Using *Lectio Divina* as an in-class contemplative tool[1]

Jake Wright, Ph.D.

Abstract: This manuscript discusses the author's experience implementing a secularized version of *Lectio Divina*, a medieval monastic contemplative reading practice, in an introductory philosophy classroom. Following brief discussion of *Lectio Divina*'s history and a description of how the practice was modified for the classroom, I discuss three benefits (increased attention to cognitive and noncognitive reactions to the text, willingness to engage with the material in novel ways, and the opportunity to engage in independent disciplinary practice) and three potential challenges (the time required, student engagement, and the practice's perceived religiosity) arising from the exercise. Following this, I discuss potential modifications to the exercise that instructors may wish to consider, namely strategies for addressing students' status as novice meditators, focusing textual selections on course materials, and having students engage in some aspects of the practice as homework.

1. Introduction

Contemplative Pedagogy has regularly adapted secularized versions of practices from religious traditions with rich contemplative histories (Simmer-Brown, 2013). One such practice is *Lectio Divina*, a medieval monastic meditative practice. Though *Lectio Divina* is frequently mentioned in both formal and informal Contemplative Pedagogy

---

literature,[2] there has not yet been an extended formal discussion of the practicalities, benefits, and challenges of engaging with *Lectio Divina* as a standalone classroom activity.[3]

I aim to fill this gap by discussing my experience implementing a daily *Lectio Divina* activity in my Introduction to Philosophy classroom, which provided students the ability to reflect on both the cognitive and noncognitive aspects of class material. I identified three benefits to incorporating the practice into my course. First, students were able to engage in and react to noncognitive aspects of philosophical practice, aspects that are often ignored in the practice of analytic philosophy. Second, students seemed more willing to engage with the material in novel, interesting, and unexpected ways as a result of their engagement with the practice. Finally, the *Lectio Divina* activity provided students a valuable opportunity to engage in important aspects of philosophical practice independent of my instruction. My hope is that those interested in implementing *Lectio Divina* will come away from this discussion with a fuller understanding of both the practice and how it could be successfully implemented into one's own classroom.

My discussion proceeds as follows. First, I shall provide a brief overview of *Lectio Divina* in Section 2. I next describe how *Lectio Divina* was incorporated into my Introduction to Philosophy class in Section 3. Section 4 presents a discussion of the

---

[2] See, for example, (Barbezat & Pingree, 2012; Burggraf & Grossenbacher, 2007; Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2012; Craig, 2011; Keator, 2018; Wright, 2018; Zajonc, 2016).

[3] The closest such discussion has come can be found in Keator's (2018) discussion of the practice as an organizing principle for her World Literature course. In this, she focuses largely on how the various individual steps of *Lectio Divina* has led to broad pedagogical insight and how the individual steps of the practice have helped in developing individual assignments and activities (e.g., name-learning activities and reflection papers), rather than the sort of independent activity I describe.

practice's benefits and challenges, and Section 5 discusses potential changes that might make future iterations of the activity more fruitful.

2. A brief overview of *Lectio Divina*

This section provides a brief overview of *Lectio Divina*, with the aim of providing those unfamiliar with the practice a rudimentary understanding of its history, steps, and goals. Numerous resources discussing the history of *Lectio Divina* at length are available for those who wish to arrive at a deeper understanding.[4]

Lectio Divina (lit. "divine reading") is—at its most basic level—a monastic meditative scriptural reading practice (Robertson, 2011) that serves as a means of listening to what a text has to say and coming to a deeper understanding of that text (Keator, 2018). *Lectio Divina* allows practitioners to "enter into" understanding, rather than "dissecting" the passage under consideration (Foster, 1983, p. 24). The practice's ultimate goal is to move practitioners from "a kind of awkward acquaintanceship with God to ever deepening levels of friendship, commitment, and experience" (Keating, 2019).

As codified by Guigo II's *Scala Claustralium*, or *Ladder of the Monks*, *Lectio Divina* consists of four steps: *lectio* (first reading), *meditatio* (repetition and reflection), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (rest in the presence of the Holy Spirit), focused on a short, easily memorized scriptural passage (Robertson, 2011). Martin (2017) frames each of the four steps in terms of a question for the practitioner: 'What does the text say?' (*lectio*),

---

[4] Duncan Robertson's *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading* (2011), Mary Keator's *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy: Re-appropriating Monastic Practice for the Humanities* (2018), and Fr. James Martin, S.J.'s discussions of the practice (available via YouTube) are especially fruitful in this regard.

'What does the text say to me?' (*meditatio*), 'What do I want to say about the text?' (*oratio*), and 'What difference will the text make in my life?' (*contemplatio*).

