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

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1. Introduction

Contemplative Pedagogy is one of several pedagogical theories, including Socratic and Critical Pedagogy, aimed at addressing the shortcomings of more traditional pedagogies, especially with respect to traditional pedagogy's perceived production of uncritical, unquestioning students (Gregory, 2015). Contemplative Pedagogy has a number of benefits for students, including increased attention, a reduction in distractive thoughts, increased creativity, and the ability to process information (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2008), as well as the ability to integrate multiple self-identities and experience personal growth (Coburn et al., 2011). Further, Contemplative Pedagogy often allow students to engage with "hidden, pre-reflective realms of experience" (Pulkki, Dahlin, & Värri, 2017, p. 227) either obscured or completely opaque to students who have not engaged in conscious reflection on said experiences.

Contemplative Pedagogy seeks to realize these goals by increasing metacognitive skills like attention (Shapiro et al., 2008) and critical reflection (Coburn et al., 2011), often through practical, experiential reflection (Coburn et al., 2011; Gregory, 2015; Pulkki et al., 2017). Opportunities to engage in such deep reflection can often be hard to come by in one's daily life (O'Donnell, 2015).

Contemplative Pedagogy has engaged in a number of meditative traditions, often adapting secularized versions of practices from religious traditions with rich contemplative histories (Simmer-Brown, 2013). One such practice is *Lectio Divina*, a medieval meditative

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monastic practice. Though discussions of *Lectio Divina* have occurred in formal and informal Contemplative Pedagogy literature (see, e.g., (Barbezat & Pingree, 2012; Burggraf & Grossenbacher, 2007; Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2012; Craig, 2011; Keator, 2018; Wright, 2018; Zajonc, 2016)), there has not yet been an extended formal discussion of the practicalities, benefits, and challenges of engaging with *Lectio Divina* as a classroom activity. The closest such literature has come to such a discussion has been Keator's (2018) use of *Lectio Divina* as an organizing principle for her World Literature course. While valuable, Keator largely focuses on how the various steps have led to pedagogical insight and assignments and activities (e.g., name-learning activities and reflection papers) amenable to the goals and techniques of *Lectio Divina*'s individual steps, rather than a regularly-practiced independent activity of the type described herein.

I aim to fill this gap by discussing my experience implementing a daily *Lectio Divina* activity in an introductory philosophy classroom as a tool for student reflection on cognitive and noncognitive responses to the material. I should state explicitly that my goal is not to argue that *Lectio Divina* is more appropriate or better than other contemplative practices that can and have been successfully integrated into college classrooms. Like other pedagogical techniques, *Lectio Divina* is a tool; like any tool, there are applications to which it is better or worse suited. Ultimately, those interested in implementing *Lectio Divina* will come away from this discussion with a fuller understanding of both the practice and how it may be successfully incorporated into one's classroom.

My discussion proceeds as follows: First, I present a brief overview of *Lectio Divina* in Section 2. Following this, I describe how *Lectio Divina* was incorporated into an introductory philosophy classroom in Section 3. Section 4 presents a discussion of the practice's benefits

and challenges, and Section 5 discusses potential changes that might make future efforts to incorporate *Lectio Divina* into the classroom more fruitful.

2. A brief overview of *Lectio Divina*

Though *Lectio Divina* translates literally as "divine reading," it is not merely a reading strategy; it is also a means of listening and coming to understanding (Keating, 2019). Monks, for whom literacy was a prerequisite for entry, were admonished to both read scripture aloud and meditate on its meaning (Robertson, 2011). Keator describes such rumination on classical and biblical texts as "[o]ne of the most cherished spiritual practices of the ancient monks" (2018, p. 119), which carried over to medieval monastics who developed *Lectio Divina*. This was due in part to the expense of books—though monks were not in short supply, Bibles were—but also part of an effort to internalize a passage of text and make the text one's own. *Lectio Divina* discourages exegetical reading in favor of personal understanding; one of the main ideas behind the fully developed practice is that true understanding is fundamentally internal and cannot be imposed externally (Robertson, 2011). This practice moves us from "a kind of awkward acquaintanceship with God to ever deepening levels of friendship, commitment, and experience" (Keating, 2019), allowing one to "enter into" understanding, rather than "dissecting" the passage under consideration (Foster, 1983, p. 24).

