

# Bringing Public Reason into the Philosophy Classroom

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, ‘philosophy as a way of life’ [PWOL] courses have emerged as an exciting new pedagogical approach. I explain here what a PWOL-course is. In doing so, I argue that the standard method for teaching such courses—what I call the ‘Smorgasbord Model’—presents us with a basic problem: viz., how to enable students in the context of a modern university setting to experience fully what a PWOL is. I propose a solution to this problem by exploring a PWOL that most teachers and students alike *already* find themselves immersed in, what I describe as *political liberalism applied to the context of the university classroom*. I show how this overlooked fact not only offers us a novel resource for teaching a PWOL-course. It also helps us as philosophy teachers—in a meta-pedagogical sense—to become more self-reflective about and appreciative of our underlying ethical commitments when teaching philosophy.

**WHEN TEACHING PHILOSOPHY**, the most basic question we need to answer for our students is: ‘What is philosophy?’ Indeed, as Seung-Kee Lee remarks, this question is “one of the problems of philosophy” itself (Lee 2018, 5). In addressing this question, we typically focus on content. We might proceed by describing the different branches of philosophy: theoretical philosophy deals with what there is (metaphysics) and how we can know it (epistemology), whereas practical philosophy explores how we should live (ethics/political philosophy/etc.). Or we might offer some general definition of philosophy. For example, we might tell our students that the aim of philosophy is “to question and understand very common ideas that all of us use every day without thinking about them” (Nagel 1987, 4). In these different ways, we portray philosophy as essentially an academic discipline with its own subject matter and methodology, alongside history, physics, or economics.

In recent years, an exciting new pedagogical model has emerged to challenge this standard approach. Building on and applying the work of many influential thinkers—including Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault as well as contemporary analytic philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, John Cooper, and

Alexander Nehamas—so-called ‘philosophy as a way of life’ (PWOL) courses encourage students to think about philosophy not merely as an academic field of study but rather *as a way of life*. That is, philosophy itself is viewed “as a mode of existing-in-the-world, which [has] to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which [is] to transform the whole of the individual’s life” (Hadot 1995, 265). Seen this way, philosophy isn’t just an intellectual pursuit divorced from the rest of our lives. Rather, it should be integrated into our activities, structuring both how we think about and carry out our daily lives.

In this paper, I want to defend a novel way of teaching a PWOL-course. Unlike what I’ll call the typical ‘Smorgasbord Model’ where PWOL-teachers allow students to sample a variety of PWOLs that are often quite new and foreign to them—e.g., Stoicism, Daoism, Confucianism, Aristotelianism, etc.—I propose that PWOL-teachers can, in addition, draw attention to a PWOL that nearly all of us, teacher and students alike, *already* find ourselves in, viz., the particular ‘way of life’ that pervades the modern university classroom itself. More specifically, I argue that—especially in philosophy courses—the manner in which we usually teach and conduct our classrooms already embodies a PWOL which can best be seen as *an academic version of political liberalism and public reason*.

My plan here is as follows. First, I’ll explain the nature of PWOLs. Second, I’ll discuss a basic dilemma that PWOL-courses in our modern pluralistic universities typically face. Third, I’ll propose a solution to this dilemma. This will require engaging in second-order reflection upon our teaching practices, comparing and contrasting them with the basic aims of political liberalism. Fourth and lastly, I’ll explicate ways in which this new approach can enhance instruction within traditional PWOL-courses.

### Philosophy as a Way of Life and Modern Education

What does it mean to regard ‘philosophy as a way of life’? To explain this, I’ll briefly outline Hadot’s seminal account of this topic. Hadot identifies three main features of a PWOL.

First, they involve (1) *embracing a holistic approach within philosophy*. Hadot appeals to the Stoic distinction between ‘philosophical discourse’ and ‘philosophy itself’ to illustrate this point (Hadot 1995, 266–7). For the purpose of ‘philosophical discourse’—that is, *when teaching about philosophy*—Stoics distinguished between three different subject matters: physics, ethics, and logic. However, in relation to ‘philosophy itself’—that is, *when philosophizing*—Stoics embraced a unified approach. That is, when engaging in philosophy itself, Stoics didn’t see issues about the physical world (*physics*), how we should live (*ethics*), and how we should think and speak (*logic*) as isolated topics. Instead, they sought to combine all these insights into a unitary worldview. Hadot claims that this ultimately should lead us to rethink the distinction between ‘philosophical discourse’ and ‘philosophy itself.’ These two activities are inseparable since philosophy needs philosophical discourse to “justify, motivate, and influence this

choice of life.” Likewise, philosophical discourse, which is not an end-in-itself, is merely incomplete unless it’s done in the service of some specific philosophical way of life (Hadot 2002, 172).

Second, PWOL involves (2) *embracing a holistic approach between philosophy and the rest of our lives*. For the ancients, philosophy was not a purely theoretical endeavor. Rather, they sought to bridge—or even dissolve—the gap between theory and practice. As Hadot writes: “We no longer engage in theory about the physical world, but we contemplate the cosmos. We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way” (Hadot 1995, 267). In this way, PWOL strives to have an existentially transformative effect upon our lives, ultimately helping us to live well and to achieve human flourishing.

