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Disciplinary Brief

VIRTUES IN THE CLASSROOM

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My career has been that of a professor of philosophy. Jennifer Herdt's fine essay, "The Virtues," has led me to reflect on the virtues essential to the flourishing of the philosophy classroom, virtues that I have tried over the years to cultivate in my students and virtues that I have myself tried to practice. Herdt writes, "The virtues. . . are stable dispositions that enable an agent to respond and act well." What are the stable dispositions that enable the members of a philosophy classroom to respond and act well?

I think back to the days when I taught sections of our department's Introduction to Philosophy, a course that was, at the time, required of all students. Each time, again, I discovered a remarkable diversity of attitudes among the students enrolled. Some were arrogant know-it-alls. Some were timid, afraid to speak up. Some were worried: they had heard from fellow students that philosophy was difficult, or their parents had warned them that philosophy would endanger their faith. Some were intellectually rigid. Some were resentful of being required to take the course. Whatever their attitude, they would assemble three times a week for three months for the purpose of being introduced to philosophy.

I had work to do. It was never my aim just to assign readings, deliver lectures, and ask the students to regurgitate on exams the main points of the readings and lectures. Had that been my aim, I could more-or-less have ignored the attitudes mentioned above. It was my aim, rather, to deliver lectures and conduct discussions in such a way that the students would genuinely engage the material – not just absorb it, but engage it: that they would begin to think philosophically and enjoy doing so. That meant that I had to cope, somehow, with the attitudes that hindered genuine engagement – cope with the arrogance of the arrogant, the timidity of the timid, the worries of the worried, the rigidity of the rigid, the resentment of the resentful. I had to do what I could to cultivate in my students various virtues, and myself to practice various virtues, with the goal of creating a flourishing community of philosophical inquiry.

Let me mention, in no particular order, some the virtues that I tried to cultivate in my students and myself to practice, without asking whether they are to be classified as moral virtues, intellectual virtues, or whatever. While the virtues I will mention are essential to the flourishing of the philosophy classroom, they

are relevant in other academic situations as well: to classrooms in subjects other than philosophy, to academic lectures, conferences, and symposia, to the refereeing of books and articles, to faculty meetings. Accordingly, after highlighting their relevance to the philosophy classroom I will point to a few of the other situations in which they are relevant.

Virtues in the Philosophy Classroom

The virtue of respect

In any college or university classroom, the professor has a position of institutional authority that the students do not have: he or she is “in charge.” And in an introductory philosophy course, the professor possesses an intellectual standing that the students do not possess: he or she already knows the subject matter.

It’s all-too-easy for professors to abuse this disparity in authority and standing: by suggesting that the question a student asked is a dumb question, by shrugging off complaints that the assignment was not clear or the exam not fair, by exhibiting favor for some and disfavor for others, by putting down any student who voices disagreement with something one said, by humiliating those who have not completed the assignment. All of these are ways of treating one’s students with disrespect. Multiple are the ways in which professors can and do abuse their position of institutional authority and superior intellectual standing by treating students with disrespect

Of course, students can and do also treat professors with disrespect. And students can and do treat each other with disrespect. The flourishing of the philosophy classroom – indeed, of any classroom – requires that the participants practice the virtue of respect with regard to each other.

The respect called for on the part of those in the classroom extends to those not in the classroom. It was an episode that occurred late in my teaching career that brought this point forcefully to mind; I should have taken note of it long before. In a session of a seminar devoted to discussing one of Augustine’s writings, one of the students made an utterly dismissive comment about something Augustine had written. I was annoyed, and blurted out, “Would you have said what you just said if Augustine were sitting across the table from you?” “Of course not,” she said. Point made. It is incumbent on us in the classroom to treat with due respect those whose works we are studying.