In the first step, *lectio*, the practitioner reads the passage aloud "leisurely and intentionally" (Keator, 2018, p. 64), merely experiencing what the passage says (Martin, 2017). For the second step, *meditatio*, the practitioner repeats the passage while ruminating, or metaphorically "chewing on" (Keator, 2018, p. 120) the text, focusing intently not just on meaning, but on one's own reaction emotionally, experientially, and intellectually (Robertson, 2011). The third step, *oratio*, asks practitioners to offer their "heartfelt response" (Keator, 2018, p. 155) to the text and the fruits of their rumination. Notably, such responses were intended to be bidirectional in that they represented one side of a colloquy or heartfelt conversation; the practitioner would not only respond to what they have experienced, but also offer a prayer in hope of some sort of response rather than a one-directional prayer of praise. In the final step, *contemplatio*, practitioners reflect on the totality of the exercise and what they have learned (Robertson, 2011).

Importantly for its application in the philosophy classroom, though *Lectio Divina* is traditionally a solitary exercise done in the presence of other practitioners, it can and has been engaged with in group settings Keating describes as a "liturgy of *Lectio Divina*" (2019). It was in that spirit I engaged with *Lectio Divina* in my own classroom, and I turn now to how the practice was incorporated in my Introduction to Philosophy class.

3. *Lectio Divina* in the philosophy classroom

This section describes how *Lectio Divina* was incorporated into my Introduction to Philosophy class. Because it is my hope that my reflections can find application beyond the philosophy classroom, I have two goals. First, I discuss metadisciplinary commitments that make *Lectio Divina* a potentially powerful tool for a philosophy classroom in the hope that instructors whose disciplines feature similar goals will recognize commonalities that may similarly make the exercise a useful tool for their classroom. Second, I discuss precisely how the practice was incorporated into my course.

3.1. Philosophy and its core commitments

As a philosopher, I am squarely rooted in the analytic tradition, which has been the dominant Western philosophical tradition since the late 19th Century (Glock, 2008). Analytic philosophy focuses almost exclusively on propositions that can be used to construct arguments (Passmore, 1957) and stands in contrast to other philosophical traditions (e.g. Continental philosophy) that are more amenable to nonpropositional, nonrational, or nonargumentative approaches (Levy, 2003; Williams, 1985).[5]

To say that a claim has propositional content is to say that the claim is truth-evaluable, or able to be judged as true or false based on whether it accurately

---

[5] This is not a claim that other traditions are necessarily problematically nonpropositional, nonrational, or nonargumentative, or to say that other traditions are significantly so. As discussed below, what sets analytic philosophy apart from these traditions is its commitment to propositionality and rationality above all; to admit a nonpropositional, nonrational, or nonargumentative approach to any meaningful degree beyond basic intuitive appeals is by itself a significant break from the analytic tradition. Further, this description oversimplifies the divisions between philosophical traditions somewhat. Philosophers will draw from traditions of which they are not a part. Especially in light of calls to diversify course offerings, analytically-minded instructors are doing a better job incorporating non-analytic sources. Philosophers can straddle more than one tradition (e.g., analytic feminist philosophy) in their own practice. But in such cases, such branching out is primarily viewed through the lens of one's primary tradition. Thus, though analytic philosophers may be moved to include Buddhist philosophy in their course, they will likely analyze and interpret it through an analytic lens.

represents the world. For example, if I were to stub my toe, the expression "Wright is in pain" would be truth-evaluable, while the actual pain I experience would not be truth-evaluable; it would merely be. Both can be mental content, either in the form of beliefs (e.g., "I am in pain") or direct experiences ("OUCH!"). Traditionally, the former sort of mental content is classified as *cognitive content* and the latter as *noncognitive content* (Thagard, 2019). Thus, if philosophy is primarily interested in propositional content as its domain, it will necessarily favor cognitive content over noncognitive content, since only the former is truth-evaluable. Generally, the only philosophically meaningful noncognitive content is intuition, the nonpropositional seeming that a claim (e.g., "Murder is wrong") is true or false. Often, propositional reasons can be provided for intuitive claims (e.g., "Murder is wrong because it violates rights"), but such propositional reasons stand alongside, rather than instead of, one's intuitions.

The primacy of propositional content and corresponding exclusion of noncognitive content is reinforced for introductory students by highly regarded introductory textbooks.[6] Even primary sources commonly used in introductory courses, like Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, make similar points.[7] Such exclusion at the introductory level is problematic for two reasons.

First, noncognitive reactions play a significant role in our reasoning processes such as the effect of negative emotional experiences on reasoning (Blanchette, 2006; Blanchette & Caparos, 2013; Blanchette, Lindsay, & Davies, 2014; Blanchette & Richards, 2004, 2010), noncognitive motivations for motivated reasoning and the

---

[6] For example, Sober describes philosophy as interested in "fundamental questions of justification" and the "enterprise of clarifying concepts" (2008, p. 4). Shafer-Landau (2009) argues that noncognitive theories of ethics render ethical claims absurd, unpersuasive, and unintelligible.

[7] As Aristotle remarks in the *Rhetoric*, "The arousing of prejudice, pity, anger, and similar emotions has nothing to do with the essential facts" (1354a, 16-18) of claims under analysis (trans. McKeon, 1941).

corresponding backfire effect (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Wood & Porter, 2019), and expressive responding (Prior, Sood, & Khanna, 2015; Schaffner & Luks, 2018). Ignoring the role noncognitive reactions play in reasoning would thus impede students' cognitive development and reduce the probability that students will develop virtuous reasoning habits.

