require that an 'Acceptable' draft be submitted before I will read the final version.

Some guidelines to keep in mind while writing.

There is an old teaching adage that goes 'Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you've told them.' Adopt this policy in writing philosophy. Announce at the very beginning what problem you're going to discuss. State the problem clearly and concisely. Think of your audience as the interested layman who has perhaps read about the issues in question, but who does not clearly

understand them. Your task is to explain to the intelligent and critical, but confused and perhaps uninformed reader, what the problem is, and what the various possible solutions are – and then to convince him that the solution you prefer is the best. I suggest that after stating the problem, you let your reader know what your solution is going to be. In arguing for your conclusion, make only those claims and arguments that are relevant to the problem at hand. Go methodically, step by step, through the relevant arguments – don't wander off. And don't bullshit. Bullshit can be spotted a mile away in a philosophy argument.

One more thing about writing philosophy. After I give an assignment, students often ask me "Do you want my personal opinion in the paper?" I never really know what to answer, because I'm never sure what the student means by the words 'personal opinion'. Certainly philosophy papers or books are not simply book reports about the claims and arguments others make. My students' papers should not be just a recounting of the articles and lectures. So in that sense, yes, I want your 'personal opinion'. On the other hand, I don't want your 'feelings' on the issue. A philosophy piece is not a report on your ideas, attitudes and beliefs – although it will include your ideas and beliefs. This may confuse you, for it may seem that there is nothing else philosophy could be. This is not so.

Suppose you are a member of a geology research team. Some soil samples are brought in, and your supervisor asks each member of the team to take one sample and analyze it. Would you ask your supervisor whether she wanted your 'personal opinion' on the soil's characteristics? No. You would do the physical and chemical analysis, come to some conclusion about the soil sample, report that conclusion, and support it with evidence developed from your analyses.

Suppose further that your supervisor gave you analyses of the same soil done last year by another research team, and she asked you to evaluate their findings. How would you write your research report? You would first present the conclusions and analyses of the previous team as impartially and as clearly as possible. Then you would point out the perceived errors and weaknesses of their analyses, as well as indicating the acceptable and worthwhile aspects of their research. Then you would present your own findings, and the evidence in favor of those findings. Your evaluation would not simply be a report on what others found, nor simply your 'personal opinion', but a reasoned and convincing presentation of your findings.

You should look at writing philosophy in the same way. I encourage students to consider the class as a philosophical research team: I am your supervisor, and you are one of the team's research staff. The

readings are research reports written by previous teams. I will assign research problems to the team, and you are to write research reports on these problems, evaluating previous analyses and then doing an analysis of your own.

What I have said so far might sound pretty discouraging, and perhaps has convinced you to drop the course, or stop philosophizing altogether. But you do not need to be a gifted writer or a genius to do well in this course, or write sound philosophy generally. You need only pay attention, read the works carefully and make a sincere effort to write clearly and accurately.

There are practical benefits to be gained from studying philosophy. First, it will improve your ability to reason, and to think originally. In reading and writing about abstract problems, you practice and develop analytical, critical and argumentative skills which are useful in many other endeavors. In turn, this will give you confidence in yourself and in your ability to think through problems and come to your own conclusions. It will make you less dependent on others and their thoughts, and put you in a better position to understand yourself and others.

Second, you will learn something about the philosophical tradition. Philosophy has been and still is a central force in Western culture and intellectual life. It is philosophers who have most clearly and thoroughly elaborated the values, ideals and theories which shape the way we live and think, even today. This is true not only for morals and religion, but also for the natural sciences, for political science, for economics and for literature.

Third, philosophy has the power to show us how extraordinary and strange are the most commonplace, mundane aspects of our existence. If considered carefully, what seems simple and unproblematic is usually highly puzzling, and when investigated thoroughly is often found to be very different from what it first seems. William James defined philosophy as ‘the unusually persistent effort to think things through’. Philosophy is thus like a microscope or a telescope, which, when focused, reveals things hitherto unsuspected. The difference is that the unexpected and weird things revealed by philosophy are what stand in front of us in our ordinary life – what we take for granted in our everyday thoughtlessness. Philosophy can give one a new and more satisfying understanding of ourselves, of others, and of the world.

Yrs, Wayne Buck.

Wayne Buck received his PhD in Philosophy from Yale University and has taught at Carleton College, Yale and Southern Connecticut University. His research interests include Continental Philosophy, social ontology and business ethics. He has an MBA from Wharton and is an experienced business executive, entrepreneur and consultant.