

# Teaching Statement

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When we read Plato's *Republic* in my courses, my goal is to teach students that asking questions is itself a skill. Through Socrates, Plato teaches us that philosophy starts with puzzlement. For many students taking philosophy for the first time and feeling confounded by it all, this can be consoling to know (it was for me!). But Plato also teaches us that if we want to arrive at any clarity, our questioning should be aimed at knowledge. Knowledge arises through dialectic, which is an exchange of ideas presented in an effort to achieve clarity. My joy and mission as a teacher of Plato is to put students in conversation with the text and to enable them to see its relevance to the ideas that guide their everyday lives.

One of the most challenging things about teaching the *Republic* is that by the lights of most people in contemporary Liberal society, Plato's rigid class structure is oppressive; it blatantly encroaches on the basic rights and liberties of individuals to pursue the lives they choose. Students object that the people of *Kallipolis* could never be free. This sometimes leads them to hasty conclusions. "Plato is a communist!" one student exclaimed during my office hour, distressed after having read about the lives of the Guardians, who are not permitted to have wealth and private property.

When faced with such challenges, I bring the questions home. Any problems that arise for Plato can be used to critique our own society. Do we really have greater freedoms than the lives of the people of *Kallipolis*? Does freedom really consist in the ability to do whatever you want without constraint, as many people think it does? Do wealth and luxuries make us happier, or even more free? It is not merely the value of its conclusions that makes the *Republic* such a powerful text, but the questions that it can prompt us to ask about our own world, and the way in which it can model for us the skill of asking questions.

For Plato, the purpose of philosophy was to help people to live better lives and become better persons. When brought to bear on issues that concern them, I believe great works like Plato's *Republic* still have the power to do this for students today. I know this first-hand. My pedagogical vision grows out of my own personal experiences. When I first read Plato's *Republic* in college at the American University of Beirut, it gave me a lifeline out of a difficult situation. Deeply embedded in two seemingly contradictory value-systems, I was especially gripped by the theory of the tripartite soul. Having grown up in a conservative Muslim household, attending public schools in the U.S., and living three months out of every year of my life in the Middle East, I was becoming increasingly unsatisfied with the values that my family considered unquestionable and that I, following them, had upheld unquestioningly. But neither was I satisfied with what at the time I thought was the only alternative: to take on the "Western" values of my American teachers and friends. I felt torn between two parts of my soul and pressured to pick a side and snuff out the other. What side was I going to pick? Both options felt like a betrayal. The *Republic* helped me to see another option.

In the dialogue, Socrates argues that a happy soul is like a well-ordered city; it is one in which each part fulfills its proper role in harmony with the others and in accordance with reason. This taught me that I needn't "pick a side" of myself (east or west) and reject the other, as I felt pressured to do, but to find ways for both sides of my identity to exist in a harmony that best

facilitated my own happiness. This meant developing values and ideals of my own that fused together the best of both of the worlds to which I belonged. This simple realization—that I could legitimately and harmoniously be American, Arab, and myself, all at once—was both liberating and empowering. But, in order to have any clarity on the contradictions in values that I was facing in my life, I needed to start having conversations about the issues I was torn about, to engage in dialectic with others. This is what led me to philosophy classrooms many years ago, and what leads me to teach philosophy today. Philosophy can enable students to develop and find greater harmony in their thoughts and values. Towards this goal, I teach them to ask questions, and not to hide from challenges, but to always follow up on their questioning with an effort to achieve greater clarity with others.

With considerable experience teaching a variety of courses to students from diverse cultures, and political affiliations, I can say that I have not always been successful in upholding my values as a teacher. As a young Arab woman often teaching emotionally charged topics in feminist philosophy and the philosophy of race at large public universities in Minnesota and North Carolina, I have been eager to seize authority in the classroom and to show students from marginalized groups that I am on their side. At times, this eagerness has led me astray. On the first day of our unit on oppression and privilege, a student in my ethics class announced to everyone that he thought oppression was “an invention designed to take wealth away from white people”. When he said this, I felt the entire class tense up. I too became tense and proceeded to cut him off, insisting that we move on to things that were more relevant to the texts at hand. Afterwards, I realized that although the content of what he was saying was not innocent, it was deeply relevant to the course material as well as to our wider political climate. I don’t think he was trying to be malevolent. He was probably repeating what he had heard others say, and what he honestly thought to be true. I think that a better way to handle the situation would have been not to cut him off, thereby increasing tension in the classroom and communicating to my students that certain positions were not worth working through in class, but rather to put the substance of what he was saying in conversation with the readings, and to highlight potential misunderstandings of the concept of oppression that may have been lurking in the background of the view he was repeating.

On other occasions, I have felt that in order to be authoritative in the classroom I must preserve the appearance of omniscience with my students. When I started teaching interdisciplinary courses like the Ethics of Peace, War, and Defense, I quickly found this to be wrongheaded. My students learn more by seeing me work through problems aloud than when I immediately “tell them how it is”. And, they learn more when they can bring their knowledge from other fields to bear on problems in philosophy. Instead of trying to maintain an appearance of omniscience, I’ve had students take the role of “discussion facilitator” where they give short presentations on some current or historical event. Then we think through it together using the philosophical arguments presented in the readings.

For example, during a unit on terrorism, a student once asked me what I thought about anti-colonialist terrorism during the Algerian revolution and whether it posed problems for the Just War tradition. Not being enough of a historian to draw any clear conclusions, I tried to give a vague and meaningless response. I immediately felt her dissatisfaction with it. So after class, I invited her to facilitate a discussion on the topic for part of our next class. She did a fantastic job presenting the problem and the students got a lot out of considering the strengths and weaknesses of the Just War tradition in addressing it. She helped me show the class that the theories we were learning about can have real- world applications.

When I first started teaching, I would prepare for class by writing extremely detailed lecture notes, 10 pages or more. I would show up to class expecting to get through everything I had written. This proved to be insufferable, for me and my students. More importantly, getting through everything in my notes meant that when students had comments about things that were not helpful in moving forward in the notes, I would have to give them superficial responses, or put them aside for the sake of “staying on topic”. When I saw how excited students could be to discuss things that were off (my) script, I changed my prepping strategies to facilitate a more fluid conversational style that accommodated what students were most interested in. This meant spending less time on set up and more time asking them questions and probing their answers. I think this has served to discourage passive reception of the material and encourage active engagement with it. I believe that actively engaging students in the learning process is crucial to enabling them to develop and authentically inhabit values and ideals of their own.

My initial desire to maintain an appearance of omniscience with my students and the impulse I had to silence honest yet offensive dissent are both counterproductive to my original aims: to teach students to ask questions, and not to hide from challenges, but to always follow up on their questioning with an effort to achieve greater clarity with others. They go against the climate of intellectual maturity that I value and want to create. Today, my commitment to engaging students of diverse backgrounds means that I tailor my instruction to my students’ interests. I’ve learned that I cannot be authoritative in the way I value while pretending to be what I am not or to know what I don’t.

One of my most fulfilling moments as a teacher was when a student from my feminist theory class came to my office hour to tell me, with much excitement, that discussing an essay by Marilyn Frye in my class inspired her to initiate a conversation with her boyfriend about the implicit assumption that she would do all the domestic work in the relationship, which was making her feel bad and was getting in the way of her doing things that she took to be more valuable. In that moment, she felt she had come to grasp something important to her, which moved her to take action. Knowing that she came from a conservative background (something she had shared with me on an earlier occasion), and had been expressing resistance to feminist ideas in my class all semester, I suspect she would not have initiated this conversation had I not engaged with her dissent in classroom discussion.