Lectio Divina represents the codification of centuries of evolving monastic practice. In the 12th Century, the Carthusian monk Guigo II's *Scala Claustralium*, or *Ladder of the Monks*, collected a number of contemplative scriptural exercises into the four steps of *Lectio Divina*: *lectio* (first reading), *meditatio* (repetition and reflection), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (rest in the presence of the Holy Spirit) (Robertson, 2011). Throughout the four steps, practitioners contemplate a short, easily memorized, scriptural passage.

In the first step, *lectio*, the practitioner merely reads the passage aloud "leisurely and intentionally" (Keator, 2018, p. 64), merely experiencing what the passage says (Martin, 2017). In the second *meditatio* step, the practitioner repeats the passage while engaging in "rumination" (Keator, 2018, p. 114) or metaphorically "chewing on" (120) the text, focusing intently on the meaning of the passage, examining their own reactions to the text emotionally, experientially, and intellectually (Robertson, 2011). Put slightly differently, *meditatio* allows the practitioner to ruminate over what the text means to them (Martin, 2017). Though various early practitioners of *Lectio Divina* disagreed slightly about how structured such reflection ought to be, there was general consensus that reflecting properly required intentionality and unrushed deliberation, and that such rumination would lead to genuine understanding of the relevant passage (Keator, 2018).

The practitioner next engages in *oratio*, prayer spontaneously motivated by their reaction to the passage. Such prayer represented their "heartfelt response" (Keator, 2018, p. 155) to the text and the fruits of their rumination. As Martin (2017) frames this step, the practitioner is asked to explore what they wish to say about the text. Notably for the purposes of the *Lectio Divina* exercise described below, such prayer was also viewed as a colloquy or heartfelt conversation (Keator, 2018). Thus the practitioner might use *oratio* as a prayer of petition, but they might also ask for further guidance or some sort of response; the words of the *oratio* were not a one-way street.

Finally, in *contemplatio*, the practitioner reflects again on the totality of the exercise, what they have learned (Robertson, 2011), awakening in the practitioner "new levels of self-awareness and a deeper understanding" (Keator, 2018, p. 178). Practitioners come away from *contemplatio* with knowledge of how their newly-gained understanding impact them (Martin, 2017). Other practitioners might concentrate on other aspects of the text, like the question of

being one's neighbor, and reach a different sort of understanding based on the different meditative focus.

3. *Lectio Divina* in the philosophy classroom

While *Lectio Divina* was developed as an individual practice, it can and has been engaged with in group settings in what Keating described as a "liturgy of *Lectio Divina*" (2019). It is in that spirit that I engaged with *Lectio Divina* in my own classroom. *Lectio Divina* is one of a wide range of potential activities that can be incorporated into a college classroom. Thus, this section has two goals. First, I discuss core metadisciplinary commitments that make *Lectio Divina* a potentially powerful tool for a philosophy classroom. Second, I discuss how the practice was incorporated into the course.

3.1. Philosophy and its core commitments

As a philosopher, I am squarely rooted in what is known as the analytic tradition. This tradition, which has been the dominant philosophical tradition of the Western world since the late 19th Century (Glock, 2008), focuses almost exclusively on propositions that can be analyzed and used to construct arguments (Passmore, 1957). Analytic philosophy stands in contrast to other traditions (e.g., the continental tradition) that are more amenable to nonpropositional, nonrational, or nonargumentative approaches to varying degrees (Levy, 2003; Williams, 1985).[2]

[2] 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). But in such cases, this branching out is primarily viewed through the lens of one's 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.

To say that analytic philosophy is propositionally focused is to say that it is primarily interested in claims that are *truth-evaluable*, or able to be judged true or false based on their ability to accurately represent the world. For example, claims like "It is sunny today," "Smith believes that giving to charity is praiseworthy," or "Jones finds the President's rhetoric upsetting," are truth-evaluable. By contrast, the actual upset experienced by Jones when the President speaks is not truth-evaluable; it merely is.[3]

Mental content can consist of both propositions and phenomena like Jones' upset. Propositions can be mental content when they constitute one's beliefs or are claims that one is thinking about. Nonpropositional experiences like pain, joy, fear, and disgust are obviously mental content when we experience them. Traditionally, a distinction has been drawn between propositional mental content, which can be used to model and represent the world by standing in for real-world objects and events, and nonpropositional mental content. The former are classified as *cognitive content*, the latter are classified as *noncognitive* (Thagard, 2019).