The second problem with eliminating noncognitive reactions from the philosophy classroom relates to philosophical skill development (Wright, 2019). Philosophy courses aim to develop students' abilities to understand philosophical concepts, analyze arguments, develop personal philosophical views, and successfully engage in philosophical practice (Besong, 2016; Burkard, 2017). These disciplinary skills are themselves often based on more fundamental disciplinary skills like distinguishing between argument types (Turner, 2013), argument construction, and evaluation (Cashmore, 2015), as well as transdisciplinary skills like college-level writing (Burkard, 2017; Cashmore, 2015; Turner, 2013) and metacognitive skills (Stokes, 2012). Such skills development can be similarly impacted by noncognitive reactions by not providing students the opportunity to engage with and process feelings of discomfort, frustration, pride, satisfaction, and so forth as they develop these skills.

For both reasons, implementing a reflective practice that afforded students the opportunity to be aware of and engage with their cognitive and noncognitive reactions to course material seemed appropriate for the course. A modified, secularized form of *Lectio Divina* was implemented in my classroom to give students the chance to examine both kinds of reactions. I turn now to a description of how the practice instantiated in my classroom.

3.2. Implementing Lectio Divina *in the philosophy classroom*

Because of the problems identified above, I introduced a secularized version of *Lectio Divina* to my Introduction to Philosophy class. The goal was to give students space to explore their reactions to course material in a way that made them more aware of their reactions and how those reactions informed their views. At the beginning of the semester, I discussed with students the history of *Lectio Divina*, the goals of Contemplative Pedagogy generally, how the exercise would work in our class, and how I hoped students would benefit.

The exercise took place at the beginning of each class with a pre-selected text intended to illustrate an important or difficult facet of the day's topic. For example, when discussing Aristotle's view that death is bad because it robs us of that which is most valuable to us—our selves and our experiences—we focused on a passage from Marquis' "Why abortion is immoral" that discussed why murder is especially morally serious:

> The loss of one's life is one of the greatest losses one can suffer. The loss of one's life deprives one of all the experiences, activities, projects, and enjoyments that would otherwise have constituted one's future... When I am killed, I am deprived both of what I now value which would have been part of my future personal life, but also what I would come to value. Therefore, when I die, I am deprived of all of the value of my future. (Marquis, 1989, pp. 189–190)

Before beginning, students were encouraged to make whatever preparations they viewed as necessary for engaging wholly and intentionally with the text, such as lowing laptop screens or sitting comfortably. After the class had settled in, I read the passage aloud to the students. The text was included in daily handouts so students could read along.

For the *meditatio* step, I would read the passage aloud a second time and give students time to reread the passage and individually reflect on their reaction. As Fr. Martin described it above, the *meditatio* step gives practitioners a chance to contemplate what the text says to them. Thus, students were encouraged to reflect on features of the text like its main idea, why the author makes a point in a particular way, the difficulty of understanding the text, or one's emotional reaction to the text.

Initially, students were given approximately three minutes of silent reflection time. This gradually shortened to about two minutes for reasons discussed in the next section.

The next step, *oratio*, was perhaps the most heavily modified of the four steps for secular practice.[8] Rather than have students pray over the object of their contemplation, this step encouraged students to participate in small group discussions about their reactions in the previous *meditatio* step. In the spirit of Fr. Martin's description of *oratio* as asking what one wants to say about the text, as well as Fr. Keating's idea of the "liturgy of *Lectio Divina*," students were asked to share an insight that they had during their contemplation. Typically, this step lasted for two or three minutes and was frequently cut off, despite ongoing discussion, in the interest of time.

---

[8] Though, as noted above, some historical interpretations of *oratio* were thought of as colloquy, dialogue, or heartfelt conversation, in all cases, this dialogue was still intended to be prayerful. In the class's practice, *oratio* was largely where the practice became secularized.

The final step, *contemplatio*, was another opportunity for students to silently and individually reflect on the overall experience before beginning class discussion. Like the *meditatio* step, students were initially given about three minutes, though this gradually reduced to about two for similar reasons discussed below.

Following the exercise, I facilitated an all-class discussion by asking what takeaways or insights students had to the text we had just examined. It was stressed to students both at the beginning of the semester and periodically throughout that the goal of this discussion was merely to catalogue reactions, rather than examine them critically, in an effort to encourage students to share even tentative or potentially problematic reactions to the text. Thus, the discussion allowed comments summarizing individual reactions, group interactions during *oratio* small group discussions, or reactions to points raised during the larger discussion, while not allowing evaluative (e.g., claims that prior contributions were good, bad, correct, or incorrect) contributions. Students were asked to withhold such contributions until the class had moved on from the exercise. During discussion, I collated student responses on a classroom white board, creating a record of the conversation as a tool to help me quickly review and organize student thoughts and as a reference for discussion throughout the remainder of the class. This discussion was allowed to run as long as students had contributions to make; on average, daily discussion lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. Overall, the exercise took between 20 and 25 minutes, with some individual sections taking as long as 35 minutes. This obviously represents a significant time commitment on the part of the instructor that may require active management and adjustment; I share some strategies for managing the time commitment below.