Third and lastly, PWOL involves (3) *the adoption of daily methods and practices, or what Hadot calls ‘spiritual exercises,’ by means of which we can best realize (1) and (2)*. Such practices include, for example, meditation; asceticism; cultivating moral self-reflection; ‘remembrance of God,’ that is, “a perpetual reference to God at each instant of life”; being present-minded; and negative visualization, such as premeditating upon evils that might befall us (*premeditatio malorum*) in order to prepare us to deal with them and to instill gratitude in us for the things we presently have (see Hadot 1995, Chs. 3–4).

In addition to such private practices, ancient philosophers also embraced a deeply social approach to PWOL. As Hadot writes:

Ancient philosophy was always a philosophy practiced in a group, whether in the case of the Pythagorean communities, Platonic love, Epicurean friendship, or Stoic spiritual direction. Ancient philosophy required a common effort, community of research, mutual assistance, and spiritual support. (Hadot 1995, 274)

This social dimension included communal living with members of one’s own philosophical school, sharing meals together, and other social activities that fostered what Hadot identifies as the ‘the spiritual exercise *par excellence*,’ viz., philosophical friendship (Hadot 1995, 89). What all this highlights is that, for ancient philosophers, PWOL involves a deep embrace of the specific philosophy in question. With only a passing or half-hearted commitment, they believed one would fail to enjoy the full benefits of PWOL and fall short of becoming true philosophers.

The main question for us is: What are the prospects of incorporating PWOL into our modern educational system? Generally speaking, teachers of PWOL-courses face a basic dilemma.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, we need to avoid teaching PWOL as merely one philosophical topic among others like, say, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, or ethics. It’s not even enough just to teach about rival accounts of the good life and the practices associated with them. Rather, students must be encouraged to actively engage in and try out the various PWOLs for themselves.

On the other hand, we need to avoid simply proselytizing students into one particular way of life or other. PWOL-courses do not aim at converting students into, say, practicing Stoics, Epicureans, Neoplatonists, Buddhists, Christians, or Confucianists. This might be suitable in a different educational context, e.g., a Buddhist monastery or theological seminary. But such an undertaking is typically not appropriate when teaching a philosophy course in a standard university setting.

This usually leads PWOL instructors to adopt what I'll call the 'Smorgasbord Model.' On this approach, students in standard PWOL-courses are, first, exposed to many different worldviews—both ancient and modern—that embody a PWOL. Second, they're invited to test out each PWOL for themselves. Third, they're encouraged to reflect upon which specific approaches, if any, yield positive transformative effects in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Notice, though, that this Smorgasbord Model inevitably falls short of a PWOL as described by Hadot in two main respects. First, certain practices or 'spiritual exercises' identified by Hadot seem infeasible or even inappropriate in an ordinary philosophy classroom, such as engaging in a perpetual 'remembrance of God' or actual communal living with like-minded adherents. In this way, standard PWOL-courses lack what Hadot identifies as an essential feature of ancient PWOLs when he writes:

*There can never be a philosophy or philosophers outside a group, a community—in a word, a philosophical 'school'—which corresponds, above all, to the choice of a certain way of life. (Hadot 2002, 3, emphasis added)*

Students in a PWOL-course, of course, can't be expected to be actual practicing members of a philosophical community, at least not in any concrete way. Second and equally important, students exposed to the Smorgasbord Model lack the kind of comprehensive single-minded commitment traditionally associated with PWOLs. By their very nature, modern PWOL-courses encourage students to adopt each way of life on a 'trial basis.' The assumption is that students are making merely provisional commitments. Usually, we can only expect students to be devoted to a PWOL for as long it takes to cover that particular topic in the course, before moving on to the next unit. Furthermore, teachers of PWOL-courses can't themselves be expected to fully embody all of the many different PWOLs being surveyed. Lastly, even if a teacher is deeply committed to a specific PWOL, students don't have the opportunity to see this PWOL lived out or modeled by the teacher in their everyday life—unlike the type of philosophical instruction involved, for example, with ancient Platonic, Aristotelian, Epicurean, or Hellenistic schools of thought.

So what should we think of this standard Smorgasbord Model? On the one hand, it falls short of traditional PWOLs insofar as it offers students only a mere sampling of the various PWOLs being surveyed. On the other hand, it seems to be the only feasible option available. Indeed, far from being a defect, we might

think that it's the only appropriate method for teaching a PWOL-course. This arises from our views about the role of education within a modern liberal democracy. During premodern times and/or in small isolated communities, it's commonplace to have social life organized around a single comprehensive philosophical or religious doctrine. In such contexts, teachers educate their students within this single worldview. By contrast, in our modern pluralistic societies, we're highly wary of government imposing any one substantive 'conception of the good' upon all its citizens. And we're equally leery of teachers—at least in the public university system—indoctrinating their students into specific comprehensive worldviews.

