Gnothi Seauton: Why and How to Teach Religion and Philosophy to Secondary School Students

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Vorkink, Peter. 2015. Gnothi Seauton: Why and How to Teach Religion and Philosophy to Secondary School Students. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts &amp; Sciences.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:17467315">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:17467315</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gnōthi Seauton:
Why and How to Teach Religion and Philosophy to Secondary School Students

A dissertation presented
by
Rev. Peter Vorkink, II

to
The Committee on the Study of Religion

in partial fulfillment
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
The Study of Religion

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

March 2015
Abstract

Rather than “saving” the difficult fields of religion and philosophy for college curricula, it is instead developmentally appropriate for high school students—fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds—to engage the complex existential, ethical, and analytical challenges raised by these disciplines, especially as they pertain to the adolescent search to “know thyself” (Gr. γνῶθι σεαυτόν [gnōthi seauton]). This is explored in the context of unfolding trends in American education which downplay the importance of a humanities education in the overall curriculum, and with reference to models of adolescent psychology and pedagogical theory, drawing in particular upon my forty years of experience as a classroom teacher.

In pursuit of this thesis, I argue for a more appropriate understanding of the definitions of religion and philosophy, as well as a more holistic understanding of the act of philosophizing. More traditional and restrictive definitions of religion need to be revised to embrace the view of the student as a person who is seeking meaning in a variety of situations and places, often outside of organized religion. The understanding of what it means to teach philosophy—that is, “to philosophize”—is likewise reappraised in light of Phillips Exeter Academy’s reliance on the pedagogy of the Harkness method, which mandates seminar-style classes modeled after the Socratic exchange. This invites a discussion of how Socrates used the apothegm γνῶθι σεαυτόν, an understanding of which is a necessary part of defining both the word philosophy and the
activity of philosophizing. There is a difference between education as *intellectual and spiritual formation* and as *information transmission*, a distinction drawn from the original intent of a Platonic dialogue.

In Chapter Two, I demonstrate how seven major figures—Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Frederick Buechner, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—function as intellectual muses for teaching students how to come to know thyself better as a person. The first four are read directly in class; the latter three inform the pedagogy embedded in the religion department curriculum at Phillips Exeter Academy.

In Chapter Three, I offer numerous Phillips Exeter Religion Department course descriptions and lesson plans to illustrate how one translates the theory of the dissertation into classroom practice.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................... viii  
Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................................................... ix  
Autobiographical Note ............................................................................................................................. 1  
Why Study Religion and Philosophy at the Secondary School Level ...................................................... 8  
Introduction to the Problem and Shape of My Argument ........................................................................ 16  

**Chapter One: “Know Thyself” in Theory and Practice** ........................................................................ 23  
  I. Defining Religion .................................................................................................................................. 23  
  II. Defining Philosophy and Philosophizing ............................................................................................. 41  
  III. “Know Thyself” in Ancient Greece ..................................................................................................... 52  
  IV. “Know Thyself” and Adolescent Psychology .................................................................................... 67  
  V. “Know Thyself” and What to Read: The Great Books and Canonical Issues ..................................... 75  
  VI. “Know Thyself” and Harkness Pedagogy: The History and Practice of the Harkness Method ........ 89  
  VII. Other Departmental Voices on “Know Thyself” ............................................................................. 112  

**Chapter Two: “Know Thyself” as the Philosophical Basis of the Exeter Religion Department Curriculum: Seven Curricular Muses** ................................................................................................................. 120
I. Muses for the Harkness Student ..............................................................122
   A) Immanuel Kant: Learning to Think for Yourself.............................122
   B) Søren Kierkegaard: “But How Am I to Live?”.................................134
   C) Friedrich Nietzsche: Developing Your Own Value System ..................148
   D) Frederick Buechner: Listening to your life..................................155

II. Muses of Adolescent Development to Guide the Harkness Educator ........164
   F) Friedrich Schleiermacher: Religion and the Affective Side of the Self ...171
   G) Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Social Justice and Practicing Your Values .......176

Chapter Three: “Know Thyself” in Curricular Practice: Various Course Syllabi ........................................................................................................191

Teaching Using Open-Ended Harkness Questions .........................................193

   Religion 421: The Literature of Existentialism ......................................194
   Religion 420: Introduction to Western Philosophy ............................223
   Religion 410: The Emerging Self: Psychology and Religion ..............261
   Religion 311: Global Ethics: What’s Wrong with the World? ............272
   Religion 220: Faith and Doubt.........................................................278
   Religion 494: Zen Buddhism.............................................................292
   Religion 490: Special Topics in Religion ...........................................303

Three Syllabi from Other Teachers in the Religion Department ...................309

   Religion 270: Islam............................................................................309
Religion 260: Judaism...........................................................................................................317
Religion 240: Religion and Popular Culture.................................................................324

Conclusion ..........................................................................................................................329

Appendix A: The Religion Department Curriculum at Phillips

Exeter Academy ..................................................................................................................334
Works Cited ........................................................................................................................337
LIST OF FIGURES

1.1: A Harkness classroom in Phillips Hall, Phillips Exeter Academy ..................................95
1.2: Traditional versus Harkness pedagogy ...........................................................................97
1.3: “Sage on the Stage” seminar format ..............................................................................107
1.4: Harkness pedagogy ........................................................................................................108
Conclusion.1: The author with his class at Phillips Exeter Academy ..................................333
Acknowledgements

It would appear that writing a dissertation is a lonely venture. A student and a stack of books and notes, and lots of time in front of a screen integrating all this material into a series of drafts. That it was, but that is hardly the entire story. So many other people are involved; a dissertation is really a joint venture by quite a team. My team had many players.

It was almost fifty years ago this fall that my wife, Gaye, and I first met, and three degrees—and many hours spent not with her and other members of the family—later, this last degree is nearing its end. But all along the way, she was with me, either at the keyboard, typing blocks of text, or in the other room supporting me in spirit as I pursued these various academic ventures, especially this last one. It is finally time to say enough, and return to regular family life. The time and space to research and write, however, is a real luxury, and I thank her for that sacrifice.

The other members of the team are numerous, and each played a role as this project unfolded. Before this project was even imagined, my Phillips Exeter Religion Department colleagues, quoted by name and at length in the dissertation, and I have worked together, taught together, met together in most cases for decades as we collectively worked out many of the understandings and issues with which this dissertation deals. I thank them each and collectively as this is really our work not mine alone. That also goes for the almost six thousand students—someone once counted them—who as Exonians crossed my classroom threshold over four decades and who were the subjects of this research and thinking, as well as recipients of this education. It is to them that I owe the greatest of debts, and without them as who they were,
individually and collectively, I would not have spent my life teaching them with the joy and
gratitude I feel every day as I enter my classroom. And I should add, when speaking about the
Academy, that the moral support and encouragement from both Tom Hassan, Principal, and Ron
Kim, Dean of Faculty, should be duly noted. Everyone at the Academy, in other words, faculty,
student, and administration, had a hand in this project, and their collective input and support
were much appreciated.

One of the earliest drafts of this dissertation was read by Bruce B. Lawrence of Duke, and
a later draft was read by my doctoral classmate Mark C. Taylor, head of the Religion Department
at Columbia, who wrote, “I am blown away by what you do with high school kids. . . . The
quality of your courses equals or exceeds many college courses. I even picked up some ideas. . . .
It was also a trip down memory lane for me—recalling the courses and people from HDS.” I
thank Mark for his kind words, and we too in the department have been “blown away” many
days by what our very talented students are capable of. We in the Academy Religion Department
have dealt for decades with the idea that the subjects we teach, and the courses we offer, are not
accessible to secondary school students, and if the past four decades have proven anything—and
as this dissertation has tried to show—it is that that assumption is false. Phillips Exeter students
are truly remarkable.

Along the way, Edouard L. Desrochers, the Academy Archivist, provided valuable
research on the origins of the Harkness gift and method. And nearing the end of what some days
seemed like endless revisions and drafts, Adam M. McGee, who recently earned his doctorate
from Harvard’s African and African American Studies program, provided extensive and
invaluable editing advice and skill in reducing every two pages to one, and cleaning up my
prose—and thinking as well. This project could not have been completed in the time frame it was without his work, and his editing hand appears invisibly on every page.

Now, for my doctoral committee. Michael D. Jackson, existential anthropologist among his many other titles, provided valuable personal as well as scholarly insight into how one understands and defines religion; Diane L. Moore, longtime friend and counselor to the Academy’s Religion Department, whose own book was my model for this project, encouraged me to be conscious of the many voices around the table, and to include the voices of my departmental colleagues in this dissertation; Stephanie Paulsell changed this entire project’s trajectory by suggesting early on that I read the writings of Pierre Hadot; I thank each of them for their respective assistance and encouragement, not at all limited to what was mentioned.

But this entire dissertation project is really the inspiration and work of one person, and one person alone, and that is Kimberley C. Patton, my adviser. From the day nearly three years ago when she asked me if I had ever thought of completing my degree and removing the ABD after my name to the final click of submission to the GSAS website, she has been the most caring and thoughtful of advisers, spending hours and hours of her time on my project and with me personally. If one could only read the probably five hundred emails between us, listen in on numerous telephone conversations (many as she drove!), and note her correspondence laced with biblical or literary citations, one would come to understand how much effort she has expended on this dissertation. Her correspondence should be published as a book on how to be a one-of-a-kind dissertation adviser. And as I explained to my committee at the dissertation defense, just as I have spent the last forty years playing Socrates to the thousands of little Menos who walked by my classroom door, so finally I too, Meno-like, was ambushed by another Socrates, Kimberley. Some days willingly, other days frustrated by the requirements of academic scholarship or the
demands of school mastering at the Academy, or the time this dissertation was taking, I clearly was her Meno—yet by sheer will power and force of example she carried me, nudged me, persuaded me, dragged me, cajoled me, encouraged me, but in the end inspired me to complete this degree, and inspiration it was. I would have never done this dissertation for anyone but her, and I would have never finished this degree but for her. I wish the world could know what kind of special adviser and wonderful personal friend she has been to me. No simple thank you can do her advice and person justice.

Good Friday 2015
To KCP,
who single-handedly carried me from inception to submission
and was Socrates to my Meno
How do I know what I think until I hear myself say it?
—Tom Driver, “Religion and Literature,” Union Seminary, 1966

There are, I suspect, a number of inaccuracies, but no deliberate deceptions.
—Walter Kirn, Lost in the Meritocracy

Perhaps this is the true attraction of autobiography: all the events over which you had no control are at last subject to your decision.
—John Berger, A Fortunate Man

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse; let us do something while we still have the chance.
—Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot

One must first learn to know himself before knowing anything else (γνῶθι σεαυτόν). Not until a man has inwardly understood himself and then sees the course he is to take does his life gain peace and meaning.
—Søren Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers
Autobiographical Note

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer.” And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: “I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.” It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: “I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.” And it was sufficient.

God made man because he loves stories.¹

The story of this dissertation begins on the afternoon of Saturday, October 20, 2012. As I sat in Academy Building 204 at the end of a long Parents’ Weekend at Phillips Exeter Academy, where I serve on the faculty of the Religion Department, I met Kimberley Patton, mother of one of my students—and Professor of the Comparative and Historical Study of Religion at Harvard Divinity School. After a lengthy conversation about her daughter, Patton asked me, out of the blue, whether I had ever thought about finishing my degree—having apparently noticed in Phillips Exeter’s Course of Instruction booklet that I was listed as “Harvard Ph.D. (ABD).” While our memories differ on how I responded—she thinks I said “every day,” and I distinctly remember that I said “never”—this initial conversation led to several months of email and

personal exchanges about whether I might consider doing so. My explanation was short and simple: I responded that I had first come to Phillips Exeter in the summer of 1972 after passing my field examinations, thinking that I would return to Cambridge in a year or two to complete the degree and go on to college or seminary teaching, but my deep satisfaction with—and sense of calling into—secondary school teaching and chaplaincy work had pushed the dissertation out of my mind. Years had passed—more than forty, to be exact—and the topic had never really come up in my thinking again.

But once the door was opened, I became, not initially but eventually, excited about the thought of completing this piece of writing. Patton’s excellent detective work in the Harvard archives produced a letter I had written to Richard R. Niebuhr, the chair of the Committee on the Study of Religion, upon my departure from Cambridge, suggesting that I had two possible topics in mind for a dissertation, either Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology, or something about secondary school religion curriculum development. Although surprised that I had at one time thought of writing about secondary school religion pedagogy, this second topic—how one translates a theological education into a secondary school religion curriculum—had only increased in interest to me over time.

My own story goes back well before that, more than fifty years. I come from an “unchurched” family—the first and only time my father received Communion was at my ordination to the Episcopal diaconate. I had entered college at Yale without knowing what I would study. I had vague notions of going to medical school to become a physician, but that was far from a definite career path. When it came time to fulfill a distributional requirement in philosophy, classical civilization, or religion, I shied away from philosophy, believing it would be over my head. Instead, I took an innocuous-looking course entitled The History of Religion in
America. Knowing absolutely nothing about religion, having never been to church in my life, I nevertheless found the course fascinating, and decided to take a course in New Testament from the same department. Soon, I changed my major to religion, and completed a dozen courses as an undergraduate at Yale in a very strong religion department which drew on the resources of the Yale Divinity School as well.

In the summer between my junior and senior years, I planned to take Greek in August in preparation for a Greek New Testament course senior year, but I had the rest of the summer free, and someone suggested that I go south to work with Martin Luther King, Jr. in St. Augustine, Florida. There, I tutored underprivileged children and worked to integrate segregated restaurants as part of a national campaign to put the civil rights spotlight on America’s oldest city. Working closely with King for much of the summer showed me a different side of religion, namely religion as praxis. I was only twenty years old, but I had the sense that my exposure to this aspect of religion—religion as it affected real people’s lives on a daily basis—would change my entire understanding of what hitherto had been a more-or-less academic interest in the field. During my time in St. Augustine, all the major figures in the civil rights movement cycled through the nightly rallies, and it was hard not to note that every one of them was an ordained minister—Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Fred Shuttlesworth, Hosea Williams, and many others. Whatever had been my image in my youthful mind of a minister, their activism challenged and changed that perception considerably.

Returning to college for my senior year, I improbably—for reasons I have never understood—was elected to the governing body of the student group that ran the university chapel at Yale, even though I had never set foot inside the building before my senior year. This brought me into very close contact with William Sloane Coffin, Jr., probably the most famous
activist college chaplain of his day. That double dose of religion—in the classroom as well as on the pastoral front—drew me to consider going to seminary rather than medical school.

Not knowing exactly what that might entail, or where it would lead, I went to see the Episcopal bishop of Pennsylvania—my maternal grandfather was nominally an Anglican—and he, a very liberal bishop who had ordained women in the Episcopal Church before it was officially sanctioned, offered to pay for my three years of seminary education. He arranged an Episcopal Church scholarship for me and suggested that, since I had already been at Yale—and, in his reckoning at the time, Episcopal seminaries seemed academically weak—I should go to Union Theological Seminary in New York. One story in particular gives a sense for how new all of this was to me: A few weeks into my first term at Union, I received a frantic call from the Bishop, asking me if I had ever been confirmed, to which I replied that I had not. Well, the scholarship was only for confirmed Episcopalians, so down to his office in Philadelphia I went the next day to be confirmed so I could retain my scholarship!

While at Union, I took courses all across the religious spectrum, including one with Abraham Joshua Heschel at Jewish Theological Seminary, but I concentrated mostly on theology and ethics. I spent considerable time working with Paul Lehmann, whom Dietrich Bonhoeffer had befriended when he fled Germany as Hitler came to power; and with Eberhard Bethge, the recipient of Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison, who was a visiting professor at Union during my second year. Not surprisingly, I gravitated toward Bonhoeffer studies, and spent the summer between my second and third years working with Bethge in Germany while attending the University of Bonn. That summer, work also led to my discovery of Bonhoeffer’s hitherto-unknown girlfriend—he was thirty-nine and she was only nineteen—when Bethge pointed me to the fact that she, too, had received letters from prison that no one but Bethge knew about.
Correspondence with her, at Bethge’s introduction, led to the publication of those letters a few months later, which I then turned into a book I edited my final year in seminary, *Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age.*

As I finished seminary and married my wife, Gaye Longyear, it turned out that both Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, who had both been visiting professors at Union, had doctoral students in Tübingen who were working on Bonhoeffer. Küng and Moltmann invited me to come to Germany and work with all of them, Bethge included. I spent the next year in Tübingen studying Bonhoeffer.

Returning to the States in the summer of 1969, I matriculated in the doctoral program at Harvard, where I spent the next three years taking various courses with Richard Niebuhr, Gordon Kaufman, and Arthur McGill while preparing for my field examinations. Moving from ethics to philosophical theology, I took as many courses as I could in that joint field, specializing in historical theology, particularly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European thought. When I passed my field exams in 1972, it was the culmination of a decade-long study across the theological and religious spectrum, with a range and depth that have served me very well ever since.

Leaving Cambridge, however, and coming to Phillips Exeter Academy (only temporarily, I thought) exposed me to a career option I had never previously considered, namely, that of a secondary school religion teacher. My initial “temporary position” was as assistant school

---


3 While in Tübingen, Hans Küng took me under his wing. At lunch one day in his home, he regaled me with the story of his most recent summons to Rome to appear before a Vatican review board concerned with the nature of his thinking and teachings—driving to Rome in his fire engine-red Porsche. In the years of the late 1960s, he was at the peak of his fame and opposition to the “less than modern thinking” of the Roman Catholic Church, as he understood their ideas. It is ironic, given the subsequent history, that he told me, with some delight, of the recent hiring of a new theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, with whom he was looking forward to working.
minister and instructor in religion in a department of only three people. Previous to my employment at Phillips Exeter, I had known little of the school. A graduate of a Pennsylvania public high school, my knowledge of the Academy was gleaned from my Greenwich, Connecticut-born college freshman roommate—with whom I was not very close—and from my Yale classmates more generally, many of whom were Exonians. Coming here, however, from Cambridge, I realized this was a vastly different school from my stereotype. The Academy, coming up on two hundred years old, had just begun to accept girls, a significant percentage of the older faculty who had been hired *en masse* in the early 1930s was retiring, and the ethos of the school was in the midst of considerable change. A boarding school of a thousand students, grades nine to twelve—now an equal proportion of boys and girls, from forty-five states and thirty-five countries—the Academy at the time was in the process of becoming one of the preeminent secondary schools in the world, and in the 1930s it had pioneered a new pedagogy called the “Harkness method.”

Unlike the traditional classroom format, in which the teacher stands at the front of the room before rows of desks, the Harkness method mandates that all classes be taught seminar-style with no more than twelve students and one teacher seated around an oval table. The teacher is expected to be a discussion facilitator, not a lecturer, with the students teaching each other. Never having taught before, I was immediately faced with having to learn this new pedagogy, but at the time there was little initiation into it other than actually trying it in the classroom. One learned by doing it, so in the fall of 1972, I set out to try. More than forty years later, I am still here in this temporary position, trying to translate my decade-long theological education, especially the several years at Harvard Divinity School, into a secondary school religion and
philosophy curriculum. The result of that effort—and the enormous benefits that it can offer to adolescents—is the subject of this dissertation.
Why Study Religion and Philosophy at the Secondary School Level

When I came to the Academy in 1972, there was a pervasive sentiment among the faculty, sometimes said as a joke and other times spoken more seriously, that the school’s curriculum could be divided into “the solids and the gases,” and one can guess where that placed the study of religion. If math and science were the solids—today’s STEM subjects—and history and language the gases, with English out on the fringes of the vapors, the study of religion was relegated to the effluvia. Although that sentiment was current more than forty years ago, it remains with us today, and, if anything, is even more pervasive.

Given the increasing focus on instrumentality in higher education, the first question I want to address is why one would teach these subjects—religion and philosophy—at all, let alone teach them to secondary school students. Just as there is an autobiographical dimension to this dissertation, so is there a cultural contextual one. We see much discussion in recent writings about the role of a humanities education in the overall educational curriculum, especially given the pressures to turn what one studies into a future money-producing profession. A number of crucial questions arise from such a polemic. Is it valuable to engage in study of the humanities as an end in itself, or should one only undertake any educational work with an eye toward its instrumental value, how one could turn such study into a job or profession? Are we, as a society, turning away from seeing immersion in the humanities as an intrinsic good—because it produces better human beings—and toward a more goal-oriented approach to education in which the aim
is to be able to secure a job? In the process, have we lost sight of the “whole person” of each student, and has this shift thus impoverished our collective ability to confront taxing ethical issues, or to value non-commodifiably dimensions of our existence? Given that I am a religion and philosophy teacher, my sympathies should be clear, but let us look at some of the examples and dimensions of this debate.

Typical of the instrumentalist thinking in higher education is the proposal of Florida Governor Rick Scott to set up a two-tiered university tuition system, charging students more if they wish to study a humanities discipline, and less if they undertake work in a “strategic area” leading to commodifiable employment.¹ This is certainly not unrelated to the nationwide decline in the number of humanities majors in higher education, driven in no small part by legitimate concerns students have about the dire nature of the economy and the seeming lack of market for people with humanities degrees.²

In the face of such challenges, we who teach the humanities must be clearer and more persuasive about the values of a humanities education, how it helps anyone in any profession to be a better, more knowledgeable person, especially when it comes to knowledge about one’s self. We need to counter the increasing focus on disseminating only that knowledge which will translate directly into employment opportunities for the student. This means making a better argument for why students of all ages should encounter the range of issues raised in the humanities, including religious and philosophical topics: namely, such engagement should be

seen as an end in itself, of intrinsic value in developing critical thinking skills, and in engaging in explorations of the emerging self. I argue that this is, in fact, a proper understanding of the entire purpose of education.

Recent reports on the state of humanities at Harvard indicate the presence locally of the same problems and issues surfacing across the nation. Representative of those problems is the recently released report, “The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future.”³ The report includes this instrumentalist argument against the humanities:

The Vocational Argument. Research has demonstrated that university disciplines must do at least one of three things to draw the support of university administrators. To be successful, the discipline must either (i) be devoted to the study of money; or (ii) be capable of attracting serious research money; or (iii) demonstrably promise that its graduates will make significant amounts of money. The university study of the Humanities is thought to score zero on each count. The fact that Humanities enrollments are declining merely shows that departments are failing in the vocational marketplace. Students are voting intelligently with their feet.⁴

The report is clear about what must be done to counter such arguments.

Education . . . in the traditional humanistic disciplines that engage philosophical, historical, literary, and artistic works, or that teach students how to write or talk persuasively about such works . . . can be the scourge of a culture or its greatest hope. Both dangerous and at the same time potentially liberating or redemptive, the humanities can help to clarify one’s sense of purpose or to undermine it, can help to identify possibilities for greatness in a culture or can artfully destabilize an existing world. An understanding of the power of the humanistic enterprise, therefore, and an understanding of how responsibly to engage it and employ it, should be central aims of any education in the humanities.⁵

Several recent books have also addressed this theme of why one should study the humanities. Three recent examples are Martha Nussbaum’s Not for Profit: Why Democracy


⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Ibid., 26 and following.
Needs the Humanities, Mark Edmundson’s Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education, and William Deresiewicz’s Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life. Nussbaum argues that a liberal arts education is crucial to helping young students develop a robust sense of their responsibilities as “citizens of the world.” How is a liberal arts education relevant to this? Nussbaum eloquently writes that such an education can help develop students’ capacity to see the world from the viewpoint of other people, particularly those whom their society tends to portray as lesser, as “mere objects.” Teach attitudes toward human weakness and helplessness that suggest that weakness is not shameful and the need for others not unmanly; teach children not to be ashamed of need and incompleteness but to see these as occasions for cooperation and reciprocity. Develop the capacity for genuine concern for others, both near and distant. Undermine the tendency to shrink from minorities of various kinds in disgust, thinking of them as “lower” and “contaminating.” Teach real and true things about other groups (racial, religious, and sexual minorities; people with disabilities), so as to counter stereotypes and the disgust that often goes with them. Promote accountability by treating each child as a responsible agent. Vigorously promote critical thinking, the skill and courage it requires to raise a dissenting voice.

The more global perspective of Nussbaum is complemented by the forceful style of Mark Edmundson’s Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education. Like Nussbaum, Edmundson is against universities being turned into student-centered institutions which focus on credentialing and getting a good (read: high-paying) job, thus turning away from a focus on learning itself and

---

6 Martha C. Nussbaum, Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Mark Edmundson, Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2013); William Deresiewicz, Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life (New York: Free Press, 2014). I offer these three as representative of many other books that raise some of the same concerns. For helpful comments on declining numbers in the humanities, see Andrew Delanco, College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 94-101. For information on how colleges and universities treat students as customers, and other problems with the way educational issues are framed, see Jeffrey J. Selingo, College (Un)bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Mean for Students (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 19–34. Selingo is in a position to know, as he is an editor-at-large for the Chronicle of Higher Education.

7 Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 45 and following.
what Keats called “soul-making”—discovering who you are and what you believe in.⁸

Edmundson goes on to speak directly to the issues of why a humanities education is so valuable, and what it means for an emerging person to come to know him- or herself. As does Nussbaum, Edmundson emphasizes that there is a link between the value of a humanities education and the pedagogy which one uses to teach it.

