

Statement on Philosophy and Pedagogy

Philosophy is not a “soft” subject. Some people think that philosophy is characterized mainly by vague but deep-sounding notions, and that a philosophy class is about sharing our subjective reactions to such notions. This conception bears little resemblance to what you’ll generally find in academic philosophy.

In part, philosophy resembles science. We strive for clarity and precision. We aim for objective truth, as best we can determine it. We ask skeptical questions and carefully judge the quality of the answers. But whereas science analyzes things of the world (empirical data), philosophy analyzes ideas – including ideas about the nature of reality and of knowledge (the foundations of science), about the nature of ourselves, and about how to judge goodness, beauty, and truth, and how to weigh and defend those judgments. In some ways, this is easier than science – thought experiments don’t require expensive lab facilities or extensive data collection. But in its focus on the abstract rather than the concrete, and in its exploration of difficult questions of value, philosophy offers plenty of challenges for even the sharpest intellect.

Studying philosophy generally does not involve absorbing a large body of facts – we might spend an hour wrestling with a single idea. What it does involve is a sustained effort in improving the strength and agility of one’s thought – valuable brain training that one doesn’t often find elsewhere. Accordingly, I design my courses to generate and reward the investment in thinking skill – philosophical astuteness that will continue to serve you in life beyond the course. I will challenge you, but if you persevere, and seek help when you need it, you may be surprised at how much you can learn.