This leaves us, though, with a problem. When teaching a PWOL-themed course in a modern pluralistic university system, is there any way to allow both teacher and students to be fully immersed within a PWOL so that students can have an actual first-hand experience of the type of PWOLs that Hadot, Foucault, and other thinkers describe? If we reflect hard enough, I think we'll realize that there is one particular PWOL that most of us—teachers and students alike—are already committed to within our classrooms: viz., political liberalism. More specifically, I contend that most philosophy courses embody *the basic tenets of modern-day political liberalism applied to the specific setting of a university classroom*. To avoid misunderstanding, let me clarify my position. I'm not arguing that we're all currently teaching political liberalism in our classrooms. Nor am I even arguing that we should teach political liberalism as one PWOL among others such as Confucianism, Stoicism, Aristotelianism, etc., in a standard PWOL-course. Instead, what I'm claiming is that, whether we realize it or not, the way in which most philosophy teachers—and indeed, perhaps most university professors in general—conduct our classrooms *already* reflects a deep commitment to a PWOL, viz., the basic principles and ideals of political liberalism.

Put differently, what I'm proposing is a meta-pedagogical analysis. My aim is not so much to defend the view that, at the first-order level, we should be teaching political liberalism as one PWOL among others in PWOL-courses. Rather, I want to engage in second-order reflections upon the manner in which most of us actually teach our courses. How we typically approach—and how we encourage our students to approach—philosophy classes are best seen as importing the basic tenets of modern-day political liberalism into the university context. Becoming more self-aware of this fact can not only help us to better understand our own underlying ethical commitments as teachers. It can also provide a unique solution to the problem discussed earlier. In order to offer students a genuine first-hand experience of what full commitment to a comprehensive PWOL might look like, we can just point, for illustration, to a particular PWOL that they're *already* immersed within: viz., political liberalism as applied to the academic setting. In the next sections, I develop this idea in more detail.

## Political Liberalism and the University Classroom: An Overview

Teachers often use political analogies to explain basic concepts to their students. One concrete example is to have students involved in drawing up a “class constitution.” Rather than teachers just laying down the rules for how students should behave—e.g., that they shouldn’t interrupt others, that they should be respectful of differing opinions, etc.—some teachers invite students to reflect for themselves and try to arrive at guidelines that all participants can reasonably endorse. As Jonathan Erwin writes in *The Classroom of Choice*, one way to do this is to:

[a]sk each student to write down the way she would like to be treated in [classroom discussion]. What behaviors and attitudes would she see and hear? Also, what behaviors and attitudes would she not see or hear? Next, this student joins with two or three other students, and the group comes up with a list they can all agree on. (Erwin 2004, 102)

When students are directly involved in establishing guidelines for class discussion, this not only enhances students’ sense of autonomy. It also makes them more likely to comply with the rules since these are ones they’ve chosen for themselves. (Of course, this approach is most realistic for a small discussion-based class as opposed to large lecture courses.)

Rather than examining specific concrete methods, I want to engage here in high-level theorizing about how best to think about our classrooms in political terms—both with regard to how we relate to our students and to how we want our students to interact with each other and ourselves. In what follows, I survey three core tenets of modern political liberalism and then show how they all can be found, in suitably modified versions, in a typical philosophy classroom. These are:

- (1) ‘the fact of reasonable pluralism,’ especially in light of various so-called ‘burdens of judgment’
- (2) the proper response to such pluralism, viz., ‘a duty of civility’ to seek out public reasons when dealing with one’s fellow citizens on certain public matters
- (3) the fundamental value underlying modern-day liberalism, viz., freedom itself

Let me offer one important caveat here. By ‘political liberalism,’ I refer to the type of liberalism which mainly focuses on issues of political legitimacy within a pluralistic society. I’ll often use John Rawls’s influential account of these topics as my starting point. My analysis is not, however, wedded to Rawls’s particular views on these debates. Indeed, it’s meant to be broad enough to include most versions of modern-day liberalism, including both ‘classical’ liberalism and what is variously called ‘new,’ ‘modern,’ ‘left,’ or ‘social’ liberalism.

With this in mind, I'll proceed by, first, explaining each political tenet, and second, showing what they look like when applied to the university classroom setting.

### Tenet #1: The Fact of Reasonable Pluralism (Political Context)

For many political philosophers, perhaps the defining feature of modern liberal democracies is 'the fact of reasonable pluralism.' As Rawls puts it, this is "the fact that a plurality of conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious, philosophical, and moral, is the normal result of its culture of free institutions" (Rawls 2003, 441). In contrast to mere 'pluralism as such,' 'reasonable pluralism' obtains when citizens, holding widely diverse views, "willingly accept [. . .] fair terms of cooperation" (Rawls 2003, 24, fn. 27). In a similar vein, Robert Talisse describes the situation as one in which:

reasonable people—sincere, honest, and intelligent individuals carefully attending to the relevant consideration and doing their epistemic best—nonetheless disagree at the level of Big Questions. (Talisse 2007, 80)

The basic idea is that no matter how sincere, conscientious, and reasonable we are, when we try to formulate our comprehensive doctrines—that is, our "conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct" (Rawls 2003, 13) about the so-called 'Big Questions' of life—this inevitably yields divergent viewpoints.