This Socratic education, the goal of which is self-knowledge, is not a luxury. Over years of teaching I have seen that those students who, through whatever form of struggle, really have come to an independent sense of who they are and what they want are the ones who genuinely thrive in the world. Thoreau says that if you advance in the direction of your dreams, you’ll find uncommon success, and teaching a few generations of students has persuaded me that he is right. The ones who do what they love without a lot of regard for conventional success tend to turn out happy and strong.⁹

Edmundson advocates for works being engaged not simply for their content and aesthetic value, but for whether they include teachings that can be embraced by students as meaningful or true. For Edmundson, reading the writings of great minds in effect is to commune with those great minds. By extension, a crucial part of that engagement with other minds is to learn to think for oneself, to speak for oneself, and to speak in one’s own words and vocabulary.¹⁰ Edmundson reasons, much as I do, that this engagement is a “religious” activity, an act of “conversion” to a different way of thinking and being in the world.¹¹

---

⁸ “For education now is not for the individual. It is not geared to help him grow to his potential and let him find out what he truly loves and how he might pursue it. No. Education now is a function of society. . . . Education now prepares us for a life of conformity and workplace tedium, in exchange for which we can have our iPhones, our flat screens, our favorite tunes, Face-book, and Twitter. But what we want is real learning—learning that will help us see the world anew and show us that there could be more to our lives than we had thought.” Edmundson, Why Teach?, xii.

⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰ Ibid., 114.

¹¹ Ibid., 160.
Speaking of classroom education about religion specifically, Edmundson concludes that to teach about religion in a humanities context is to work at locating “what the philosopher (and anti-philosopher) Richard Rorty calls a person’s ‘final vocabulary.’ A final vocabulary is the ultimate set of terms that we use in order to confer value on experience. It’s where our principles lie.”

Edmundson surmises that “when someone talks about the Ten Commandments, or the Buddha’s four noble truths, or the innate goodness of human beings in their natural state, or history being the history of class conflict, and does so with a passion, then in all likelihood the person has revealed the core of her being.”

In one of the book’s most eloquent passages, Edmundson summarizes what he sees as the ultimate stakes of a religious and philosophical education in the humanities classroom.

This sort of teaching says that a most pressing spiritual and intellectual task of the moment is to create a dialogue between religious and secular approaches to life. . . . The aim is not conversion. It is the encounter between the transcendental and the worldly. The objective is to help the students place their ultimate narratives in the foreground and render them susceptible to influence. . . . The issue of belief matters greatly to the young, or at least it does in my experience. They want to know how to navigate life, what to be, what to do. Matters of faith or worldliness are of great import to our students, and by turning away from them, . . . we do them injustice.

Deresiewicz makes these same points even more explicit in his recent book, Excellent Sheep. In a chapter entitled “What is College for?”, he writes,

---

12 Ibid., 192. Edmundson is quoting Rorty’s ideas from Contingency, Irony and Solidarity: “All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. . . . A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin, flexible, and ubiquitous terms such as ‘true’, ‘good’, ‘right’, and ‘beautiful’. The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, ‘Christ’, ‘England’, . . . ‘professional standards’, . . . ‘progressive’, ‘rigorous’, ‘creative’. The more parochial terms do most of the work.” Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.

13 Ibid., 192–93.

14 Ibid., 198.
“Return on investment:” that’s the phrase you often hear today when people talk about college. How much money will you get out of doing it, in other words, relative to the amount you will have to put in. . . . Is the only purpose of an education to enable you to get a job?\textsuperscript{15}

He offers the following description of the purpose of college, particularly a humanities education:

What’s the return on investment of college? . . . The things that are most worth doing are worth doing for their own sake. Anyone who tells you that the sole purpose of education is the acquisition of negotiable skills is attempting to reduce you to a productive employee at work, a gullible consumer in the market, and a docile subject of the state.\textsuperscript{16}

Behind the acquisition of skills is the larger purpose of college:

Before and beneath the public good that such an education does, there is a private one—we might say, the private one. . . . College is an opportunity to stand outside the world for a few years, between the orthodoxy of your family and the exigencies of a career, and contemplate things from a distance. . . . Creating a self, inventing a life, developing an independent mind: it all sounds rather daunting. How exactly is college supposed to help? By deploying that most powerful of instructional technologies: a liberal arts education, centered on the humanities, conducted in small classrooms by dedicated teachers. This is not a cheap or “innovative” enterprise, but it is still, and will be for the imaginable future, an indispensable one.\textsuperscript{17}

While these three books mostly direct their arguments at college-level students, the same argument can be made for secondary school students.

In fact, the arguments that can be made about the appropriateness of teaching the humanities in college should be made even more forcefully with regards to doing so in secondary school. I would argue that maturation means coming to “know thyself”—in the Platonic formula—and the methods for teaching the disciplines of religion and philosophy are predicated

\textsuperscript{15} Deresiewicz, Excellent Sheep, 77.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 79.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 83, 81, 149.
on the belief that these disciplines can be integral to acquiring such self-knowledge. This belief is based on my four decades of experience teaching adolescents the equivalent of a graduate education in religion and philosophy.
Introduction to the Problem and Shape of My Argument

I will work in concentric rings inward, from the largest, the historical and theoretical issues associated with γνῶθι σεαυτόν; to the center ring, the philosophical and curricular underpinnings of the Exeter Religion Department as found in γνῶθι σεαυτόν; to the smallest ring, the actual course syllabi which demonstrate how to teach γνῶθι σεαυτόν in a classroom. These rings could be described as theory, curricular philosophy, and praxis.

In this dissertation, I offer a rationale for, and a specific methodology for, the teaching of religion and philosophy to secondary school students in the United States. Not only are these subjects age-appropriate for this group of students, but my teaching experience suggests that these disciplines are integral to this age group’s development and in coming to understand what it means, at the deepest level, to be a person. Maturation means coming to know oneself, and my work with these two disciplines—religion and philosophy, as I will subsequently define each—has led me to a developmental theory about the nature of adolescence which underpins the pedagogy presented here.

Rather than “saving” these difficult fields of thought for college curricula, it is instead developmentally appropriate for this age group—fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds—to engage the complex existential, ethical, and analytical challenges of religion and philosophy. By turning away from immersion in the humanities as an intrinsic good because it produces better human beings, and toward a more instrumental, marketplace-driven ethos that favors the natural, political, and technological sciences or training in business, marketing, or media, the
contemporary world of higher education in the United States has lost sight of the “whole person” of each student. It has thus impoverished our collective ability to confront taxing ethical issues, or to value non-commodifiable dimensions of our existence. Confronting the current focus on knowledge that translates directly into employable skills, I argue that asking adolescents to encounter religious and philosophical issues should rather be seen as an end in itself, of intrinsic value in developing critical thinking skills and in engaging in explorations of the emerging self.

Underpinning this argument are what I propose to be more appropriate definitions of the words religion and philosophy, and what the study of each entails—especially at the secondary school level. Even though many scholars think that the word “religion” is only several centuries old, the activities it attempts to describe have an ancient history. We need to cast aside some of the contemporary reductions and even corruptions of the term to find a definition that describes a more fundamental human activity than is allowed by some more limiting definitions. In a necessary and central section of the argument of my dissertation, I address the complicated question of how one defines “religion,” and engage with a number of scholars who are seeking more contemporary understandings of how one understands religion and what it means to be religious. We need to move away from the older presumption as religion teachers that the student is already a member of some established faith community, often Christian, and instead shift to thinking of the student as a person who is more generally seeking meaning in a variety of situations and places. This is especially true for adolescents.

Similarly, it is important to be clear about the definition of philosophy, and what it means to philosophize as a mode of thought and as a way of life. An extended discussion of the original design and intent of a Socratic exchange is a necessary part of defining both the word philosophy as well as the activity of philosophizing. This has to do with the verb “to philosophize” in both
common parlance as well as in technical terms. Many popular writers and scholars have noted that Western philosophy is alleged to have begun with the “Greek sense of wonder.” To be a “friend of wisdom”—to philosophize, in other words—is not simply to study what others’ wonderments have produced, but to wonder oneself, to ask questions which are difficult to answer, such as “Why?”, “How?”, “What does it mean to . . . ?”, “Is that so?”, “Is that true?”, “Are you sure?”, “How do you know that?”, and “Is that what’s really happening?” When we wonder, we question, we are puzzled, we start to think, we ask bigger questions, we philosophize.

Here, history is important. Careful examination of the Platonic γνῶθι σεαυτόν in its several uses in his dialogues allows us to rediscover the ancient roots of heuristic exercises which have the goal of coming closer and closer to understanding who one is, and where one lives and moves and has his or her being. Coming to “know thyself” for Plato was an ongoing process of digging deeper and deeper into one’s soul to understand in what ways one is human and not divine, finite and not all-knowing like the gods. A discussion of the several historical references will illustrate how Socrates guided his many students, willingly and sometimes unwillingly, into a deeper and richer knowledge of selfhood, a selfhood one needed to discover before one ventured out into the wider world.

From that ancient historical record, we can move forward to see how the Great Books movement of the late nineteenth century and the canon debates of more recent times again focus on what constitutes the proper goal of an education and what one should study and read to achieve such a goal. Surprisingly, perhaps, there may well be a congruence between the ancient Socratic debates and dialogues and what those who were behind the Great Books program
thought the educational enterprise entailed. Soul-making, classically understood, may be the Ariadne’s thread of educational curricula over the centuries.

Exploring the original intent of the Socratic dialogues and the Platonic γνῶθι σεαυτόν from the perspective of educational psychologists and theorists, we move to try to determine what pedagogy would best facilitate such self-examination, such soul-making. The oral nature of the original Socratic dialogues suggests that such “philosophizing” was more a manière de vivre, part of a spiritual practice which would include dialogue, reflection on that dialogue (almost of a meditational nature), and learning how to think, not just what to think. There is a difference between education as intellectual and spiritual formation and education as information transmission. At its best or ideal, a Socratic dialogue—as well as an Exeter seminar discussion in what is called the Harkness method—does the former, and not really the latter. In sum, the study of religion and philosophy are “quintessentially Harkness,” and they are precisely the disciplines one should study around a seminar table, in that there are no right answers to memorize, no set formulae, only questions whose answers are more questions.

In the next part of the dissertation, I show how seven key thinkers—Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bonhoeffer, and Buechner—enact in their thought particular principles that naturally lend themselves to great usefulness in teaching adolescents to consider the deeper questions of meaning implied in the study of the humanities. These thinkers can serve as curricular muses who frame issues of faith- and self-formation as evidenced by their respective philosophies and theologies, and, more importantly, the critique each made of the others, both stated and implied. Each figure is offered as a kind of intellectual muse for one particular aspect of adolescent formation, and together they address the fullness of issues a young person inevitably will confront in his or her own maturation. Whether it be Kant’s lifelong
quest to understand how we think, how we should act, or what we can believe; Hegel’s understanding that the truth is an ever-evolving matter, formed in dialogue with other ideas and other people; Schleiermacher’s desire to locate religion, as he understood it, in the affective part of the person to protect it from any rationalist or moralist critique; Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the non-systematizable and individual nature of the meaning of life; Nietzsche’s lifelong search for sources of meaning apart from traditional religion, to be found in man’s overcoming of himself; or Bonhoeffer sense that there is an integral link between one’s theological thinking and the need to act upon such ideas in real-life situations; and whether we understand and can take seriously Buechner’s claim that we need to “listen to our life,” and what it is saying to us; in the end, these and many other similar questions form the basis for class conversations with adolescents about religion.

The third section of the dissertation demonstrates, through the inclusion of a number of Phillips Exeter Academy course descriptions, how such issues can be taught in the classroom to this particular age group. Phillips Exeter is the historical originator of the Harkness seminar-style educational method, wherein the teacher is a discussion leader but the students essentially teach each other as the instructor leads them through a given text (or mathematical problem, or physics experiment) using a series of open-ended questions. In traditional pedagogy, the teacher is the “sage on the stage,” whereas in Harkness pedagogy the teacher is the “guide on the side.” It needs to be said that meeting in small groups, seminar-style, does not automatically equate with Harkness teaching. It is just as possible for the teacher to be the sage on the stage in a seminar as in a larger lecture format. The key issue in understanding the difference between the two pedagogies is encapsulated in the questions “Who is asking the questions?” and “Who is answering the questions?” In Harkness pedagogy, the students are talking directly to each other,
questioning and answering each other, with the teacher there only as a guide, gently steering the conversation on any given topic. In the end, a sketch of the exchanges should show no more arrows from the teacher than from any other person around the table.

In the sphere of the teaching of religion and philosophy, Harkness pedagogy is both a content-focused and a process-oriented mode of teaching that places the development of critical thinking skills—as well as faith- and self-formation—front and center. Issues of meaning, purpose, and value are always the focus of our class discussions. Using the theoretical framework of the academic study of philosophy and theology, I explore how these ideas interface with specific pedagogies as one tries to put them into practice. How can these concepts be translated into specific curricular materials suitable for the faith- and self-formation of adolescents? Why is this a worthwhile, rather than a prematurely complex, endeavor for this age group?

Many readers will be more familiar with the lecture or small section pedagogy, the traditional pedagogy of many schools and colleges, where the role of the teacher or professor is to instruct the assembled students (Lat. instruere, “to teach, to draw up, to prepare”), whereas the role of the Harkness teacher, following Socrates’s example in Plato’s *Meno*, is to educate the student (Lat. educare, “to draw out” that which is already there but which needs to be reassembled, re-collected). A careful review of Harkness course syllabi reveals how a given group of adolescent students can recreate the spiritual exercises which lead to the “conclusions” one would otherwise “present” to the students in a different pedagogical format. Unlike in other pedagogies, there is thus a sense of ownership in the educational process. In short, the goal of each course, regardless of specific content, is to engage the mind in critical thinking exercises
that assist the student in coming to a clearer understanding of the larger issues of meaning, purpose, and value in his or her life—all fundamentally “religious” questions.

In conclusion, I argue that attention to the ancient Delphic ideal of γνωθι σεαυτόν ("know thyself") is a better preparation for life after one’s formal schooling has ended, and is moreover a truer understanding of the purpose of education, especially during that period in life we label adolescence. In the end, the goal of education should not be simply to assist the student in securing employment, but rather to help the student come to know him- or herself better, to know how to think critically, to understand better what one believes, what gives meaning and purpose to one’s life, and to be a more critical commentator about, and participant in, the larger world around us.
CHAPTER ONE

“Know Thyself” in Theory and Practice

I. Defining Religion

In attempting to define religion for the Harkness educator, I am well aware of the definitional swamp into which I am about to wade—yet it is necessary, given that how one defines religion is crucial to understanding the nature of the intellectual and spiritual exercises one is teaching. I cannot help but be reminded of this comment by Jonathan R. Herman: “I doubt that any five randomly chosen scholars in this discipline mean the same thing when they use the word ‘religion.’”¹ Jonathan Z. Smith adds further complexity by suggesting, “Religion is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define.”²

When, as happens on occasion, I get into a conversation with the person operating the cash register in the supermarket, and that person asks me what I do for a living, I respond that “I teach religion.” The next question is then usually something like, “Does that mean you teach specific religions like Christianity or Judaism, or is this like adult Sunday School?” Without holding up the checkout line too much, I often respond that no, I don’t teach any specific


religion, and no, this is not catechetical or doctrinal instruction. But by now, the groceries are packed up and I’m on my way, and I imagine the woman is left wondering what I do teach. Why is the negative always easier to explain than the positive?

Actually, it is often no different when I return to school. Students coming to Exeter Academy almost always think of religion in its institutionalized forms, namely, as what goes on in a church, synagogue, or mosque, or in any of the uncountable other formal religious structures that have grown up over the centuries around the world. Getting students—although this is surely not limited to adolescent students, as such thinking pervades our whole culture—to move beyond this generalization is a real challenge for any secondary school religion teacher. Those of us who work in the field of religion know the numerous and ever-evolving definitions of religion, but for the beginning high school student, such fluidity and subtlety is often absent when they think of the term. Thus, to “teach religion” is often misinterpreted by students (and their parents, and by culture at large) as “indoctrinating” them to one particular institutionalized understanding of religion. In their defense, they have known no other definition; they have never had the opportunity to know or study otherwise. They have not (yet, at least) been exposed to the academic study of religion, and the numerous ways in which religion and the religious impulse can manifest itself.

---

3 Betsy Dolan of Phillips Exeter’s College Counseling Office has indicated that some colleges remove all religion grades from the Exeter transcript and recalculate the applicant’s GPA without them. What is the rationale for such practices? What do colleges and universities think of religion courses at Exeter? Additionally, as far as the NCAA eligibility regulations are concerned for Division I and III sports for high school students, why is it that religion courses often do not count for such eligibility, at least courses the NCAA calls “doctrinal” religion classes? And most interestingly, why is it that the NCAA does not think ethics courses at Exeter should count for college athletic eligibility? Note how they specifically exclude any course with the word “ethics” in the title: see “NCAA Eligibility Portal—High School Portal,” NCAA, accessed January 22, 2015, https://web1.ncaa.org/hsportal/exec/hsAction. Yet they declare eligible all the biblical courses, and courses with titles such as The Experience of Religion! See “What is a Core Course,” NCAA, accessed January 22, 2015, http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/eligibility_center/CoreCourseInfo/Core_Course_Definition.pdf.

4 I hasten to point out that some think that the word “religion” is so corrupt that it is better to find some other term. See an extended conversation on that point in an essay by Laurie Patton about Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s views on
While the term religion has been used since at least the sixteenth century, in its present usage, it is a more-or-less modern term, and a secondary one at that. Jonathan Z. Smith offers a useful discussion of the debates among present-day scholars about the term’s meaning.

Paul Tillich . . . argued that: “Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern . . . manifest in the moral sphere as the unconditional seriousness of moral demand[,] . . . in the realm of knowledge as the passionate longing for ultimate reality[,] . . . in the aesthetic function of the human spirit as the infinite desire to express ultimate meaning. [Religion is not a] special function of man’s spiritual life, but the dimension of depth in all its functions. . . .” Tillich has in fact provided a definition of the religious as a dimension (in his case, the ultimate, unconditioned aspect) of human existence. This is explicit in William A. Christian’s reformulation: “Someone is religious if in his universe there is something to which (in principle) all other things are subordinated . . . .” If one removes Tillich’s and Christian’s theological criteria . . . , then it becomes difficult if not impossible to distinguish religion from any other ideological category. This would be the direction that Ninian Smart points to in suggesting that religion be understood as “worldview,” with the latter understood as a system “of belief which, through symbols and actions, mobilize[s] the feelings and wills of human beings.”

Like Ninian Smart, my pedagogical inclination is to define religion in more anthropological, rather than theological, terms. However, to call religion a “worldview” may be too all-encompassing, and too suggestive of something systematic. The second half of Smart’s definition makes much more sense to me and to the students I teach: “symbols and actions, the usefulness of that term, or any move to cease using it. Laurie Patton, “The Magic in Miniature: Etymological Links in Comparative Religion,” in Patton and Ray, A Magic Still Dwells, 196–99. Laurie Patton’s discussion is a gloss on Wilfred Cantwell Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). The formerly-called Council of Religion in Schools determined around 1997 that the word “religion” was so corrupt that it had to be abandoned in the organization’s title, and they changed the name of the professional group to CSEE, the Council of Spiritual and Ethical Education. We at Exeter disagreed sharply with that decision, as the new name sounded too “New Agey” for us, among other reasons, but the new name continues, with the organization doing essentially the same work as before. Partly in response to the issue of there being no professional organization for schools like Phillips Exeter, Diane Moore (through her programs at Harvard, and sometimes with the joint support of CSEE) has on many years organized a conference immediately before AAR/SBL called “Keeping Us Current”—a very helpful conference which draws together “Exeter-types” for a day of meetings and workshops. We have not, though, ever tried to identify by title or profession the “us” in “Keeping Us Current” as religion teachers, spiritual teachers, ethicists, or what.

mobiliz[ing] the feelings and wills of human beings.”" When I think about religion, and teaching religion to adolescents, I think about ferreting out, identifying, naming, discussing, and comparing the personal and practical pieties of our students, the value systems by which they live, that which they hold most dear in their hearts, what’s really real for them, what really matters, what constitutes the center of meaning for them—all of which is encapsulated for me in that term “religion.” Notably absent from this definition is an obligatory belief in some divinity—something which I suggest is less central to religion than is commonly held.

In *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, Michael Jackson advocates for what he calls a “penumbral definition of religion,” suggesting that the religious impulse arises out of “critical situations in life where we come up against the limits of language, the limits of our strength, the limits of our knowledge, yet are sometimes thrown open to new ways of understanding our being-in-the-world, new ways of connecting with others,” and that these might be labeled as “phenomenologically indeterminate zone[s],” experiences traditionally apt to be described in religious language. Moreover, to reduce his multivalent examples to “religion,” however he understands it, does a similar injustice to the other possible social, biographical, or cultural understandings of those same examples. In short, whatever aspect of human experience that Jackson attempts to categorize in the sixty-one stories in his text, the potential meaning of those stories is not exhausted by identifying them as potential examples of the search for religious meaning or

---


7 Michael Jackson, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Relatedness, Religiosity, and the Real* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), xii. On page 132, Jackson rejects the sacred vs. secular distinction: “the distinctions we make between the secular and the sacred are artifacts of language, not facts of pure experience,” so in the end he has a much more holistic and inclusive understanding of religion, one which refuses to categorize, distinguish by sharp contrast, or even think that verbalizing primary experience of any type can do justice to the experience itself.
experience. This limitation is, in fact, precisely what Jackson is pointing to with his adoption of the term “penumbral.”

[The meaning of all human experience remains ambiguous, containing within it both the seeds of its own comprehensibility and nuances and shadings that go beyond what can be comprehensively thought or said. To capture this sense of experience as occurring on the threshold between what can and cannot be entirely grasped—intellectually, linguistically or practically—I use the image of the penumbral . . . with its connotations of a phenomenologically indeterminate zone “between regions of complete shadow and complete illumination,” “an area in which something exists to a lesser or uncertain degree,” and “an outlying or peripheral region.”]

Jackson cites a number of other thinkers who have shared his notion of the religious as a penumbral zone, including Jaspers’s Grenzsituationen and Adorno’s “frontier-situations.”

In one of the passages of Jackson’s text which is most immediately relevant to our efforts, Jackson sets Robert Orsi and Arthur Kleinman in conversation. Through this, Jackson explores both the most minimalist definition of religion that is possible, along with questions of whether such a definition must necessarily be theistic.

“Simply stated,” Orsi writes, “religion . . . means ‘what matters.’” Here he seems in perfect agreement with Arthur Kleinman’s thesis in his book, What Really Matters, where the moral is not made identical with the moral codes we commonly associate with religion but with deeper existential imperatives that find expression not only in religious doctrines but in experiences, unfolding between what we take for granted and what we find we cannot control or comprehend. Whether we refer to these experiences as intimations of ultimate reality or of the divine is beside the point; what really matters is not how we name them, but how we live through them, though naming the new is always an important tactical response to it.

Throughout, Jackson points toward ways of discussing religious experience that do not necessarily depend on recourse to conventional God language.

8 Ibid., xii.
9 Ibid., xii n2.
Hence perspicacious presentations, juxtapositions, analogies, poetic images, epiphanies, and anecdotes may best do justice to the ephemeral and transitive character of experience and carry us into those penumbral regions where the unnamable begins or, as Wallace Stevens puts it, “The search for reality is as momentous as the search for God.”

In fact, what interests Jackson the most are those places where conventional language, even conventional religious language, breaks down into what he would call penumbral experiences.

Drawing on the pragmatist philosopher William James, Jackson writes,

As a pragmatist, James is less concerned with whether our language actually captures the essence of the elusive world that lies about us, since what is most crucial are the entailments of what we say and do for our own well-being and the well-being of others. “Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is He? are so many irrelevant questions,” James writes. “Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life is, in the last analysis, the end of religion.”

Jackson therefore seeks to make a productive distinction between primary religious experience and the institutionalization of those experiences in various practices and doctrines, and suggests that one cannot work backward with any accuracy from the latter to the former. Noting the dichotomy between the two, the actual experience as primary and the verbalization, or formulation, or institutionalizing, of the latter as secondary, Jackson struggles to free his sense of the religious as an experiential domain from conventional definitions of religion, which, as he says,

... tend to emphasize the rituals, practices, doctrines, ethics, laws, symbols, and experiences associated with beliefs in spiritual, extrasocial or “supernatural” beings. Such definitions are substantive in character and presume that religious experience can be directly inferred from beliefs and practices.

---

11 Jackson, *Palm at the End of the Mind*, xiv.
13 Jackson, *Palm at the End of the Mind*, 99.
Instead, noting the extreme variability of religious experience, even among people who profess to share the same religious convictions, Jackson submits,

I am skeptical of the idea that we can grasp the truth of any experience from the ways in which it is conceptualized. Methodologically, this means construing terms like God, heroism, good and evil as potential ways in which we retrospectively gain some purchase on shattering experiences or acknowledge that the ways in which events overtook us appear to confirm the truth of our conventional ways of describing the world.14

In other words, the meaning of religious experience is not exhausted by the terms of institutional religious meaning.