Thus, with respect to mental experiences, analytic philosophical practice is primarily interested in cognitive content to the exclusion of noncognitive content; only the former is truth evaluable. Generally speaking, the only noncognitive content that plays a meaningful role in analytic philosophy is *intuition*, the nonpropositional seeming that a particular claim is true or false. For example, philosophers will take seriously the idea that murder is morally wrong because it seems wrong; many of us have a strong, noncognitive response to murder that, for lack of a better term, makes us feel the wrongness of murder in our gut. One could offer truth-evaluable reasons for murder's wrongness, like the negative consequences of the

[3] To see this, consider the pain you feel when you stub your toe. A proposition about that pain, like, "I am in pain right now," can be judged true or false. But it is inappropriate or incoherent to say that the actual feeling of pain (or even the cry of pain) upon stubbing your toe is true or false because the pain does not represent anything; it merely *is* pain.

murder or the violation of rights accompanying the murder, but such propositional content stands alongside, rather than replaces, one's intuitions.

Highly regarded introductory textbooks reinforce this focus on propositional and cognitive content to our students. 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. Indeed, a throughline for such ideas in the Western tradition can be traced back to Aristotle, who remarked, "The arousing of prejudice, pity, anger, and similar emotions has nothing to do with the essential facts" of claims under analysis (*Rhetoric*, 1354a, 16-18).[4] Even intuition itself has recently been challenged,[5] threatening to exclude all noncognitive content from analytic practice.

This exclusion, especially at the introductory level, is problematic for two reasons.

First, it has been repeatedly shown that noncognitive reactions can 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 corresponding backfire effect (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Wood & Porter, 2019), and recent research into the phenomenon of 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. For example, introductory students are often either uncritical,

[4] Translation, (McKeon, 1941).
[5] See, e.g., (Nichols, Stich, & Weinberg, 2003; Weinberg, Nichols, & Stich, 2001).

tribal realists about the nature of truth or uncritical skeptics of truth who view all 'facts' merely as matters of personal opinion (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010; Lochrie, 1989). Students also regularly face social pressures to not offend others (Erion, 2005) and to at least appear tolerant of views with which they disagree (Delaney, 2004; Erion, 2005; Irvine, 2000; Lewis, 2015; Momeyer, 1995). Ignoring or setting aside students' reactions to course material, both cognitive and noncognitive, makes students more likely to adopt problematic views of rational enquiry as a result of the above considerations—for example, naïve skepticism—rather than views that will help students successfully engage with the world around them (Wright, 2019).

The second problem with the elimination of 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 because, as Keator remarks, *Lectio Divina* engages "the whole person: body, mind, and spirit" (2018, p. 65). I turn now to a description of how the practice instantiated in my classroom.

3.2. Implementing Lectio Divina *in the philosophy classroom*

I introduced a secularized version of *Lectio Divina* to my introductory philosophy class in an effort 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, how the modified *Lectio Divina* exercise would work in our class, and how, specifically, I hoped students would benefit from this practice.[6]

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

[6] I note that this discussion was did not occur because any form of informed consent was necessary; the exercise as implemented in class was merely a regular feature of the class in the same vein as reading questions, group activities, etc. Thus, no informed consent or IRB approval was necessary. Rather the discussion took place as the result of my goal of being as transparent as possible with my students when implementing any pedagogical technique; I want them to understand what it is and why we are doing it.

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 are encouraged to make whatever preparations they view necessary for engaging wholly and intentionally with the text, such as lowering laptop screens or sitting comfortably. After the class has settled in, I read the passage aloud to students. The excerpt for the day is included in the daily handouts so that students can 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 because, as I discuss below, there is a significant difference between three minutes of meditation and two to a novice meditator. Though contemplation in *Lectio Divina* is intended to be leisurely (Keator, 2018), that does not mean taking more time than is advisable or productive. This change was reflective of that difference.

The next step, *oratio*, was perhaps the most heavily modified of the four steps for secular practice.[7] 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

[7] 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.

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.

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.