Discussion bridged the *Lectio Divina* exercise and the remainder of the class. By giving space to voice their views and reactions in a judgment-free context, students were able to begin working through their noncognitive responses to the day's material and engage in rudimentary philosophical analysis. As the instructor, I was able to collate student reactions in a way that allowed me to quickly note common areas of concern or struggle, points of interest, and content mastery. This allowed me to modify my lesson to maximize its impact on students; I had a sense of which concepts I needed to spend more time on, what ancillary issues were worth further exploration because of student interest, and how noncognitive reactions were coloring student responses to the day's topic. This led to a number of benefits, discussed below.

4. The benefits and challenges of incorporating *Lectio Divina* into the classroom

Though students' work during this exercise was largely personal—I obviously had no access to students' mental states and deliberately refrained from inserting myself into small group discussions—the fruits of the activity were readily apparent in the daily all-class discussions. Thus, much of my focus on the benefits and challenges will relate more directly to these discussions than to four initial steps.

During my time as a philosopher, I have taught approximately 75 individual sections of philosophy courses, usually in an introductory setting. While these experiences do not constitute data in a more formal sense, they represent a rich well of experience from which I am able to make meaningful, though tentative, conclusions. When reflecting on student experiences in sections that incorporated *Lectio Divina* as compared to those that did not, three benefits seemed to manifest themselves. First,

students were able to engage in and react to noncognitive aspects of philosophical practice, aspects that are often ignored in the practice of analytic philosophy. Second, students seemed more willing to engage with the material in novel, interesting, and unexpected ways as a result of their engagement with the practice. Finally, the *Lectio Divina* activity provided students a valuable opportunity to engage in important aspects of philosophical practice independent of my instruction. In addition, I noted three challenges I believe are worth discussing explicitly: the time the exercise required, an occasional lack of student engagement, and the exercise's perceived religiosity.

4.1. Benefit: Attention to cognitive and noncognitive aspects of philosophical practice

As noted previously, ignoring noncognitive responses and their effects on reasoning is both inappropriate and inauthentic. Further, we are sometimes unaware of our noncognitive responses absent the opportunity to engage with them directly. Confusion and frustration are regular parts of even the most gifted philosopher's practice, and such responses are especially common among introductory students. The *Lectio Divina* exercise discussed above seemed to provide students with a valuable opportunity to engage in and reflect on these responses, in addition to their engagement with cognitive responses.

For example, during the aforementioned discussion of Marquis, students were not only able to analyze Marquis' main point, but also used the space to discuss emotional reactions to the text; multiple students noted the topic and text felt "heavy," "scary," and "dark." During discussion, students noted that this was likely due to having never thought intentionally about their own mortality. Here and elsewhere,

students also felt comfortable expressing confusion and frustration, with regular questions about the text, its meaning, or the author's intention. Such expressions seemed to go well beyond the typical "I don't get it" often expressed in class and left at that. For example, a student discussing Marquis expressed discomfort with Marquis because of his ultimate use of the excerpt as the lynchpin of an argument against abortion's immorality. A discussion of health and disease led to questions about questions about why certain terminology may be more preferable, while a discussion of metaphilosophy led to questions about particular sentences and phrases. Such questions, in addition to making it easier to see where student difficulty lay, made general expressions of confusion more helpful as well; students who expressed such confusion were more likely to be genuinely, totally confused, which signaled where additional time needed to be spent helping students understand.

In short, the exercise gave students a chance to express their noncognitive reactions to the text, along with how those reactions impacted their reasoning, while also allowing students to more precisely articulate their cognitive confusions. Such engagement is not typical, at least within my experience as an instructor and colleague, because the structures that allow for such engagement are not typically present in the philosophy classroom. This engagement seemed to increase both student understanding of the material and their understanding of how their noncognitive reactions impacted their thinking while also allowing me a better perspective on the difficulties students faced.

4.2. Benefit: Students were more willing to offer novel and risky interpretations of class material

Because the discussions merely aimed at collecting student responses without any evaluation of these interpretations, students seemed more willing to offer novel or risky interpretations of the material when compared to more traditional presentations of the same material. Most notably, students were comfortable voicing concerns that arguments presented were weak, incomplete, or insufficiently charitable, claiming, for example, that Wakefield's (2007) view of health and disease would stigmatize the mentally ill, that Mackie's (1955) version of the argument from evil was mocking and contemptuous of genuine believers, or whether Kierkegaard's leap of faith[9] justified belief in conspiracy theories like the anti-vax movement. In perhaps the clearest example of the risks students were willing to take, students were comfortable voicing concerns that Kelly James Clark's (2008) argument for God's existence via direct experience did not constitute doing philosophy, which in essence meant that introductory students with less than a semester's formal training felt comfortable challenging whether a respected philosopher was actually engaging in philosophy. Such interpretations can be risky for students, especially at the introductory level, where students frequently seeking the instructor's definitive answer to a question. In all my years of teaching, I can't recall another instance of a student flatly declaring that what we did simply wasn't philosophy outside of this exercise.