This conversation about the difference between a religious experience and the way it is conceptualized recalls a thread of thinking in Wayne Proudfoot’s *Religious Experience*. Proudfoot, after stating that the search for a definition of religious experience is a futile one, goes on to add, “As can be seen in the attempts to define religion or mysticism, the meaning of religious experience cannot be fixed by appeal to clear and universally shared intuitions.”15 After an extended discussion of William James and his theories on the varieties of religious experience, Proudfoot suggests, much as Jackson does, that,

Religious experience must be characterized from the perspective of the one who has that experience. It is an experience that the subject apprehends as religious. This is rather close to James’s circumscription of the topic of his lectures: “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”16

---

14 Ibid., 99–100.
What Proudfoot is saying, citing William James, is that it is important to look at whatever one would call religious experience from the point of view of the subject, from the perspective of what the subject thought he or she was experiencing.

But there is a problem in this definition, which so broadly defines religious experience as simply being whatever the subject him- or herself defines as religious. As Proudfoot writes,

> Seldom do people actually describe or identify their experiences as religious. In fact, the possibility of doing so is very recent and is restricted for the most part to the modern West. People understand and identify their experiences in terms of the concepts and beliefs available to them. But religion is a term that is relatively recent in origin and belongs to the history of Western ideas. [Wilfred Cantwell Smith] has argued persuasively that this concept was not available to the adherents of most of the traditions we identify as religious. Attempts to translate similar terms from other cultures as ‘religion’ often distort the meaning of those terms. 

Proudfoot is suggesting that, even when we look at the experience as religious from the subject’s point of view, the idea of seeing the experience as “religious” is a fairly new phenomenon, new to us in the West since about Schleiermacher’s time. As Proudfoot notes,

> In the modern West, at least since the eighteenth century, the concept of religious experience has been available, so people could identify and understand their experiences in this way. James’s Varieties could only have been written in a culture in which there was some meaning to the concept of religious experience. Although most of James’s examples come from Christian cultures, they often diverge from the orthodox tradition, and he views them as exemplifying a kind of experience that has instances in many different traditions.

What are we to do, then, with those experiences which we might wish to label as “religious” but which—whether because of cultural differences, or anachronism, or simply subjective preferences—have not been identified as such? To address that problem, Proudfoot introduces the distinction between two types of reductionisms, noting preemptively that

---

17 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 184.

18 Ibid.
reductionism “has become a derogatory epithet in the history and philosophy of religion.” As a first line of inquiry, Proudfoot insists that we must attempt to see the experiences from the point of view of the subject, in the context—even in the words—the subject used to describe those religious experiences. Such an understanding of religion and religious experience is reminiscent of Jackson’s, in whose work so much time is spent carefully documenting the exact thinking and words of his subjects as they themselves understand their own experiences. Proceeding to discuss Mircea Eliade’s work and that of many other “history of religionists,” Proudfoot delineates the crucial difference between what he calls “descriptive vs. explanatory reduction.” As for the former, “Descriptive reduction is the failure to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it. This is indeed unacceptable.” When I read this, I cannot help but think of the number of times I have heard my Exeter Academy students—as well as many educated adults—claim that “the deity other people worship (say, in Asian religions) is really the Christian God we worship in the West.” That is the worst type of reductionism, to see someone else’s religious experience, even when so obviously different, as really one’s own in disguise—which, by extension, you naturally understand better than they do.

By contrast, Proudfoot defends what he calls “explanatory reduction.”

Explanatory reduction consists in offering an explanation of an experience in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his approval. This is perfectly justifiable and is, in fact, normal procedure. . . . Historians offer explanations of past events by employing such concepts as socialization, ideology, means of production, and feudal economy. Seldom can these concepts properly be ascribed to the people whose behavior is the object of the historian’s study. But that poses no problem. The explanation stands or falls according to how well it can account for all the available evidence. Failure to distinguish between these two kind of reduction leads to the claim that any account of religious emotions, practices, or experience

19 Ibid., 190.

20 Ibid., 196.
must be restricted to the perspective of the subject and must employ only terms, beliefs, and judgments that would meet with his approval.21

Aside from the obvious merit of Proudfoot’s argument qua argument, Proudfoot’s defense of “explanatory reduction” is absolutely crucial to the work of teachers of religion because we are often engaged in precisely this kind of intellectual work, taking the experiences of students—say, when they are asked to write a personal meditation in one of our courses—and recasting those thoughts as religious experiences, when the students did not themselves think of them as such. If we return to Robert Orsi’s definition of religion—“religion . . . means ‘what matters’”—then anything which matters to our students in the general area of meaning, purpose, and value may justly be embraced as religious. Whether the students understand them as such, and whether we as teachers name them as such, is less important to us, and perhaps to them, than one might imagine: it is the experiences which are primary, and our job as religion teachers is to move students in the direction of having those experiences—“having” in the sense of providing the materials, the literature, the conversations where those questions and issues might and do surface. In that sense, our particular mission as secondary school religion teachers may be different from that of a college or seminary, because at least when I say we deal with religion, I mean we read about, raise, discuss, and write about various experiences others—as well as the students themselves—have which we as teachers might use explanatory reduction to call religious experiences.

This brings me to a discussion of Patton and Ray’s collection of essays, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. The volume explores one of the fundamental concerns here, namely, the tension between religion and religious experience as a single-person-specific experience versus as a universal, applicable-to-others experience. We

---

21 Ibid., 197, italics in original.
alluded to that issue above—the degree to which one can generalize from a single person’s experience to others—but we need to address the structuralist versus postmodern conversation more directly here. This conversation is crucial because if, in the context of a Harkness-style discussion, we are left with only one person’s experience as definitive and non-generalizable, there is not much to discuss. On the other hand, if we only generalize and speak at a universal level, that devalues the individual’s personal experience. There needs to be some middle ground which values and affirms both the individual and allows for generalizing to others and their experiences, too. That is Patton and Ray’s thesis, and their arguments are helpful in sorting out our task as teachers.

In their introduction to *A Magic Still Dwells*, Patton and Ray recommend that, for historians of religion, a comparativist model has the potential “to steer a middle course—between the universalism of our modernist forebears and the nihilism of certain of our postmodern contemporaries—through the opening afforded by the cognitive activity of reading and interpretation.”

22 In other words, this may be a false dichotomy.

No one in this volume is willing to follow the postmodernist strategy of today’s reductionisms—the turning of religion’s perceived truths into merely exploitative systems of power, the fantasies of the weak, or the sociobiological strategies of the human species. Nor do our authors practice theological apologetics.

23 If we can heuristically say that religion teachers have been presented with the option of two quite opposite approaches—an older and at one time traditional (now no longer in vogue or even possible) hermeneutic of history of religions, once called “comparative religion,” and a contrasting hermeneutic based on the thinking of post-structuralism and postmodernism, which would in effect negate or discount the entire enterprise as an impossibility—I advocate here for a

---


23 Ibid.
third way, which I describe in this dissertation and which I have sought to practice in the Religion Department at Phillips Exeter Academy for the past several decades.

If one looks carefully at what is happening in a Harkness classroom, we clearly do some of what the postmodernists or deconstructionists do when we read texts. Wendy Doniger offers the following description of a deconstructionist approach, which looks very much like what happens every day around the Harkness table when we “teach Harkness.”

Deconstructionism . . . eschews grand theories and imperialist metanarratives; allows several meaning/patterns to emerge; compares phenomena within a focused frame that aims at developing insights into the phenomena that are compared (rather than in grand theory); shows how the study of others is self-involving and becomes both personal and objective; accords prominence to local linguistic/knowledge contexts, but shows that their meaning transcends the local; allows all local voices/interpretations to play a role; and centers the interpretive activity on a genuine intellectual/personal dialogue with the materials.²⁴

In a gesture that in many ways replicates the approach that we have taken for years at Exeter, Doniger then advocates for a comparativist approach that merges many of the advantages of both deconstructionism and the conventional tools of history of religion. Doniger recommends a bottom-up analysis of religion that uses individual experience as an entry point into larger cultural and religious themes.

This emphasis upon real people, arguing from the bottom up, obviates the sorts of problems that arise when we argue from the top down and posit a transcendental agent as the source of cross-cultural congruences. And these real people are not merely political agent; they are the authors of texts with many different agendas, including aesthetic, philosophical, and especially religious agendas that postcolonial critique too often ignores. We can thus anchor our cross-cultural paradigms in an investigation of the unique insights of particular tellings of our cross-cultural themes, to focus on the

²⁴ Wendy Doniger, “Post-modern and -colonial -structural Comparisons,” in Patton and Ray, A Magic Still Dwells, 70. Also note her comment: “The postcolonial agenda is compatible with some agendas of postmodernism, the age that rejects metanarratives and argues for the infinite proliferation of images. The problem of the same and the different is crucial not only for comparative religion and postcolonialism, but for the self-definition of postmodernism. For Postmodernism, sameness is the devil, difference the angel; the mere addition of an accent aigu transforms the modest English word into the magic buzzword for everything that right-thinking (or, as the case may be, left-thinking) men and women care about: différence (or buzzier yet, diﬀérance).” Ibid., 69.
individual and the human on both ends of the spectrum . . . thus not so much ignoring the problematic cultural generalizations in the middle as leaping over them altogether.25

In the Harkness method, we aim for precisely this oscillation, offering each student his or her space to process a given text or issue on his or her own terms, in his or her own vocabulary, and in light of his or her own background—and, in listening to others, in speaking for oneself, and in comparing responses, we move back and forth from what Doniger calls “the focus on the individual and the human on both ends of the spectrum.” Note that, by design, Harkness conversations exclude the use of secondary sources, predigested materials which the structuralists (using that term liberally) might think important, for such generalizing by others hijacks the process of permitting the Harkness student to think of the issues on his or her own, and thus from forming his or her own ideas rooted in personal experience.26

In the Harkness system, we are doing comparative religion all the time, discussing, examining, formulating, comparing personal pieties, individual ways of seeing the world, all without ever—and here adopting the deconstructionist turn—saying or judging whether any are better or worse, especially from the teacher’s or institution’s point of view. That last point is vital: As a teacher, I never end class with any attempt at a grand conclusion. Neither do I try to summarize where I think most of the students are in their thinking, or even where the discussion seemed to be going. The longer I teach, the less I think I am in control of what the students are learning, even if, in some senses, I feel more in control of what I am teaching—a crucial distinction. In that sense, the deconstructionists are correct to keep the focus on the individual—

25 Ibid., 70–71.

26 A postgraduate student in one of my recent classes had a difficult time adjusting to the Harkness method, since at her prior high school in Dallas her English class consisted of students taking out their smartphones and Googling various words/phrases/images in a given story or poem and comparing which secondary source seemed to offer the best answer. She said she was lost without her phone, and couldn’t easily adjust to having to think for herself.
but the way of comparativists like Patton and Ray is also correct in the sense that, unless we are Leibnizian monads simply bouncing around in space without any contact with another, we live and inhabit the same world, and thus it is fair—even necessary—to compare one personal belief system with another as a normative human activity to see, in an open-ended fashion, where each of us stands individually and where we stand collectively.

A helpful example of how this approach works in practice can be drawn from my Exeter course, Religion 421: The Literature of Existentialism, which will be discussed at greater length later. There are two possible approaches to the “philosophy of existentialism”—acknowledging the inherent challenge that many so-called existentialists rejected that term and did not think of themselves as part of a school or philosophy. One approach to such a course is through existentialism’s academic philosophy, the other through its literature; in the course I teach, we take the latter approach. On the first day of the course, I forbid the students from using the word “existentialism” in class until the very last day of the course. If the students came up with a settled definition of the term prematurely, they would spend the rest of the term trying to make everything else adhere to that. Here, the structuralists are not correct that there is some system at work, some larger meaning we can find in every text. However one identifies the set to be called “the existentialists,” there will be considerable variety in the outlooks and philosophies of the component authors: there are Christian existentialists, non-religious existentialists, academic existentialists, literary existentialists, and so on. Agreeing with the deconstructionists, I tell the students that they should pay attention to the text itself, every word, even down to the two possible words for “insect” which Kafka uses in *The Metamorphosis*—Mistkäfer and Ungeziefer—and we do close textual analysis in class of each short story or play or novel. The pedagogical agenda of every class meeting in the course is to read and discuss, with no
secondary sources, and with resistance from the teacher to making any comparisons story to story, author to author—yet, and this is a significant yet, I know that the subtext of this literature is the several definitions of religion outlined above. We all know that the central question of this literature is, “What is the meaning of life, individually and for us as a society?” Thus, there is a silent dialogue going on between each member of the class and the literature we are reading, a dialogue asking what you, the individual student, think the meaning of life is. But then there is also the move outward, because in our comparing answers around the table, the individual student, for whom this question is singular and personal, is also a member of society, a society for which the group’s shared discussion serves as a microcosm.

The need for a non-dogmatic approach to secondary-level religious education—one which honors both the individual and the group—is driven home anecdotally by a discussion of the religious make-up of the Phillips Exeter student body. When I first came to the Academy in 1972 as instructor in religion and assistant school minister, one of the tasks assigned to me was to collect demographic information about the “religious preference” of the students. I found that about two-thirds of the student body left the question blank in the survey, and the largest group who listed anything listed themselves as “Episcopalian,” with at least half of those respondents misspelling the word. That was in 1972, and for a variety of reasons, we subsequently stopped trying to gather such information, so it is now anyone’s guess what the religious composition is of the current Phillips Exeter student body. However, I surmise that the majority of the student body remains in the blank stage, or what we more formally call non-aligned or non-religious.

When I say we all know what the grand theme of existentialist literature is, I am not imposing some structuralist definition on it, but rather extracting such ideas directly from the literature itself; see Camus’s statement in the opening pages of The Myth of Sisyphus, where he says, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards.” Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and other Essays, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 4.
That means they do not self-identify with any religion. However, in my experience, they all, to a person, have religious issues—issues which we seek to address in our curriculum. The students themselves may not even think that they have religious issues in their lives. No matter, as long as we in the Religion Department identify them as such—that is our version of Proudfoot’s explanatory reductionism—and embrace them as the philosophical and pedagogical basis for our curriculum.

Because we seek to address our students’ religious questions which are, for them, still experienced as largely proto-religious, that often means we are teaching courses that might not seem, in a facile sense, to even belong in a religion department. Frequently, the proverbial woman in the supermarket would not really understand what I do to be teaching “religion”—hastening to add that her attitude is that of most students and parents at the Academy, as well—despite which, the issues we teach are at the heart of the religious enterprise. One of the comments my non-Religion Department colleagues often make at the Academy, a comment said more with jealousy than criticism, is that “you can teach anything you want” (and, as some then add, “and call it religion”). If truth be told, that is true, but perhaps not for the reasons he or she thinks. “Religion” is an infinitely capacious category, something that potentially touches on anything, everything that Patton calls “the human relationship to the ‘really real.’”28 In other words, how do we relate to whatever we consider the most important, the most real source of meaning in our lives?

Beyond the capaciousness of the category itself, the lack of a single religious identity within the student body furthers the need for the broadness of what we offer as religious education. As Talal Asad has pointed out in his critique of Geertz, there is no universal definition

---

of religion as such, and all such definitions are themselves tied to the cultural context in which the question is being asked—a point around which this discussion has constantly revolved. Put another way, anyone seeking the definition of religion has to be aware first and foremost where he or she is standing when and where the question is asked.

One can see this position encapsulated in our department’s formal acknowledgment that both sides of a religious debate must be reflected in secondary school religion curricula, although this ambiguity or lack of definitive answers must be presented in a way that is age-appropriate. In the Phillips Exeter Religion Department, we have come to see that, developmentally-speaking, ninth-grade minds are different from twelfth-grade minds, with the great divide coming seemingly after the tenth-grade summer. Ninth and tenth graders have minds that are more factually based, suited to the learning of specific bits of information, and said students tend to see issues in more black-and-white terms. Older students, eleventh graders and up, have more plastic minds, minds which can see the subtleties in any given issue and theorize or abstract more easily, minds which can take an idea and run with it for some period of time. Taking these developmental differences into account, we teach our courses very differently in ninth and tenth grade level than in eleventh and twelfth grade. If one looks at our lower-level offerings, they tend to be more factually-based classes—on specific religious traditions, on historical religious issues,

on biblical texts and traditions—whereas the upper-level classes tend to be more conceptual and abstract, often focusing on themes or ideas running through various traditions and texts. As a result, we offer almost no courses that are open to students in all four grades.

In effect, the lower-level classes gravitate toward Talal Asad’s perspective that religions should be studied in their cultural contexts. We are less interested in any abstraction at this level, but rather focus on understanding and mastering the basic factual information about traditional religions—terms, people, texts, histories. We occasionally tip our attention toward abstraction and indeterminacy—setting the stage for higher-level courses—but that is not the focus of the class. Having laid this groundwork, we are able in upper-level classes to move almost entirely to the abstract or conceptual level, using any given text to generalize and abstract in the direction of our departmental “trinity” of issues: “meaning, purpose, and value.” We assign reading materials, carry on classroom conversations, and assign paper topics which move students much more toward Geertz’s concept of religion as an a priori underneath any given manifestation or expression. To say that does not mean that we buy into Geertz wholeheartedly, assuming there is but one generic religious a priori, but rather some fundamental adolescent quest—and I emphasize “adolescent”—to understand one’s individual meaning, purpose, and value, at this time and in this place and on this day.

Thus, contrary to Geertz, we have no universal transcultural definition of religion at work here, no definition of interiority, no Protestant agenda, but rather we see ourselves as doing, with our students, something very much like Michael Jackson’s fieldwork. Wherever the students,

30 Another way to illustrate the difference between a lower- and upper-level religion class is to note—as we often do—that a typical open-ended “Harkness question” in a ninth-grade class may generate two minutes of conversation, whereas a similar question at the senior level, even with the same book or issue, may run for the full fifty minutes of class. Younger students stick more to the facts, whereas older Academy students can take a conceptual issue and carry it for many minutes. In that sense, an Academy teacher asks very different questions in a ninth-grade class from those used in a twelfth-grade conversation. The expectations for the students and the pedagogy are quite different.
individually and collectively, go, we go. In short, while any five randomly chosen scholars in this discipline might define the term differently when they use the word “religion,” I trust this extended explanation has a consistency concerning how the Phillips Exeter Religion Department understands and uses the term in the practical context of secondary religious education.

II. Defining Philosophy and Philosophizing

It is equally important to be clear about the definition of philosophy and what it means to philosophize as a mode of thought and as a way of life—especially for adolescents. In November 2012, two other Phillips Exeter faculty members and I took a group of fourteen Exeter students on a five-day tour of Silicon Valley technology companies, including Apple, Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and a half-dozen other smaller companies. We wanted the students, who ranged in age from incoming ninth graders to recent graduates, to see the variety and types of tech companies, from the newest startups to the most established firms. Given Phillips Exeter’s large alumni network, and the fact that many of the younger alumni work in this field, at almost every stop we not only toured the facility, but the alumni would host a panel discussion so our current students could engage with the several (anywhere from two to ten) alumni working at the company. While there was no agenda for these conversations, we would often ask the alumni to speak about their time at the Academy and the preparation it might have given them for their current work.

One of the more interesting panel discussions was at Google in Mountain View, California, where six alumni, all in their thirties, spoke to the students about how one should follow one’s passions in life regardless of where they lead one, and major in whatever one wants
in college—surely not computer science, which none of them had—and let the vocational chips fall where they may. Many of the panel discussions at the other companies echoed the same message, but at Google, the panelists then shared what each had majored in, ranging from political science to English and history. One alumnus said that, while he had majored in Chinese Studies at Brown, the “best preparation for my current position at Google was the Introduction to Western Philosophy class I took at the Academy with you, Mr. Vorkink.”

In Religion 420: Introduction to Western Philosophy (discussed in detail in the dissertation’s final chapter), the students and I work our way topically through many of the major issues in Western philosophy. The students read only primary source documents, organized according to many of the classical subdivisions of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, free will versus determinism, the problem of evil, ethics, logic, aesthetics, political philosophy, and the classical proofs and disproofs for the existence of God. But there is a deeper issue embedded in those specific subdivisions of the more general topic of philosophy, and it has to do with the verb “to philosophize” in both common parlance and in technical terms.

To understand what it means to philosophize, we do well to turn to the Greek origins of such “wonderings.” Many scholars have noted that Western philosophy is alleged to have begun


32 I have tried both topical and chronological approaches, using college textbooks arranged each way, and in my experience, the topical approach works much better with students of this age. Knowing almost nothing about philosophy, they find it more difficult to follow the issues from philosopher A to philosopher B, who may not have focused on the same issues, whereas a topical approach allows us to select an issue and have up to a half-dozen primary source readings (usually arranged in chronological order) on the same set of problems.

with the “Greek sense of wonder,” an idea found in the writings of both Plato and his pupil Aristotle, and traceable in Western philosophy up through Nietzsche and Heidegger, among others. θαυμάζειν (thaumazein) is the infinitive form of the word θαυμάζω, “to wonder” or “to be astonished,” to have one’s eyes opened as well as to be plunged into the darkness of the unknown. To be a “friend of wisdom”—to philosophize, in other words—is not simply to study what the wonderment of others has produced, but to wonder oneself, to ask all those questions that are so simple to raise but so complicated to answer: Why? How? What does it mean to . . . ? Is that so? Is that true? Are you sure? How do you know that? Is that what’s really happening? Such questions quickly expand to embrace others of an even more vexing nature: What is really real? How do I know what I know? Do I have free will or are my actions determined? What is the ‘problem’ in the problem of evil? What is the good? What ought I to do? What is beauty?

When we wonder, we question, we are puzzled, we start to think, we ask bigger questions, we ask deeper questions—we philosophize.

Based on extensive experience teaching these topics to adolescents, I advocate that it is age-appropriate for adolescents to raise and answer such questions, to philosophize in this way. Yes, it is important to study the classical philosophical texts, what some of the masters of Western philosophy have thought; yes, it is vital to understand the issues as they framed them. However, in the end, what attracts secondary school students to an introduction to Western philosophy is the opportunity such a course gives them to philosophize for themselves.

What is more, it seems clear that this was the original intent of a Socratic dialogue, a fact that has often been obscured in conventional interpretations that focus more on the content of the dialogues than in their orientation towards process. Although there is a long history of

34 See, as typical, a college-level textbook of readings in the history of Western philosophy, using this theme as the basis for its organization: James L. Christian, Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art of Wondering, 11th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2011).
interpreting Socratic dialogues and the Socratic method, the recent work of Pierre Hadot has helped illuminate the original nature and purpose of a Socratic exchange, where the process of philosophizing about a given problem is more important that the content of the conversation, however important that content might also be. The oral nature of these dialogues suggests that, for their participants, philosophizing was, in its founding, a manière de vivre, part of a spiritual practice which would include dialogue, meditational reflection on that dialogue, and learning how—not just what—to think.

Similarly, there is a crucial difference between education as intellectual formation and education as information transmission. At its best or ideal, a Socratic dialogue—like a Harkness seminar discussion, with its basis in the Socratic method—does the former, and not really the latter. In sum, the study of philosophy and its sister discipline, religion, is quintessentially Harkness, in that there are no right answers to memorize and no set formulae, only questions whose answers are more questions. As Jonathan Z. Smith once said about this kind of teaching, “There is nothing more dated than an answer.”

35 The two seminal Hadot books relevant to my thinking, and used extensively in this dissertation, are: Pierre Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); and Pierre Hadot, What is Ancient Philosophy? (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). The former has been especially helpful in providing a philosophical framework for my emerging theory of adolescent development. My theory is not only psychosocial (after Erik Erikson) but also, and more importantly, spiritual and religious, following Hadot’s appraisal of philosophy as a spiritual exercise and manière de vivre. The theoretical scaffold for this dissertation is a combination and integration of Erikson, Hadot, my own graduate education at Harvard Divinity School, and my classroom experiences of the last forty years.

To be more specific about both Plato and Aristotle, in the *Theaetetus*, Plato writes, with Socrates speaking, “This sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin” (150d).\(^{37}\) Aristotle likewise writes (*Metaphysics* 1.2.982b12),

> A sense of wonder started men philosophizing, in ancient times as well as today. Their wondering is aroused, first, by trivial matters; but they continue on from there to wonder about less mundane matters such as the changes of the moon, sun, and stars, and the beginnings of the universe. What is the result of this wonderment, this puzzlement? An awesome feelings of ignorance. Men began to philosophize, therefore, to escape ignorance.\(^{38}\)

In both cases, the underlying word in Greek is θαυμάζειν (*thaumazein*), a word with a long and significant history in Western philosophy.\(^{39}\) As Theaetetus responds to Socrates, “indeed it is extraordinary how they set me wondering (*thaumazô*) whatever [these questions we are

---


\(^{38}\) Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941). Given that Socrates taught Plato and Plato taught Aristotle, one can assume that all three men were working with the same idea of wonder.