Far from being a tragedy, however, Rawls insists that we should embrace this result. It highlights the fact that the public political cultures of democratic societies are strongly committed to protecting individual liberties, including freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Thus understood, the fact of reasonable pluralism is simply "the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions" (Rawls 2003, xxiv).

In order to explain such divergences, Rawls appeals to what he calls 'the burdens of judgment.' He identifies six main sources of disagreement between reasonable people. These include: (1) the evidence being complex and contradictory and difficult to assess; (2) different weightings for relevant considerations; (3) vague concepts which lead to differing interpretations; (4) our assessments being shaped by our total experience, which varies from person to person; (5) that there are normative considerations on both sides of a given issue; and (6) that there exist a plurality of values, often making decisions difficult with no clear-cut answers (Rawls 2003, 56–57).

In light of this situation, Rawls claims that we should see "the diversity of reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines found in democratic societies as a *permanent feature of their public culture*" (Rawls 2003, 136, emphasis added). Indeed, he suggests that the prospects for a single comprehensive philosophical, religious, or moral doctrine to which all members of a modern

society adhere to “can be maintained only by an oppressive use of state power,” or what he calls ‘the fact of oppression’ (Rawls 2003, 37).

### Tenet #1: The Fact of Reasonable Pluralism (Academic Context)

What does ‘the fact of reasonable pluralism’ look like when transposed to the university classroom? If anything, philosophy teachers face an even greater diversity of viewpoints than what Rawls envisions. Rawls only focuses on differing comprehensive doctrines related to rival theories of human flourishing or the good life. As Talisse puts this point:

There is no single comprehensive philosophical, religious or moral doctrine upon which reason converges. That is to say, there is a set of defensible and reasonable comprehensive moral ideals such that each ideal is fully consistent with the best exercise of reason but inconsistent with other members of the set. (Talisse 2010:16)

By contrast, philosophy teachers face ‘the fact of reasonable pluralism’ across the entire philosophical spectrum. Reasonable pluralism applies not just to issues in moral and political philosophy, but also to metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, and all other branches of philosophy. If we can’t expect professional philosophers—who presumably engage in philosophical debates in sincere, conscientious, and reasonable ways—to avoid reasonable pluralism regarding what Talisse calls the ‘Big Questions,’ then there’s no reason to think that the situation will be any better when it comes to our undergraduate students.

In the political context, the fact of reasonable pluralism primarily takes the form of conflicting religious or philosophical traditions, such as different religious faiths or rival comprehensive philosophical doctrines like utilitarianism or Kantian ethics. In the academic context, however, this occurs at more individualized levels. While students’ worldviews do often reflect their prior commitment to some particular philosophical or religious tradition, most undergraduate students’ outlooks tend to be an amalgam of many disparate influences, including their social upbringing, their peers, and occasionally even their professors. Regardless, all the same ‘burdens of judgment’ apply equally to the modern university classrooms: evidence is complex and contradictory; our evaluations are shaped by our varying total experiences; we assign different weights to various considerations; our concepts are vague; and there exist a plurality of values, such that no clear-cut answers are easily available. In this way, reasonable pluralism is just as inevitable in the philosophy classroom—or perhaps even more so—as it is in the political domain.

Lastly, the only possible way to eliminate ‘the fact of reasonable pluralism’ in our courses would similarly be through what we might call ‘the fact of pedagogical oppression.’ For example, we might choose to grade students harshly if they don’t agree with our particular philosophical viewpoint. Or we might choose to call mainly on those students who share our specific outlook. Such practices



should, of course, be eschewed. But doing so means that ‘reasonable pluralism’ will invariably remain a permanent feature of our philosophy classrooms.

In light of this situation, the question arises: What’s the best way—either for (1) political actors (e.g., judges, political figures, and private citizens) or (2) teachers and students in the academic context—to deal with this unavoidable ‘fact of reasonable pluralism’? I address this concern in the next two sections.

## Tenet #2: Public Reason and the Duty of Civility (Political Context)

What Rawls strikingly calls the ‘fundamental’ or ‘central’ organizing idea for his entire political philosophy is the idea of ‘society’ understood as “a fair system of cooperation over time” (Rawls 2003, 14–15). Given this, Rawls thinks that the fact of reasonable pluralism leads to the following pressing concern:

[W]hat political conception of justice can provide the common basis of principles and ideals to guide public political discussion on which citizens affirming conflicting religious and nonreligious yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines can agree? (Rawls 2003, xl)

Rawls’s overall idea is that, in a spirit of cooperation, we should seek principles of justice that all citizens can reasonably endorse from a shared point of view. Put differently, such principles should be the object of an ‘overlapping consensus’ which all citizens can affirm from within their respective comprehensive doctrines. This ultimately helps us to achieve what Rawls calls ‘stability for the right reasons’—that is, not a mere balance of power or *modus vivendi* but rather a social stability grounded in an allegiance to the democratic society’s ideals and values (Rawls 2003, 459).