Naturally, some interpretations were problematic, incomplete, or simply wrong—nothing about the exercise changed the fact that my students were novices—but this chance to be wrong in a low stakes environment was valuable in and of itself. The interpretations students provided were a valuable jumping-off point for daily

---

[9] Kierkegaard represented the rare instance where we did not read a primary source. Instead, students examined Kierkegaard via a secondary source, (Schacht, 1973).

discussion; I not only had a better sense of what my students were thinking, but their interpretations were often either right or wrong in interesting ways meriting further discussion.

4.3. Benefit: Students engaged in independent philosophical practice

The final advantage offered by the exercise was the opportunity it afforded for students to engage in key aspects of philosophical practice independent of my instruction. As Gregory (2015) notes, traditional pedagogies struggle to produce critical, questioning students because such pedagogies aim to assess students mainly via repetition of knowledge first provided by the instructor. Similarly, introductory students often crave an environment where knowledge is transferred from instructor to student, rather than constructed, because of their present state of intellectual development (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010; Lochrie, 1989; Perry, 1970).

As a result, one of the greatest challenges of introductory philosophy—though not unique to philosophy—is moving students away from the view that the instructor is the sole source of knowledge and towards student confidence in their own abilities to analyze, interpret, and construct arguments independently. In other words, one of the primary challenges I face each semester is how to get students to do philosophy either without me or alongside me. This exercise has proven to be an invaluable resource for realizing this aim.

For example, throughout the semester, daily reflections led to basic versions of the free will defense, discussions of the limits on God's perfection, conditions under which evidence-free belief might be appropriate, and whether there was a meaningful

distinction between death and an unrecoverable coma. In each case, the ideas expressed by students were concepts or arguments I intended to raise after the exercise had been completed. Further, these ideas are necessarily provided independent of my instruction, since reflection takes place at the facilitate. Students use the reflection as an opportunity to do philosophy.

The sorts of responses offered in this section and previous sections often just do constitute doing philosophy. Students are constructing meaning and interpreting views. They are attending to noncognitive reactions and how those reactions impact their beliefs. They are crafting objections and counterexamples. They were able to do this each day without my help. Furthermore, because of the bridge function the end-of-exercise discussion served, interpretations offered by students frequently formed the foundation of the remainder of class by serving as a jumping off point or callback when discussing the bulk of the day's material. A question about interpretation, for example, can serve as a valuable starting point when introducing a topic. A nascent objection can both be previewed during presentation of an argument (e.g., noting that a particular premise might need additional defense because of concerns raised earlier) and serve as the basis for a more fully-developed objection. In short, I've never done a regular exercise that has led me to respond to students with some version of "We're going to come back to this" as frequently as this exercise did.

4.4. Challenge: The activity's time commitment

The four steps of the *Lectio Divina* activity took approximately ten minutes each day, followed by additional discussion of approximately 10–15 minutes. Thus, on average, the entire activity took between 20 and 25 minutes, with some daily discussions of 30

minutes or more. While not a significant challenge in my own class, this length of time can obviously be challenging when considering the time available for each session.

Because my class met for 75 minute sessions, even on days that generated the most discussion, I still had over half of the class time available to cover remaining material. The most serious challenge I faced was that *Lectio Divina* precluded other group activities, since such activities tend to be similarly time intensive. However, not every instructor has 75 minutes for each period. Thus, considering strategies to mitigate time concerns would be worthwhile. I shall discuss some strategies related to this challenge in the next section, but I believe it important to note the challenge explicitly here.

4.5. Challenge: Student engagement

During the semester in which the *Lectio Divina* activity was implemented, I taught three sections of Introduction to Philosophy. In two sections, the activity seemed well-received with active, robust participation. The third section, however, proved to have a serious, persistent issue with student engagement. A review of the discussions for this section showed students who seemed to contribute less or move on more quickly during the *oratio* step; while other sections regularly had to be cut off, this section seemed to either drift off topic or peter out.

Unlike the time commitment discussed above, I have no suggestions for addressing this concern above and beyond general strategies for addressing disengaged students. Personally, this disengagement was particularly difficult for me both because of the value other sections seemed to be receiving from the exercise and the aid it provided me as the instructor. While the *Lectio Divina* exercise was generally

very well-received by my students, instructors who wish to implement a similar activity would do well to consider how to respond to similarly disengaged students in advance so as to minimize any disruption.

4.6. Challenge: Lectio Divina*'s religious heritage*

Though Contemplative Pedagogy has incorporated a number of secularized versions of religious contemplative practices (Simmer-Brown, 2013), such practices invite concerns that students are either being compelled to engage in religious practice or that the related activities represent cases of cultural appropriation.[10] Though I did not face this challenge, it seems worthwhile to explore these concerns explicitly.

Regarding concerns about the practice's religiosity, I would point out here—as I did to my students at the beginning of the semester—that we are unproblematically surrounded by secularized versions of religious practices every day, such as yoga and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. As noted earlier, such modified practices are common in Contemplative Pedagogy. These practices are employed not because of their religious nature, but because of the benefits they provide. It would be wrong if I required my students to pray the Rosary or engage in *Lectio Divina* in an effort to bring them closer to Christ, but engaging in a secularized *Lectio Divina* to realize the benefits laid out earlier in this section requires no more commitment to Christianity than practicing yoga to realize the benefits of strength and flexibility requires a commitment to Hinduism.