\(^{39}\) Heidegger, well aware of both Plato and Aristotle’s usage, picks up and expands upon their idea that philosophy begins with wonder. Commenting upon both passages in his *What is Philosophy?*, he writes (using “astonishment” or “pathos” as his synonym for *thaumazein* [wondering]), “Astonishment, as *pathos*, is the *arche* [beginning] of philosophy. We must understand the Greek word *arche* in its fullest sense. It names that from which something proceeds. But this ‘from where’ is not left behind in the process of going out, but the beginning rather becomes that which the verb *archein* expresses, that which governs. The pathos of astonishment thus does not simply stand at the beginning of philosophy, as, for example, the washing of his hands precedes the surgeon’s operation. Astonishment carries and pervades philosophy.” Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback (New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1956), 81. Heidegger’s point here is that the beginning of philosophy in wonder does not mean that wonder as an operating principle in philosophy is ever left behind; astonishment, asking questions which lead to ever more questions, is the method of philosophy. In an important way, one could claim there is a difference between the philosophic method and the scientific method: science seeks to dispel wonder with understanding, whereas philosophy has as it guiding idea that wonder always leads to more questions, the answers to which are still more questions which make us “dizzy,” as Theaetetus (and my students) note. For more on this issue, see Gregory B. Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Transition to Postmodernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Heidegger’s ideas about the role of wonder in philosophy are, however, more complex than presented in this one quotation from *What is Philosophy?*. It is his contention that, while wonder was the origin of Western philosophy, man has not been thinking in such terms for a significant period of time because we are not in the right mood (*Stimmung*). We currently live in a moment which is the end of one age and the start of a new one. The first age started with the Greeks and ended, Heidegger claims, with Nietzsche’s metaphysics, which placed “be-coming” over “be-ing.” For more on this issue, see Brad Elliott Stone, “Wonder, Curiosity, Time: Heidegger’s Being-Historical Critique of the Ordinary Conception of Time,” *KronoScope* 6, no. 2 (2006): 205–31. See also: Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger’s Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism, and the Greeks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
discussing] can mean. Sometimes I get dizzy with thinking of them.”

Since Academy students often leave an Introduction to Western Philosophy class meeting telling me that they have a splitting headache, it may be helpful to examine what it means to wonder, to be astonished by new questions—to philosophize, to be a “friend of wisdom.” My central claim here as it relates to the education of young people is that to be a “friend of wisdom,” to philosophize, is not simply to study what other wonderments have produced, but to wonder yourself, to ask all those questions, so simple in their raising but so complicated in their answering.

I would also propose that there is a deeper skill or lesson being learned when one enrolls in a philosophy course, and that additional lesson is at the heart of what the Exeter alumnus meant when he said that such a course is good preparation for working at Google. Namely, learning to philosophize for oneself means learning never to stop questioning, to see every response as an invitation to ask another question, even questions as simple as, *Are you sure about that? Is there another way to see these issues? What if we try this approach to the problem?* As in philosophy, progress in real-life dilemmas often depends upon the capacity to engage in open-ended inquiry. There is never really a final resolution, only a series of temporary resting places or leaps of progress, stops which allow us to catch our breath before we move on with still other questions. What the young alumnus learned around the Harkness table is quite simply what so often are called “critical thinking skills,” an art which the ancient Greek philosophers practiced

---

40 Hamilton and Cairns, eds., *Plato*, 860. John Llewelyn writes, “Wonder is the only beginning of philosophy”, Plato has Socrates say [in] the *Theaetetus*. . . . And [in] the *Metaphysics* Aristotle says, ‘it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophise’. ‘Wonder’, *thaumazein*, is one of those wonderful words that face in opposite directions at one and the same time, like Janus and the androgynous creature of whom Aristophanes tells in the *Symposium*. It seems possible to use it in opposite senses at once; *thaumazein* both opens our eyes wide and plunges us into the dark. It is both startled start and flinching in bewilderment. Reflection on it might well have made Theaetetus’s head swim as much as do the aporias Socrates leads him into in the pages culminating at 155 in *Theaetetus*’s exclamation: ‘By the gods, Socrates, I am lost in wonder (*thaumazō*) when I think of all these things. It sometimes makes me quite dizzy.’” John Llewelyn, “On the saying that philosophy begins in wonder,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art Context and Enquiry* 4 (2001): 48.
on a daily basis as a way of life. Perhaps we could even call these “religious or spiritual practices”—as Hadot does, a topic to which we will return.

The study of philosophy is quintessentially Harkness—or rather, as it turns out, the Harkness method is modeled after classical philosophical inquiry—in that there are no right answers to memorize. We never resolve anything in a given philosophy class, yet the examination of any topic gives us the chance to engage in a particular way of thinking, a special way of life, in which we work through numerous issues from various angles, knowing there is no one “correct” response, just some which are better than others, but never perfect—the very type of intellectual mindset and analysis any good lawyer, doctor, or business person needs in order to do his or her work well. But while that type of thinking has instrumental value in any profession, its real worth is in it becoming a way of life, a formative process which shapes the way one thinks about everything one encounters.41

To deepen the conversation, let me turn to the work of Pierre Hadot, particularly his Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault. As part of his overall theory that philosophy was a manière de vivre for the ancients Greeks, Hadot’s contends that ancient texts need to be read in that context.42

For ancient philosophy, at least beginning from the sophists and Socrates, intended, in the first instance, to form people and to transform souls. That is why, in Antiquity, philosophical teaching is given above all in oral form, because only the living word, in dialogues, in conversations pursued for a long time, can accomplish such an action. The written work, considerable

41 While I will not vouch for all the claims, the Rutgers University Department of Philosophy’s website has a compendium of reasons why one should study philosophy, for its intrinsic as well as instrumental value—a document that advocates for education in philosophy as the ideal preparation for higher study in a variety of professional disciplines, including business, medicine, and law. Tomás Bogardus, “Philosophy: What can it do for you?”, accessed January 22, 2015, https://sites.google.com/site/whystudyphilosophy/.

42 See also John M. Cooper, Pursuit of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). The introduction and first chapter are helpful, but in many ways they duplicate Hadot, to whom Cooper gives credit.
as it is, is therefore most of the time only an echo or a complement of this oral teaching.\textsuperscript{43}

The emphasis thus is on dialogical education, learning by talking with others. One could learn by reading a book, by attending a lecture, by a hands-on experiment, by watching a video presentation—all standard pedagogical techniques—but for Hadot, dialogue is more central to the learning process because, in part, it pushes the student to become involved him- or herself, to pay attention to the self. To talk with another person in a dialogue is an “exercise of authentic presence” of the self to itself and the self to others.\textsuperscript{44} Moreover, that interaction between two people, two authentic selves, is more important than whatever it might be that they agree or disagree about; the path they traverse to get to a possible solution is more important than the proposed solution itself.\textsuperscript{45}

Plato’s dialogue *Meno* provides an excellent example of this process in action. Meno is a student of Gorgias, both members of the Athenian school of philosophy called the Sophists. Meno is crossing the agora in Athens when he is verbally accosted by Socrates. In this exchange, Meno, who fashions himself wise and sophisticated—especially in the area of ἀρετή (virtue)—finds himself in a protracted discussion about the meaning of the term and whether virtue, however defined, can be taught. We see two men in dialogical combat, “amicable but real,” trying to figure out the most appropriate definition of virtue, which they find nearly impossible: is it a collective noun or something else, and is there a capital-\(V\) Virtue distinct from individual virtues—and what makes the individual virtues (such as honesty, piety, and beauty) virtuous?

The befuddlement continues over the issue of whether virtue can be taught: if it is a form of

\textsuperscript{43} Hadot cited in Arnold Davidson, ed., *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 20. Davidson’s introduction to the volume is a helpful summary of Hadot’s overall philosophy in this and other books and papers.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
knowledge, then it ought to be able to be taught, like mathematics—or is it taught by example, such that the virtuous men of Athens should have virtuous children? What is important about this agora exchange between Socrates and Meno is not the informational resolution—the imparting of some set idea or theory of what virtue is and whether it can be taught—but the intellectual formation of Meno by Socrates, who leads him through this torturous process. Socrates is trying to form the character of Meno, especially his moral character. Meno wants a quick answer about virtue that he can trundle out on occasion to show how learned he is; instead, he encounters the master of dialogical exchanges, who sees the purpose of such inquiry not as information transmission, but as _manière de vivre_, as learning how to philosophize.

What I find fascinating about the dialogue is that, however confusing the exchange appears to be in Meno’s mind—he ends the dialogue not sure of anything anymore, neither the definition of, nor the teachability of, virtue—he himself through this spiritual exercise becomes a more virtuous person. This reflects Hadot’s point that philosophy as a spiritual exercise is not simply an intellectual game, a matching of one wit against another, but a work of spiritual formation.46 Anyone who has ever taught around a Harkness table knows the truth of Hadot’s point, namely, that there is more going on in a class discussion than intellectual combat. It is teaching and learning a way of life which involves the whole person—character formation, not information transmission alone. That’s why calling Harkness intellectual formation is not the full story, because the entire person, and how each lives in the fullness of his or her being, is imprecated in acts of character formation. This sensibility is, in fact, enshrined in Phillips Exeter’s charter, written by John Phillips.

---

46 Ibid., 21.
Goodness without knowledge . . . is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous. . . . Both united form the noblest character and lay the surest foundation of usefulness to mankind.\textsuperscript{47}

It shall ever be considered as a principal duty of the instructors to regulate the tempers, to enlarge the minds, and form the morals of the youth committed to their care.\textsuperscript{48}

Hadot is particularly concerned with the contemporary disconnect between the kind of philosophical instruction being carried out in colleges and universities today and the incorporation of philosophizing as a way of life. In fact, his larger point is that, in the ancient world, the two were the same, whereas now they can be, and often are, quite separate. This is encapsulated in the marked difference between the history of philosophy (read: specific theories and ideas associated with various people and schools of philosophy) and the art of philosophizing, the latter defined as living the life of a philosopher, of a person who incorporates philosophizing into one’s daily activities.\textsuperscript{49} Hadot is very clear about the oral nature, the dialogical character—person to person, face to face—of the study of philosophy in ancient times. This kind of learning is not something one simply reads about in a book, but must be experienced firsthand, and the learning of it comes from the actual practice.\textsuperscript{50} Remarkably, Hadot’s description of Ancient Greek spiritual exercises could almost be a description of the Harkness method.

In matters of philosophical teaching, writing is only an aid to memory, a last resort that will never replace the living word. True education is always oral because only the spoken word makes dialogue possible, that is, it makes it possible for the disciple to discover the truth himself amid the interplay of questions and answers and also for the master to adapt his


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{49} Hadot cited in Davidson, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 56.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 60.
teaching to the needs of the disciple. A number of philosophers, and not the least among them, did not wish to write, thinking, as did Plato and without doubt correctly, that what is inscribed in the soul by the spoken word is more real and lasting than letters drawn on papyrus or parchment.51

As is likely clear to the reader by now, Hadot’s exploration of the philosophical begins to wear down the borders between religion and philosophy which we have thus far sought to maintain. Because philosophical practice—as opposed to the study of the history of philosophy—involves the whole person, and seeks for transcendence beyond the confines of the individual, ancient philosophy inescapably and by design was a spiritual exercise, and thus it is not a stretch to see this philosophical work—what Hadot calls “spiritual exercises”—as inseparable from what we have been calling the religious.

“Spiritual exercises.” The expression is a bit disconcerting for the contemporary reader. . . . It is nevertheless necessary to use this term, I believe, because none of the other adjectives we could use—“psychic,” “moral,” “ethical,” “intellectual,” “of thought,” “of the soul”—covers all the aspects of the reality we want to describe. . . . These exercises in fact correspond to a transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality. The word “spiritual” is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual’s entire psychism. Above all, the word “spiritual” reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he replaces himself within the perspective of the Whole (“Become eternal by transcending yourself”).52

The communal nature of that spiritual exercise is also important, for in engaging in this kind of group exercise, each person comes to see that each of us is a “work in progress,” someone—especially at this stage of adolescence—who is an emerging self, not yet fully formed.53 Often, if one observes what transpires in a Harkness classroom discussion, it appears that we as a group

51 Ibid., 60–62.
52 Ibid., 81–82.
53 Ibid., 90.
are not “getting anywhere,” are not “accomplishing anything,” and such experiences can be frustrating, but the deeper work of these spiritual exercises may be found in the very circuitous route taken in any given class, the fits and starts, the apparent cul-de-sacs. As Hadot writes,

Dialectic must skillfully choose a tortuous path—or rather, a series of apparently divergent, but nevertheless convergent, paths—in order to admit an unforeseen conclusion... Thanks to these detours, “with a great deal of effort, one rubs names, definitions, visions and sensations against one another”; one “spends a long time in the company of these questions”; one “lives with them” until the light blazes forth... What counts is not the solution of a particular problem, but the road travelled to reach it; a road along which the interlocutor, the disciple, and the reader form their thought, and make it more apt to discover the truth by itself.54

The truism that the journey is more important than the destination is also applicable to these continuing discussions. Frustrating as some class conversations might be, as incomplete as the process of identity formation might be on any given day, it is the wrestling with these issues which is so important to this particular age group. Above all else, it is that perspective—of philosophical education as process, as manière de vivre—which Harkness teachers and teachers of philosophy and religion at the secondary level must bear in mind when engaging with students in the classroom. We are teaching our students not just a discipline, but a way to be in the world.

III. “Know Thyself” in Ancient Greece

Given the centrality of the Socratic imperative “know thyself” (γνῶθι σεαυτόν [gnōthi seauton]) to this inquiry, it is helpful to ask what meaning this recurrent phrase had in its original context, and what bearing this has in the present day on the philosophical and religious instruction of adolescents. As I will show, two interrelated vectors of meaning for the phrase seem to emerge from the ancient Greek evidence. First, “know thyself,” especially as Socrates

54 Ibid., 92.
uses it, implies a heuristic *method* of questioning everything in order to know one’s limitations and ultimately to accept that what one thought one knew or understood, one really doesn’t. This method concerns human finitude—the double finitude of our powers, both of reasoning as well as of understanding. Second, given where this admonition once is thought to have appeared—on the *pronaos* (forecourt) of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, it embeds a *substantive* idea as well: whatever one knows or understands, it is less than what the gods know or understand. They see clearly; we, in our finitude, see only with disastrously little clarity. The convergence of these two, method and substance, means that there is nothing that mortals should not question—especially the limitations of our own knowledge, powers, or virtues—knowing full well that there is no absolute truth or non-evolving understanding available to us. Herein lies the pedagogical value: Self-knowledge is therefore as much a process as a goal, never quite complete, but taking precedence over other activities in which the self is engaged, including (especially for adolescents) the powerfully consuming activities of relating to others and to the world around us.

Scholars differ on their understanding of the exact history, usage, and meaning of γνῶθι σεαυτόν. Although many associate it with Socrates and Plato, or at least think they popularized it, the maxim had a history, however clouded, prior to their usages. As Eliza Wilkins notes, “The original authorship of the sayings [on the Delphic pronaos] is an open question now as of old, for we cannot be sure whether they first appeared on the temple or whether they were put there after they had become familiar in current thought.”

55 Even though many have heard the phrase “know thyself,” there is a paucity of scholarly material and research on the history and meaning of the phrase. One of the few is: Eliza Gregory Wilkins, *“Know Thyself” in Greek and Latin Literature* (Chicago: Ares Publishing Company, 1980 [1917]).

56 Ibid., 5.

53
side would seem to indicate that someone thought there was a meaningful connection between them.

Some scholars attribute an earlier version of γνῶθι σεαυτόν to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, working at Ephesus (in modern Turkey). Heraclitus’s dates are uncertain, but he worked around 500 BCE (Socrates’s dates are 469–399 BCE).57 Mentions of Heraclitus’s teachings are only fragmentary and without context, so there is some doubt as to what he meant. Wilkins notes that “we may venture to construe the fragment of Heraclitus quoted above somewhat in this way: ‘It is the part of all men to know their limitations and be sober.’”58 Other scholars attribute the saying to various other Greek philosophers and sages, including Bias of Priene (sixth century BCE), Chilon of Sparta (early sixth century BCE), Cleobulus of Lindus (sixth century BCE), Myson of Chenae (sixth century BCE), Periander (625 BCE–c. 587 BCE), Pittacus of Mitylene (c. 650–c. 570 BCE), Pythagoras (c. 570–c. 490 BCE), Solon of Athens (c. 630–c. 560 BCE), and Thales of Miletus (c. 624–c. 546 BCE). Plato himself lists some of these same people as the “Seven Sages.” There is thus ample uncertainty as to who might have written about, spoken about, or mentioned γνῶθι σεαυτόν prior to its appearance at Delphi—let alone which of the ten names above Plato had in mind as the “Seven Sages.”59

Whatever its history or origin prior to its appearance at Delphi, γνῶθι σεαυτόν was one of several aphorisms inscribed on or near the Temple of Apollo. From Pausanias’s (c. 110–180 CE) Travels Through Central Greece (I.10.24.1), we know that γνῶθι σεαυτόν was on the pronaos a half-millennium after Socrates, along with several other aphorisms, as well as the letter Sigma, 57


58 Wilkins, “Know Thyself” in Greek and Latin Literature, 13.

59 Wilkins says that “no less than twenty-two names are accounted among the Seven by different authors.” Ibid., 6.
but when γνῶθι σεαυτόν first appeared at Delphi is still a mystery. However many sayings there were—as few as three or more likely five, or perhaps as many as were necessary to make an arrangement in hexameters, and to whom (if any) of the twenty-two wise men (pared down to the “Seven Sages” of Plato) they could be attributed—is not likely to be resolved anytime soon.

Focusing on γνῶθι σεαυτόν alone, however, we ask why, in the first place, might it be inscribed on a stone or column as one entered the Temple of Apollo at Delphi? The maxim has to do with the nature of human finitude and “the unexamined life.” The unexamined life is the life of one who does not question, does not know one’s limitations, does not know what one does not know, and does not know that what one knows is less than what the gods know. In short, the unexamined life is the life of one who does not know the vicissitudes of human finitude. Whoever inscribed γνῶθι σεαυτόν on the entrance thought that those passing the pronaos should be exhorted to remember the difference between man and the gods.

It is just this idea of an examined life which can be documented in Plato’s eight references to γνῶθι σεαυτόν, with the clearest example in the four related references in the Alcibiades I (123e, 128e, 129b, and 131b). Even though this dialogue’s Platonic authorship is contested, it may hold some of the most important clues about the way Plato, or the Platonists,
understood the aphorism. Socrates’s main interlocutor is a young man, full of ambition to enter public life, full of himself, his good looks, his high birth, and his friendship with the Athenian ruler, Pericles. Socrates, the older, wiser man, not having seen Alcibiades for a number of years, befriends him anew, taking him on as a student before the latter must address the Athenian assembly. As the dialogue ends, Alcibiades agrees to tutelage under Socrates.

Examined more closely, *Alcibiades I* is a dialogue filled with Socratic instruction about what it means to be a person, particularly the person Alcibiades wants to become. For millennia, it has been thought that this is the best introduction to Plato’s fundamental views on self and self-knowledge. That may explain the wealth of secondary sources on the topic. Scholar of education Darryl De Marzio directly connects the education of Alcibiades and coming to know oneself with Pierre Hadot’s thinking, synthesizing in one matrix of meaning γνῶθι σεαυτόν, the purpose of education, and the act of philosophizing as a Hadotian way of life. De Marzio writes,

> Philosophers such as Michael Foucault, Pierre Hadot, and others have shown that the philosophy of antiquity amounted to a project of self-formation and that the over-arching concern of all ancient philosophical discourse remained in the service of self-formation and care of the self. Care of the self often fails to be taken seriously by educators precisely because our institutional arrangements . . . are structured in such a way that

---


64 Reading De Marzio ratified my characterization of Alcibiades: “Let us imagine a modern-day version of Alcibiades: an adolescent male at a prestigious college preparatory boarding school. He is a member of the school’s senior class and has stood out as the brightest student that is ever walked through the school’s doors. Scoring a 1600 on his SAT has landed him an early acceptance at Harvard. He plans to pursue a career in politics, a career like that of his father who currently serves as United States Senator. . . .” De Marzio, “Care of the Self,” 109.
teachers and students are pointed toward content information and
development of observable skills rather than complex understandings. . . .
To illustrate these points we can turn our attention to the young Alcibiades
who represents an educational success story. His brilliance, appearance,
and social charm signaled to his fellow Athenians that he was ready to take
on the role of political leadership. However, his encounter with Socrates
shows that in spite of such signs his potential would remain unfulfilled
without attention to the care of the self.  

In that sense, De Marzio can be read as supporting the central thesis of this dissertation,
continuing as follows:

Care of the self often fails to be taken seriously by educators precisely
because our institutional arrangements—schools, curricula, student
assessment criteria, etc.—are structured in such a way that teachers and
students are pointed toward content information and development of
observable skills rather than complex understandings. In this sense, our
instruments for measuring educational success are thoroughly distinct
from the ancient tradition.  

Harkening back to Pierre Hadot’s *What is Ancient Philosophy*?, I am reminded of the
book’s opening lines:

Seldom do we reflect upon what philosophy is in itself. Indeed, it is
extremely difficult to define it. What philosophy students are introduced to
is above all *philosophies*. . . . For their exams, students often have to write
an essay showing that they are quite familiar with the theories of such-
and-such an author. Another essay is designed to test students’ ability to
reflect on a problem which is called “philosophical” because it usually has
been discussed by ancient or contemporary philosophers.  

As De Marzio reflects on Hadot’s opening paragraph—especially in reference to what Socrates
might be attempting with his educational program for Alcibiades—we are reminded once again
of the significance of seeing “philosophizing” as a way of life, of a living interchange between
two or more subjects in an attempt to come to know oneself.

65 Ibid., 103.
66 Ibid.
67 Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*?, 1, italics in original.
What Hadot is pointing to here is a distinction between philosophy as a way of life, a life devoted to wisdom, and philosophical discourse as a mode of discursive thought, an essential part of the philosophical way of life. Our modern understanding of philosophy, which is ultimately expressed through the manner in which philosophy is studied and taught, privileges the discourse of philosophy—its theories, systems, texts, arguments etc., over and above philosophy as a way of life. Hadot says there is an important and often overlooked difference between the two; not an antithetical difference, which would place philosophical discourse outside of the philosophical way of life, but a difference of degree which would place philosophical discourse as a crucial element toward living the philosophical life.\textsuperscript{68}

Hadot himself reinforces that point in his second paragraph of *What is Ancient Philosophy?*. It certainly seems that the way one can come to have an idea of philosophy is by studying philosophies. Yet the history of “philosophy” is not the same as the history of philosophies, if what we understand by “philosophies” are theoretical discourses and philosophers’ systems. In addition to this history, however, there is room for the study of philosophical modes of life.\textsuperscript{69}

Hadot, as noted earlier, has always been clear that there is a difference between studying philosophies, what most college students do, and leading a philosophical life, which is what the Socratic exchanges entailed.\textsuperscript{70} The philosophy practiced in antiquity about which Hadot speaks was a philosophy of self-cultivation. Its central focus was the question of what is a good life and how one might live it, taking pains to care for oneself first and foremost. Ancient epistemology, metaphysics, and even ethics had a practical focus—the living of a philosophical life. What Hadot calls “spiritual exercises”—contemplation, writing, dialogue, care of the self—were all effective methods to better oneself and move closer to wisdom.

\textsuperscript{68} De Marzio, “Care of the Self,” 105.

\textsuperscript{69} Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 2.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
We can see Socrates teaching his young pupil just this lesson, namely, that Alcibiades needs to take more care of himself and understand himself better before he goes public with his political career (*Alcibiades I* 106c):

Socrates: And suppose that when you are ascending the *bema* [the platform from which an Athenian addressed the assembly], I pull you by the sleeve and say, Alcibiades, you are getting up to advise the Athenians—do you know the matter about which they are going to deliberate, better than they?—How would you answer?

Alcibiades: I should reply, that I was going to advise them about a matter which I do not know better than they.

This exchange is a paradigm of what transpires throughout the dialogue. A good adviser is one whose knowledge surpasses that of the one he or she is advising. Alcibiades needs Socrates not just because of what Socrates might know about the good, the honorable, and the expedient, but, more importantly, because Socrates can help him to become aware of his own ignorance and relieve him of the mistaken idea that he knows anything. Socrates has “lifted the conceit of knowledge” from Alcibiades, and has thus brought him closer to an understanding of himself. In the process, Socrates has connected Alcibiades’s education to the Delphic prescription to “know thyself.” Alcibiades now understands, in a way he had not before, that he is not yet ready for a political career; it needs to be postponed until such time as he takes more care of himself and knows himself—his strengths and limitations—better.

Even as teachers, let alone as adolescents, none of us can know the exact nature of our souls, for if we did, we would be like the gods of ancient Greece. But that does not mean that dialectical education is for naught. On the contrary, we, teachers and students alike, must engage in continuous questioning of every assertion, every value, in the quest to find out what is true for us—for each of us individually, and for us as a collective. Πνῶθι σέαυτόν is an exhortation to self-examination, to take care of the self through honest and open-minded truth-telling.
The dialogue itself makes this same point in the following exchange (*Alcibiades I* 133c):

Socrates: And if the soul, my dear Alcibiades, is ever to know herself, must she not look at the soul; especially at that part of the soul in which her virtue resides, and to any other which is like this?

Alcibiades: I agree, Socrates.

Socrates: And do we know of any part of the soul more divine than that which has to do with wisdom and knowledge?

Alcibiades: There is none.

Socrates: Then this is that part of the soul which resembles the divine; and he who looks at this and at the whole class of things divine; will be most likely to know himself?

Alcibiades: Clearly.

The Socratic dialectical method revealed in *Alcibiades I* shows the unknowing student the virtues of coming to terms with one’s lack of knowledge, and how caring for oneself and one’s soul should take precedence over any other educative activity.\(^7\) In that education, Alcibiades is not only transformed, but also completely redirected in purpose.