So what’s the best way to respond to the challenges raised by ‘the fact of reasonable pluralism’? Rawls’s solution is an appeal to the idea of ‘public reason.’ He argues that whenever we seek to exercise the coercive power of the state with respect to matters of basic justice and constitutional essentials, we should offer ‘public reasons’ for our decisions: that is, ones that draw upon a common point of view rather than merely private reasons based only upon our individual comprehensive doctrines.<sup>3</sup> This proposal is of course highly controversial. Defenders of the Rawlsian view think that satisfying this requirement is the only course of action compatible with treating our fellow citizens justly (Quong 2014) or with showing respect to those holding different viewpoints from our own (Larmore 2003). By contrast, critics argue that this requirement is too exclusionary. They insist that this approach unfairly forces religious believers in particular to set aside their private religious convictions when engaging in public affairs.

For our purposes, we need not try to settle these debates. Instead, I mainly want to draw attention to the underlying motivation behind this Rawlsian ideal. Rawls thinks that this demand reflects what he calls a moral—rather than legal—‘duty of civility’ for us to explain how our proposals align with publicly shared

values and to reflect a willingness to listen and be fair-minded when making decisions that significantly impact other people (Rawls 2003, 217).

At the end of the day, what motivates Rawls's appeal to public reason is a concern for what he calls 'civic friendship' (Rawls 2003, 447).<sup>4</sup> This requires us to display a kind of basic civility in our dealings with fellow citizens. As Cheshire Calhoun observes, the virtue of civility "always involves a display of respect, tolerance, or considerateness" (Calhoun 2000, 259). In fulfilling this duty of civility, we display a willingness to interact on fair terms of cooperation that express a mutual respect for our fellow citizens, seeking to justify our various legislative policies and actions from a common point of view.

## Tenet #2: Public Reason and the Duty of Civility (Academic Context)

What might such a 'duty of civility' look like when imported to the university setting? Following Rawls's lead, I think we should also regard the classroom as a kind of 'society.' More precisely, it more closely resembles what Rawls labels an 'association.' What exactly is the difference? For Rawls, a society is a 'complete and closed social system': that is, a self-sufficient social order that we enter by birth and typically exit only by death and in which we lead a complete life (Rawls 2003, 40). Associations differ in two main ways. First, they're entered into and exited from voluntarily. Second, unlike the modern liberal democracies that Rawls focuses on, associations—e.g., private clubs, religious organizations, etc.—usually have some concrete substantive final end or aim (Rawls 2003, 41).<sup>5</sup>

What are the relevant parallels between 'associations' and philosophy classrooms? First, both teachers and students enter into—and, in certain cases, exit from—the latter voluntarily. Second, philosophy classrooms also have a substantive final end or aim. Unlike private clubs and religious organizations, though, the specific shared goal here is simply *learning*. Nonetheless, akin to a Rawlsian 'society,' we should think of philosophy classrooms as also involving "a fair system of cooperation over time." In a Rawlsian framework, this involves adopting "terms that each participant may reasonably accept provided that everyone else likewise accepts them" (Rawls 2003, 16).

What do such 'fair terms of cooperation' look like in an academic context? At the most basic level, this requires establishing ground rules for how students should behave, especially in class discussion. Such fair terms of cooperation might involve, for example, that students should raise their hands and wait to be called upon; that they shouldn't interrupt when other students are talking; that they should be respectful and refrain from insulting or attacking others who hold contrary views; that they should avoid monopolizing discussion; etc. More generally, this reflects a fundamental commitment to two basic values: (1) reciprocity and (2) civility. Reciprocity involves participants doing their part and acting cooperatively as the rules require, where this results in a mutually beneficial situation for all parties. And conforming to such fair terms of cooperation amounts to a basic act of civility. In doing so, students follow 'socially established

rules' including rules of etiquette, that express mutual respect, tolerance, and considerateness for their fellow classmates (cf. Calhoun 2000).

Finally, how should we deal specifically with 'the fact of reasonable pluralism' as found in higher education? Here, unlike Rawlsian 'public reason,' I'll instead invoke what I will call *public reasoning*. For Rawls, the demand for public reasons requires citizens to refrain from offering private reasons—that is, ones based solely on their own personal comprehensive doctrines—as opposed to reasons that all citizens can reasonably endorse in cases where state coercive power is used to enforce matters of basic justice and constitutional essentials.