Concerns of cultural appropriation can be addressed by being forthright not only about what is being done, but also why it is being done and the context in which it

---

[10] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who suggested this concern be incorporated.

is being done. Employing a practice from any cultural tradition runs the risk of appropriation, and whether one impermissibly engages in such appropriation depends not on *what* one does, but *how* one does it. In the case of *Lectio Divina*, taking the time to accurately discuss what the practice is, its roots, and how and why the practice as implemented in the classroom differs from traditional practice provides valuable context through which students can come to more fully understand and appreciate what was likely a heretofore unknown practice. Such contextualization, done sensitively, is in many ways the opposite of cultural appropriation, which borrows from and fetishizes other cultures under a misguided sense of "otherness" or mysteriousness. Further, concerns about the power dynamics in cultural appropriation, where dominant cultures adopt aspects of marginalized cultures' practices, is mitigated in the case of *Lectio Divina*, since the Christian tradition remains a dominant cultural tradition in the context in which the course was taught. Essentially, one ought to be highly sensitive to concerns about cultural appropriation when engaging in this or any other culturally-rooted practice, but it does not follow that such concerns cannot be satisfactorily addressed.

5. What could be done differently

On the whole, I felt that the benefits *Lectio Divina* exercise I employed outweighed any drawbacks or challenges. That being said, I also feel that the exercise could have been improved both to address some of the challenges I faced and to improve the overall quality of the exercise. In this section, I offer some thoughts on how instructors who wish to incorporate the *Lectio Divina* exercise into their class might modify the practice outlined above to gain maximum impact from its implementation.

5.1. Keep in mind that students are likely novice meditators

The first thing I think could have been done differently, or perhaps more intentionally in this case, would be greater recognition that the students participating in the exercise are essentially novice meditators who have not chosen the class because of its contemplative component. In speaking with my students, few if any indicated any meaningful experience with meditation or contemplative practice, and the incorporation of contemplative techniques was not an advertised part of the class. Though the exercise explicitly took these facts into account—for example, the beginning-of-term overview of what *Lectio Divina* was and why it was being utilized was accompanied by a range of resources to further student understanding—there were aspects of the exercise where greater implicit recognition of this fact would have been beneficial.

To cite one such instance, the time spent in silent reflection during both the *meditatio* and *contemplatio* steps may have been too long at first. Three minutes can seem like a long time to engage in silent, unguided meditation if one lacks previous experience. A major impetus for reducing the length of silent reflection throughout the semester from about three minutes to about two was the recognition that some students were struggling to remain focused for the entire time. Reducing the time spent on silent reflection seemed to help, but future versions of this exercise might benefit from a reduced period of reflection or greater guidance on how to engage in silent reflection effectively. In addition to the greater overall benefit such attention might produce, such attention may help with issues of student engagement; in short, a

better-constructed environment for successful practice might reasonably be expected to lead to more engaged student participants.

I should note that students' novice status was not, to me, a reason to avoid engaging in *Lectio Divina* any more than one's sedentary lifestyle is a reason to engage in exercise. While a sedentary person ought not walk out of the house and immediately run a marathon, there are levels of activity that even the novice is capable of, especially with guidance and training. *Lectio Divina* was, in my class, just such an exercise. Students were able to successfully engage in the practice and improved as the semester wore on. Even a novice can reflect silently for two minutes at a stretch, though occasionally with some difficulty.

5.2. Keep textual selections explicitly related to the day's topic

A second change I would make moving forward would be to keep all of the reflections related to the central topic itself. There are many ways for a text to be related to the day's topic, and some proved to be more fruitful for my students than others.
For example, during a unit discussing the nature of art, I departed from my usual practice of selecting an excerpt from the assigned reading or a closely-related reading, instead choosing a poem to reflect on. The goal was to give students a common touch point from which they could react and reflect on the theories of art we were discussing. In some respects, this effort was successful; having students offer interpretations of an intentionally meaningless Dadaist poem did an effective job of motivating antiessentialist theories of art, for example.

Upon reflection, many of the benefits found in reflecting on these texts might have been better realized by analyzing them in a different context. As Robertson (2011)

notes, though *Lectio Divina* can have an analytical component that emerges out of an imagined dialogue between practitioner and text, the practice is not intended to be a merely exegetical tool. To do so would interfere with the open, unguided aspect of *Lectio Divina*.

Certainly, there were some reactions to the surprise twist at the end of one poem or the anger in some of the text, but the exercise itself tended to veer off into an analytical one that abandoned discussion of noncognitive reactions, suggesting that a more analytical exercise would have been appropriate for those texts. In addition, spending time engaging with the poem, rather than a text focused directly on one of the day's key points, seemed to lower student engagement with the material itself; students seemed less sure-footed because they lacked the normal opportunity to reflect intentionally on the topic, rather than an exemplar.

