

Is Clarity Essential to Good Teaching?

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Abstract: It is common to think that clarity is an essential ingredient of good teaching, meaning, in part, that good teachers always make it as easy as possible to follow what they say. We disagree. What we argue is that there are cases in which a philosophy teacher needs to forego clarity, making strategic use of obscurity in the undergraduate classroom.

“What a ridiculously unclear teacher I seem to be!”—Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*

“It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you.”—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Ask many college teachers and administrators nowadays, and they will say that clarity is an essential ingredient of good teaching. In Thoreau’s phrase, they think that whenever you are addressing students you should “speak so that they can understand you.” We disagree. Though clarity can be quite important (*pace* Thoreau), we deny that it is *essential* to good teaching. In fact, what we will argue here is that there are cases in which a philosophy teacher *needs* to forego clarity, making strategic use of obscurity in the undergraduate classroom. One of us is a philosopher who has sometimes been deliberately obscure in teaching undergraduate classes, and the other is a student who was in several of these classes.

It might be old news to some philosophers that obscurity can be pedagogically useful. (And the above quotation from Plato may hint at why.) But naturally, if they think it can be, they do not say much about this in print. Meanwhile, in various disciplines such as teacher education, there is a hefty literature on the indispensability of “teacher clarity” in *all* undergraduate classes.¹ Some of it explicitly recommends asking students, on teaching-evaluation forms, to rate how “clear” their teacher was, and—most important—it is not uncommon for colleges

and universities to follow the advice.² So it matters if clarity, in fact, is *not* essential to good teaching and if, for that matter, philosophy teachers sometimes *need* to forego clarity: at some schools, they might be penalized for doing so.

All we will argue is that there *are* cases that call for obscurity. We hardly mean that all philosophy teachers come across cases of this sort. Maybe there are few who do. And neither will we try to map a specific plan for making use of obscurity. Our aim is simply to address a certain theoretical issue that has to do with teaching philosophy. After indicating more fully what we mean by the terms “clarity” and “obscurity” (§1), we will make our case (§§2 and 3).

1. *What We Mean by “Clarity” and “Obscurity”*

Ironically, the terms “clear” and “obscure” are hard to define. It’s understandable that the “teacher clarity” literature, for example, doesn’t do much to explain what they mean.³

But when people think of clarity (for example, when a teaching-evaluation form asks students to rate how “clear” a teacher has been), there are at least two things that may come to mind. They may think of *lucidity*, as one can call it. And instead of lucidity, or in addition to it, they may think of what a philosopher, perhaps, would regard as *clarity proper*. “Clarity proper,” as we will term it, seems to be what philosophers often refer to when they speak of clarity. Now, it is notoriously difficult to say what *they* mean by “clarity,” and they rarely try to define the term, even when they use it heavily.⁴ We, too, will beg off for the most part. Yet we can *gesture* toward what we mean.

We’ll start by contrasting “clarity proper” with lucidity. Suppose “lucid” means just something like “easy to follow.” In that case, this sentence, for example, seems not to be very lucid:

It’s not true that Sally isn’t one of the people who deny that empiricism is untenable.

The tangle of negations in this sentence makes it tough to follow. However, a philosopher still might say that this sentence is fairly *clear*, meaning, perhaps, that there is a fair amount of *determinacy* with regard to which proposition the sentence conveys. Perhaps an utterance need not be fully *explicit* in order to be fully clear. But determinacy might matter.

Consider also the following three sentences:

[Joey:] How can people ever *really* find themselves?

[Dawson:] They have to learn to let go. They have to take life to the next level.

These three sentences, together or separately, might seem fairly *unclear*, regardless of whether they are lucid.⁵

And it is not just *sentences* that can be unclear by philosophical standards. For example, as Gerald Cohen sees it,

there is the unclarity of a sentence itself, and then there is the unclarity as to why a certain (possibly perfectly clear) sentence is uttered in a given context. So, for example, the meaning of Wittgenstein's "If a lion could speak, we would not understand him" is in one way perfectly clear, but it might nevertheless be judged obscure, and unclarifiably obscure, by one who doubts that it carries, in context, a graspable point. There is also the unclarity of why one statement should be taken to lend credence to another statement. And there are no doubt other pertinent unclarities too.⁶

For Cohen, not only a sentence or group of sentences, but also, for example, the articulation of an *argument* or set of arguments can be clear or unclear to various degrees.⁷

Below we will try to accommodate the range of meanings that the terms "clarity" and "obscurity" can have. For convenience, we'll use the term "clarity" to mean the following:

BOTH (1) "clarity proper"

AND (2) lucidity

And "obscurity" will refer to the following:

(1) lack of "clarity proper"

AND/OR (2) lack of lucidity

2. *When Might a Philosophy Teacher Need to Be Obscure?*

In saying there are cases in which philosophy teachers *need* to be obscure, we have in mind simply a hypothetical imperative:

Sometimes philosophy teachers need to be obscure *if* their main goal is to motivate and equip students to philosophize well (or, at least, to motivate and equip them to philosophize as well as they *can*).