The *Charmides* (164D) gives an additional reason why Plato thought the admonition γνῶθι σεαυτόν belonged at the entrance to the Temple of Apollo. Another possible translation of the aphorism, given that it was to be read as one entered the temple, is “be temperate,” especially as the second aphorism of μηδέν ἄγαν (“nothing in excess”) was also on the pronaos at Delphi.

Earlier in the dialogue, it appears that Charmides has a hangover-induced headache, and one cure

\(^7\) Here is how Lampert described the relation of “know thyself” to Alcibiades: Socrates’s “private teaching to Alcibiades gave the words put up at Delphi a prominent place—both Critias and Alcibiades were led by . . . Socrates to think about the Delphic inscription. With Alcibiades, Socrates’ explanation of ‘know thyself’ shows what Socrates thought it was necessary for Alcibiades to learn: ‘know thyself’ means know who your actual rivals are, those you will have to surpass, in Alcibiades’ case the Lacedaemonian kings and the Great King of Persia. . . . Socrates went on to show Alcibiades the difficulty of knowing oneself, of knowing one’s own thing (129a) and that knowing oneself is knowing one’s soul (130c). Knowing oneself is explicitly said to be sôphrosunê at 131b and 133c. Socrates’ final explanation of the words used in the image of an eye looking into another eye; for Alcibiades ‘know thyself” becomes the intimate but shared experience of looking into the eye of the other, of Socrates, that other who just demonstrated his indispensability to Alcibiades (132d-133b).” Laurence Lampert, *How Philosophy Became Socratic: A Study of Plato’s Protagoras, Charmides, and Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 186n72.
for that situation would be more self-control, more temperance. That self-control is a kind of wisdom (need we add?) that comes with age, often not yet seen in youth—or, as one commentator on this passage noted, quoting William James, one can “live enough to tempt the will.”  

The γνῶθι σεαυτόν in the *Charmides* as well as in the *Alcibiades* and *Protagoras* seems to be an organic exponent of the Greek philosophical ideal of σωφροσύνη [sôphrosunê]. Sôphrosunê literally meant “healthy-mindedness,” and by extension, self-control or moderation guided by knowledge and balance. Laurence Lampert has recently given us an intensive study in sôphrosunê. In the *Charmides*, he sees Critias using three related definitions of the word: sôphrosunê as “doing one’s own thing,” sôphrosunê as “doing good things,” and sôphrosunê as “knowing oneself.” On the use of γνῶθι σεαυτόν in this dialogue, Lampert says that the aphorism is a “cautionary counsel warning humans about the propensities of their own kind,” an admonition to all who enter the temple not to forget their human finitude. While the gods may greet one another as equals, the person who inscribed this aphorism on the entrance knew he was not a god, and counseled his fellow man not to think otherwise.

"‘Know Thyself’ was commonly interpreted to mean know you are not a god, know your place as a mortal.” So understood, “Know thyself” is counsel and means the same as “Nothing too much”—it is as far as possible from a greeting between equals, for it is the god’s counsel to “Know that you are not my equal.” By making “Know Thyself” a greeting of the god, Critias accepts the greeting from the one who put it up and greets him in return, acknowledging that he knows that the one who put it up acted like a god in giving words to the wordless god; Critias knows him as one who knew himself and knew what gods are. By putting up the riddling words as a greeting of the god to those entering the temple, he put up words inviting

---


73 The meaning and interpretation of this word should also be of interest to biblical scholars, especially of the New Testament, who debate its usage there; see I Timothy 2, I Thessalonians 4:11, and I Peter 3:4 for variants.

their reader to know what he knows, and Critias returns his greeting; he greets the godlike godlike.75

In short, the greeting at the entrance to the Temple of Apollo was a vivid, even ominous warning to all who entered that they were human and the gods divine, something all needed to hear.

As he is the center of the discussion in *Charmides*, we should note that Critias was one of the “Thirty,” a pro-Spartan oligarchy installed in Athens after the defeat of that great polis in the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE. His nickname was “The Tyrant,” for he showed no patience or self-control in Athenian politics. In Plato’s blueprint for a good society, *The Republic*, the tyrant is the worst kind of ruler in the worst kind of society, whereas the philosopher-king is the best in the best society.76 Socrates is showing Critias that what he thinks he knows about medicine, house-building, and so on is less than he actually knows, and pointing out such ignorance is an issue which will surface many times in subsequent Socratic exchanges.77

The *Phaedrus* is a complex dialogue with a number of issues buried late in its pages. Γνῶθι σεαυτόν occurs very early, right at its opening (229e). Unlike other Platonic dialogues, which often recreate a narrative of the day’s events, this one is a straightforward conversation between just two people, Phaedrus and Socrates, set, atypically, on the outskirts of Athens rather than in the city. Phaedrus has just come from the home of Epicrates, where Lysias had just given a speech on the meaning of love. Upon meeting Phaedrus, Socrates hopes that Phaedrus will recount the speech, and the two of them walk to a tree where they sit and discuss the meaning of love as well as a number of other topics, including erotic love, reincarnation, and rhetoric.

75 Ibid., 187–88, italics in original.
In a self-reflective mood, Socrates almost offhandedly mentions the Delphic inscription γνῶθι σεαυτόν. While this looks to be another passing reference, as in the Protagoras, the rest of the dialogue makes it clear that it is the introduction to a much deeper set of issues. Socrates asks a very important question of himself, “whether I am a monster more complicated and more furious than Typhon or a gentler and simpler creature, to whom a divine and quiet lot is given by nature” (230a3–6). Much of the later discussion in the Phaedrus concerns the nature of the soul, so the conversation about γνῶθι σεαυτόν, and knowing oneself, turns to a discussion of the nature of the soul. As C. J. Rowe notes, “Knowledge about the nature of the soul will be said to be one of the requirements of a proper science of rhetoric, based on dialectic (270 b ff; but . . . especially 277c 2-3).”78 Socrates’s opening speculation about his own nature—monster or gentler, simpler creature?—is the lead-in to that deeper conversation about the exact nature of the soul. Later in the same dialogue, in Socrates’s second speech about the nature of love (246a), he compares the soul “to a charioteer and his two horses, one good, one bad; the charioteer stands for reason, the good horse for our higher emotions, the bad for appetite.”79 This dialectical image of a two-part soul should also be compared to The Republic’s representation of the three “parts” of the soul, a man, a lion, and a many-headed beast (588b). Resonant with the latter, Typhon in the Phaedrus is said to be a hundred-headed dragon, with arms and legs to match, the last obstacle between Zeus and the kingship of the gods. In both this dialogue and in The Republic, Socrates elicits from his interlocutor in each dialogue the anthropological realization that he and each of us share, by nature, in the use of our reason, some divine and un-Typhonic portion. It is this part of us which is truly human and not the beast of appetite. “Rationality is an


79 Ibid. In class, we mention this very famous image in relation to Franz Kafka’s short story, “The Country Doctor.”
essential feature of our divinity,’ as Rowe says, and, by extrapolation, an essential dimension of self-knowledge.\textsuperscript{80}

If one reads Socrates’s $\gammaν\omegaθι\varsigma\varepsilon\alphaυτόν$ in the \textit{Phaedrus} against the theological anthropology of Plato in \textit{The Republic}, both written around 370 BCE, what meaning of the phrase emerges? In the \textit{Phaedrus}, Socrates espouses the need for self-knowledge in a divided soul, with reason as the non-monstrous element, while, in \textit{The Republic}, Plato through Socrates formulates a theory of a tripartite soul, casting reason as the mediator between two warring parts.\textsuperscript{81} In the \textit{Phaedrus}, knowing oneself seems to have meant recognizing the importance of one’s soul, of one’s spiritual or moral health, by contrast with one’s bodily health—that is, ordinary material concerns. Whether a bi- or tripartite soul, this radical image of our true nature, with its various parts at war with one another—with the ascendancy of any given part in question at any given point in time—has provoked much response in the subsequent millennia, including in Freudian psychology.\textsuperscript{82} “Knowing thyself” in the \textit{Phaedrus} thus means knowing that one’s soul has various parts which are often at odds with one another, with the hope that reason, the charioteer, is able to manage or control the other parts—that or, as the \textit{Phaedrus} expresses the same dialectical triumph, I am “not a monster but a gentler and simpler creature to whom a divine and quiet lot is given by nature.”

\textsuperscript{80} Rowe discusses the relationship between the myth of the Greek Typhon and “Typhonic,” a conversation in which other scholars have participated. As he notes, “The original Typhon was certainly puffed up, since he stood in Zeus’ path, as appetite stands in the path of reason; but in light of the later speeches on love [in the \textit{Phaedrus}] (love as madness), the second connotation [delusion, craziness] is also likely to be relevant.” Plato, \textit{Plato: Phaedrus}, 141.

\textsuperscript{81} Plato thought the $\psiγ\chi$ is composed of three parts: the $\lambda\omicron\gamma\iota\sigma\sigma\iota\tau\iota\kappa\omicron\upsilon\nu$ (logical), the $\theta\omicron\mu\omicron\sigma\delta\zeta$ (high-spirited), and the $\epsilon\pi\theta\omicron\mu\omicron\eta\omicron\tau\iota\kappa\omicron\upsilon\nu$ (appetitive). The logical is the thinking part, the high-spirited is the part by which we get angry or lose our tempers, and the appetite is where we experience erotic love, hunger, and thirst. The \textit{Phaedrus} proposes a two-part soul, with a charioteer steering between a pair of winged horses, one of them glorious and obedient and the other mean and reluctant, one reaching for the gods, the other racing downward toward earth. Given that the \textit{Phaedrus} and the \textit{Republic} were written at about the same time, there may not be that much difference between these two models. In each case, there is a charioteer, or $\lambda\omicron\gamma\iota\sigma\sigma\iota\tau\iota\kappa\omicron\upsilon\nu$, steering between the two opposing forces.

\textsuperscript{82} Think, among other things, of Freud’s tripartite id, ego, and superego.
Considering these four Platonic references to γνῶθι σεαυτόν in *Alcibiades I, Charmides,* the *Phaedrus,* and the *Protagoras,* I propose that the Exeter religion and philosophy curriculum attempts, around our Harkness tables, to enact a pedagogy with roots both in Socratic philosophical anthropology and in Socratic dialectical method. The ancient roots of our curriculum suggest a timeless task. Socrates insisted that, before one can go out into the world and “be someone”—namely, a socially constructed and adapted persona—a person needs to come to terms with who he or she is as a person, as a self. One must attempt to understand one’s nature, and limitations, as well as one’s potentialities.

Admittedly, some would counter that the adolescents who are at the center of our curriculum are already too self-absorbed, part of a cohort sometimes criticized for being excessively narcissistic, the so-called “selfie” generation. But that is a surface read of an age group with much underlying anxiety, the deep anxiety of being the betwixt-and-between generation. I contend that what may be mistaken for narcissism is, in fact, the cover for a probing inner search for their adolescent true selves, a search often truncated by all the other seemingly important issues of the age group: *Who am I? Where am I going in this life? Do my friends like me? What is my gender identity? My sexual orientation? What is my racial or ethnic identity vis-à-vis the “majority” culture? How do I feel about my family? What about their finances? Our social class? I didn’t know I had a social class! Why am I so anxious all the time? Why do I feel so alone? All my friends are drinking or using; should I? Would they accept me more if I do? Would my grades be better if I slept less? Is my body normal? Am I normal? What does that even mean? What do I really care about? Everyone tells me I should “find my passion,” but what does that mean and how do I do so? All of which often translates into: How am I doing academically? Where do I want to go to college? What should I major in?*
In an age group characterized by rapid mood swings, thrall to the vicissitudes of daily life, finding the time and the means to sort out these conflicting emotions—of not being a monster but a divine and quiet creature—is no easy task, and one often overlooked or postponed. It is a wild chariot ride through adolescence, and there are many days that reason has a difficult time steering any middle course. But a curriculum with those issues as its central focus provides the opportunity to raise and potentially sort through a host of conflicting emotions and ideas central to forming a more coherent and stable self. The risks of not providing the opportunities to address these deep questions are high, namely, going through college or life as a divided, troubled self, as the time was never taken to piece together a collected and meaningful self. Every Alcibiades needs a Socrates, or at least a mentor, who slows the youth down, providing the chance to care for his soul before he goes out into the world to care for others. The texts we as a department read, the paper assignments we give, the conversations we have around our Harkness tables are all designed to provide those opportunities.

It is no less than a tragedy that many young people have been deceived into believing that such probing can be skipped in the race to pursue some vocational direction. It should be clear that this is a long and convoluted process, often happening on a conscious as well as unconscious level over a considerable period of time—so to think this process can be truncated or deleted to move on with the “business of life,” however that is defined, is to do a severe injustice to the process of becoming a self. Messy as it is, self-formation is an integral part of growing up, and all the curricular maneuvers we undertake in our courses are attempts to give our young people time and space to begin or continue to address those many aspects of identity formation.\footnote{For an eloquent discussion and documentation of the problems of “identity confusion”—the problems associated with not taking sufficient time and energy to form an identity during adolescence—see Erik Erikson, \textit{Identity: Youth and Crisis} (New York: Norton, 1968), 128–207. It includes a lengthy exploration of case studies illustrating the}
IV. “Know Thyself” and Adolescent Psychology

When one examines various theories in the field of contemporary adolescent psychology, there is much evidence to support the claim that secondary education in religion and philosophy is not only age-appropriate, but instrumental to healthy psychological development. Here, the developmental psychology work of Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg is relevant, including how such theories are utilized in the writings of James Fowler.84 The work of Erik Erikson has particular resonance for this discussion, not only because he is a key figure in the discussions about adolescent development (and the periodization of the birth-to-death life cycle), but because I often teach Erikson to my adolescent students precisely as a way of helping them explore these themes. His book *Identity: Youth and Crisis* has provided me with invaluable assistance over the years in understanding the age group with which I have worked. Erikson’s periodization of the life cycle offers a psychosocial theory of “identity formation” in problems of identity confusion. As Erikson notes on 131, quoting Arthur Miller’s Biff in *Death of a Salesman*, “I just can’t take hold, Mom. I just can’t take hold of some kind of life.”

84 See as typical: Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development*, vols. 1–2 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981 & 1984); Lawrence Kohlberg and R. Mayer, “Development as the Aim of Education,” *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (1972): 449–96; F. C. Power, A. Higgins, and Lawrence Kohlberg, *Lawrence Kohlberg’s Approach to Moral Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Listing these various psychologists is not to imply that they were the first to think of periodizing the life cycle. Such thinking goes back at least as far as Aristotle, was common in the Middle Ages, and Shakespeare could have assumed his audiences were familiar with the idea when, in *As You Like It*, Jaques talks about the “seven ages of man” (II.vii.138–65). What is significant about the more recent periodizing of the life cycle is the attempt to distinguish certain moral or religious characteristics for each stage, and it is the attempt to periodize the life cycle in terms of religious development which is relevant here. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper One, 1981).
adolescence.\textsuperscript{85} The definition he provides of that specific process has been front and center in my thinking for years.

[I]n psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflections and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him.\textsuperscript{86}

Anyone who works with adolescents knows that they are extremely conscious of how others in their peer group think, act, dress, buy, consume, and define what is “sick” or “mad” (that is, superlative, to use their idioms). I have always found the double comparative dynamic of Erikson’s definition to be accurate, and not just for adolescents: I judge myself in relation to a typology I find relevant to me, and in relation to a typology others find relevant to themselves, and to me and my typology, all this going on simultaneously and unconsciously. This constant oscillation in comparisons—me to my self-image, me to others’ self-images, others to others’, my judgment of others’ to others’ and to my own—is particularly characteristic of an age group which seeks acceptance often above all else, wanting to fit in and not be considered the odd person out. Even the odd person out is often formulated in relation to the accepted “in”—so it is a dependent independence rather than a true independence.

Erikson’s understanding of identity formation is insightful in not just the psychosocial arena, but potentially in the religious as well. Based on my own experience with this age group over the years, I think this same process goes on with “spiritual formation” for adolescents; they do not form their religious identities in isolation, but exactly as Erikson describes it for identity formation as a whole, namely, in comparison with others, and in relation to a typology

\textsuperscript{85} Erikson, \textit{Identity}, 91–141.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 22–23.
significant to them and to others. One might even go so far as to name this a type of religio-social identity formation. Adolescents are very conscious of their peer group and what others think and believe, and in class discussions and in the dormitories at night, there are many conversations about religion, institutional and personal, conversations which have great influence on what any given adolescent ends up believing about religion—however it is defined, expressed, or practiced. Forty years of working with this age group, teaching them in class and living with them in the dormitories, suggests that wherever they are in their own religious formation—twixt childhood and adulthood—they, as a group and as individuals, are greatly influenced by the same peer relations and pressures evident in their overall identity formation.  

The “in-betweenness” of adolescence—no longer a child, not yet an adult—makes this a perfect age, in other words, for the teaching of religion and philosophy. This is an age in transition, open to new and different ways of modeling the world and behavior, different ways of discovering what is important, what is of value.

87 There are some very helpful and instructive parallels between Erikson’s theories of identity formation and Michael Jackson’s ideas about “intersubjectivity.” In The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy, Jackson develops a theory common to several of his books, the dialectic of “being a part of the world while being apart from the world”—drawn from deep roots in Heidegger and Sartre, especially the latter. Through personal narrative combined with running commentaries and critiques of various philosophers and philosophies, he spells out how, in the practical fashion of Dewey, that duo-dynamic works itself out in actual experience. Michael Jackson, “Ajálá’s Head: Reflections on Anthropology and Philosophy in a West African Setting,” in The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy, eds. Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhrigupati Singh (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 27–49. In Jackson’s Between One and Another (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), he explains more fully his view of intersubjectivity; see especially 2–3. That explanation can also be found in his Life Within Limits: Well-being in a World of Want (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), where he defines intersubjectivity very clearly in the opening pages. There, we see Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger vs. Hegel, and the philosophical basis for Jackson’s ethnographic work. Jackson’s theory of “a part and apart” is an existential anthropological analogue to Erikson’s psychosocial theory of identity formation which is at the heart of my theory of how an adolescent forms his or her spiritual identity. Erikson’s theory is heavily dialectical: you form your identity in relation to others, and in relation to a typology relevant to you and to them. It is always a back-and-forth process. Identity is formed apart—it is distinctively yours—but it is formed in relation to others, a part of a social whole. Interestingly, many of those ideas come together in Jackson’s Between One and Another when he describes trying to explain Hesse’s Siddhartha to his uncomprehending teenage daughter, Freya. Jackson says to her, “These are all experiments with yourself, as you search for the right balance between being a part of the world and remaining apart from it.” Freya responds, “I know that. Sometimes I don’t listen to my teachers or my books, but if I am interested in a subject I read about it in my own way and learn about it for myself.” Jackson, Between One and Another, 157.
Erikson’s definition of identity, be it noted, draws heavily from the religious arena, and has many overlaps with my working definition of religion. In fact, the first person Erikson cites when seeking to define identity is William James (the second is Freud).

As a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity, what I would call a sense of identity seems to me best described by William James in a letter to his wife: “A man’s character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: “This is the real me!” . . . James uses the word “character,” but I am taking the liberty of claiming that he describes a sense of identity. . . ...

What is important for our purposes about Erikson’s definition of identity as “a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity”—remembering that identity has its roots in the Latin idem, sameness, so identity is “self-sameness over time”—is that, in an age group characterized by in-betweenness, continuity and sameness are lively and important issues. In other words, what could be more age-appropriate than exploring some of those tensions with adolescents by exposing them to some of those same issues as found in literature, philosophy, religious texts, psychology, and so on—in order that we as teachers can be handmaidens to psychosocial development?

88 Erikson, Identity, 19-20, quoting William James, The Letters of William James, vol. 1, ed. Henry James (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 199. Here is what Erikson said about his second example, his onetime teacher, Freud: “[L]et us now turn to a statement which asserts a unity of personal and cultural identity rooted in an ancient people’s fate. In an address to the Society of B’nai B’rith in Vienna in 1926, Sigmund Freud said: ‘What bound me to Jewry was (I am ashamed to admit) neither faith nor national pride, for I have always been an unbeliever and was brought up without any religion though not without a respect for what are called the “ethical” standards of human civilization. Whenever I felt an inclination to national enthusiasm I strove to suppress it as being harmful and wrong, alarmed by the warning examples of the peoples among whom we Jews live. But plenty of other things remained over to make the attraction of Jewry and Jews irresistible—many obscure emotional forces, which were the more powerful the less they could be expressed in words, as well as a clear consciousness of inner identity, the safe privacy of a common mental construction. And beyond this there was a perception that it was to my Jewish nature alone that I owed two characteristics that had become indispensable to me in the difficult course of my life. Because I was a Jew, I found myself free from many prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect; and as a Jew I was prepared to join the Opposition, and to do without agreement with the “compact majority.”’ No translation ever does justice to the distinctive choice of words in Freud’s German original. ‘Obscure emotional forces’ are ‘dunkle Gefühlsmaechte’; the ‘safe privacy of a common mental construction’ is ‘die Heimlichkeit der inneren Konstruktion’—not just ‘mental,’ then, and certainly not ‘private,’ but a deep communality known only to those who shared in it, and only expressible in words more mythical than conceptual.” Erikson, Identity, 20-21.
In the religious realm specifically, James Fowler tried to take the various psychological or psychosocial theories current in his day and apply them to the religious development of the individual—with extensive dependence upon Erikson’s work.\footnote{A quick look at Fowler’s index shows just how extensive that dependence is. Fowler, \textit{Stages of Faith}, 325 and following.} Fowler proposed a six-part “stages of faith” developmental model, with adolescence being Stage Three, or the “synthetic-conventional” stage.\footnote{Ibid., 151–73.} In this stage of developing independence, the adolescent searches for various sources of meaning in his or her life, often adopting the belief system of the parents or immediate social world. The synthetic-conventional stage is paired with “a formal-institutional” attachment to the structures of organized religion, says Fowler. Any sense of possible conflicts inside one’s belief system is ignored in the name of consistency. Stage Four, begun in young adulthood, is named the “individuative-reflective” stage; in this stage, the young adult begins to question his or her inherited faith system and comes to understand that there are other possible faith systems. There is, in this phase, a greater openness to more complex ways of finding meaning and purpose, combined with the realization that the inherited system did not always provide the necessary answers.\footnote{Ibid., 174–83.} This critical examination of the adolescent’s faith often leads to considerable skepticism about the institutions of formal religions and their belief systems, thus a “skeptical-institutional” correlative goes with this individuative-reflective stage.

Fowler’s book was published in 1981, and my own experience of working with this same age group—adolescents—for forty years leads me to conclude that, in the last three decades, the sharp distinctions between these stages have decreased, if not collapsed. Most students with whom I have worked did not go through the synthetic-conventional stage, and thus had very
minimal formal-institutional attachment. In truth, what the average student today knows about his or her parents’ religion—assuming the parents have a formal religion—is minimal; references in class to scripture (of any faith), religious history, various symbol systems or doctrines, or religious metaphors are usually met with blank stares. This is not a generation that, as a group, can be said to possess extensive knowledge about organized religion. By extension, then, Fowler’s periodization is not applicable, as there is little inherited faith to adapt, or even adopt.

There are elements of Fowler’s Stage Four that are, however, applicable in my experience: namely, what he describes as an openness to the complexity of various different faith systems other than the one in which one was raised—even if one does not know his or her own religious heritage very well, if at all. The implied assumption of Fowler’s fourth stage is that it is developmentally appropriate for adolescents to attempt to construct a faith system of their own design, either dependent upon or independent from one inherited from parents or the culture at large. This, then, brings us back to the same conclusion, namely, that adolescence is the ideal time to expose students to the various issues of religion and philosophy; one might go so far as to argue that doing so is not simply a viable curricular option, but an indispensable part of aiding adolescent identity formation.

Having advocated for this approach to education, one must however ask, if the goal of exposing adolescents to the deepest issues raised by religion and philosophy is to promote self-

---

92 I find today’s students almost completely, innocently, blissfully ignorant of most religious references—including, or especially, biblical references. If you assign Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall*, or Camus’s *The Fall*, and you ask about “the Fall,” you get the shrug of shoulders as an answer. If one makes reference to any biblical story—Adam and Eve, the Flood, Cain and Abel, any New Testament parable or event, any reference to Jesus’ ministry, the chance that the average student will know the reference is slim. (This says nothing, be it noted, about references to the life of Muhammad or the Buddha, or to any other Asian religion or philosophy.) Given that almost all of the authors of the texts the students read were well versed in the Bible and biblical imagery, there is a significant disconnect between the worlds of today’s students and those of the authors they read in school. This disconnect is even more profound when authors use deeper imagery or symbolism, such as a “Christ complex” or Eucharistic symbolism. In some ways, this situation is not all bad: yes, you have to stop and decipher the reference, but it also opens the door to a freer, student-constructed faith system.
understanding, is there an analogous issue for the teacher? To be an effective teacher, is it not also important for the teacher to know him- or herself as well? On that topic, we turn to the work of Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach* for guidance.\(^93\) Palmer’s focus is on the teacher and, as the extended title of his book says, the “inner landscape of the teacher.” While some people might look upon teaching as easy work—the teacher and a few students amicably tackling some topic—as anyone who has ever tried it knows all too well, it is exhausting work, very labor intensive, and one’s self-assessment is often based on how well a given class went one a particular day. It is the most interpersonal of work, two people meeting at a profound level of their being, sharing their humanity and hoping all goes well. Often it does, but some days it does not. Of those days, Palmer writes that “the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused—and I am so powerless to do anything about it—that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham.”\(^94\)

Attempting to explain how classes can go wrong, Palmer cites two obvious potential causes, namely the complexity—and imperfection—of both the teacher’s and students’ grasps of the material. But then Palmer proposes a third reason for the success or failure of teaching, saying, “we teach who we are.”\(^95\) But what does this wonderful phrase mean? Palmer starts his explanation:

> Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I


\(^95\) Ibid., italics added.
have a chance to gain self knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to
good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. . . . The work
required to “know thyself” is neither selfish nor narcissistic. . . . Good
teaching requires self-knowledge: it is a secret hidden in plain sight.96

It is clear that Palmer thinks good teaching has much to do with an almost religious
understanding of the role of education: to find meaning and purpose in life, the intrinsic—rather
than the instrumental—purpose of education. We are not describing teaching as knowledge
acquisition, useful in locating a job after graduation, but understanding who one is as a person
and one’s meaning in life. Palmer acknowledges that students are often resistant to such an
approach to classroom instruction, having been taught to believe that the value of education is in
its ability to lead to gainful employment.