A different, but related, point is the following. Every now and then I discerned that a student found it difficult to separate disagreement from personal attack; when a fellow student expressed disagreement with something they said, they viewed that as an attack on them personally. They felt that they had been demeaned, treated with disrespect. They looked crushed; on occasion, they wiped away tears. So after the class I would make a point of taking them aside and explaining that, in philosophy, it’s essential that we not interpret disagreement as personal attack. Almost always what turned up in the course of my talk with them is that they had been reared in a subculture that pervasively interpreted disagreement as personal

attack. Of course, sometimes the student who voiced the disagreement did so in a dismissive disrespectful way; then I had to speak afterwards to that student.

Philosophy is impossible when disagreement is interpreted, or conducted, as personal attack; philosophy lives on respectful disagreement. Consensus would kill it off.

To treat someone with due respect is to treat them justly. The flourishing of the philosophy classroom requires that its members exercise the virtue of justice with respect to each other.

The virtue of tolerance for other world-and-life views

A dimension of respect that deserves separate mention is the virtue of tolerance for other world-and-life views.

Students enter the philosophy classroom with a variety of different views on life and the world, including the social world, views shaped by their upbringing, their experience, their own attempts at finding meaning, etc. Insofar as these diverse world-and-life views find expression in the philosophy classroom, the flourishing of the classroom requires that they be treated with respect – unless, perchance, someone's world-and-life view incorporates the tenet that certain members of the class are to be treated with disdain because of their race, their ethnicity, their religion, or whatever. Believers are to treat unbelievers with respect, and vice versa, political conservatives are to treat political liberals with respect, and vice versa, mainline Christians are to treat evangelicals with respect, and vice versa.

The flourishing of the philosophy classroom requires that its members practice the virtue of tolerance for the world-and-life views of their fellow members.

The virtue of intellectual humility

Intellectual humility consists of being willing to acknowledge that some of one beliefs are mistaken, and that there are things one doesn't know on the topic under discussion. Intellectual arrogance is the opposite. The intellectually arrogant person digs in his heels, insists that he is right, insists that he has nothing to learn. The flourishing of the philosophy classroom requires that its members – including the professor – practice the virtue of intellectual humility.

The virtue of bafflement

Aristotle wrote that philosophy arises out of wonder. Sometimes it does; but mostly, I think, it arises out of bafflement. Reality is mysterious, elusive. I want to understand something, but I don't understand it; so I am baffled, perplexed. I want, for example, to understand the basis of moral obligation, but I don't understand it; I am baffled. So I set about trying to dispel my bafflement. I read what philosophers have written on the topic; I think for myself. Eventually, if all goes well, I experience the delight of understanding. Philosophy lives on bafflement and on release from bafflement: being baffled by something

one wants to understand but doesn't, and then coming to understand. The student who has no interest in understanding the basis of obligation, and hence experiences no bafflement on the matter, will find a course in philosophical ethics a crashing bore.

The flourishing of the philosophy classroom requires that students exercise the virtue of bafflement.

The virtue of patient persistence

Some students take to philosophy like a duck to water; that was true in my case. But many find philosophical discourse strange. Questions are posed that it never occurred to them to ask: Do numbers exist? Do properties exist? What is justice? Strange questions. What motivates such strange questions? And how does one go about answering them? Do they even have answers?

So every now and then I would offer reassurance and urge patience. You may find philosophy strange. But hang in there; you'll catch on, I assure you. Eventually you may even find yourself enjoying this novel way of thinking. Many students before you have.

The flourishing of the philosophy classroom requires that students exercise the virtue of patient persistence.

The virtue of amazement

Philosophy is amazing, amazing in much the same way that pure mathematics is amazing. Amazing that human beings should be so created as to be capable of purely abstract thought, thought not aimed at achieving some practical goal. When introducing students to philosophy, I would every now and then stop and invite amazement at the astounding intellectual creativity represented by Plato, by Augustine, by Descartes, by Kant – by the whole long line of philosophers. We are the product not just of evolution but of creation. Be amazed.