Perhaps this *should* be their main goal. But we will not argue that it should be, and there are other goals that might be worthwhile—for example, simply acquainting students with what philosophers have said, or introducing students to formidable arguments for certain beliefs they already hold (such as religious beliefs).⁸

Nonetheless, we take it to be relatively uncontroversial that the goal we have named can be worthwhile. Teachers who have this aim needn't say that *all* philosophy classes should motivate and equip students to philosophize well. And even if they say this, their claim may not be particularly bold. The view that *philosophy* classes should motivate and

equip students to be better philosophers might simply be on par with, say, the view that biology classes should be geared to make students into better biologists.⁹

At any rate, a philosophy teacher who has the goal we have named can face challenges, of course. What they are will depend on a range of factors such as the personality of the particular teacher, where he or she teaches, what the students are like, and so on. But some relevant scenarios are easy enough to think of.

For example, imagine a philosopher—call her Prof. Tellem—who wants to motivate and equip her undergraduate students to philosophize well. Prof. Tellem is a brilliant lecturer. Her explanations are crisp, elegant, and illuminating. Her segues are smooth. Her jokes are funny. And the students are captivated. Day after day, they listen intently as she outlines a philosophical debate, or presents a philosophical problem and then proposes a solution:

- Descartes said that *p*, Hume replied that *q*, and Kant dealt the winning blow.
- How are we to solve *problem-X*? We could say that *p*, but then we'd face *problem-Y*. So *p* won't work. We could say that *q*, but then we'd run into *problem-Z*. So *q* won't work. But happily, if we say that *r*, we avoid all these problems.

If Prof. Tellem fills her classes with nothing but these lectures, does she *motivate* her students to philosophize well? It seems likely that she does. Does she *equip* them to philosophize well? Perhaps. If the students listen actively enough, her lectures may prepare them to do the following:

- glean insights from contemporary or historical debates in philosophy and
- put these insights to use by
- discerning the strengths and weaknesses of other people's arguments and
- crafting formidable arguments of their own

But of course, even if Prof. Tellem's lectures do the trick with this semester's students, she might have less success with next semester's students because of who they happen to be.

And even if Prof. Tellem's lectures always are successful, her colleague Prof. Toldem—who gives the same sort of lectures equally well—might need to do more than *just* lecture, simply because of how Prof. Toldem's personality works in the classroom. His students follow everything he says and are fascinated. But for some reason, they stay stuck in the role of spectators. When he lays out a philosophical

problem, they understand it, they feel its pinch, and they are eager to hear what his proposed solution is. But he hardly equips them to propose a solution of their own. They are like a passive audience that awaits the ending to a puzzling whodunit tale.

All of this probably is obvious enough, so we will not belabor the point.¹⁰ The point is just that sometimes lectures are, by themselves, insufficient. At other times, they do enough. But whatever it is, there is something about thinking through an issue for oneself that can do a lot to beef up one's philosophical skills—not necessarily thinking through it *on one's own* (that is, without guidance), but engaging the issue oneself. Accordingly, in some cases a philosophy teacher needs to have a conversation with a class of students, in a way that gets the students themselves to wrestle with philosophical problems.

How is the teacher to do this? Consider some possibilities.

One familiar option is to make claims that are provocatively counterintuitive. Prof. Tellem and Prof. Toldem, for example, might mix counterintuitive claims with their lectures. Claims of this sort can work well, of course. Students can get invested in trying to refute the teacher, end up struggling with him or her, and in the process grow philosophically stronger by combating a range of views that are worth seriously considering.

But for various reasons, taking this tack is not always appropriate. For one, sometimes it requires a teacher to be quite confrontational. And there are schools where confronting students is heavily discouraged, while even elsewhere, of course, it can be problematic when the teacher is physically imposing or students are insecure or emotionally delicate.

Plus, though this strategy can be effective, it does not always turn out to be. Among other reasons, sometimes it seems too contrived or campy—or it seems to be no more than limp devil's advocacy—unless the teacher genuinely seems to *hold* the views he or she defends. And when the teacher feigns sincerity in cases where this is required, sometimes it is too easy for students to see through the act, whereupon the act grows tiresome or just falls flat.¹¹ Take, for example, a course in which students need to engage a range of views that they are prone to dismiss yet that also conflict with one another. Obviously, the teacher can defend each view one after the other, claiming each time to have had a change of mind; but this quickly strains credibility.