Their cynicism simply proves that when academic culture dismisses inner
truth and honors only the external world, students as well as teachers lose
heart. How can we who teach reclaim our hearts, for the sake of our
students, ourselves, and educational reform? . . . The foundation of any
culture lies in the way it answers the question “Where do reality and power
reside?” . . . In our culture, the answer is clear: reality and power reside in
the external world of objects and events and in the sciences that study that
world, while the inner realm of the heart is a romantic fantasy, an escape
from harsh realities, perhaps, but surely not a source of leverage over the
“real” world.97

Just as Edmundson insists that we should read literature because books might help us find our
inner voice—and, in doing, such books might actually change our lives—Palmer insists that
higher education must awaken to the crucial role it can play in self-discovery. In his newest
book, The Heart of Higher Education, he writes,

Beyond academic and research excellence, universities have forgotten their
main purpose, which is to help students [quoting Harry Lewis] “learn who
they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college

96 Ibid., 2–3. This mention of entanglements by Palmer brings to mind an excellent exploration of this same concept
in Eric Hodder, Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things (New York: Wiley-

97 Palmer, The Courage to Teach, 18–19.
as better human beings.” . . . Echoing Lewis’s sentiments, . . . Anthony Kronman argues persuasively in *Education’s End* that the true purpose of education has been lost, namely, a deep exploration concerning the meaning of life or “what life is for.” . . . Something essential has gone missing, something that brought coherence and true purpose to our colleges and universities.  

Whether one calls that task “soul-making,” or “finding truths one can live by,” or “exploring life’s mystery and meaning,” it is in the process of exposing adolescents to the issues of religion and philosophy that such work transpires.

V. “Know Thyself” and What to Read: the Great Books and Canonical Issues  

While the argument of my dissertation is located in the current humanities crisis in this country, and focuses on the contemporary debates between an instrumentalist versus an intrinsic view of the purpose of education, these issues have historical precedents which may be instructive in demonstrating that this is a perennial conversation lacking a clearly “correct”

---

98 Palmer and Zajonc, *The Heart of Higher Education*, 3. When Palmer talks about what pedagogy would be best suited for achieving the goals he seeks, he writes, “Engaging students in the dynamics of the community of truth is a principle of sound pedagogy. But the methods I have examined for creating that community in the classroom are neither normative nor exhaustive. The ‘right’ method to use in replicating the community of truth is one that emerges from the identity and integrity of the teacher. What seems right for me, after many years of searching, is to sit in a circle with my students (or try to relate to the crowd in a lecture hall as if we were in a circle) and lead an inquiry into the great thing in our midst.” Ibid., 135–36. That pedagogy sounds very much like Harkness teaching. Paulo Freire could also be invited into the Edmundson-Palmer dialogue. Freire writes about dialogue changing people’s lives: “As we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same times a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.” Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Penguin, 1970), 87.

99 Lee Morrissey, ed., *Debating the Canon: A Reader from Addison to Nafisi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) makes this same linkage between the Great Books program and the contemporary canon debates, so my thought is hardly original: “Central to this controversy [of what college students ought to learn] are the lists of major works of ‘Western Civilization,’ sometimes called ‘The Great Books,’ and sometimes thought to constitute ‘The Canon.’” Ibid., 1. Morrissey goes on to state the basic question I have used to frame this response: “While the debate [about the canon] dovetails with what are sometimes called the Culture Wars, it tends to come back to one recurring question: what should college students read?” Ibid., 2. It is interesting to note that Morrissey uses “canon” and the “Great Books” almost interchangeably. In other words, she too sees this as a seamless, overlapping issue.
resolution. One could easily reach far back into Western history for the beginnings of the debate about what texts one should read and why. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is sufficiently instructive to explore how this unfolded as the “Great Books” debate toward the end of the nineteenth century in America.\textsuperscript{100}

If one had been an undergraduate at Harvard or Yale around the time of the Civil War, the curriculum would have looked much like the following:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Harvard freshman year:} Greek, Latin, Math, French, Elocution, Ethics
  \item \textbf{Yale freshman year:} Greek, Latin, Math
  \item \textbf{Harvard sophomore year:} Physics, Chemistry, German; recite twenty chapters of Gibbon; Greek, Latin, Math
  \item \textbf{Yale sophomore year:} Greek, Latin, Math
  \item \textbf{Harvard junior year:} Philosophy, Physics, Chemistry, Forensics
  \item \textbf{Yale junior year:} Greek, Math, Logic, Physics, Rhetoric
  \item \textbf{Harvard senior year:} History, Philosophy, Latin, Greek
  \item \textbf{Yale senior year:} Philosophy, Moral and Mental; Chemistry, Geology, Political Science, History, Rhetoric\textsuperscript{101}
\end{itemize}

It is clear that such college curricula were essentially adoptions of the medieval \textit{Trivium} (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and \textit{Quadrivium} (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music).\textsuperscript{102}

The young men (not yet women) of the time were thus reading Greek and Latin texts in their original languages; their curriculum was focused on reading the classic texts of the ancient Western world—and that had been the curricula at these institutions for many decades if not centuries. In that sense, a late nineteenth-century student at one of these institutions would have


\textsuperscript{101}Harvard’s curriculum was as of 1869, Yale’s as of 1875. Beam, \textit{A Great Idea}, 10.

\textsuperscript{102}Ibid., 42.
felt right at home as a medieval schoolman, for he was studying a curriculum a thousand years old. But, with Charles Eliot’s appointment as president of Harvard in 1869, and despite the pleas of his fellow university presidents, Eliot dropped Harvard’s Greek requirement in 1884, and by 1899 Harvard’s curriculum was fully elective.\textsuperscript{103} Yale soon followed suit, and there, at the turn of the nineteenth century, we see the beginnings of what we now know as the modern elective curriculum.\textsuperscript{104}

Within this tension over what an undergraduate should study—the ancient Trivium and Quadrivium, or what we now call a liberal arts curriculum—we can easily discern the shape of an argument that continues to this day and with which this dissertation is principally concerned: what should a student read and know, and what is the purpose of a college education? Reynolds quotes the following from an 1858 student editorial from Erskine College in South Carolina:

\begin{quote}
The main object of an education is the training of the mind to think. As a means to this end, the ancient classics and the mathematics have been universally adopted. . . We believe all praise due to these. By means of the classics, we are instructed in the peculiar structure of languages acknowledged to be the nearest perfection of any known language. We can thus hold converse with the mighty dead. . .\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

In other words, the purpose of an education was to “learn to think,” and while the content of that curriculum may have been changing over time, the goal was a constant.

However, following the Civil War, hundreds of colleges and universities were founded based on an entirely different educational philosophy, namely, not learning how to think, but learning a trade, learning the skills necessary to practice a particular profession. The

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{104} It is interesting to note that Phillips Exeter Academy dropped its own Latin requirement only in 1947. Up until that point, all boys had to read some of these same texts in the original language. Additionally, the designation of Classical versus English diplomas as it appears at graduation can be traced to the idea that those receiving a Classical diploma were college-bound whereas the English diploma boys would terminate their education at Exeter.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology was established in 1861 to engage in the practical study of more technical fields, not the more abstract liberal arts curriculum of its neighbor, Harvard, and its founding was part of what was enacted into law at about the same time with the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, which established what were called “land-grant universities.” Through these acts, the national government deeded federally-controlled lands to the states to sell for the purpose of raising money to establish and endow “land-grant” colleges. The express purpose of these colleges, as outlined in the 1862 Morrill Act, was to offer training in the practice of science, engineering, agriculture, and the mechanical arts.\footnote{Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Land-Grant College Act of 1862,” accessed February 1, 2015, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/392851/Land-Grant-College-Act-of-1862.} Cornell, for example, was originally a land-grant college, and many of its separate undergraduate schools today still bear that stamp.

By the turn of the twentieth century, many other elite schools outside of the Ivy League had been drawn into the debate about the merits of liberal arts versus vocational training—notably Amherst, Williams, and especially Swarthmore. One of the major figures in this debate was Alexander Meiklejohn, who proposed a new and distinct style of liberal arts education based on his Oxford experience, in which tutors and fellows would teach to small classes or seminars. Once appointed president of Amherst in 1912, he tried to install his philosophy there, including “socratizing” the running of the college.\footnote{Scott Buchanan had entered Amherst as a student the year Meiklejohn took over as president of the college, and as Buchanan later noted, “This [questioning] was very catching. Students began doing it too. . . . Amherst was a very dialectical college. Just ordinary conversation took on a new quality and we were going after each other intellectually.” Harris Wofford, Jr., Embers of the World: Scott Buchanan’s Conversations with Harris Wofford, Jr. (Santa Barbara, CA: The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1970), 45; cited in Reynolds, “Reinterpreting the Roots of the Great Books Movement,” 11.} After his Amherst presidency, Meiklejohn went on to found an “experimental college” at the University of Wisconsin, based on reading ancient and modern classics, a college which lasted only from 1927 to 1933. The president of Swarthmore, Frank Aydelotte, had also been at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, so the British educational system
of private tutors and studying classical literature probably played a crucial role in the genesis of their educational philosophies—as it did for Edward S. Harkness and his ideas in the late 1920s and early 1930s for a new pedagogy at Exeter.\(^\text{108}\) It must be remembered that when Harkness wanted to model his new plan for Exeter, he had various Exeter faculty travel to England to study the seminar/tutorial system there.

No discussion of the Great Books philosophy could neglect the role of John Erskine at Columbia University. Erskine was a literature professor as well as a poet, and a skilled musician who later became the head of the Julliard School of Music. In 1928, he published his own version of what students and others should read, a volume entitled *The Delight of Great Books*.\(^\text{109}\) It was Erskine, often called the “spiritual father” of the Great Books movement, who proposed that an undergraduate curriculum should focus on classical Western literature, and even before his book had been published, he had suggested to his Columbia colleagues that the university institute a requirement that all undergraduates take a two-year course of study based on seventy-five volumes of great Western literature. Moreover, it was not simply what the students were to read, but how they were to be taught that should be noted. As Reynolds comments, “As innovative in pedagogy as in content, the plan called for discussion groups based on Socratic dialogue, so that the students ‘having read the books . . . could form their opinions at once in a free-for-all discussion.’”\(^\text{110}\) For anyone familiar with the Harkness Method as practiced at Exeter, this should sound very familiar. While the plan was at first turned down by the Columbia faculty in 1916, after serving in World War I and returning to teaching, Erskine

\(^{108}\) The history noted in this section is drawn from Reynolds, “Reinterpreting the Roots of the Great Books Movement”, 8–14.


proposed it again and it was begrudgingly accepted in 1919. It was reconstituted in 1931 as the “Colloquium on Important Books,” swelling to 133 authors, and such a program is still in service at Columbia as the Core Curriculum. Columbia’s Core Curriculum inspired many similar Great Books curricula at other American universities over the subsequent decades of the twentieth century, programs still running at many major universities—including at Yale under the title of “Directed Studies,” a program taught to approximately ten percent of each freshman class.111

The Industrial Revolution and changing ideas about social class sparked an entirely novel understanding of the purpose of an education. As Reynolds summarizes,

> By the close of the nineteenth century, the liberal culture imparted by the Western literary icons was touted by classicists as a response to runaway enthusiasm for a curriculum aimed at careerism and financial gain. Classicists urged alternatives to utilitarian higher education by inferring that “classical study bestowed something higher than vocational or exclusively scientific preparation: it offered culture. . .”112

The mention of “culture” in that citation, with its corollary of elitism, touches on an accusation long leveled at the Great Books program, or even at liberal arts education in general. However, while the Great Books educational model has long been accused of being an elite privilege—an option only for those wealthy enough to have no pressing need for vocational training—the irony

---

111 Directed Studies is affectionately known as “directed suicide” by the students, in good part for its weekly integrative papers—but the fact that Yale College keeps expanding the number of openings suggests the popularity of the program. It is an integrated philosophy, history, and literature program very similar to those at many other colleges today. Other examples of Great Books-inspired programs still taught would include, among others, Fordham University’s Honors Program Curriculum; Brigham Young University’s Honors Program’s Great Works List; Georgetown’s Liberal Arts Seminar; Colgate University’s required Western Traditions class; University of Chicago’s Core Curriculum; Concordia University’s Liberal Arts College; Dartmouth College’s Dialogues with the Classics program; Hillsdale College’s Great Books and Western Heritage classes; New York University’s mandatory Texts and Ideas course; Oglethorpe University’s mandatory Core Curriculum sequence; Princeton University’s Interdisciplinary Approaches to Western Culture; St. John’s College Great Books reading list; Saint Mary’s College of California Collegiate Seminar; Stanford University’s Program in Structured Liberal Education curriculum; University of Notre Dame’s Program of Liberal Studies curriculum; Boston College’s Perspectives Program and Honors Program; and Reed College’s Humanities 110.

is that the Great Books program was originally proposed as a way to democratize education, 
distributing to many a kind of learning that had been previously available only to a select few.

Despite the seeming elitism in returning to a medieval curriculum based on the Trivium 
and Quadrivium—even going so far as to read the original texts in their original languages—it is 
clear that, in the minds of many of the early Great Books proponents, these programs were seen 
as offering outreach education or adult education for the masses. Admittedly, over time, that 
outreach took on crass commercial aspects, which in some ways sealed the fate of the Great 
Books movement—but the initial impulse was to give the general public access to books and 
materials ordinarily only read in elite colleges. While it may be difficult to remember that 
rationale, given the later snobbery attached to the commercial pitches of having a set of the Great 
Books in one’s personal library, many Great Books scholars became actively involved in public 
outreach programs for a more general audience.

Without question, one of the most radical proponents of this view was President 
Meiklejohn of Amherst College, who thought that a college liberal arts curriculum could “unite 
intellectual excellence and democracy in a community that included students of all races and 
religions.”\textsuperscript{113} To put that idea into practice, Meiklejohn had Amherst become involved in one of 
the country’s first adult workers’ education programs, offering to the mill workers of the 
surrounding Connecticut River Valley towns classes in reading, writing, history, and 
economics.\textsuperscript{114}

But it was Meiklejohn’s former student and protégé, Scott Buchanan, whose activities 
best illustrate this dimension of the Great Books movement. After receiving his Ph.D. from 
Harvard in 1925, he became assistant director of the People’s Institute, a New York City

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
educational outreach program at Cooper Union. The founder of Cooper Union, a Columbia professor, later recalled that Buchanan “wanted the immigrants of the Lower East Side to meet the intellectuals of the Upper West Side, to make the ‘melting pot’ boil.”115 The People’s Institute courses, free public lectures, and programs exposed the immigrants of the Lower East Side to the same ideas Erskine had proposed in his Columbia Great Books course. This linkage had a profound effect on Buchanan’s thinking and formed the basis for his later emphasis on adult education and the move to democratize access to the ideas contained in the Great Books program. As his fellow collaborator and associate at St. John’s College, Stringfellow Barr, would later put it, Buchanan’s philosophy of education, based on the formative experience of his Cooper Union work, had the effect of seeing “hungry adults of every class, of every age, of many races, of both sexes, who, like Aristotle’s man, desired to know. Buchanan never forgot the uncollegiate drive for understanding at Cooper Union and the contrast between this and a certain coziness that well-endowed campuses readily acquire.”116

The Great Books program arguably achieved its apotheosis at St. John’s College in Annapolis. Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan, both influential members of the University of Chicago faculty and proponents of the Great Books program, were recruited to become the College’s president and dean in the hopes that they could prevent the struggling school from failing—on the condition that Barr and Buchanan would be allowed to introduce a Great Books program as the College’s curriculum. Not that the trustees were enthusiastic about installing a Great Books program at St. John’s, but, in a memorable turn of phrase, they were told to “just

---


116 Ibid., 13. See also Beam, A Great Idea, 19, 36, 71, and 146.
hold their noses and jump—because it was either that or close.”117 Barr and Buchanan were careful to explain in one of their first course catalogs for the reinvented college that the texts chosen were not from the Great Books, but that “any limited number of the classics must always remain open to revision. There is no better way of revising it than its continuous use in teaching in a college. The ‘best hundred books’ is a variable for collecting the values that satisfy its criteria.”118 Were that comment not clear enough, when Barr was interviewed in 1968, he remembers thinking, “The public always thought we said ‘the’ great books or ‘the’ 100 great books, as if we knew just exactly. We never talked of ‘the’ great books. We were simple minded, but not that simple minded.”119 Likewise, Barr’s colleague, Scott Buchanan, a proponent of the canon’s democratizing power, argued, “Great books are those which have the greatest number of possible interpretations. . . . Great books raise unanswerable questions. . . . They exercise the intuitive reason and its inevitable companion, the contemplative imagination. . . .”120

Regardless of which books they used, Buchanan was insistent that the pedagogy to teach those books always be that of the Socratic seminar.121 Like the Harkness method used at Phillips Exeter, a Socratic seminar at St. John’s was to start with a teacher’s question to be followed by student discussion, and more questions and more discussion. Barr later described that methodology this way: “The rules of the dialectic are not unlike the rules of a game. You ask your question, get the answer, and keep asking questions until you find where the argument


leads. . . This is a special talent which I think we succeeded in cultivating to a rather remarkable degree at St. John’s.”  

Despite these high points, by the 1940s, the Great Books program had largely been gutted of meaningful intellectual purpose, transformed instead into a massive commercial publishing venture, complete with door-to-door salesmen working on commission, selling either the Encyclopedia Britannica or the fifty-four volumes of the *faux* leather-bound *The Great Books of the Western World*—443 works by seventy-four white men, amounting to 32,000 pages of tiny double-columned, eye-straining type. Such hucksterism in many ways cast a pall over the entire philosophy of the Great Books. The Great Books program and philosophy never really recovered from the negative publicity attached to what happened to the program from the 1940s to the 1990s—when the mass-marketing and listing of “Great Books” got caught up in the culture wars of the second half of the twentieth century.

Reflecting on this ignominious “end,” Daniel Bell writes,

> While the “great books” have been soundly berated as an authoritative canon reeking of Western white-male elitism, post-structural interpretations aided by historical contexts support the notion that the roots of the concept are closer to Daniel Bell’s argument that, starting with Erskine’s proposal at Columbia, “the intention in reading the ‘great books’ was to inculcate in the student a humanistic rather than a professional orientation; to force him to confront a great work directly, rather than to treat it with the awe reserved for a classic; and, in the contemporary jargon, ‘to acculturate’ a

---


123 All primary source documents for St. John’s history can be found in Nelson, *Radical Visions*.

student whose background and upbringing had excluded him from the ‘great traditions.’”¹²⁵

For me, the lesson of the Great Books debate is that there is not, and should not be, a standardized set of “Great Books”—some exclusive, definitive list, especially one limited to works only from the Western world—to set and delimit the reading materials a student or adult must have read to be considered educated. But there are good books, and better books, and even great books, and Buchanan’s idea that a great book is one having the greatest possible interpretations, raising unanswerable questions, and arousing the contemplative imagination is not a bad definition of what should be read in any curriculum, whether in college or secondary school—or in life.

When we turn to the issue of the canon and the contemporary “culture wars,” I am reminded that the philosophical and theological world of my education (1962–72) was essentially a Christian world in the minds of my teachers, and thus in my mind. (I was, for example, admitted to the doctoral program at the Harvard Divinity School in the program named “Christian Theology.”) But cultural and societal movements were afoot to challenge many of those hidden or unstated assumptions, and in many ways I have become part of a “bridge generation” between a more clearly-delineated Christian educational world and the world of today’s multifaceted, multi-religious, more nuanced understanding of the fields of religious and philosophical studies. Even a superficial look at Phillips Exeter’s Religion Department curriculum of today when compared to forty years ago clearly shows that evolution, and that is true in my own teaching as well. The books I select for the students to read are ever-changing, and the courses I teach are continuously updated and changed. I love to teach (mostly) Western

students about completely different ways to conceive of reality, and I long ago stopped referring to what “we think” or using any language which assumes a shared Christian faith on the part of the students in class. In fact, as discussed earlier, my own working definition of religion is no longer rooted in any one religious tradition, but is much more capacious in nature, more existentially and contextually defined.

Having said that, however, one has to assign something to read in each course one teaches, and in the course I teach the most often each year—Introduction to Western Philosophy—I have chosen to read the people I read as a graduate student. That means we read the works of the giants of the Western philosophical tradition up through the nineteenth century. Regardless of the exact reading list in any given term, this invariably means we read exclusively texts written by dead white men; for better or worse, the history of Western philosophy in that period was written by those figures. Admittedly, we could read recent philosophy from a more diverse set of writers, as well as philosophers from diverse cultures and backgrounds. However, I contend that there is a pedagogical issue at stake here: at the secondary school level, beginning philosophy students do best by focusing on the half-dozen major philosophical issues framed in the Plato-to-Nietzsche period prior to venturing into the byways of twentieth century philosophy, for which college is better suited (and where there would be much more diversity in the readings). Put another way, twentieth century philosophy makes little sense if one has not first read around in the prior two millennia. It would be the equivalent of studying the last decade of American history with no prior knowledge of what went on in the preceding three hundred years.

The same is true for the other course I teach the most, The Literature of Existentialism. One of my younger colleagues once assigned Malcolm X in that course, but in doing so he had to drop Nietzsche, and I am skeptical of that switch. Any course on the literature of existentialism
needs to read figures such as Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kafka, Sartre, and Camus—again, the history is of dead white European men. For this, I again make no apology since, as with Introduction to Western Philosophy, those are the people who wrote the critical materials. Rather than diluting these courses, one of the clearest solutions to the issue of a Great Books approach being too white, too male, and too Eurocentric is to simply offer other courses in which one reads vastly different literature, books from diverse cultures and backgrounds—books which raise the same questions but from a completely different point of view. We do precisely that in the Religion Department curriculum, in other courses, and it is done all across the Academy curriculum, in many departments other than ours.

It is important to acknowledge the current changing and changed prevailing views around the question of what one should read and why. However, I contend that there is a vast difference between proceeding ignorantly as if nothing had transpired in the interval, and recognizing that changed landscape but still defending a certain way of doing something.\textsuperscript{126} It is clear that trying to defend anything other than where we are today with regard to multiculturalism and the inclusion of a diversity of viewpoints places one on the wrong side of history; moreover, it places one on the wrong side of thinking, in that limiting one’s reading to only one group of writers, however defined, is by definition a restriction of point of view, of sensibilities. Yes, there are many subtleties one can and should flesh out in this debate, but in the end, in a globalized world of infinite diversity, we need to hear all voices, especially those hitherto underrepresented or silenced.

That said, as the canon debates became so politicized, what may have gotten lost was any discussion about point of view in general. It is not sufficient to define the issue as saying that we need “diverse points of view,” but rather one needs to examine the nature and sources for one’s own point of view. This is really an exercise in self-consciousness. Whether apocryphal or not, the story goes that Hegel was once asked how he could prove he was at home. He responded something to the effect of, “Simple, I get up out of my easy chair in my living room in front of my big picture window, and go out the front door and peer back in, and see that I am home sitting in my chair.” Obviously, that won’t work, as you cannot be in two places at once. But the story illustrates a deeper truth: try as you might, you may not be able to see the world from another person’s point of view, so the best you can do is be as self-conscious as possible about your own point of view. My guess is that that is the genesis of the rise of cultural studies, namely, that we study other cultures not simply to be exposed to how others think, but that, through doing so, we become much more conscious of our own culture, with its thought-world, biases, and unstated or unexamined assumptions.

Approaching this question from the perspective of subaltern studies, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has argued for the necessity of studying the Western canon because to jettison it a priori deprives one of the tools necessary to challenge it or to construct one’s own subjectivity in response to it.

The Western male subject has long been constituted historically for himself and in himself. And, while we readily accept, acknowledge, and partake of the critique of this subject as transcendent, to deny us the process of exploring and reclaiming our subjectivity before we critique it . . . leaves us nowhere, invisible and voiceless in the republic of Western letters. Consider the irony: precisely when we (and other Third World people) obtain the complex wherewithal to define our black subjectivity in the republic of Western letters, our theoretical colleagues declare that there ain’t no such thing as a subject, so why should we be bothered with that? In this way, those of us in feminist criticism or African-American criticism
who are engaged in the necessary work of canon deformation and reformation confront the skepticism even of those who are allies on other fronts, over this matter of the death of the subject and our own discursive subjectivity.  

