Teaching Statement

My primary goal as an instructor is to democratize philosophy. By this I mean that I aim to make philosophy accessible to students of different backgrounds, and to make philosophy seem like something it is natural for us to do, both privately and socially. As I stress to my students, this doesn't mean doing philosophy is *easy*; for even if we are disposed to wonder about things like freedom and justice, we need practice in shaping clear questions and honing clear answers. But nor does it mean that doing philosophy is hard because doing it well requires that we find the *right* answers. I often try to stress in the first few meetings of a course, when students are still finding their footing and confidence to speak up, that many of our most revered philosophers were ultimately wrong about very important things; or, as one philosopher put it, "the history of philosophy is in large measure the history of very smart people making very tempting mistakes." In stressing this, I encourage students to think of philosophy as a process that requires that we be comfortable with navigating uncertainty, since this serves the class's ultimate end of finding better answers and better questions.

As an instructor, I aim to be accommodating to students of diverse backgrounds in how I construct my courses. One way I do this is by ensuring that the reading selections for my courses demonstrate the diversity of authors in the field, especially those from underrepresented groups. Students often express appreciation for this approach to representation because it allows them to see that philosophers come from different backgrounds and because the views expressed by these philosophers often challenge canonical ways of thinking about problems in philosophy. This is easier to do in some courses than others (e.g., philosophy of race vs theory of knowledge), but it is always worth it.

In recognition that students who come from less privileged backgrounds are often less confident in class discussion, I also divide class discussion evenly between small group and plenary discussions, ensuring students who are less familiar with academic settings, and who therefore might be more reticent in a large group, have their voices heard by their peers. Over the course of a semester, as students get to know each other through participation in small groups, discussion tends to open up and it becomes easier to involve everyone in discussion.

One activity that I have found especially helpful for bringing in perspectives from students from underrepresented backgrounds is a variation of think-pair-share. In the activity, I allow students to take a few minutes to write down their own thoughts on a question before they are paired off to share them with a peer. After sharing, students are responsible for rearticulating the ideas of their partner to the class, fielding questions, and defending that view against objections. In this activity, quieter students benefit from having their ideas discussed by their peers without the stress of having to defend them themselves, which is often a barrier to speaking up. They also gain practice articulating reasons and defending arguments to their peers in a lower-stakes setting, since the ideas are not their own. I also like this activity because it gets students to think differently—to consider other kinds of reasons or to weigh these reasons differently. Students often find themselves changing their perspective on a question, even if they do not ultimately change their mind.

Another approach I take to creating a welcoming classroom is to start every class with a short roll call question that students discuss in a small group. Usually these ice-breakers are discussion questions that are related to the reading or other branches of philosophy. I typically pick ones that students are apt to have strong reactions to, since this encourages them to speak

their mind with their peers. One of my favorite experiences from the past year was on the first day of my epistemology course in the Spring, when in reaction to my question the room erupted in laughter and disbelief. I have found that half the battle of getting students to talk about the course material is getting them to feel comfortable with each other, and roll call questions generate a fun, low-stakes environment in which to do this.

These strategies often result in a different classroom dynamic than one might expect if one were to look at the demographic data in philosophy: class discussion is often led by students from underrepresented backgrounds.

In recognition that not all students have the same background in philosophy or a family history with college, and that students come to my course with different skill sets, I also organize my course assessments in a manner that allows students to build writing and argumentative skills in low-stakes, pass-fail assignments early in the semester so that they feel more confident deploying them in larger assignments like term papers and group projects later on. This is helpful for students who have had very little exposure to philosophy in their life, though they are excellent students otherwise, since doing philosophy is a skill that requires practice.

As one example, I require that students keep a running document (or sometimes a paper journal) of pass-fail reflections on readings in which they are to practice summarizing and objecting to the main arguments. Since these are pass-fail assignments, students are more open to getting things wrong and trying new reasoning strategies, and this reduces the pressure to cheat on assignments. When I grade these, I aim for personalized feedback that helps each student improve from their baseline. I also give students three virtual 'tokens' a semester, that

they can cash in to revise an unsatisfactory assignment or turn it in 48 hours past the due date.

As someone who worked all through my bachelor's degree, I understand that students have different social challenges to navigate, and that this is often most true of students who come from less privileged backgrounds who may be working to support themselves or their families.

I have also found that experiencing discrimination in my own life often contributes something new to conversations about ethical issues like responsibility and bias in the classroom. This is especially true in my Philosophy of Race course, where we investigate the nature of race and racism, but also in courses like contemporary moral issues, bioethics, and introduction to philosophy. Though I rarely speak about my own experiences with racism unless asked to by students, I can often draw on them to move conversations from the abstract to the concrete, constructing cases that are based in reality. Drawing on personal experience is also helpful in more fraught conversations, like those in the unit I teach on racial identity and experience. Many of the questions in this unit are reflective: what is it like to experience discrimination? What should people who experience discrimination feel toward others who have harmed them? What is our responsibility, if any, to help rebuild relationships with these people? My students are often vulnerable when discussing challenging questions like these. In response, I aim to generate a safe space for individual reflection and sharing experiences before encouraging debate so students feel supported as they work through these ideas with their peers.

Finally, in recognition that students who come from underrepresented backgrounds may feel less comfortable asking an instructor for their advice or attention, I make it a point to meet with each one of my students during office hours at least twice a semester. I recall how much fun it

was to speak with a professor one-on-one, but also how nervous I would be to ask for their time. I usually make these meetings mandatory, revolving around a term paper assignment or final exam, so that we can discuss their progress and how they feel about the course. In these meetings I provide one-on-one feedback for their work and make myself available as a resource for any challenges they are having in the course.

It is not always easy to strike a balance between democratizing philosophy and maintaining a standard of rigor that pleases all students, but finding this balance is something I am committed to since it makes philosophy accessible to the most students. And I often find that those students who would benefit from a more solitary way of doing philosophy—for example, those who might best served by a class structured around lectures—find a way to get what they need by coming to office hours more often or holding forth on a question in class even when the other students have had enough.

In short, my approach to teaching is to make philosophy accessible to students of all different backgrounds. I try to help students recognize that doing philosophy well and living a philosophically rich life takes all kinds. Using this as a starting point, the task is to find a way to ask the right questions, or at least better ones, in many different ways so that we can see what we're missing from people who are different from us.