An alternative, of course, is just to pose questions (or to mix questions with lectures, counterintuitive claims, or both). And at times, this is all that is needed. But on occasion, a teacher who takes this approach may face some obstacles.

On the one hand, questions that are fairly open-ended—such as “Does Kant's analytic/synthetic distinction hold water?” or “Is Anselm's

version of the ontological argument sound?”—may do too little to get the students engaged. There is something to C. S. Peirce’s warning that “the mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any struggle after belief. There must be a real and living doubt, and without this all discussion is idle.”¹² On the other hand, even when the students are fully engaged (having found themselves in “a real and living doubt”), they may be struck dumb. The issue at hand may be so perplexing that they hardly see how to make inroads into it.

The difficulty can be compounded when students propose a series of responses to a question and all of the responses are problematic enough that the teacher has to shoot them down. Seeing one attempt after another crash and burn, students can end up hesitant to speak. One might think here of Euthyphro’s exasperation in Plato’s *Euthyphro*: “But Socrates, I have no way of *telling* you what I have in mind, for whatever proposition we put forward goes around and refuses to stay put where we establish it!”¹³ Euthyphro’s exasperation is understandable, and it is safe to say that Plato’s psychological portrait is at least sometimes true to life. Sometimes a string of open-ended or refutative questions is quite befuddling, and it is tempting to reply to the questioner: “I don’t know. *You tell me*” (or as one of the authors was once told, “I don’t know! I don’t know my *name* anymore!”).

In short, students can need some *direction*. And both for this and for other reasons, it can be important to introduce them to some of the arguments that philosophers have offered on the issue, or to an argument that is the teacher’s own. One of those other reasons is plain enough: unless a group of students is apprised of what philosophers have said, the class may end up simply pooling its ignorance. If, for example, the issue is whether Kant’s analytic/synthetic distinction holds water, it may be important for students to consider Quine’s contribution. And if the task is to weigh the strength of Anselm’s version of the ontological argument, perhaps the students need to ponder what Gaunilo had to say about an island than which no greater can be conceived, and what Anselm’s defender can say in reply to Gaunilo, and so on.

Imagine, then, a teacher named Prof. Askem who has laid out Anselm’s version of the ontological argument and wants to introduce Gaunilo’s counter-argument to a group of students who have not already anticipated it—or, in any case, she wants them to consider better counter-arguments than the ones they have already thought of. They need direction: it won’t do for her to ask a fairly open-ended question such as “Is Anselm’s argument sound?” So she starts with a more leading question—for example, of this sort:

[Askem:] Anselm’s argument refers to “that than which nothing greater can be conceived”—in other words, to God. Could we

give the same sort of argument about something other than God?

Perhaps this question, by itself, will lead the students to Gaunilo's counter-argument or to some other formidable objection: perhaps in trying to think of a suitable objection, they have hardly known where to start, yet a nudge in Gaunilo's direction is all it will take.

But on occasion, at least, the response to Prof. Askem's question will be just something like:

[class:] Maybe.

And in those cases, Prof. Askem will need to ask another question. The more open-ended each of her questions is, the more likely it is that the students will be at a loss. For example, suppose her follow-up question is:

[Askem:] What might this other thing be?

Though this question may help, it may flop, instead. At times, Prof. Askem will need to ask a question that is a bit more leading, such as:

[Askem:] If so, is this a problem for Anselm's argument?

And if this does not work, she may need to be even more directive.

So let's say that in asking a series of questions that fill in Gaunilo's counter-argument, Prof. Askem gets the class to accept p , q , r , and s , and to agree that t follows from those four premises:

[Askem:] p ?

[class:] Yes.

[Askem:] q ?

[class:] Yes.

...

[Askem:] Therefore, t ?

[class:] Yes.

Will Prof. Askem's line of questioning do more to equip her students than a lecture on Gaunilo's counter-argument would have? Once the students have grasped the counter-argument and seen the force of it, will they be better prepared to do the following?

- discern the strengths and weaknesses of other people's arguments and
- craft formidable arguments of their own

The answer may well be "yes." To start with, the interaction with the students might do more to keep them alert and attuned than even a riveting lecture would do. And more important, each time Prof. Askem asks her students to evaluate a proposition or inference (p ? q ?

. . . Therefore, $t?$), they themselves will have to consider whether the proposition is true or the inference is allowable.