I take Gates to be saying that you cannot stand nowhere; you must stand somewhere, and the question is to be self-conscious of where one does stand. Regardless, it is clear that the debates about what one should read, and why one should read it, will—and, in fact, must—continue, as they have for centuries. That debate, too, is part of a process, and as time and sensitivities change, we will continue to discuss and debate exactly what it means to come to know oneself, and what we should be reading to assist in that evolving process. Over the decades, the Religion Department at Exeter has spent many meetings discussing just that question—what should we ask the students to read and why—as we adjust our curriculum to changing views of what constitutes our canon of assigned texts.

VI. “Know Thyself” and Harkness Pedagogy: The History and Practice of the Harkness Method

But in order to know, one must act; even if you believe you have [certainty], without a means of judging, it is untested.

ἀλλ’ εἰδέναι χρὴ δρῶσαι· ώς οὖδ’ εἰ δοκεῖς ἔχειν, ἔχοις ἄν γνῶμα, μὴ πειρωμένη.

—Sophocles, The Women of Trachis 592–93

The genesis of the Harkness method explains much about its methodology. Contrary to the common perception that it is a pedagogy for only the brightest of students—The New York

Times, for example, cannot mention Exeter Academy without placing the adjective “elite” before the school’s name—the origin of the Harkness method was rooted in the desire to help the weakest rather than the strongest students in the class, based on Edward S. Harkness’s own experiences as a “dull” student at St. Paul’s School.\(^{128}\)

The history of this method of teaching at the Academy dates back into the 1920s and the friendship between the then-principal of Phillips Exeter, Lewis Perry, and oil baron Edward S. Harkness. Harkness told Perry, his long-time friend, that he would be interested in offering a significant donation to Phillips Exeter to assist in the establishment of a new pedagogy at the school, one, it turns out, based not on a larger educational philosophy but on Harkness’s own struggles as a student when he was a youth at St. Paul’s in Concord, New Hampshire. At first in the discussions between Perry, the Phillips Exeter faculty, and Harkness, the people at Phillips Exeter did not understand the depth of feeling Harkness had for the student who struggles in class, as Harkness had done repeatedly in his mathematics class, for example. Initially, Harkness funded an exploratory trip to England for Perry and another teacher to explore British public schools to see how they operated.\(^{129}\) The two visited many schools, including Winchester College, Eton College, St. Paul’s School, Merchant Taylors’ School, St. Andrew’s School, Wellington College, Harrow School, Rugby School, and Oundle School, where they found an educational system not unlike Phillips Exeter’s at the time: a teacher on a raised platform in front of the class of boys who sat in rows of desks, with an occasional recitation to complement the teacher’s lecture.\(^{130}\)

---


When Perry made his first proposal to Harkness after the British trip about how to spend Harkness’s potential gift, Harkness rejected it as not “ambitious enough,” and in the handwritten notes of their meeting, Perry wrote: “Harkness felt that we did not have anything new enough or fundamental enough. . . . Any scheme which we have at present he might aid, but would not go into deeply.”\footnote{Lewis Perry, undated handwritten notes, Saltonstall Papers, Harkness Plan, Folder 1, Phillips Exeter Academy Archives, italics in original; cited in Heskel and Dyer, \textit{After the Harkness Gift}, 2. Edouard Desrochers, the Phillips Exeter Academy archivist, is the person who guided me in this research. The trip to England to visit schools there and talk with educational authorities did not, therefore, provide the genesis for Harkness’s ideas about small classes and more individualized instruction; that seems to have come from Harkness’s own biography. Reading Harkness’s words about “a dull boy, like himself” makes one wonder about what then-unknown or undiagnosed educational or psychological issues lay beneath the surface of Harkness’s self-assessment. Long before anyone spoke of “learning differences” and the necessity of tailoring classroom instruction to the needs of individual students, Harkness must have felt neglected in his large classes at St. Paul’s, where his academic struggles perhaps went unnoticed by his teachers—so much so that, years later as a wealthy adult, he felt the need to address in a significant way the deficiencies of the classrooms of his youth.} Instead, Harkness has his mind fixed on smaller classes—eight or ten—and the Conference method of instruction. . . . His whole idea is that the dull boy, like himself, who was in large classes in mathematics and did not know what was going on.” “Remember the \textit{Conference} system of teaching. That’s the big idea! . . . Not recitations, \textit{conferences} . . .”\footnote{Lewis Perry, undated handwritten notes, Saltonstall Papers, Harkness Plan, Folder 1, Phillips Exeter Academy Archives.}
Both at St. Paul’s School and at Yale, Harkness felt that, as a weak student, he had fallen through the cracks, so to speak, in a larger classroom setting where there was little individual attention to the less talented students. He wanted a pedagogy of smaller classes and more individualized instruction so students like himself would benefit more easily from the personal attention of the teacher. In the notes from an April 9, 1930 meeting between Lewis Perry, Jeremiah Smith, Jr., and Harkness, Harkness is reported as saying,

“... I am thinking of something much more radical than that. I want to see somebody try teaching—not by recitations in a formal recitation room where the teacher is on a platform raised above the pupils and there is a class of twenty or more boys who recite lessons. I think the bright boys get along all right by that method, but I am thinking of a boy who isn’t a bright boy—not necessarily a dull boy, but diffident, and not being equal doesn’t speak up in class and admit his difficulties. What I have in mind is teaching boys in sections where eight boys could sit around a table with a teacher who would talk with them and instruct them by a sort of tutorial or conference-method. This would be a real revolution in methods.”

133 Edward Harkness attended St. Paul’s School in Concord, NH and went on to Yale, graduating in 1897. He received creditable grades, but was not a natural or brilliant student, and worked hard to keep up. His experience and struggles at St. Paul’s had a profound impact on him and shaped his thinking about the need for changes in educational methods.” Towler, “Report for the Alumni/ae Affairs and Development Office of Phillips Exeter Academy.”

134 Notes for meeting between Lewis Perry, Jeremiah Smith, Jr., and Edward Harkness, April 9, 1930, Saltonstall Papers, Harkness Plan, Folder 1, Phillips Exeter Academy Archives. Note that this typed memorandum is not signed and refers to Harkness as “Mr. Jones,” presumably for purposes of confidentiality. If one looks closely at the wording of this summary, it should be apparent that Harkness was not envisioning anything like what today at Exeter we call the “Harkness method.” The notes above suggest Harkness wanted a teacher in a small classroom setting to “instruct them by a sort of tutorial,” an explanation followed by question and answer, which means that the teacher was still the sage, but on a smaller stage. It was the small class size which would make the difference, such that the “below-average boy would feel encouraged to speak up, present his difficulties, and the teacher would know... what his difficulties were.” Aside from the palpable pain one feels reading these lines today, one wonders how many teachers had the skill and insight to realize, let alone respond to, the deeper causes behind why the quieter or weaker student had difficulty joining the conversation. Having noted that genesis of the Harkness method, and wondering if 1930s Exeter teachers were that skilled in realizing the causes behind the “diffident boy’s diffidence,” I should also emphasize the closing sentence in the November 25, 1930 faculty resolution thanking Harkness for his gift and pointing to the purpose behind the new pedagogy: “Whatever else may be the outcome, this school at least, it may be reasonably hoped, will henceforth be a better place for the eager and inquiring, and even for the vagrant and reluctant, mind of youth.” Faculty resolution, November 25, 1930, Saltonstall Papers, Harkness Plan, Folder 1, Phillips Exeter Academy Archives. This quotation was called to my attention by Desrochers. Phillips Exeter Academy, of course, has often been known as a school for the “eager and inquiring,” but I cannot emphasize enough Harkness’s and then the faculty’s idea that his new pedagogy was also for “the vagrant and reluctant mind of youth.”
In the six months between the spring and late fall of 1930, the Phillips Exeter faculty joined Perry in the challenge of developing a bold plan for redesigning the Academy’s pedagogy. On October 30, 1930, Perry wrote to Harkness with a long letter outlining his new plan. Instead of the more traditional pedagogy of students sitting in rows and listening to the teacher lecture at the front of the class, the students would sit around seminar tables and discuss the materials themselves, under the guidance of a teacher (Fig. 1.1). Class size would be reduced from twenty-five or thirty to many fewer, and, as Saltonstall says,

> These students, grouped roughly according to ability, would sit with their teacher around an oval table, looking at one another’s faces rather than at the backs of one another’s necks. Conversation and discussion, not lecture, would be the order.\(^\text{135}\)

In considerable detail, Perry explained his vision of a new “Harkness Plan” which would involve sitting around a conference table to engage in tutorial-style instruction,

> with a teacher of discernment, sympathy, background, and a live and full knowledge of his subject, who would guide and direct the discussion of the lesson. With the smaller groups and the conference the teacher would see more completely the content and processes of the student’s mind. The greater class discussion inherent in the conference plan would train each boy gradually to learn to talk and to think while he is talking. The net result would be that the boy would become more grown-up, would think of his studies as something more real, and would have an interest, a compelling motive, which he would carry to college. The successful teacher in the conference plan would not be a drill master, but a partner in a human enterprise.\(^\text{136}\)

Perry also included at the end of his letter a proposed budget for this new plan, which came to $5.8 million (about $400 million in 2015 dollars). Less than a week later, Harkness wrote back accepting the proposal and funding request, and thus was launched the new Academy pedagogy.

\(^{135}\) Saltonstall and McCord, _Lewis Perry_, 64–65.

\(^{136}\) Ibid. The last sentence suggests the teacher plays exactly the same role which Socrates plays in his dialogues. There is probably no better description of the role of a Harkness teacher today.
What exactly is the Harkness method as currently practiced? Here is how the Phillips Exeter Academy website describes the Harkness method:

Here at Exeter, we believe learning is best done collaboratively by as diverse a set of students as we can assemble, and while that learning experience is not all confined to our classrooms, there is no question that the quintessential example of ‘youth from and for every quarter’ is our signature Harkness tables. This is the academic heart of our institution and the best example of how we all learn to think more creatively, deeply and compassionately when we experience the various viewpoints of others.

Harkness is also

a way of learning: everyone comes to class prepared to share, discuss, and discover, whether the subject is a novel by William Faulkner or atomic and molecular structure. There are no lectures. It’s a way of being: interacting with other minds, listening carefully, speaking respectfully, accepting new ideas and questioning old ones, using new knowledge, and enjoying the richness of human interaction. You see the Harkness philosophy played out in our dorms, in our theater productions, on our playing fields. It’s fun, it’s exhilarating, it’s the way to be. It’s how you learn to love learning.\(^\text{137}\)

Even if one discounts the promotional purpose of this text, it is an accurate shorthand summary of what the Harkness method is. Admittedly, teaching according to the Harkness method, often abridged as “teaching Harkness,” can be more an art than a science, something one attempts again and again over time, often never quite reaching mastery, but nevertheless something learned in the doing—in that sense, making it as much a “spiritual exercise” for the teacher as for the students. The Exeter Humanities Institute acknowledges this when it writes that “there are probably as many definitions of ‘Harkness teaching’ as there are practitioners of this elusive art.”

Loosely speaking, Harkness teaching is leading student-centered discussions in class, finding ways to get students to make the discoveries for themselves, to get them to draw their own conclusions, to teach them how to consider all sides of an argument and make up their own minds based on analysis of the material at hand. Harkness teaching tries to

Figure 1.1. A Harkness classroom in Phillips Hall, both the new building and the classroom design funded by the Harkness gift. Phillips Exeter Academy. Photograph courtesy of Warren Patterson and Phillips Exeter Academy.
develop in students their own sense of responsibility for their educations. The teacher is the cultivator of that sense of responsibility, rather than the fount of information and analysis. 138

Surprisingly, with all the attention today to different learning styles and multiple pedagogies, there is not as much attention to the benefits of discussion-based learning as there might be. 139 To address that deficiency, the Exeter Humanities Institute runs annual summer workshops that train secondary school teachers from other independent as well as public school—at the elementary, middle, and secondary school levels—what it means to teach Harkness. 140 The key to understanding Harkness is that it is entirely student-focused, from start to finish. It is not only discussion-based learning but it is student-generated and student-led conversation. They are talking to and with each other; as Edmundson puts it, the teacher is only “a facilitator—not a ‘sage on the stage’ but a ‘guide on the side.’” 141 A diagram of a


139 Chickering and Gamson note, “Learning is not a spectator sport. . . . [Students] must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.” A. W. Chickering and E. F. Gamson, “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,” American Association of Higher Education Bulletin 39, no. 7 (1987): 3–7. Cf. Sam Wineburg, Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). There is much work on the benefits of discussion-based teaching in general. Perhaps the staunchest argument advocating this pedagogy is Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005). In a chapter entitled “How Discussion Helps Learning and Enlivens Classrooms,” they present a list of fifteen benefits of discussion. Among the many benefits the authors cite are, “It increases students’ awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity and complexity. . . . It helps students recognize and investigate their assumptions. . . . It encourages attentive, respectful living. . . . It increases intellectual agility. . . . It develops the capacity for the clear communication of ideas and meaning,” and “it develops habits of collaborative learning.” I recall this dictum: “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I’ll remember. Involve me and I’ll understand.” James W. Gentry and the Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Guide to Business Gaming and Experiential Learning (Dubuque, IA: Nichols Publishing Co., 1990), 9.


141 Edmundson, Why Teach?, 150.
conventional classroom compared to a Harkness classroom not only makes clear the physical differences in the layout of the classes, but also highlights the dramatic difference in the role of the instructor in classroom discussions (Fig. 1.2).)

![Figure 1.2. Traditional versus Harkness pedagogy. Dikshant International School in Zirakpur, India, http://www.dikshant.org/hawkness_method.php](image)

Although student-generated and student-led conversation sounds so simple—as if the teacher just sits back and does nothing, letting the conversation unfold naturally and automatically—the truth is far from that. In fact, much of the success of any Harkness class depends very much upon what happens before the class begins, what kind of preparation the teacher has done before class. In the lecture system, the teacher can control what might happen in class on any given day by preparing what he or she wants to say. Aside from the questions students may ask, it is possible to predict what might transpire in the class and exercise a high degree of control. The preparation for a Harkness class is very different.

---

Much of the success of a class can be determined, or at least strongly influenced, by the preparation before class. The selection of the homework material goes a long way towards developing an interesting class discussion. Generally, homework with some “tension” makes for the best discussions: different viewpoints on the same event, contemporary and modern interpretations of the same event, accounts that are biased one way or another—all of these give the students something to ponder and discuss. . . . Many of us put questions on our syllabi to encourage the students to think about the material a bit before they come into class.143

Regardless of the homework assigned—whether that be a section of a novel or play, a primary source, an article or chapter from a book posing some ethical issue, or a Zen koan—it does take some initial effort on the teacher’s part to begin the discussion. Yes, some conversations are truly self-generating: the students arrive already excited about the reading, and start the conversation on their own. More often, though, it takes an opening comment on the teacher’s part to get the conversation underway. My own opening questions are often no more complicated than, “What did you think of the reading?” or “Where are we in our conversation?” or, simplest yet, “What would you like to talk about today?”144 On the other hand, if there is a watchword about Harkness teaching, it is that the teacher needs to anticipate and prepare for the unexpected. With student-generated and -led conversations, the teacher is not always in control of what is going on in his or her classroom, and that is a positive, not a negative—but one must be prepared for that. In a truly student-led conversation, class may go very differently from what was planned, even from the start.

The students may want to talk about something completely different from whatever it was that the instructor had planned, or it may quickly become clear that they did not really understand the reading, and if the teacher were to forge ahead with his planned questions they would not be able to do justice to the topic. Worse, they might be completely lost and either tune


144 Admittedly, this kind of opening works much better in a school where every class, regardless of discipline or grade level, operates with Harkness pedagogy. The students, in other words, expect this kind of opening, and come prepared—most days, at least!—to carry on a student-generated and -led conversation.
out, or take in misinformation or confusion and learn it as “fact.” . . . Teachers can prepare, to an extent, for these “unpredictabilities” in different ways. Some of our colleagues will write a list of critical events on the board before class and then cover it before class starts by pulling down a wall map. Should the need arise the teacher can go to the board, lift the map, and the information can then be included in the discussion without interruption. Maybe students will be asked to write or to work in pairs for the first few minutes of class to get “warmed up” before coming together to discuss. Or handouts can be prepared before class to be handed out, or not, depending on how the discussion goes. A question might be written on the board that could be used to refocus a wavering discussion. Preparing for possible eventualities with different approaches makes these apparently random transitions much easier.¹⁴⁵

Perhaps counter-intuitively, all of this unpredictability is, in fact, what a Harkness teacher hopes will happen and the teacher needs to be able to “go with the flow” of the student-driven conversation. The hardest task for a teacher new to Harkness is to have patience: in its absence, the teacher becomes uncomfortable with the unpredictability, fits and starts, and silences of a student-led conversation, and jumps in to take control. Students sense this immediately and can happily wait out the inexperienced teacher’s nervousness and tendency to work through some lesson plan. The new teacher’s half-dozen well-thought-out and penetrating open-ended questions can be asked in the first ten nervous minutes of class, and then there are forty minutes left in the period, for what to happen?

Whatever the preparation for class, class will probably not go exactly as planned. This is where the need for the teacher to let go and have some confidence arises. With a little patience we find that often the students will ask the right question, or develop questions along thoughtful and interesting lines. These may not be the questions or topics that the teacher had planned, but if the discussion is on topic and driven by the students then they are getting something out of it and learning the material. And, the teacher has to let go. Silences, feared and dreaded by most teachers new to this pedagogy, are quite often nothing more than a moment in time when

---
¹⁴⁵ Smith and Foley, “Harkness Teaching in the History Classroom,” n.p. I begin many classes with a short writing assignment, a focus question which asks the student to center on some key issue in the text, or some character’s situation, which then becomes the launching pad for the subsequent class conversation. These are not meant to be “gotcha questions,” nor questions to test whether the student did his or her homework (although the students often see them that way); rather, they are my way of singling out some issue or situation which we might then use to begin our class discussion.
the students are all thinking, and if the teacher were to rush and fill the silence the students will become dependent on this and effectively be “let off the hook.”

In this unpredictable conversation—the teacher not knowing exactly which way a given day’s conversation will go, or what is on the students’ minds that day—the Harkness teacher needs to have a mental lesson plan consisting of, say, six major issues or points the class might cover that day. However, in any given class, the conversation may go A-D-E-B-C and never get to F, which is saved for another class. Other days, the conversation goes C-B-A-D-E-F in the first half of the period. Then what do we do with the remaining time? Harkness teaching is exhausting work—for the students, yes, but for the teacher as well—for no one can predict on any given day where the conversation might go and what issues might surface. It must be emphasized however—lest the free-flowing nature of these discussions be mistaken for seeming aimlessness—that students and teacher are in the classroom with a clear agenda, to read and discuss and process some body of material that contains an issue or topic carefully chosen by the teacher to be appropriate for that course and those students at that point in time.

Why are such structured student-generated and student-led conversations so important to the students for whom this pedagogy is designed? The answer to that addresses our larger pedagogical issue of emerging adolescent spiritual development. Much as teachers or lecturers think the students will understand their points when made in the traditional lecture format, in Harkness pedagogy, if the learning process is going to work at all, it will work because the student owns the pedagogy through which he or she is learning. When a student understands a

---


147 When I first came to the Academy, I taught for several summers in the Exeter Summer School, and I still remember the surprised look on one student’s face when I gave out the homework packet the first day of class. Inquiring about the look, I was told that she thought Harkness was “students sitting around the table just talking.” When pressed on what she imagined happened in class, she replied, “I thought we would sit here every day and just talk about our own lives, and what we think about things in general.” Harkness homework was a rude shock for her.
given point or issue, he or she can explain it to others, and when others do not understand, they can ask and get an immediate response from their colleagues; in the fits and starts of discussion, students are teaching each other, and in this way they are becoming educated, with the emphasis on the Latin root of education, ē-ducō: the students’ learning is being “drawn out” of them in the give and take of a Harkness conversation.

This discussion of the Harkness method raises an important question the Exeter faculty have discussed and debated for years: is Harkness pedagogy more about process than content? As is often the case with anything Harkness, the answer is both yes and no. Remembering the discussion about the purpose of a Socratic dialogue, the answer is yes, in that Harkness teaching is more a methodological approach to learning, and while considerable content is discussed and processed, the focus is on the mode of inquiry and not the mastery of the content per se. That surely does not mean that no content is learned, but it does mean that the content is not the be-all and end-all of the pedagogy; the focus is never rote memorization and regurgitation, as is so often the case in the “default” pedagogy in many other schools. Instead, the process of collaborative inquiry—where every question can lead to another question—makes this pedagogy, as Hadot would label it, a manière de vivre, and not simply an exercise one does inside a classroom with no carry-over to life outside the classroom. As noted earlier, an Exeter student may exit Introduction to Western Philosophy knowing a good deal about who said what when, and what were the major issues in Western philosophy, but, much more importantly, he or she has learned how to philosophize, how to ask endless questions that examine an issue from many points of view, which leads to a deeper understanding of the issues under examination. That, in fact, is a life skill, and the reason why graduates remember their experience with the Harkness method so fondly after Phillips Exeter.
Practically speaking, then, what are the specific skills a Harkness teacher can employ to encourage table conversations, and how does one evaluate whether the conversation is “succeeding”? While teaching according to the Harkness method may be an art, it is an art which can be described and taught. There are even training manuals, for example, Becky Moore’s *Exeter Humanities Institute Workbook*, which is complete with directions on such topics as setting classroom tone, how to enter a discussion, how to learn to listen, classroom physical arrangements, keeping quiet as an instructor, and evaluating the discussion. As one who is still developing this art after many years, I can say that one of the best metaphors I have for the Harkness educator is that he or she is an orchestra conductor; I am not making the music, I have no instrument in my hands except the baton, and they, the students, are the ones actually producing the sound. Just as there are many different styles for conducting, some days I more-or-less stand (or sit) there silently, with an occasional wave of the arm, while other days I am a frantic Leonard Bernstein, cueing some instruments while silencing others—or, translated into the student vocabulary of Phillips Exeter, silencing the Harkness warrior and calling on the Harkness wallflower.

---

148 After the training manual lists the formal directions, a number of Phillips Exeter teachers discuss at length their own strategies for conducting Harkness classes in discipline-specific situations. The manual includes a number of interviews with veteran Phillips Exeter teachers who respond to the question, “When did you first think of yourself as a Harkness teacher?” Most say that it is an art one works on for his or her whole life; no sooner does one think that a class has gone well than the next class proves how far one is from the ideal. For example, “I think anyone who tries to give the students the freedom to set the agenda and struggle to learn how to talk with each other and listen with each other and learn together is a Harkness teacher. There are days, when I know that I am good at what I do, especially after an amazing class which I think are marked when the students get to issues that you hadn’t thought about, but that are clearly critical to the piece we are reading. Or when they just connect with each other, with wonderful timing, humor, insight and delight, walking out still talking, and you know that they will continue thinking about the issues raised. Those are great days. But then there are other days when I think I should start looking for a new job, I am so lousy at this one. . . . Sometimes those days can come side by side, even with the same class (smile).”

149 “The students in one of my classes years ago came up with a chart of different Harkness student-types, and that chart has now become famous, and has been added to the ‘Exeter lore’ for faculty and students alike. The list of Harkness types includes: Harkness Guerilla – Although silent for most of the term, he/she occasionally utters some stunning revelatory remarks or administer a crushing putdown, then retreat back into the safely of his/her ideological jungle. Ends the term with an A. Harkness Kamakazi Bomber – Lacks skills to create meaningful discussion. Instead
It is a continuous and draining exercise to keep one’s mental lesson plan in one’s head, formatting it and reformatting it as the class conversation unfolds, going with the conversation, yet steering it ever-so-gently. You may be a guide on the side; you may be, to use a different metaphor, “first among equals,” and while it is the students’ class, their conversation, there are many moves that you, the conductor and facilitator, can do to make the conversation run more smoothly, to make sure that every student is included at the level of his or her interest and ability, and to have the conversation deal with the deeper issues in the text assigned for the day.

In a Harkness classroom, everyone learns, and that includes the teacher. It is not false humility to say that much of what I know about the texts we read in class comes from decades of listening to students explain them to one another. One of the great joys of teaching this particular age group is that, while they may not yet have the academic or scholarly vocabulary to express their ideas the way a university professor might, their insights into the issues match those of the most sophisticated scholars. Such anecdotal experiences, reported so frequently among Harkness teachers, reinforce the conviction that these materials are age-appropriate for adolescents.