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

Because much of the work students did throughout this exercise was personal—I obviously had no access to students' mental states during reflection and as the instructor, I deliberately refrained from inserting myself into small group discussions—much of my discussion in this section will focus on the end-of-exercise discussions, which represented the public-facing fruit of the activity. As mentioned above, I kept track of each discussion by summarizing student responses on a classroom white board. At the conclusion of each class, I photographed the white board for reference. The exercise was completed 21 times each across three sections, for a total of 63 individual instances of the *Lectio Divina* exercise. These 63 discussions formed the

basis of my reflection on the benefits and challenges of *Lectio Divina* in the college classroom, discussed here. My experience suggests that *Lectio Divina* played a beneficial role in helping novice philosophy students succeed, playing a crucial role helping students understand material, develop their philosophical skills, and successfully engage in philosophical practice.

4.1. Benefits of incorporating Lectio Divina

Incorporating *Lectio Divina* into my classroom has had at least four benefits. First, it provided students an opportunity to engage with the noncognitive aspects of philosophical practice, like attending to one's emotional reaction, in a way that many philosophy courses and philosophical exercises—which as noted above, focus almost exclusively on propositional and cognitive content—do not allow. Second, students were given space to express noncognitive reactions in a more accepting environment than is typically found in an introductory undergraduate philosophy classroom, again because of the disciplinary commitment to propositional and cognitive content. Third, students seemed more willing to propose interpretations—even novel or non-standard interpretations—of material than they normally would. Relatedly and finally, this exercise provided a valuable opportunity for students to engage in important aspects of philosophical practice independent of my instruction.

> Lectio Divina *allows students to attend to noncognitive aspects of philosophical practice and gives students space to discuss certain noncognitive responses not normally found in class*

As argued previously, it would be both inappropriate and inauthentic to ignore noncognitive responses and their effects on our reasoning, despite—as noted above—philosophy's regular move to exclude such responses. Further, we are sometimes unaware of our noncognitive

responses when we are not afforded the chance to experience them directly and reflect on that experience. As Pulkki et al. (2017) note, contemplative pedagogy provides a valuable opportunity to engage with these hidden experiences. Confusion and frustration are regular parts of even the most gifted philosopher's practice, and these responses are especially common among introductory students.

While much of the discussion following the *Lectio Divina* exercise unsurprisingly focused on textual interpretation in some way—such interpretation is often both familiar and safe for students—students also discussed noncognitive responses to the text that they were sometimes unaware of absent the opportunity to reflect.

For example, when discussing the excerpt from Marquis referenced above, students were able to identify Marquis' main point, but they were also able to use the discussion as a space to discuss emotional reactions to the text; multiple students discussing the topic noted that it felt "heavy," "scary," or "dark." This was, in part, the result of having never expressly considered how students' mortality made them feel. Another student expressed discomfort with Marquis' argument not because of the narrow point about life's value and the badness of death, but because Marquis uses this argument to underpin a view—abortion's impermissibility—the student disagreed with.

For other topics, students felt more comfortable expressing confusion or frustration. Nearly every day's reflection led to questions about the text, it's meaning, the author, or the author's intention. Such expressions often went beyond confused students' typical "I don't get it" and thus allowed students to discuss both cognitive and noncognitive reactions. In our metaphilosophy unit, for example, students expressed frustration, but also asked precise questions about the meaning of particular sentences and phrases. During a unit on the nature of health and disease, students asked questions about particular terminology, wanting to

know why one set of terms was preferable to another. A reflection during a unit on death and the meaning of life led to precise questions about Kierkegaard's leap of faith and what the leap involved. 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.

Ultimately, *Lectio Divina* allows students to engage with and discuss both their cognitive and noncognitive reactions to difficult or key textual passages in a way that is not typical, at least within introductory philosophy. This engagement not only increases student understanding, but also allows students to attend to the noncognitive influences on their beliefs and allows the instructor a better perspective on areas of difficulty students face.

Students are more willing to offer novel and risky interpretations of class material

Because discussion is merely collects student responses without evaluation of these interpretations, students seemed comparatively more willing to offer novel, nonstandard, or risky interpretations of the text after we reflected on it relative to more traditional presentations of the same material I have offered.[8]

Rather than simply accept the material as presented, students were comfortable voicing concerns that the arguments presented in daily excerpts were weak, incomplete, or insufficiently charitable. For example, students expressed concerns that Wakefield's (2007)

[8] Though I have no explicit argument for this claim, I suspect this result is due in part to contemplation's ability to increase creativity and information processing (Shapiro et al., 2008).