Nevertheless, even when Prof. Askem's questions work better than a lecture, the results may at times still leave something to be desired. Those times may be few and far between. But they, too, are easy enough to imagine.

For example, we can picture a student in Prof. Askem's class, Ernest, who is enthusiastic, diligent, and sharp. He follows all of Gaunilo's counter-argument and even is persuaded by it, concluding that Anselm's argument fails. In a conversation one evening later in the semester, he squares off with Trip, a student from another class, who thinks Anselm's argument is sound. Baffled by Trip's confidence, Ernest duly begins the line of questioning he saw Prof. Askem go through. And all goes well enough at first:

[Ernest:] $p?$

[Trip:] I'll grant it.

[Ernest:] $q?$

[Trip:] Okay.

But when Ernest gets to r , Trip balks:

[Ernest:] $r?$

[Trip:] Well, I don't think so. How can r be the case when x ?

And Ernest is thrown. It occurs to him that x may be true, and that if it is, Gaunilo may be wrong. To top it off, Trip doubles back and says: "And by the way, I'm not sure it's clear that p or q ," and he gives reasons that leave Ernest flummoxed.

Now, obviously, Ernest's furrowed brow hardly shows that Prof. Askem has failed as a teacher. It's just that Ernest's breakdown may be no fluke: even after fully grasping Gaunilo's counter-argument and assenting to all of its premises and to the inference, Ernest and other students may flounder when confronted with rejoinders that were not addressed in Prof. Askem's class. To be sure, a lot depends on who Prof. Askem's students happen to be—especially what their particular talents and weaknesses are: perhaps plenty of the students will get enough just from Prof. Askem's questions. The problem is simply this: When Prof. Askem leads everyone through a series of questions that paint in Gaunilo's counter-argument, there are cases where the students will see every step and be persuaded, yet they will come away with little more than a procedure to follow for navigating the issue of whether Anselm's argument is sound—for example, the sort of procedure that Ernest tried to follow in talking with Trip ("Get your interlocutor to assent to p , then to q , then . . .").

What might account for this? Analogies, we realize, are often beside the point, but the following analogy might be usefully illustrative. A sixty-three-year-old friend of ours, Will Fold, had gone his whole life without using a computer until he relented and bought one some months ago. Suffice it to say that he and his computer have not yet become one with each other. Dutifully, he has dusted off his typing skills, and he carefully adheres to the instructions he was given for opening a program, closing a window, saving a file, and so on. After the instructions have been thoroughly explained, they make good sense to him. Further, they are helpful insofar as they give him a procedure to follow—a sequence of commands to enter. And all goes well enough as long as these instructions work for him. But even the slightest hitch will throw him. For example, when he tries to open the file that contains his grocery list, he might double-click too slowly while clicking on the wrong part of the icon, so that instead of opening the file he mistakenly selects the name of it:



And when this happens, he is stumped. He is at a loss to see what the problem is or how to fix it. The reason is that the whole interface is too foreign to him.

Contrast Will with another friend of ours, a twenty-three-year-old technology liaison at our university. She is more than qualified for her job, but she never took a computer science course or the like. When a computer problem arises which is wholly new to her, she may need to tinker for a bit, but she always finds a solution. How is she able to do this? The answer is that years of tinkering (along with natural talents and so forth) have put her on intimate terms with computers.

In a word, thinking through a philosophical issue for oneself is analogous to the tinkering that this technology liaison has done. At least, the payoffs of the one activity are analogous to the payoffs of the other. For whatever reason, people who have thought through a philosophical issue for themselves are better prepared to handle new challenges that arise as they continue to think about this issue. Quite likely, Ernest, for example, is as stumped as he is because he has relied on Prof. Askem's guidance more than he has thought through the Anselm issue for himself. And we should emphasize: This hardly has to be because he is intellectually lazy, for example. In fact, it may be due in large part to how enthusiastic, diligent, and engaged he is. After all, when a philosophical problem is vexing enough and we are anxious enough to solve it, it is natural for us to cling tightly to the

instruction that we are given. Plus, when Prof. Askem first asked her class to evaluate, one after the other, *p*, *q*, *r*, *s*, and the inference to *t*, Ernest may have genuinely found the whole argument compelling at each stage—much as the instructions that Will Fold was given made good sense to him when they were first explained.

A general rule of thumb emerges from all of this: The more directive the teacher is, the stronger the students' stock of arguments, counter-arguments, objections, and replies may end up being, while, up to a point, the less well equipped the students may be to make full use of these tools. At the same time, the less directive the teacher is, the more likely the students are to wind up philosophically adrift.

