

Steven M. Cahn, Alexandra Bradner, and Andrew P. Mills, eds. *Philosophers in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching*. Hackett Publishing Company 2018. 280 pp. \$69.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781624667459); \$25.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781624667442).

What is a review article? I ask this question as I prepare a review. The question is intentional, directed. I intend to highlight an overarching theme that runs through the 24 autobiographical accounts of teaching philosophy within the book *Philosophers in the Classroom*.

Is a review a critique, or perhaps a summary, or both? What makes a good review as opposed to a bad one? Who establishes the conventions governing such decisions, and why? For whom is the review written? Finally, what is the *value* of a review? I begin with the last question. Seen within the context of other academic forms of writing, the review is trivial. It is in some sense a report of a report, and therefore serves as second-hand information. It is unequal to the journal article or academic book. Institutionally, it is insufficient for tenure. I leave the question of the nature of the review article at this.

I now ask—*What is philosophy?* What makes for good and bad philosophy? Who establishes such conventions and why? For whom is philosophy? Finally, what is the *value* of philosophy? I begin again within the last question. Seen within the context of other academic professions, philosophy is trivial. It is in some sense a report of a report, and therefore serves as second-hand information. It is unequal to the STEM fields, nursing, and business. Institutionally, the existence of philosophy is unnecessary.

Now I do not say that the latter evaluation of philosophy is correct. I only say, and do believe, that it is the evaluation that is often prejudicially stamped upon philosophy. Institutionally, philosophers are review articles. As David Curry puts it: ‘Philosophers have been swimming upstream since long before Socrates drank the hemlock, sparring with a recalcitrant public’ (Ch 16: David C.K. Curry, ‘Of Games and Confrontations,’ 150).

The status of the philosopher within the institution today may be likened (I say this by way of analogy, not identity) to that of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. The oppressed does as the oppressor wills. The oppressor leads, the oppressed follows. The oppressor commands, the oppressed obeys. Insofar as the oppressed submits to the oppressor, there is no resistance. Insofar as the oppressed refuses to submit, there is resistance. Resistance ultimately strengthens the oppressed, and weakens the oppressor. For the oppressor thrives on the continuation of the status quo between oppressor and oppressed. Insofar as this relation is disturbed, the oppressor loses status and position, so that the inequality naturally shifts to the other side. The oppressed strengthens in resistance. The oppressor weakens by this resistance.

Who is the oppressor of philosophy? *Metis*, as Odysseus once said—no one. And yet, the oppressor is in some sense everyone. For the oppressor is an *ideology*. In precisely this, however, philosophy has an advantage. For one of the tasks of philosophy is to criticize just such ideologies. The trained philosopher is less likely to be deceived. Still more, philosophy sits at the lowest rung in the analogy of oppressor and oppressed. The philosopher is often least valued, must resist the most, and is in turn strengthened the most. *I am not a review article!* Exclaims the philosopher. *I am more than this*. In resisting such evaluations, great philosophy is born. And so too great teachers.

The overarching theme of *Philosophers in the Classroom* is the ideological devaluation of philosophy coupled with the stories of teachers who, in resisting this ideology, have become great teachers. It is also the story of the need to explain the benefits of philosophy to a society that no

longer wants philosophy, and therefore does not understand the consequences that might arise from the absence of it.

A case example. Elizabeth Jelinek (Ch 20: ‘Critical Thinking Can Save Your Life’) tells the story of her Jewish grandparents who fled pre-war Nazi Germany. It was her philosophically-minded grandfather who saved the family from destruction. After procuring a copy of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*: ‘He read, he analyzed, but most importantly, he had the courage to confront uncomfortable truths’ (204). In this case, ‘uncomfortable truths’ meant taking Hitler’s ejaculations on Nation and Race seriously. The family *had* to leave Germany. The moral of the story, as the title suggests, is that critical thinking *can* save your life. But philosophy is chiefly concerned with the development of critical thinking. The remaining deduction is clear.

What then becomes of a generation that sees no benefit in philosophy? It will fail to procure the ‘virtues’ of philosophical training—deliberative thinking, the habitude of self-reflection, the speculative retreat beyond the mundane, and why, for the simple reason that thought may *freely* do so. Philosophy is, in some sense, the intellectual instantiation of whatever it is that is ‘free’ within our nature. Bereft of this, what becomes of society? Again, the deduction is clear.