The flourishing of the philosophy classroom requires that its members exercise the virtue of amazement.

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There are, of course, a good many other virtues required for the flourishing of the philosophy classroom; the virtue of attentiveness is one that comes to mind. The virtues I have mentioned are those I found, when I was teaching philosophy, that I had to cultivate in my students, and myself to practice, if my students were to genuinely engage the material – if they were to begin to think philosophically and enjoy doing so. Lack of attentiveness was not then a significant problem. I gather from talking to friends that it has become a problem: students nowadays are distracted by the devices of various sorts that they bring to class. Instead of paying attention to what is being taught, they are texting and being texted. The flourishing of the philosophy classroom requires that students be attentive to what is being taught.

Part Two: Virtues in Other Academic Settings

I mentioned at the beginning of this essay that the virtues I would mention are relevant not just to the philosophy classroom but to other academic situations as well.

Most of them are relevant to classrooms in subjects other than philosophy – intellectual humility is an obvious example of such a virtue, as is respect. One that is easy to overlook is the virtue of amazement. I noted that the intellectual creativity represented by the works of the great philosophers is amazing – truly amazing. But so too is the creativity represented by the works of the great poets, the great composers, the great sociologists, the great natural scientists, the great mathematicians; it's all amazing. Yet more amazing, far more amazing, is the immensity, intricacy, and lawfulness of God's creation. It is my conviction that something is seriously deficient if professors and students do not, every now and then, stop in amazement.

And when it is some segment of history that they are studying, if they do not, every now and then, experience horror at what human beings have done to human beings, and to the natural world. Amazement and horror.

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The exercise of multiple virtues is also required for the flourishing of situations in which scholars interact with other scholars: academic conferences, lectures, and symposia, the supervision of research, the refereeing of books and articles, the funding of research, the award of prizes, faculty meetings and departmental leadership, etc. Let me mention two virtues that are of prime importance in such situations; I leave it to the reader to identify others.

The virtue of respect

I noted that a significant feature of a typical college or university classroom is the discrepancy of institutional authority and intellectual standing between professor and students; professors have an authority in the classroom, and an intellectual standing, that the students lack. A similar discrepancy is present in many situations in which scholars interact with other scholars – especially older, well-established scholars with young scholars. Here, too, the discrepancy is all-too-often abused. Older scholars put down young scholars, demean them, treat their work dismissively, sometimes bully them – often because they feel themselves threatened. What is lacking in such situations is respect.

What also calls for mention here is what historians are increasingly bringing to light, namely, situations in which white scholars have treated scholars of color with disrespect, and situations in which male scholars have treated women scholars with disrespect. I am writing these words on Tuesday, October 3, 2023. In this morning's *New York Times,* there is a story of the important contribution of Lise Meitner, in the 1930s, to the understanding of how uranium behaves under bombardment by neutrons. The work of her male

associates gained public recognition; hers was scrubbed from the record.

The virtue of intellectual humility

Willingness to acknowledge that one is mistaken, and that there are things one doesn't know, is as important in situations where scholars interact with scholars as it is in the classroom. I am thinking here of a well-known philosopher, who will go unnamed, whom I have often heard lecture and with whom I have participated in a number of symposia. I have never heard him concede a critical point. Invariably, when someone offers an objection to something he said, he becomes defensive and concedes nothing. I have often found myself amazed at his ingenuity at evading the force of an objection. It goes without saying that this lack of intellectual humility inhibits the flourishing of the discussion.

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Respect and intellectual humility: I trust that my highlighting of the importance of these virtues for the flourishing of interactions among scholars will stimulate readers to identify other such virtues.

Further Reading

Adams, Robert, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good*

Along with the work of Jennifer Herdt, this is one of the best comprehensive discussions of the nature and importance of virtue.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Educating for Responsible Action*

A survey, now somewhat dated, of the psychological literature on the formation of virtues.

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