Teaching Statement

As an undergraduate, I was fortunate enough to take a drawing class with an excellent instructor. She emphasized drawing what we saw, not what we thought we saw. In the service of this, she assigned the class an exercise that I still recall vividly now, twelve years later. She placed a reproduction of a Man Ray photograph of a woman's face with an African mask beside it on the projector completely out of focus, so that it was just a field of gray, and then instructed us to draw it. This left many of us scratching our heads and thinking, "Draw what, exactly?" but we dutifully began filling the page with charcoal shading. Fifteen minutes later, she turned the dial on the projector so the image was slightly more in focus. This process continued for two hours, the image drawing increasingly into view. Because we had been unable in the beginning to see more than light and shadow, we had been forced to set aside our assumptions about what we were drawing, and as a result we were able to more faithfully capture what was there. I see my task as a philosophy instructor as analogous to the task undertaken by my art professor: to encourage students to slow down, be careful, and be curious about what they can learn from a place of uncertainty. Being unable to judge what exactly I was drawing allowed me to see it more clearly, without interference from my presuppositions about what a woman's face looks like. Similarly, I try to raise questions about students' default ways of describing normative reality in order to create a sense of aporia, where their presuppositions are likewise disarmed. My aim is to create a productive kind of confusion, one which makes room for students to see things anew.

When I first taught my own course, Introduction to Ethics, I underestimated how difficult it would be for my students to tolerate uncertainty. On our first day of class, I told them that we would be discussing three major ethical theories: utilitarianism, Kantianism, and virtue ethics. One of my students then asked me which of these was the correct ethical theory. When I said that I didn't think any ethical theory was correct exactly, my student's face fell. This is one of many cases

in which students have shown a reluctance to regard uncertainty as something potentially fruitful, which makes sense given that it is at odds with how students are often taught to think about their education.

Teaching philosophy is peculiar in that one must both encourage students to care about the truth when it comes to complex subjects, and yet also reassure those same students that they are not being evaluated based on whether they come up with the right answer. In my experience, the best way to do this is to try to show students directly what can be gained from questioning what they take to be obvious, even if they are left with some remaining doubts. In support of this, I find it helpful to center theoretical discussions around examples from ordinary life. Students tend to have clear intuitions about these cases, but the clarity of their intuitions often comes from inattention to normative detail. By eliciting a conflicting set of intuitions that come from paying attention to other normative considerations that they previously overlooked, one demands of students to slow down and be more careful in their thinking.

When teaching Bioethics, I discussed a case involving a deaf couple who purposefully conceived two deaf children. My first intuition about this case, and one that was shared by nearly all of my students, was that this decision caused their children harm. Further reflection, however, forced many of us to concede that if the children would suffer more because of being deaf in a world that discriminates against people with disabilities, this would also generate reasons for people of color to abstain from having biological children because their children would likely experience racial discrimination. This raised an aporia for the class; selecting for disability *felt* different than deliberately conceiving a child who would probably experience racism, but it is not at all obvious what the difference might be in the context of this argument. By comparing situations that they had not thought to compare before, students were able to bring more of the normative details of this case into focus; in particular, they realized that they had to look deeper in order to establish whether

or not selecting for disability was permissible. These students, many of whom aspired to be health care professionals, expressed surprise and gratitude at having been asked to consider the implications of what they took to be a perfectly straightforward argument that these parents prevented their children from having an optimal health outcome.

A similar exchange took place in my Morality and Law course, where I devoted considerable attention to the justification of punishment. Many of my students had reservations about the current criminal justice system in the United States but had even stronger reservations about reducing or eliminating hard treatment as a response to breaking the law. In particular, they thought that harsh punitive measures were necessary to deter crime. When I presented them with empirical evidence that past a certain minimal point, increasing the severity of punishment had no additional deterrent effects, this left them not only with questions about whether harsh punitive measures could be justified, but with the sense that our current scheme of punishment was far from inevitable. When we discussed possible alternatives to punishment, my students had additional tools to raise critical questions about these alternatives without simply dismissing them out of hand as idealistic or otherwise ill-advised. Regardless of whether they go on to study philosophy further, my hope is that my students will recognize that doubt, while sometimes unpleasant, can profoundly enlarge their sense of how the world might be.