By contrast, what I'm calling 'public reasoning' involves no such restrictions. Students invariably draw upon both publicly shared and privately held beliefs in the classroom. The main difference arises with respect to how such behaviors are treated. When a citizen fails to offer public reasons that others can reasonably endorse, this arguably amounts to a failure of basic civility or respect for one's fellow citizens. When a student fails to engage in public reasoning, however, this amounts more to a failure of justification. Purely 'private reasoning' in the classroom—e.g., a sheer assertion without any explanation or defense ("I just don't agree, end of story") or appeals to purely private insights or transcendent mystical experiences—isn't so much disrespectful or uncivil as it is insular and unpersuasive. That is, what's at stake with respect to 'public reasoning' is the student's ability to meet their fellow interlocutors on common ground—that is, from a shared point of view where they can see each other's views as reasonable. Taken to an extreme—say, a student displaying strident unreasonableness—a lack of public reasoning might indeed become uncivil and disruptive. More often than not, however, the student simply fails to win any support for their position. Put differently, while failures to engage in Rawlsian 'public reason' arguably display *a lack of respect for one's fellow citizens*, failing to try to engage in what I'm calling 'public reasoning' in the university classroom instead results in *a loss of respect for one's own views*, at least from the standpoint of fellow classroom participants.

Maughn Gregory and Megan Laverty claim that one concrete final end in teaching a philosophy course is to lead students "to arrive at one or more *reasonable philosophical judgments* regarding the issues and questions they have identified as most meaningful" (Gregory and Laverty 2009, 167). Encouraging students to engage in terms of 'public' rather than merely 'private' reasoning helps them to express and formulate their viewpoints in more philosophically reasonable ways.

### Tenet #3: The Fundamental Value of Freedom (Political Context)

Lastly, *why* should we adopt this overall approach? The most fundamental value for modern political liberalism—as its name implies—is freedom. Valuing the freedom to 'live one's own life as one chooses' has been described as the 'benchmark' of liberalism (Gaus 1996, 360) or as simply 'definitional' of what it even means to be a liberal (Cranston 1967, 459).

Following Isaiah Berlin (1969), we can distinguish between two types of freedom here: ‘negative’ and ‘positive.’ Negative freedom has two main aspects. On the one hand, negative freedom implies a lack of coercion. That is, modern liberal states are generally expected to refrain from infringing upon individual liberties. On the other hand, it implies that when states do employ coercive force, they’re required to provide good justification for such interference. That is, it’s always illegitimate for a state to engage in a merely arbitrary exercise of power. Gerald Gaus describes this as the ‘Fundamental Liberal Principle,’ which he states as follows: “Imposition on others requires justification; unjustified impositions are unjust” (Gaus 1996, 165).

In contrast to negative freedom which implies the mere *absence* of something—e.g., of wrongful imposition, interference, coercion, etc.—positive freedom requires the *presence* of something in order for us to be truly free—e.g., self-mastery, self-determination, self-realization, autonomy, etc. Berlin famously worried that such positive freedom might lead to the potential for authoritarian regimes. By contrast, present-day liberals tend to interpret this type of freedom in terms of the more modest demand to create “conditions necessary for individuals to be self-sufficient or to achieve self-realization” (Carter 2021).

This basic ideal underlies Rawls’s well-known idea of ‘primary goods,’ which he describes as the ‘necessary means’ for achieving one’s aims in life ‘whatever one’s system of ends’ (Rawls 1971, 93). For Rawls, such primary goods include “rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth” (Rawls 1971, 62). In addition, they also involve what Rawls characterizes as “perhaps the most important primary good, viz., self-respect,” which involves “a confidence in one’s ability, so far as it is within one’s power, to fulfill one’s intentions” (Rawls 1971, 440). Without such basic primary goods, it is difficult, if not impossible, to successfully realize any of our individual life plans.

### Feature #3: The Fundamental Value of Freedom (Academic Context)

In what ways can a commitment to the value of freedom be found within the typical university classroom? The American Association of University Professors’ *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* (1915) states: “The term ‘academic freedom’ has traditionally had two applications—to the freedom of the teacher and to that of the student, *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*.”<sup>6</sup> Although debates about academic freedom have mostly centered around professors, teachers, and researchers, I want to focus here on how it applies to *students*.

First, what does the recognition of what I’ll call, adapting Berlin, ‘negative’ academic freedom look like? Normally, ‘negative’ academic freedom is cashed out in terms of freedom from wrongful state or public interference. That is, academic freedom consists in “the freedom of individual academics and students to teach, study and pursue knowledge and research without unreasonable interference or restriction from law, institutional regulations or public pressure” (Matei

2018). Besides such external threats to ‘negative’ academic freedom, however, it’s important to highlight potential threats found within the classroom setting itself.