So there are pitfalls all around. And it would be nice to find a way to avoid them as much as possible. Now, as it should go without saying, there is only so much a teacher can do. Teachers often have to make tradeoffs, and some pitfalls may simply be unavoidable. But in cases such as Prof. Tellem's, Prof. Toldem's, and Prof. Askem's, if there is a more promising approach than the ones we have described, then philosophy teachers need to take the alternative approach, as long as their main goal is to motivate and equip students to philosophize well.

Naturally, we are going to argue that a more promising approach in some cases is to make use of obscurity. We should be quick to stress that an approach which is more promising in *these* cases may be unsuitable in other cases, and the relevant cases may be rare. But how rare they are is unimportant here, since our thesis is correct as long as there are *some* cases in which foregoing clarity is the thing to do.

3. *What Obscurity Can Do*

It's fitting that philosophers have often talked about philosophizing in terms of navigation. For example, it's appropriate that Wittgenstein said such things as: "A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about.'"¹⁴ It also makes sense that Plato's *Meno* contains a famous exchange about whether you need knowledge, rather than just true belief, in order to find your way to Larissa (97a9–b8). And it's understandable that, in the *Republic*, when Socrates speaks of people who have only true belief instead of knowledge, he says they are no different from "*blind* people who happen to travel the right path."¹⁵ Imagine a person who cannot see—not because she is congenitally blind, but just because she is momentarily blindfolded—and suppose you want to direct her down a cramped hallway. You might say: "Take eight steps forward. Then turn to the right. Then take five steps forward." This is, virtually, what it is to give directions to a tourist who's traveling on wholly foreign terrain and who does not even have a map of it. This is also, for all intents and purposes, what it is to direct Will

Fold when he tries to use the computer. And he and the tourist are, as a practical matter, not much different from Ernest, if Ernest's use of the procedure that Prof. Askem gave him is as inflexible as we have said it can be. Like Will, the tourist will be disoriented if the need arises to divert somewhat from the directions. And if Ernest runs into an objection that obstructs him, he will scarcely manage to find his way around it.

The navigation metaphor is expedient, so we will stick with it, albeit at the risk of overtaxing it. What the tourist, Will, and Ernest each *have* is a path to follow (a procedure, or sequence of steps), and what they each *need* is a familiarity with the terrain that surrounds the path, so that they can still find their way even if they have to divert from the course they are on. They need guidance, yet they are likely to stick too tightly to any path that is blazed for them. (At least, *most* tourists without a map would cling tightly, unless they are unusually adventurous or in a hospitable enough locale.) To guide them, what would be most helpful is not to chart a path for them, but to shine a *beacon* from Larissa, as it were, so that they are not entirely disoriented, but they still have to find the way for themselves. What, then, would make for a suitable beacon, so to speak? In the case of an interlocutor (to drop the metaphor for a moment), what would be a suitable intermediate between asking open-ended or refutative questions, on the one hand, and asking leading questions, on the other hand?

Obscurity, we suggest, is fit for the task. What we have in mind is conveying obscurely a claim, an argument, or even a question that reveals a possible resolution to whatever philosophical issue is on the table. On the one hand, obscurity heightens the need for interpretation. Faced with, say, an obscure statement that conveys a possible solution to a philosophical problem, interlocutors have to scap to make sense of the statement—they have to piece together what the proposed solution is. Further, when they think the statement comes from someone who is insightful, or at least when they are bound by the principle of charity, they have to philosophize: they have to figure out what would make the most sense for this person to mean. And when they are up against this challenge, more is required of them than when they are asked a series of leading questions which are clear and which take the form of “*p?*” “*q?*” “*r?*” “*s?*” and “Therefore, *t?*” When asked a series of questions of that sort, they have to consider whether *p*, *q*, *r*, and *s* are true and whether *t* follows. But—for example—regarding the argument for *t* that is taking shape in front of them, they need not discern why someone would favor *this* argument, rather than another argument, for *t* in addressing the specific issue at hand. More than leading questions do, the obscure statement leaves them to rely on their own resources in finding their way about. Yet on the other hand, it does not

ask them to set off into the wilderness with no hope in sight such that they are prone to feel overwhelmed or even grow discouraged. They have a destination to work toward, something to orient them. In fact, make the beacon alluring enough, and an interlocutor may become particularly resourceful.

Accordingly, in some cases in the undergraduate classroom obscurity is more promising than lectures, counterintuitive claims, open-ended or refutative questions, leading questions, or some combination of them. It might help sometimes for a teacher to offer, for example, an obscure rendition of Gaunilo's counter-argument, or to ask an obscure question about Kant's analytic/synthetic distinction, or to make an obscure claim about some attempt to solve the Gettier problem.