‘Philosophers are not clergy,’ Nick Smith informs us, ‘We do not sit bedside or offer last rites. But we are guides who share conversations with students about the very deepest issues in their lives’ (Ch 23: ‘When Our Students Die,’ 250). Here the question might be asked: Is not every teacher a guide? Both yes and no. Every parent, guardian, teacher, etc., is in some sense a guide. But not every parent, guardian, teacher, etc., has prepared themselves for confronting the deepest issues in life. Philosophy ought to prepare us for this. I say ‘ought,’ not ‘does.’ Modesty dictates that we be realists in such matters. There are few Nick Smiths among us. We have not all equally suffered the lessons of life. Yet even in this we may derive some benefit: equipped with philosophy, we may at least better learn from those lessons that we do suffer.

‘Although the study of philosophy has comparable importance and enormous practical relevance for their lives, many students arrive profoundly skeptical of such claims, and many are not converted by their first (and often last) encounter with philosophy’ (Paul Hurley, Ch 5: ‘Meeting Students Where They Are,’ 34). The initial reaction here is to perhaps blame. Whose fault? Their fault. Their parent’s fault. Societies’ fault. We cannot know if any of this is the case. One thing that we can know, however, is that it is the teacher’s fault insofar as the teacher ceases to care for students who do not care. Paul Hurley illustrates the significance of this—evolve, adapt, try again, don’t give up. Philosophy is different from other things. If a student fails to see the significance of calculus, they may simply not be suited to mathematics. If a student fails to see the significance of philosophy, they may not be suited to life. This is unacceptable. And even if an exaggeration, the sheer fact of the ‘may’ makes the teaching of philosophy an exigent matter. The teacher may not always be successful. The teacher of philosophy often feels that they *must* be successful.

Another benefit: *Philosophie als fröhliche Wissenschaft*. The ancients understood this concept well, and so too it seems Russell Marcus (Ch 22: ‘Teaching as a Humanism’). In a whirlwind that combines both comedy and tragedy, Marcus shares with us his life spent with students as a high school mathematics teacher in NYC’s neglected boroughs, of his hysterical account (this is a must read) of the five Los Locos as a social studies instructor in Costa Rica, and of his eventual encounter with the well-to-do as an assistant professor of philosophy at the prestigious Hamilton College. Reading his story, one understands what makes not only a good teacher, but also a good teacher of philosophy, which is again, adaptability, the instinct to evolve, but not only—for there is also a willingness to experience life with both reason *and* feeling, a never too serious seriousness (*fröhlich*), and a humility that seems to blush at its own excellence.

As a final example, there is David Palmer (Ch 14: ‘Is the Unexamined Life Worth Living?’) whose interactions with general studies students at the University of Tennessee exposes the kinds of a priori disaffections that students often feel for philosophy coupled with the strategies that the philosophy teacher must adopt in order to penetrate through the veneer. ‘Maybe the life of examination is *one* way to live well,’ his students object when faced with the Socratic challenge—‘But why think that it’s the *only* way?’ (125). The sentiment is clear. There is no justifiable reason to think that the examined life is preferable to any other kind of life. Palmer’s response reflects the characteristics of a good teacher. He situates the problem around sentiments that students in some sense already (a priori) share. What if we understand philosophy broadly, ‘as, for instance, the activity of identifying and evaluating the principles that underlie our beliefs and choices, with the aim of making better choices and forming more defensible beliefs?’ (130). Seen in this way, would not the examined life just be the life devoted to the care of oneself and one’s living? And who can say that such a care is not of personal interest?

I conclude with what amounts to my ‘official’ review of *Philosophers in the Classroom*. Every philosopher who is a teacher (and even those who are not) ought to own or at least read a copy of this book. The joys and sorrows, obstacles and over-comings, as expressed in the 24 stories are, I wager, experiences that all teachers have had and will continue to experience. To hear such stories expressed by others is a breath of fresh air. It suggests that we are not alone in the good fight, but have sympathetic friends. It brings back the much needed sense of community that tends to get lost among the competition for positions, publications, and the everyday institutional hassle that academic philosophers (among others) face. Finally, their example expresses a truth: that even if philosophy is dead as some (I should add—quite incorrectly) contend, the philosophers absolutely are not.

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