view of health and disease would lead to stigmatizing the mentally ill and that that Mackie's (1955) version of the argument from evil was mocking and contemptuous of genuine believers. During our unit on death, students questioned whether one's desire to die impacted the seeming badness of death or whether Kierkegaard's response[9] to the absurdness of our existence could justify wholehearted belief in conspiracy theories like the anti-vaccination movement. An excerpt from Morris Lazerowitz's (1970) "A note on metaphilosophy," where the author notes that philosophers who are "serious about the subject itself" (91) must attend to the nature of philosophy, led students to question why it took thousands of years for a philosopher to express that view, whether Lazerowitz's claim meant that all philosophy prior to 1970 was in some way unserious, and what the impact of philosophers' previous seeming failure to attend to philosophy's nature was. 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, and 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 students' interpretations were problematic, incomplete, or simply wrong; though this exercise motivated students to engage more deeply in independent philosophical practice than they normally would have otherwise, they remained novice philosophers. For example, though Lazerowitz is credited with coining the phrase

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

metaphilosophy and the idea of metaphilosophy as a distinct field of philosophical study is comparatively new, it's not the case that past philosophers failed to consider what philosophy was in some important sense. The value in this case comes from the opportunity the exercise provides to students to risk these interpretations by providing a low-stakes environment. These interpretations provide a valuable jumping-off point for daily discussion; I not only have a better sense of what my students are thinking, but the interpretations are often either right or at least wrong in very interesting ways meriting further discussion.

Students are able to engage in independent philosophical practice

The final advantage offered by the *Lectio Divina* exercise in my class was the opportunity it afforded, mentioned briefly above, 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 et al., 2010; Lochrie, 1989; Perry, 1970).

As a result, one of the greatest challenges of introductory philosophy—though not one I think is 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.

4.2. Drawbacks and challenges related to in-class use of Lectio Divina

While there are a number of benefits that accompany the *Lectio Divina* exercise described above, there are important challenges instructors who wish to implement this strategy or one like it would face.

The first major challenge this activity faces is the time commitment. The four steps of the exercise took approximately ten minutes each day, and the discussion following the activity took an additional 10 to 15 minutes. This meant that, on average, the entire activity took between 20 and 25 minutes, with some daily discussions pushing the total time to 30 minutes or more.

In my case, this was not a particularly serious challenge because class sessions lasted 75 minutes; even on days that generated the most discussion, I still had over half of the class remaining to cover course material. The most serious impact the exercise had on my class was that it often precluded other group activities, since such activities tend to be similarly time-intensive. More seriously, not every instructor has 75 minutes for each class period; classes that meet for an hour or less are more standard, and in such cases, the exercise has the potential to essentially swallow a class whole. There are some strategies that I believe could be implemented to mitigate both the concern that the *Lectio Divina* exercise would take up entire class meetings and the concern that it precludes other activities I shall discuss in the next section, but I think it is important at this juncture to note the challenge that such an involved exercise poses from a time-management perspective.

The second major challenge I faced dealt with student engagement. During the semester I piloted this activity with my class, I taught three sections of Introduction to Philosophy. In two of the sections, the activity seemed to be well received with active engagement and robust participation, even if the discussion sometimes took a minute or two to get rolling. For the third class, however, engagement proved to be a serious, persistent

problem. Reviewing discussion summaries for each section, the disengaged section regularly contributed less and seemed to move on more quickly in the third *oratio* step; while I frequently had to cut discussion short in this step for other sections, I moved on with the disengaged section because either the discussion petered out or because it seemed to drift off topic from the snippets of discussion I was able to pick up. In such cases, there was no reason to delay the final reflective portion and good reason to accelerate it in an effort to prevent the exercise from coming off the rails.

Unlike the time commitment issue discussed above, I do not have concrete ideas for how to address student disengagement with the exercise; this general disengagement from one section was particularly difficult for me. At the very least, strategies for overcoming such disengagement represent a potentially fruitful avenue of future research.

A final challenge not faced in my classroom but worthy of explicit consideration is *Lectio Divina*'s religious heritage and how that heritage could be viewed as either forced religious practice or cultural appropriation. One might ask why a practice with *Lectio Divina*'s religious heritage would be advisable when there are alternatives that don't carry such baggage.[10]

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

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

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 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.

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.

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.[11] 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

[11] In this case, the selections were a Dadaist poem of my own invention, "The parable of the old man and the young" by Wilfred Owen, and a verse from Jay-Z and Eminiem's "Renegade."

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.

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.

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 because this was the context in which the practice itself took place, 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.

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