Of course, in certain cases obscurity can be at least as disorienting or discouraging for undergraduate students as a string of open-ended or refutative questions can be (and sometimes a group of students may be heavily stratified, such that obscurity befits part of the group but is grossly ill-suited for the rest of it). A teacher must have a nose for which cases are which, and must forego *obscurity* when appropriate. *If* students are capable of handling obscurity, obscurity can be preferable to the alternatives: for reasons we have indicated, it can sometimes do more to equip students philosophically than the alternatives would. So from time to time a teacher might shift into speaking obscurely in case it will work. But the teacher should be ready to shift back out of it when it seems to demand too much of students. No doubt, it tends to demand a fair amount. It probably requires students to be, at the least, fairly invested in the conversation already.

Nonetheless, obscurity might have some advantages even for the task of properly motivating students. Although Prof. Tellem's students and Prof. Askem's may at first grow highly motivated to philosophize, their motivation might be unlikely to stand the test of time. Their zeal may be rather naïve and, in turn, may wane after the procedures they glean from class have failed them repeatedly. Again, Prof. Tellem's and Prof. Askem's approaches may often be the best that are available. But it would be nice for teachers to have recourse to a better approach, if or when it becomes feasible.

Now, there are, naturally, some possible objections to being deliberately obscure in teaching an undergraduate class. In closing, we will briefly address the following three:

- A. Teachers who are deliberately obscure will see their teaching evaluations suffer too much.
- B. Deliberate obscurity is deceptive and, thus, morally impermissible insofar as it violates the principle of respect for persons.
- C. Deliberate obscurity threatens to foster a cult of personality that leaves students overly attached to the teacher.

The third of these objections may need some explanation.

Yet it is straightforward enough. It has to do with a certain pedagogical style that is unattractive to many people.¹⁶ Some comments made by Martha Nussbaum in a different context happen to convey nicely what this style is, and they also point to some reasons it can seem objectionable. Nussbaum is worth quoting at length here:

Some precincts of the continental philosophical tradition, though surely not all of them, have an unfortunate tendency to regard the philosopher as a star who fascinates, and frequently by obscurity, rather than as an arguer among equals. When ideas are stated clearly, after all, they may be detached from their author: one can take them away and pursue them on one's own. When they remain mysterious (indeed, when they are not quite asserted), one remains dependent on the originating authority. The thinker is heeded only for his or her turgid charisma. One hangs in suspense, eager for the next move. . . . One is given the impression of a mind so profoundly cogitative that it will not pronounce on anything lightly: so one waits, in awe of its depth, for it finally to do so.

In this way obscurity creates an aura of importance. It also serves another related purpose. It bullies the reader into granting that, since one cannot figure out what is going on, there must be something significant going on, some complexity of thought, where in reality there are often familiar or even shopworn notions, addressed too simply and too casually to add any new dimension of understanding.¹⁷

Of course, the authors whom Nussbaum refers to are, presumably, about the business of doing philosophy *simpliciter*: they are addressing primarily colleagues in professional publications. And even if a certain tactic is vicious in that sort of context, it might be plenty sensible for pedagogical purposes. Nonetheless, if teachers take the sort of posture that Nussbaum describes here, it might be counterproductive, at least when their main goal is to motivate and equip students to philosophize well. As we have suggested, students can grow particularly well equipped when they have thought for themselves about significant philosophical issues. And students might be less likely to do this if they are waiting in awe for the teacher to unveil a secret.

But this sort of pedagogical style is not at all what we have in mind in referring to deliberate obscurity.¹⁸ When teachers forego clarity on occasion, they need not take the posture of a sphinx. As a matter of fact, they can be entirely open (and, of course, clear) about what their reasons are for making use of obscurity, at least if their reasons are the ones offered above. And those reasons hardly should suggest to students that they're to be initiated into the mysteries. If anything, foregoing clarity may require less playacting than certain other pedagogical maneuvers we have discussed, such as confronting students with provocatively counterintuitive claims.

Meanwhile, if teachers can be so open, then it should be easy enough to accommodate the deontological worry named above. At the outset of a semester, if necessary, teachers can make it plain that they might forego clarity at times, and why they might do so. (Perhaps even a thorough note on the syllabus would be sufficient.) Students can then have a chance to consent (or to refuse) to stay in the class.