In general, we think that students should have the freedom to think for themselves, to express their own opinions, and to explore their own ideas about various debates without undue interference. This seems especially true for a philosophy classroom. When discussing Plato’s views on education, Andrea Tschemplik puts the idea this way:

In conversation with another person, a sudden spark flies and an insight is born in the soul. Something very close to this is what needs to happen in the classroom, and *this requires that the classroom become a community where participants can freely engage in inquiry.* (Tschemplik 2018, 13, emphasis added)

However, as any veteran philosophy teacher knows, such freedom cannot be given *carte blanche*, especially for undergraduate students. There are three main sources of potential ‘coercion,’ at least from the students’ perspective: (1) grading; (2) the enforcement of classroom guidelines; and (3) *via* what Robert Nozick calls the ‘coercive’ force of philosophical argumentation itself. Notably, these restrictions are not inherently illegitimate. As discussed earlier, what’s crucial is that any “[i]mposition on others requires justification; unjustified impositions are unjust” (Gaus 1996, 165). When focusing on philosophy classes in particular, (2) and (3) are arguably the more distinctive topics to explore vis-à-vis the issue of the ‘negative’ academic freedom of students.<sup>7</sup>

First, philosophy teachers must often use coercion in enforcing classroom guidelines, especially during class discussion. Unlike the kind of unlimited freedom experienced within a Hobbesian state of nature, citizens in civil society—and likewise, students within the philosophy classroom—enjoy freedom only within reasonable limits. Impositions on freedom are needed in many instances, from giving late grade penalties to keeping disruptive or dominating students in check. In disciplinary matters, what’s most essential is that teachers explain to the affected parties, either beforehand *via* stated policies on the class syllabus or in later conversations with students, why they’re being punished or called out in a certain way—at least if teachers want to avoid making a student feel like their actions are just sheer arbitrary exercises of power. This is especially important when it comes to classroom discussion in a philosophy course. As the philosopher of education Matthew Lipman points out:

[Students] must be allowed to experience what it is *like to exist in a context of mutual respect, of disciplined dialogue, of cooperative inquiry, free of arbitrariness and manipulation.* The casual observer may dismiss what seems to be happening in such a classroom as ‘just talk.’ But this ignores the fact that *nothing sharpens reasoning skills like disciplined conversation.* (Lipman 1988, 48, emphases added)

In the end, enjoying academic negative freedom within reasonable limits ultimately helps philosophy students to refine and improve upon their own reasoning abilities.

Second, Robert Nozick in *Philosophical Explanations* intriguingly defends the view that philosophical argumentation itself can often be “carried on as a coercive activity” (Nozick 1981, 4). He points out that this is reflected in our common metaphors for philosophizing: arguments are *powerful* when they are *knockdown*; weak arguments don’t carry much *punch*; the aim of philosophy is to *defeat* our opponent’s position; or arguments *compel* or *force* us to believe in a certain view. By contrast, Nozick defends an alternative way of philosophizing which he calls ‘philosophical explanations.’ I quote Nozick’s proposal in detail:

Philosophy, without arguments, in one mode, would guide someone to a view [. . .] present[ing] thoughts the reader has had (or is ready to have), only more deeply. Reading [. . .] stimulated new thoughts which, pleased with, he tentatively adopts on his own [. . .] [the following discussion] deepens and extends these very thoughts [. . .] [and] also stimulates further new thoughts [. . .] At no point is the person forced to accept anything. He moves along gently, exploring his own and the author’s thoughts. (Nozick 1981, 7)

What Nozick provocatively describes as ‘philosophy without arguments’ is indeed a common way that some philosopher teachers conduct their own courses. Rather than aiming to compel students, *via* argumentation, to adopt a certain set of beliefs, they engage in more open-ended explorations of the issues where teacher and students alike can think together about various topics. Nozick describes this approach in terms of ‘philosophical explanations’ since what we’re trying to do here—in keeping with Aristotle’s famous dictum that ‘philosophy begins with wonder’—is to make sense of certain philosophical puzzlements. That is, we’re asking: “how is one thing possible, given (or supposing) certain other things?” (Nozick 1981, 9).

Notably, this non-coercive approach resembles the type of philosophizing that Hadot says took place in a PWOL like Plato’s Academy. Hadot writes:

[N]either one of the interlocutors imposes his truth upon the other. *On the contrary, dialogue teaches them to put themselves in each other’s place and thereby transcend their own point of view. . . .* This *logos*, moreover, did not represent a kind of absolute knowledge; instead, it was equivalent to the agreement which is established between interlocutors who are brought to admit certain positions in common. . .” (Hadot 2002, 63, emphasis added)

*Contra* Nozick, however, I want to argue that (1) the traditional model of philosophical argumentation and (2) a more open-ended inquiry defended by Nozick *both* have their places within the philosophy classroom. On the one hand,

philosophical argumentation—where we aim *to convince* students about various matters—has many invaluable benefits. As any philosophy teacher knows, students sometimes just get things wrong or fail to see certain problems in their own positions. Indeed, Nozick himself concedes that philosophical argumentation—that is, “considering objections, hypothetical situations, and so on”—does “help to sharpen a view” (Nozick 1981, 5).

On the other hand, more open-ended inquiry—where we *think alongside* our students—also offers significant rewards. It can often be highly refreshing for students to feel like there’s no explicit agenda behind a classroom discussion. In this situation, teachers and students alike belong to what we might call, borrowing from the Philosophy for Children tradition, a ‘community of inquiry,’ in which all participants are invited to explore and to share both their own and other participants’ views on various topics (cf. Lipman 1998 and 2003).