5.3. Have students complete the exercise on their own outside of class

A third change that might be beneficial, especially if available in-class time were reduced, would be to offload some of the initial reflection steps. In discussion with peers about this practice, the main concern that has been raised has been the time involved. 20-30 minutes is not insignificant, even if one has 75 minute class time. Thus, a common suggestion has been to offload a portion of the initial reflection as homework. For example, one might provide the text in advance and ask students to read, reflect, and journal as the *oratio* step, rather than discuss in small groups. Doing so would significantly reduce the amount of in-class time required for the exercise; perhaps all that would be necessary during class itself would be the final discussion after students complete the *Lectio Divina* on their own.

While this may be a fruitful strategy and I have mentioned it here because it may be best aligned with other instructors' intentions, I have avoided this for three reasons. I mention them below so that instructors who wish to adopt the exercise to their classroom can better understand whether this change would be fruitful for them. First, completing the exercise in class provides a level of quality control. If the activity takes place in class, I can be assured that all students, at some level, are engaging in the practice and can take steps to encourage or direct student attention as necessary. For example, if students seem distracted by their laptop screens, I can gently suggest that the exercise may be more fruitful if screens were closed. Offloading the exercise offers no guarantee that students are properly engaging in the activity itself, rather than, say, quickly reading the text and jotting down a brief journal.

Second, it seems to me there is some benefit to having the all-class discussion immediately after the exercise because the thoughts that occurred to students are fresh in their minds. This is not to say that there would be no benefits from the added reflection time that students may engage in having done the exercise prior to class, but on balance, my pedagogical goals seemed to align better with an immediate turnaround.

Finally, I have endeavored to keep my secularized *Lectio Divina* as close as possible to the monastic form outlined above. One aspect of the monastic form is the collective nature of the exercise. As discussed above, even when individually reflecting, as opposed to instantiations of *oratio* that focused on conversation, texts were intended to be read or recited together as a group. Given the changes already made to adapt *Lectio Divina* to a secular college classroom, I was hesitant to make

additional changes, such as completely removing the communal nature of part of the exercise. that were not strictly necessary for the activity to work successfully.

5.4. Engage in the exercise less frequently

For a variety of reasons, I chose to begin each class session with the *Lectio Divina* exercise. This led to a significant time commitment. If the time commitment is of concern to instructors who wish to utilize *Lectio Divina* in class, one option for reducing that commitment would be to engage in the exercise less frequently. For example, one might lead students in this exercise one per week or once per unit.

Doing so would remove the benefit the exercise provided each day, but such a modification could provide much of the benefit with a greatly reduced time commitment. Perhaps, for example, one could lead a reflection on a major or overarching theme that presented itself over several days. Also, engaging in this less-regular *Lectio Divina* might afford the opportunity to reflect as a capstone activity, rather than a kick-off; meditating on a text at the end of the week or unit would almost certainly allow for different insights than would be manifest at the beginning of a discussion.

6. Conclusion

Lectio Divina has a rich tradition that lends itself well to in-class contemplative practice. This essay has sought to provide both background and context for the practice and an analysis of one course's implementation of a secularized form of *Lectio Divina*, including a discussion of the benefits, challenges, and additional considerations one might take into account when implementing this or similar strategies. Though the

context of this discussion was an introductory philosophy class, it is my hope that the practice itself and the benefits it confers are generalizable enough that one can adapt the practice to one's own classroom regardless of discipline.

Works Cited

Ambrose, S., Bridges, M., Lovett, M., DiPietro, M., & Norman, M. (2010). *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. Jossey-Bass.

Barbezat, D., & Pingree, A. (2012). Contemplative Pedagogy: The Special Role of Teaching and Learning Centers. In J. Groccia & L. Cruz (Eds.), *To Improve the Academy* (Vol. 31, pp. 177–191). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Besong, B. (2016). Teaching the debate. *Teaching Philosophy*, *39*(4), 401–412. https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil2016112256

Blanchette, I. (2006). The effect of emotion on interpretation and logic in a conditional reasoning task. *Memory & Cognition*, *34*(5), 1112–1125. https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193257

Blanchette, I., & Caparos, S. (2013). When emotions improve reasoning: The possible roles of relevance and utility. *Thinking & Reasoning*, *19*(3–4), 399–413. https://doi.org/10.1080/13546783.2013.791642

Blanchette, I., Lindsay, P., & Davies, S. (2014). Intense Emotional Experiences and Logicality: An Exploration of Deductive Reasoning in Survivors of Sexual Abuse. *The Psychological Record*, *64*(4), 859–867. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40732-014-0073-4

Blanchette, I., & Richards, A. (2004). Reasoning About Emotional and Neutral

    Materials: Is Logic Affected by Emotion? *Psychological Science*, *15*(11), 745–752.

    https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0956-7976.2004.00751.x

Blanchette, I., & Richards, A. (2010). The influence of affect on higher level cognition: A

    review of research on interpretation, judgement, decision making and

    reasoning. *Cognition & Emotion*, *24*(4), 561–595.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930903132496

Burggraf, S., & Grossenbacher, P. (2007). *Contemplative Modes of Inquiry in Liberal Arts*

    Education. Crawfordsville, IN: Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash

    College.