Plus, philosophy majors, at least, may welcome the challenge that obscurity poses, especially if it seems plausible to them that the challenge can make them more philosophically robust. And if teachers are generally effective and convey that they have respectable *reasons* for being obscure, it is unlikely that *their use of obscurity* will lead to low overall ratings on formal teaching evaluations.¹⁹

4. Conclusion

Of course, even if the *overall* ratings will be high, there may be cause for concern if the evaluation form asks students to rate “teacher clarity,” as educationists and others call it. Suppose students think very highly of their teacher—in fact, they think she is the best teacher they have ever come across—and they are well aware of why she foregoes clarity on occasion. What are they to do when asked to rate how clear she has been? She has at times been *obscure*. Yet if this is reported, it is seen as a low estimation of the teacher’s performance (and, obviously, this can have repercussions, particularly at schools where the importance of teaching is emphasized the most heavily). In short, the evaluation form puts students in an awkward position.

At least, this is the case if clarity is, indeed, *not* essential to good teaching, as we maintain. Again, it’s widely believed to be an essential ingredient. In fact, some colleges and universities set out to ensure that there is always as much teacher clarity as possible. And this certainly is understandable. But we hope to have given them reason to reconsider. As we have contended, there are cases in which philosophy teachers need enough leeway to forego clarity if their main goal is to motivate and equip students to philosophize well. In some cases, various options that are available to teachers—such as making counterintuitive claims, asking open-ended or refutative questions, and/or posing questions that are more leading—do not do as much to equip students philosophically as strategic obscurity can do. These cases may be rare, and perhaps there are few teachers who ever come across them. But as dedicated as many teachers are, they’ll be at pains to take the best feasible approach in each case, even if it is an approach that seems too risky or zany to other people. This, we submit, is worth consideration.

Notes

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1. For some of this work and for some surveys of it, see Barnes et al. 2008; Zhang 2007; Zhang and Oetzel 2006; Bradley and Bradley 2005: 60; Chesebro 2003; Chesebro and McCroskey 2001; Hativa 2001: 147–56; Braxton, Bray, and Berger 2000: 216; Pascarella et al. 1996: 8, 16, all of which include some other relevant bibliographical information. Zhang (2007: 213) goes so far as to say that “the overall positive relationship of teacher immediacy and/or clarity with student affective and/or cognitive learning appears to be stable across cultures,” while Braxton and colleagues even concluded that “student perception of faculty teaching skills” including “clarity . . . demonstrate positive effects on [among other things, students’] social integration” with other students (Braxton, Bray, and Berger 2000: 222).

2. E.g., many evaluation forms at the University of Michigan, whose model for teaching evaluation is heavily influenced by McKeachie et al. 2006, ask students whether “the instructor explained material clearly and understandably” (<http://www.umich.edu/~eande/tq/tqreq.pdf>, accessed 7 November 2009; thanks to Michael Gose for filling us in on this). The University of Alberta’s evaluation form asks whether “the instructor spoke clearly” (http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/gfcpolicymanual/content.cfm?ID_page=39298§ion=39301&contentshow=section, accessed 7 November 2009). The University of Maine’s form asks: “How clearly did the instructor present ideas and theories?” (Coladarci and Kornfield 2007: 4). One of the main evaluation forms provided by IDEA, which is a teaching evaluation system used at about two hundred seventy-five colleges in the United States, asks whether the instructor “explained course material clearly and concisely.” (The form appears at http://www.theideacenter.org/sites/default/files/Student_Ratings_Diagnostic_Form.pdf, accessed 7 November 2009. See Sonntag, Bassett, and Snyder 2009). And see the evaluation questions collected in Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf 2008: 69, 70, 86, 87, 88, 101, 106, 107, 108. Examples could easily be proliferated.

3. On this point, and for some of the few definitions that are offered, see, e.g., Zhang and Oetzel 2006: 224, Chesebro and McCroskey 2001: 62, Hativa 2001: 148, Civikly 1992: 138–40, and Crabtree 1986: 75, which contain some other relevant bibliographical information.

4. Harvey, e.g., names certain “facets of philosophical clarity” (Harvey 2008: 153) but, understandably, offers no definition. See also, e.g., Hart 1990: 197: “It is striking that the corpus of analytic philosophy includes no settled articulate analysis of clarity, nor even much in the way of rivals for that office.” And see Cohen 2002: 332: “I shall not try to say what ‘clear’ means in this essay. (I’m inclined to think it’s not possible to do so, in an illuminating way.)” Commenting on Cohen’s admission, Frankfurt writes: “This comes pretty close to conceding that ‘clear’ is unclarifiable” (341), and he adds: “It must surely be conceded that there are no generally accepted or authoritative criteria of what counts as meaningful. Standards of clarity are quite impressionistic [and] most discourse is by some standards and in some respects and to some extent unclear” (Frankfurt 2002: 342).