Second, moving on to the topic of ‘positive’ academic freedom: What might this look like in the philosophy classroom? Philosophy teachers not only provide their students with a certain body of philosophical knowledge. Perhaps more importantly, they also furnish students with a bevy of what we might call ‘intellectual’ primary goods, useful not just for further academic pursuits but for deeper, more reflective lives in general. Such ‘intellectual’ primary goods include, e.g., critical thinking and reasoning skills; refined verbal abilities, both in terms of speaking and writing; creativity; rigor and discipline; depth of thought; intellectual autonomy; and so on. Indeed, these goods taken together arguably help to realize what Rawls calls “perhaps the most important primary good,” viz., the student’s own sense of ‘self-respect.’

When talking about the overall benefits of a liberal arts education—where this obviously includes philosophical training—Amy Gutmann helps to put this point into perspective. She writes:

At its best, a liberal arts education *prepares undergraduates for success in whatever profession they choose to pursue*, and it does so by means of teaching them to think creatively and critically about themselves, their society (including the rules and responsibilities of the professions in their society), and the world. (Gutmann 2015, 21, emphasis added)

Fully appreciating this fact—on the part of both teacher and students—can help promote students’ experience of ‘positive’ academic freedom in the classroom. In the end, this enhances our students’ sense of autonomy, self-determination, and self-realization.

## Conclusion

In his introduction to Diana Hess’s *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, Michael Apple writes: “[D]emocracy is a *way of life*. It is best learned in schools by actually engaging in and practicing it” (Hess 2009, xii). This echoes Hess’s own later sentiments that “[d]emocratic education is a form

of civic education that purposely teaches young people how to *do* democracy” (Hess 2009, 15).

In a similar vein, I’ve been arguing here that political liberalism is also a ‘way of life.’ And quite strikingly, it’s one that we’re *already* engaged in—in a suitably modified version—within the college classroom itself. Just like in the political sphere, philosophy teachers within an academic context must also:

- (1) confront ‘the fact of reasonable pluralism’ in their classrooms due to various ‘burdens of judgment’
- (2) encourage students to conform to a ‘duty of civility’ by seeing the classroom as a ‘fair system of cooperation’ and to offer ‘public reasoning’ for their views if they wish to persuade their fellow classmates
- (3) defend students’ ‘negative’ academic freedom to think for themselves within certain reasonable limits
- (4) and strive to enhance students’ ‘positive’ academic freedom by furnishing them with a basic set of ‘intellectual’ primary goods—e.g., critical thinking and reasoning skills, verbal skills, creativity, rigor, and intellectual self-respect—that are among the necessary means for achieving many, if not most, of their concrete aims in life

When discussing teaching Introduction to Philosophy courses, Stephen Daniel remarks: “Introduction to Philosophy is not a survey of material; it is *an invitation to a lifestyle*” (Daniel 2018, 90, emphasis added). That is, philosophy itself can feel like a new ‘way of life’ for many students. What I’ve claimed here is that a particular PWOL—viz., political liberalism as applied to the higher education context in general—is also a lifestyle that teachers and students alike find themselves already acculturated to and immersed in, whether we realize it or not.

Importantly, this recognition can greatly assist us when teaching PWOL-courses. Unlike the standard ‘Smorgasbord Model,’ the present approach can enable students to understand what a full commitment to a PWOL might actually look like. More significantly, this is a PWOL that students are intimately familiar with—and likely already committed to—themselves. Highlighting this fact can help to prepare students for what they’ll later encounter in a PWOL-course. Students will not only have a better appreciation of what a PWOL is and how it can be transformative for their lives. In addition, they’ll also have a concrete point of reference—viz., their own first-hand experience of the PWOL found in the university classroom—by which to compare and contrast the often quite new and foreign PWOLs that they’ll encounter throughout the semester.

Lastly, this discussion can help philosophy teachers more broadly. By becoming more reflective about their underlying ethical commitments, philosophy teachers can use this meta-pedagogical insight for guidance as they seek to adopt



teaching practices that best reflect the overall aims and ideals of political liberalism found within higher learning in general.

## Notes

1. For an insightful discussion of this worry, see Horst 2021.
2. For helpful accounts of typical PWOL-courses, see Hidalgo 2021, Wright 2021, and Horst 2021.
3. This should be understood, of course, in light of Rawls's later famous 'proviso'—see Rawls 2003, lii.
4. For a helpful discussion of this topic, see Dagger 2014.
5. Notice that in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls typically thinks of 'associations' as societies dominated by a single comprehensive doctrine. By contrast, in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls offers a more inclusive conception of associations—see Rawls 1971, Section 71.
6. <https://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/A6520A9D-0A9A-47B3-B550-C006B5B224E7/0/1915Declaration.pdf>.
7. For a provocative discussion of grading as 'coercive,' see Curren 2005.

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