Burkard, A. (2017). Everyone just has their own opinion: Assessing strategies for

    reacting to students' skepticism about philosophy. *Teaching Philosophy*, *40*(3),

    297–322. https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil2017101773

Cashmore, S. (2015). Changing values in teaching and learning philosophy: A

    comparison of historic and current education approaches. *Teaching Philosophy*,

    38(2), 297–322. https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil201532634

Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. (2012). *Case Studies*. Florence, MA.

Clark, K. J. (2008). Without evidence or argument. In K. J. Clark (Ed.), *Readings in the*

    Philosophy of Religion (Second, pp. 201–207). Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview

    Press.

Craig, B. (2011). *Contemplative Practice in Higher Education: An Assessment of the*

    Contemplative Practice Fellowship Program, 1997–2009. Florence, MA: The Center

    for Contemplative Mind in Society.

Foster, R. (1983). *Meditative Prayer*. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Glock, H.-J. (2008). *What is analytic philosophy?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, UK.

Gregory, M. R. (2015). Ethics Education as Philosophical Practice: The Case from

      Socratic, Critical and Contemplative Pedagogies. *Teaching Ethics*, *15*(1), 19–34.

      https://doi.org/10.5840/tej201410173

Keating, T. (2019). *Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina with Thomas Keating, Part 1*

      [YouTube]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7igrkA8OCw

Keator, M. (2018). *Lectio Divina as contemplative pedagogy: Re-appropriating monastic*

      practice for the humanities. New York, NY: New York, NY : Routledge.

Levy, N. (2003). Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Explaining the Differences.

      Metaphilosophy, *34*(3), 284–304. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9973.00274

Lochrie, J. (1989). Perry revisited—A fresh look at Forms of Intellectual and Ethical

      Development in the College Years. *Studies in Higher Education*, *14*(3), 347–350.

      https://doi.org/10.1080/03075078912331377723

Mackie, J. L. (1955). Evil and omnipotence. *Mind*, *64*(254), 200–212.

      https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/LXIV.254.200

Marquis, D. (1989). Why abortion is immoral. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *86*(4), 183–202.

      https://doi.org/10.2307/2026961

Martin, J. (2017). *James Martin, S.J. on "Lectio Divina."* America - The Jesuit Magazine.

McKeon, R. (Richard P. (Ed.). (1941). *The basic works of Aristotle*. New York: New York :

      Random House.

Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political

      Misperceptions. *Political Behavior*, *32*(2), 303–330. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-

      010-9112-2

Passmore, J. A. (1957). *A hundred years of philosophy.* London: London : Duckworth.

Perry, W. (1970). *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston.

Prior, M., Sood, G., & Khanna, K. (2015). You Cannot be Serious: The Impact of Accuracy Incentives on Partisan Bias in Reports of Economic Perceptions. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, *10*, 489–518. https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00014127

Robertson, D. (2011). *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*. Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications.

Schacht, R. (1973). Kierkegaard on "truth is subjectivity" and "the leap of faith." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *2*(3), 297.

Schaffner, B. F., & Luks, S. (2018). Misinformation or Expressive Responding? What an Inauguration Crowd Can Tell Us about the source of Political Misinformation in Surveys. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *82*(1), 135–147. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfx042

Shafer-Landau, R. (2009). *The Fundamentals of Ethics*. Oxford University Press.

Simmer-Brown, J. (2013). "Listening Dangerously": Dialogue Training as Contemplative Pedagogy. *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, *33*, 33–40.

Sober, E. (2008). *Core questions in philosopy* (Fifth). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Stokes, P. (2012). Philosophy has consequences! Developing metacognition and active learning in the ethics classroom. *Teaching Philosophy*, *35*(2), 143–169.

Thagard, P. (2019). Cognitive science. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019). Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cognitive-science/

Turner, D. (2013). How to teach: Critical thinking. *Teaching Philosophy*, *36*(4), 399–416. https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil20131015

Wakefield, J. C. (2007). The concept of mental disorder: Diagnostic implications of the harmful dysfunction analysis. *World Psychiatry : Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, *6*(3), 149–156. Retrieved from PubMed. (18188432)

Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press.

Wood, T., & Porter, E. (2019). The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence. *Political Behavior*, *41*(1), 135–163. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-018-9443-y

Wright, J. (2018). Unconventional teaching ideas that work: Using monastic meditative reflection in the classroom. *Philosopher's Cocoon*. Retrieved from https://philosopherscocoon.typepad.com/blog/2018/12/unconventional-teaching-ideas-that-work-using-monastic-meditative-reflection-in-the-classroom-jake-w-1.html

Wright, J. (2019). The truth, but not yet: Avoiding naïve skepticism via explicit communication of metadisciplinary aims. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *24*(3), 361–377. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1544552

Zajonc, A. (2016). Contemplation in Education. In K. A. Schonert-Reichl & R. W. Roeser (Eds.), *The Handbook of Mindfulness in Education* (pp. 17–28). New York: Springer-Verlag.