5. And perhaps they *are* somewhat lucid: even if there is little or no determinacy where their propositional content is concerned, discerning their communicative functions might be easy enough. In a word, “clarity proper” has to do with *semantics*, whereas lucidity has to do with *human psychology*—more specifically, with which utterances human minds are capable of processing easily enough. It can be difficult to process an utterance that

conveys a string of negations or a set of nested conditionals, e.g. Thanks to Scott Aikin and Rob Talisse for the invaluable conversations about all of this.

6. Cohen 2002: 332–33. Perhaps in *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*, as Stroll (1994: 88–90) can seem to suggest, Wittgenstein strategically foregoes clarity or transparency because he does not want “to spare other people the trouble of thinking” (Wittgenstein 1958: Preface, p. x). Thanks to one of *Teaching Philosophy*’s anonymous referees for pointing this out.

7. To offer a somewhat fuller (if less lucid) rendition: Perhaps Cohen would say that in order for *arguments* to be fully clear, there needs to be determinacy with regard to which propositions are conveyed *and* what the logical relations are among the propositions (e.g., inductive, deductive, etc.). Whenever there is indeterminacy involving some of the propositions and/or logical relations, there is unclarity. And how much unclarity or clarity there is depends simply on how broad or narrow the scope of the indeterminacy is. On another point: Various philosophers, of course, would resist the idea that clarity is primarily a property of sentences. Here we simply have to bracket issues involving inferentialism, e.g.

8. Someone has suggested to us that reformed epistemologists such as Alvin Plantinga have this goal. We doubt they do, but we take the point.

9. So, e.g., teachers who hold this view needn’t be internalists with regard to epistemology, and they needn’t suppose that every person has the responsibility to justify his or her beliefs. Admittedly, perhaps these teachers do need to affirm certain views about reasoning and justification which are at odds with views held by Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, and Alasdair MacIntyre, among others.

10. On, generally, the need sometimes to supplement or replace lectures, see, e.g., Shah 2008, Watkins 2008: 313, Cassidy 2005, Loui 2000, Nissani 1995, and Scherer and Stuart 1991.

11. Some undergraduate students also may be religious believers who think their faith is under threat, and they may be wary enough of any philosophy professor that confrontation can lead them actually to *disengage* (cf., e.g., Macedo 1995)—e.g., students who grew up hearing stories such as the “Dropped Chalk” tale, reproduced at <http://www.snopes.com/religion/chalk.asp>, which is part of a so-called urban legends website.

12. Peirce 1935: 5.376.1.

13. 11b6–8. This translation is basically G. M. A. Grube’s. Herein all references to Plato’s *Republic* are to the text in Slings’ edition, and all references to other Platonic dialogues are to the text in Burnet’s edition. Our translations of lines in the *Republic* are based on Reeve 2004.

14. Wittgenstein 1958: 1.123.

15. Quoting 506c8. Though these passages in the *Meno* and *Republic* are about the value of true belief compared to knowledge, and not about motivating and equipping other people to philosophize well, the navigation metaphor still is relevant here, for reasons we’ll soon point to.

16. See, e.g., Burnyeat 1998, especially 338.

17. Nussbaum 1999: 39. Cf. Cohen’s (2002: 322) comments on certain writings that he spent a lot of time on and found hard to understand: “When I managed to extract what seemed like a reasonable idea from one of the[se] texts, I attributed to it more interest and/or importance (so I later came to see) than it had, partly, no doubt, because I did not want to think that I had been wasting my time. (That psychological mechanism, a blend, perhaps, of ‘cognitive dissonance reduction’ and ‘adaptive preference formation,’

is, I believe, at work quite widely. Someone struggles for ages with some rebarbative text, manages to find some sense in it, and then reports that sense with enthusiasm, even though it is a banality that could have been expressed in a couple of sentences instead of across the course of the dozens of paragraphs to which the said someone has subjected herself.)”

18. Incidentally, we also aren't promoting any type of “indirect communication” associated with Søren Kierkegaard that we're aware of.

19. Even if, as some researchers might say, evaluation scores would suffer if students thought the teacher's obscurity isn't deliberate but simply due to incompetence (see, e.g., Onwuegbuzie et al. 2007: 129, 131, 132, 150; Greimel-Fuhrmann and Geyer 2003; Spencer and Schmelkin 2002; Hativa 2001: 150–56; Feldman 1989; and Koon and Murray 1983).

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