It is also a legitimate question to ask how a teacher might evaluate a student’s performance in a Harkness classroom. Aside from the standard papers, quizzes, and tests which are still a part of Harkness instruction, the conversation around the table can be evaluated on a daily basis and each student assigned some type of formal or informal grade. Although each of

utterly devastates others’ arguments by supporting them with faulty evidence. Harkness Orchid – Never says anything but looks real good sitting there. Harkness Parasite – Never has an original argument. Instead, usurps the valid points of others to gain strength. Harkness Postal Worker – Destroys discussion suddenly and unexpectedly because of personal issues. Harkness Jehovah’s Witness – Can be relied on to find biblical connection. Several times a class. Every class. Forever. Harkness Ed McMahon – Supports a particular compatriot without exception. Often weakens argument in his/her substitution of zeal for comprehension. Harkness Grandpa – Illustrates every point with a lengthy and poorly told personal anecdote. Forces others to listen. Harkness Gestapo – Refuses to listen to opponents arguments; dismisses them as inferior. Occasionally threatens fellow students physically. Harkness Impressionist – Never talks but draws some pretty cool pictures in his/her notebook.” Moore, Exeter Humanities Institute Workbook, n.p.
us who teaches according to this method may have a different assessment model, here is a typical Harkness teacher’s grading scale, illustrating the difference between an A and C grade.¹⁵⁰

An A grade is awarded to a student who

- consistently arrives prepared to engage in the work of discussion
- is a class leader during the discussions, taking on much of the work
- is turned to by others for guidance with a response to a question or idea
- is capable of expressing him- or herself clearly
- is skilled at thinking on his or her feet and providing the evidence necessary to persuade others that opinions are valid
- tackles the tough questions as well as the easy
- is always pushing the class to deeper and broader levels of thinking about the text
- is attentive and respectful of others’ opinions and questions

A C grade is awarded to a student who

- arrives to class having read the work but takes a passive role in discussions
- prefers to listen and let others do the work of discussion
- frequently is one who needs to be called upon in order to respond
- is a less strong member of discussions; participates on occasion but often only briefly
- is looked to for his or her opinion on some matters of debate
- is capable of expressing him- or herself clearly on most occasions
- offers some perceptive responses and some good, insightful questions during the term
- is a little less skilled in thinking on his or her feet, cannot always be relied upon to provide evidence to persuade others that opinions are valid but goes with instinct instead
- tackles easy rather than challenging questions
- occasionally pushes the class in a new direction through a comment or question
- is attentive and respectful of others’ opinions

There is, of course, a deeper issue buried in the conversation about student assessment in the Harkness method. Whatever any given teacher might think about a student’s participation, it is important to remember that the real purpose of a Harkness conversation is not to earn a grade, but to recreate the “spiritual exercise of philosophizing” as the manière de vivre about which Hadot speaks so movingly. No teacher can easily measure that in any given course, but over the

¹⁵⁰ The grade for the term includes all student work, written and oral, so the class participation grade is but one factor in the overall evaluation. It should be added, however, that class participation is weighted much more heavily in Harkness teaching than in traditional pedagogy. To use a rowing metaphor in common use at Exeter, the student who pulls the “laboring oar” can pull a B-level grade on all his or her other work up to the A range, whereas a student who “weighs his or her oar,” and rarely says anything in class, can easily have A-level written work pulled down to a final course grade of B. The Harkness method depends on the willingness of students to engage in conversation around the table; cultural differences aside, this is not a pedagogy for the reticent.
long run, and through the use of the Harkness method in every discipline at the Academy, each student learns what it means to live questions whose answers are only more questions. We often cite the words of Rainer Maria Rilke.

> Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.\(^{151}\)

That quotation applies not only to any given student over the course of his or her lifetime, but also to the nature of Harkness exchanges and inquiry. To own the Harkness pedagogy is to live the questions around the table, and to live the questions on a daily basis around every discipline’s tables is the heart of Harkness learning.

This discussion about the nature of, philosophy behind, and evaluation of Harkness teaching invites a conversation about how Harkness teaching compares to Socratic questioning, as the two are often compared, and even confused. Many of my own colleagues even discuss Harkness teaching and Socratic teaching as if they were synonyms. More often than not, Socratic teaching has become synonymous with one or another version of the “sage on the stage” model, simply transferred from the lecture hall to the seminar room. All too often, Socratic questioning has been interpreted as a “question and answer” session between the teacher and his or her assembled students, the student asking and the teacher answering, or even vice versa.\(^{152}\)

---


\(^{152}\) There is, of course, a more technical discussion to be had about the exact nature of a Socratic exchange, but the specifics of that are less important than the more popular understanding of what is now called “Socratic questioning.” In that technical discussion, Socrates is engaging in what is called the method of elenchus (Gr. ἔλεγχος [elenchos], “refutation, scrutiny”) or using the elenctic method, a method of discussion between several people wherein, through the asking and answering of questions, critical thinking skills are developed. It is a dialectical method in that a particular point of view is examined or questioned, and in the course of explaining or defending oneself, a contradiction is exposed which leads to a new round of questioning. In that
end, it makes little difference if the real purpose of the session is for the less-informed students to be quizzed by, or in conversation with, the well-informed teacher. If one diagrammed such a session of what often passes for seminar-style education, the diagram would show all the arrows going back and forth, teacher to student, student back to teacher (Fig. 1.3). What’s missing here is any significant exchange between the students; they are not asking questions of each other, nor are they talking directly with each other. This is not their conversation, run by them with their own agenda, whatever that might be; rather, it is the teacher’s conversation, to focus on matters questioning, a negative methodology, increasingly unlikely hypotheses are eliminated in the process of locating better and more plausible responses. Additionally, it should be clear that there is a philosophical basis behind this elenctic method, namely, Socrates’s idea that knowledge is a form of “re-collection” (Gr. ἀνάμνησις [anamnêsis]), that what we know is latent in the conscious mind, and needs to be “re-called” or “re-collected” in a pedagogical method named maieutics (Gr. μαίευτική (n.), from μαίευτικός, “obstetric”), in which the asking and answering of intelligent questions “gives birth” to the truth. The Socratic teacher becomes the midwife in the search for the truth. For more on this point, see the discussion of Plato’s Meno in the final chapter’s section on Religion 420: Introduction to Western Philosophy. In Meno, Socrates engages Meno in this fashion, especially on the nature of virtue, or how, with the slave boy, one determines the square of the hypotenuse in a right-angled triangle. For more on the elenctic method and maieutics, see Paul Friedlaender, Plato: An Introduction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 127–70; David Fortunoff, “Dialogue, Dialectic, and Maieutic: Plato’s Dialogues As Educational Models,” accessed February 1, 2015, http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Anci/AnciFort.htm.

153 This stereotype of a teacher aggressively quizzing a student, putting him or her on the spot in front of the class of whatever size and reducing the student to the lowest level of ignorance is a popular misconception of the Socratic method. See, for example, the role of the law school professor, Prof. Kingsfield, played by John Houseman in the 1973 film The Paper Chase, a part for which he won the Academy Award. As Kingfield explains in the movie, “We use the Socratic method here; I call on you and you answer a question. Why don’t I just give you a lecture? Because through my questions you learn to teach yourself. Through this method of questioning, answering, questioning and answering, we seek to develop in you the ability to analyze that vast complex of facts that constitute the relationships of members within a given society. Questioning and answering. At times you may feel you have found the correct answer, but I assure you that this is a total delusion on your part. You will never find the correct, absolute and final answer. In my classroom there is always another question, another question to follow your answer. Yes, you are on a treadmill; my little questions spin the tumblers of your mind. You are on an operating table; my little questions are the fingers probing your brain. We do brain surgery here. You teach yourself the law and I train your mind. You come in here with a skull full of mush and you leave thinking like a lawyer.” In fact, many law schools consider such random public quizzing, often called “cold calling,” an acceptable and standard part of their pedagogy, so much so that entering law students are warned to be prepared for this version of Socratic questioning. Even if a “Socratic exchange” is understood to take place in a seminar setting, not in front of a large lecture hall, it is still possible to misunderstand its structure and purpose, with the emphasis more on the role of the teacher as authority figure who asks the questions and drives the classroom agenda. This different kind of misunderstanding is found, for example, in Valerie Ross, ed., “The Socratic Method: What it is and How to Use it in the Classroom,” Speaking of Teaching: Stanford University Newsletter on Teaching 13, no. 1 (2003). Despite Ross’s best efforts to describe the Socratic method as fully participatory and student-centered, she still situates the teacher at the center of classroom exchanges as the one asking, and even answering, the questions. For a video of Stanford professor Rob Reich explaining why Kingsfield’s teaching style is not the Socratic method, and what Reich thinks the actual method is, see: “The Socratic Method: What It Is and How to Use It in the Classroom,” YouTube video, 31:13, posted by “CTLStanford,” March 27, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr_NtXFskQw.
of his or her choice. This is predicated on the assumption that ill-informed students need to sit at the feet of a master scholar to learn whatever the master scholar knows. There is little confidence that the students know anything, let alone that, in their ignorance, they might be able to teach one another. Is that not the blind leading the blind? That’s why all the arrows go back and forth through the teacher. By contrast, a Harkness exchange looks quite different when diagrammed (Fig. 1.4). In the ideal, a Harkness classroom conversation should have arrows running all across the table, student to student, with, in most cases, no more arrows running from the teacher than from any given student, if not fewer.
While it is a truism in education that the “teacher is a learner, too,” that is especially true in a Harkness classroom. The Harkness teacher joins in the conversation as an equal participant; it is a group discussion among equals, although occasionally the Petrine first among equals. But a conversation among “equals” it is; the teacher is one voice among many in the conversation, and while it is his or her role to offer an open-ended question every so often to steer the conversation in a particular direction, the students are actually in control of the discussion. Thus, the true Harkness teacher is identical to the Socratic teacher, properly understood: not the intimidating and aggressive sage on the stage, poking and prodding the students’ ignorance, but

Figure 1.4. Harkness pedagogy. Courtesy of Lawrence Smith, Exeter Humanities Institute.
the guide on the side, searching to know him- or herself better by repeatedly asking questions.

Hadot helpfully elucidates this paradox when he speaks of the irony of Socrates:

Here we touch the heart of Socratic irony: if Socrates refused to teach or be considered a master, it was because he had nothing to say or to communicate, for the excellent reason that, as he frequently proclaimed, he did not know anything. Since he had nothing to say, and no thesis to defend, all Socrates could do was to ask questions, even though he himself refused to answer them. . . . Socrates, the eternal interrogator, used skillful questions to bring his interlocutors to admit their ignorance. By so doing, he disturbed them so much that they were eventually led to question their entire lives.\(^\text{154}\)

Socrates’s ironic role suggests that the interrogator is playing a part, the same way a Harkness teacher plays a part in the classroom. The Harkness teacher invites the student to see into the mind of the teacher, to travel together with the teacher on a quest for self-understanding, a quest hardly confined to one class, or one course, or even during that formative period in the life of the adolescent.

That is the Harkness method in theory. To reap the full benefit of the method, however, classroom management presents a vital and constant challenge for the would-be Harkness educator. Particularly critical is making sure all students get “equal airtime,” or at least airtime equal to their interest, ability, and developing oral skills. Some students are naturally inclined to dominate the conversation if left to their own devices, a category we often call “Harkness warriors”; the teacher’s challenge with such students is to get them to see themselves less as soloists and more as orchestra members. Allowing the class to be dominated by one or a few students and permitting the others to sit back could easily leave quieter, weaker student to feel silenced, ironically leaving behind precisely those students that the pedagogy was intended to

\(^{154}\) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 152, 149.
most serve. That would be a real travesty, devising a new pedagogy which in the end only compounded the problem it sought to solve, allowing more students to fall through the cracks.\footnote{This issue was developed in conversation with Kimberley Patton. It is an important irony because Edward S. Harkness came to know himself, and his various weaknesses and strengths, all too well later in life as he reflected on his experiences as a student at St. Paul’s School. Thus, he took the initiative to design and fund a pedagogy specifically constructed to make sure others would not have the same experience he had as a youth. As Patton wrote, “what in Harkness’s day was called ‘weak’ or ‘dull’ or ‘average’ may have hidden, in addition to the lower intelligence of some, a whole range of what in others would now be diagnosable as learning disabilities, including dyslexia and context-based language disability, that have nothing to do with intelligence. Notice that [Harkness] speaks with particular sadness about his struggles in math. He clearly wasn’t unintelligent. . . . And some students are profoundly shy, even biologically so, as research has proven. . . . [W]hat of them in his day, what of them in our day? . . . Everything has changed at Exeter. And yet there is a real way in which nothing has changed at Exeter. I don’t think you should be afraid to lift this up as an irony and a pedagogical problem that is not easily solved. You can remark on the insoluble tension between a teacher’s wanting a class to go well, wanting the students to arrive at the place she wants them to (so letting the best and brightest and chattiest rule the experience), and wanting to be sure that all hear their own voices and ask all their questions, as Harkness wanted, until they are patiently and completely answered by the teacher, so that no one falls between the cracks. . . . The terrible pedagogical reality is that it’s almost impossible to achieve both goals.” Patton continues, “Notice that Harkness’s remedy was actually not, it would seem, Harkness as it became, nor the Socratic method. So we now have three, not two, distinct Exonian models, all of which fit loosely under the ‘Harkness’ umbrella: 1.) Edward Harkness’s original model, which seems to be based on the teacher initially presenting . . . but correspondingly, of the students freely asking questions of the teacher, especially when they were confused or needed help in understanding something (based on [Harkness’s] own painful experience of falling between the cracks). . . . 2.) The archetypal Harkness model in practice today, whereby ideally the teacher gets the ball rolling, but oh so lightly, and acts as a guide on the side with the occasional question or set of problems, but the students talk to one another and teach one another (not what Harkness said at all, which I find fascinating; of course he did not preclude this evolution, but it is definitely an evolution), and: 3.) The Socratic, dialogical method, which, as you know better than I do, is not about an exploratory, truly open-ended dialogue between equals (e.g., two students who are peers in the same classroom, two non-philosopher male citizens of Athens), but about the philosopher-sage (Socrates) dialectically cross-examining his interlocutor (Alcibiades, Euthyphro, Phaedo), in an expansive form of proof, but very much with a certain set of questions or perhaps even answers in mind; or: a teacher asking important but leading questions of her student, trying to get that student to unpack a line of logical reasoning for herself, step by step, or to arrive at a certain, previously occulted truth about the text or problem on the table. You practice a virtuoso combination of 2) and 3) in your teaching, but not all Exeter teachers do; most are trying to follow their own version of 2). But almost no one is practicing a pure form of 1) . . . , a classroom which Harkness himself envisioned as a ‘safe place’ for students with (I suspect) different learning styles, or even learning disabilities, which were profoundly ill-served by the pedagogies of the time.” Kimberley Patton, emails to author, January 13, 2015. I am, of course, not the best judge of the accuracy of that last observation, but it is my goal in any class; the degree to which it is achieved says much about whether Harkness’s original intent to serve the less able or quieter student (not at all the same issue) is currently working in any given classroom.}
teacher has a special role to play, as outlined earlier. Just as Socrates was not simply having a
good chat with whomever passed him on the streets of the agora, but instead had an idea in his
head of what issues he wished to cover with his “ambushee,” so the Harkness teacher has a
lesson plan in his or her head, and gently, and we hope seamlessly, guides the conversation to
some predetermined conceptual point—mirroring exactly the way a Socratic dialogue unfolds.\textsuperscript{156}
The “guide on the side” is truly a guide. Yes, Socrates “had nothing to say,” but his guidance had
a goal in mind, to bring his ambushees to a better understanding of themselves—which is exactly
the role of the Harkness teachers who use this pedagogy to its fullest.

To guide, as Socrates or as a Harkness teacher, is not to assume there is a common goal, a
right answer for the class as a whole, other than self-understanding or self-knowledge—with the
emphasis on the word “self.” I can guide a student to a particular question that I have in mind,
but the real hope is that it becomes their own, to answer any way they wish. My role is to present
materials and guide a conversation which focuses on that question. This type of guidance is not
abstract educational theory, but something I utilize and see happening every day in class. To
guide on the side with a predetermined goal in mind is not a contradiction but a paradox; the
Harkness teacher guides the students, not to the teacher’s thinking, but to the deepest questions
posed by the thinkers in the texts they encounter, so that they are compelled to ask such
questions for themselves. I cannot answer the most fundamental of questions for my students—
Who am I? Where am I going? What has value?—anymore than I can live their lives for them.

\textsuperscript{156} As to exactly how one guides from the side, see the lesson plans in Chapter Three. Each offers numerous
strategies—from starting class with a five-minute writing prompt (to give the quieter Edward S. Harkness-types a
chance to formulate their thoughts before conversation begins), to open-ended questions which lead the class in new
or different directions, to homework prompts which invite the students to come to class prepared to talk—all of
which guide and shape the conversation. The \textit{premise} of the class is always a student-generated and student-led
conversation, but the skillful Harkness teacher is constantly balancing class discussion with the overall lesson plan
for the day and course. A good Harkness class is no more random than a Socratic dialogue.
The answers to those questions of self-knowledge are for them to determine. But it is absolutely essential that they ask them. What other real purpose can education have?

“The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.”

ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπω

—Plato, *Apology* 38a

VII. Other Departmental Voices on “Know Thyself”

Lest the thinking of this dissertation appear to reflect only my own thinking and experiences, I want to include a discussion of the views of my departmental colleagues. I polled them, many of whom I have worked alongside for more than twenty-five years, on how they would understand the central issues of this project. I gave each of them a questionnaire and the summer to respond. The ten questions I asked them can be reduced to four central ones:

1) How would you define “religion”? What is your own working definition of religion? When one studies religion, what is one studying?
2) How would you define “philosophy”? What is your own working definition of philosophy? When one studies philosophy, what is one studying?
3) Why might or should one study religion and/or philosophy? What is the purpose as you understand it to studying either or both in an academic setting?
4) Why should these subjects as you understand them be studied at the secondary school level? What is the point of a secondary school religion/philosophy department, and how would you explain or justify why you have spent your life thus far doing what you do every day in the classroom? What is the rationale for such work?

One of my senior colleagues, Kathy Brownback, responded to the first question by defining religion as “the way one comprehends or perceives or experiences the world, and some of the historical efforts to express, develop, or codify that comprehension in thought and in
embodied practice.” When asked to elaborate, Brownback said that spiritual identity formation takes place in a group setting, that the dialectic of working out one’s own spiritual identity includes listening to the views of others and incorporating them into one’s own thinking. It is individual yet communal, exactly what Jackson means by “apart and a part.” Here is how she described that dialectical process in her own words:

[I]t seems to me that in our classes the element of the group helps to expand (or in postmodern language, “complicate”—but I think it is more than that) one’s notion of identity. It is not just identity defined as what “I” think as a separate ego, but how my perspective is in constant conversation with the whole table (and by extension, the whole school and the larger world). . . . In regard to spiritual practice, the church setting included practice in prayer and singing and moments of silence and attention to the spoken and unspoken needs of others not present and the element of transcendence. Embedded in it is the element of a noncognitive dimension of connection to self, other, and God/ultimate. In moving to the classroom, we knock out the obvious elements of that—and yet, not really. Much of that connection was no longer alive anyway, for those in attendance at church. There is a community that forms in a classroom—or can form—based partly on the kind of understanding Hadot has of oral exercise, and partly (maybe he includes this) on a noncognitive element that remains whenever people come together in a group. In the classroom there still is—or can be—that element of a larger identity. It is there in the idea that a group can move together despite cognitive disagreement. There can be a bigger sense of “we” or “us” that does not devalue the individual. That might be the Hegelian synthesis, as long as we think of it as growth toward more complex understandings—understandings that include more perspectives, more bringing to consciousness what we didn’t even know we thought. That to me is “re-ligare.” I think it’s essential that there be no end to the conversation, as long as that does not lead one to say it’s a pointless conversation for that reason. . . . Simply having people in the room is not enough. There has to be a commitment to and aspiration toward that larger identity.  

Another of my colleagues, the Rev. Jamie Hamilton, also an Episcopal priest and a school minister at the Academy, was actively involved in the renovation of the school chapel more than a decade ago. As part of that work, she served on a committee which drew up a

---

157 Kathy Brownback, email to author, July 13, 2014.

158 Kathy Brownback, email to author, September 18, 2014.
program statement for the school church which included a definition of religion that she authored. She referred me to that definition as her own working definition of religion:

[Our] definition of religion . . . reflects its Latin roots re-, “back especially to an original or former state,” plus ligare, “to bind.” Those words suggested to us that the word religion implies a universal human search to discover a feeling of connection to or unity with something outside of one’s self. We saw that religion defined in that way spoke to the individual’s need to relieve himself or herself of a feeling of separation or isolation; that it had less to do with the dogma of any particular faith than the words that appear regularly on the back of the Phillips Church program: “[Worship] is the common sharing of life’s wonder, terror, mystery and ambiguity.” In a moment of illumination, we realized that we were talking about religion in a new way, thinking not of a specific religion, like that of Muslims or of Jews or of Catholics, but rather of a universalized experience of religion. It was, we decided, as if we were talking about Religion rather than religion. In that light, we began to talk about our own Religious experiences, and in that talk, we found substantial common ground. As we did so, we found ourselves accepting as axiomatic that the religious impulse precedes spiritual growth rather than the other way around, whether it be the impulse of a believer or the impulse of an atheist . . . . The ministry of Phillips Church needs to be as concerned with the questions of the seeker of religion as it is with the practice of a follower of any particular religion.\(^{159}\)

Hamilton went on to say that such a definition “reflects what I had learned from the department. I felt empowered to direct our vision for the church based on my experience in the department.”\(^{160}\) She added,

I admit that I have a religious underpinning for all my classes and the best way to summarize it would be to quote William James on religious belief: “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.” I believe that there is the Real, the Absolute, an Unseen Order and sometimes I feel comfortable referring to that as God, yet, I can speak to it in non-theistic terms as well. But basically, I think there is something more real than something else (thank you Plato) and whether or not my students think that is the case is irrelevant. But in a nutshell, I think that is what we are doing when we study religion: We look to the historical/cultural/theological/praxis of

---

\(^{159}\) Program of the Ministry of Phillips Exeter Academy, “Report of the Program Planning Committee for Phillips Church” (unpublished, 1998), 2. This report is the source of the distinction between “Big R” and “little r” religion.

\(^{160}\) Jamie Hamilton, email to author, July 15, 2014.
whether or not there is something beyond/within ourselves that is Real/True. And then of course to see how you/community fits within that search that spans the beginning of time.\textsuperscript{161}

Although slightly different from some of the above definitions, there remains the dialectic of “apart and a part” which runs through all our departmental definitions.

Another colleague of long standing, Tom Ramsey, uses definitions of religion that include both institutional and experiential dimensions. For example, Julia Hemeyer defines “a developed religion” as an “integrated system of beliefs, lifestyle, ritual activities and social institutions,” and Robert Thurman similarly defines religion as “a system of beliefs and practices.” Both of these statements refer to institutional religion. However, both Hemeyer and Thurman continue by explaining the substance of religion experientially. Hemeyer: “by which individuals give meaning to their lives by orienting themselves to what they experience as holy, sacred, or of the highest value.” Thurman: “that bind our lives in patterns of meaningfulness, especially taking care of the difficulties that threaten the pattern. Thus religion is a “re-binding” (re-ligare), a reinforced “holding” of human lives into a prescribed and beneficial pattern. So, with Hemeyer, Thurman, and many others, I define religion in terms of a developed system of beliefs and practices and in terms of the substance of such systems, that is, as they relate to what is experienced as sacred and meaningful.\textsuperscript{162}

A younger colleague, Tom Simpson, trained more recently with different scholars, approaches the definitional question this way:

This is a notoriously difficult question to answer, so difficult that I try to help students tackle it (without forcing an artificial resolution) right from the start. In the past, I’ve used John Bowker’s excellent introduction to his \textit{Oxford Dictionary of World Religions}. There, . . . he presents an extensive compilation of scholars’ definitions of religion. It’s a dizzying array, ranging from reductionism (“belief in supernatural beings”) to sprawling complexity (Geertz’s five-part definition). Bowker then goes on, in what I think is a very helpful manner, to make an argument for the significance of religion in the evolution of humanity, as a way of articulating, preserving, and passing on what a culture treasures most: what it holds sacred and sees as essential to survival. In recent years, I’ve been especially fond of the opening chapter of John Esposito et al.’s \textit{World Religions Today}, for its

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{162} Tom Ramsey, email to author, August 19, 2014.
clarity in defining not only religion, but also core concepts in the academic study of religion like myth, ritual, ethics, morality, orthodoxy, and orthopraxy. Religion, the authors contend, is best thought of as a fundamental orientation toward—and a desire to be in right relationship with—the powers that govern one’s destiny. It is about power and meaning in relation to human destiny, a way of seeing and experiencing all things. This allows me to get students from diverse backgrounds to start considering really important questions in the very first homework assignment: who or what in your life has real power over you? Who or what inspires—or deserves—your fear, allegiance, loyalty, love, and devotion? What, if anything, do you hold sacred (which the authors define as worth living or dying for)?

In essence, Simpson shares our working definition of religion as that human activity which tries to identify and articulate that which gives meaning to people’s lives. One starts, regardless of the age of the inquirer, with where and how one experiences meaning and value in his or her own life. That was also true in the definition of another longtime colleague, Russell Weatherspoon, who wrote, “religion includes belief systems about ultimate meaning and purpose. Sometimes these belief systems include cultic practices and conduct codes. Religion is concerned with all attempts to probe or understand what humans mean by goodness, justice, mercy, sacredness, and holiness. Religion is various systems of belief and practice regarding ultimate concerns.”

When I asked my departmental colleagues to articulate why teaching religion and philosophy is important for this particular age group (question #4), Jamie Hamilton wrote,

I like Aquinas here when he switches the paradigm from believe in order to understand, to understand in order to believe. I also like William Faulkner, “memory believes before knowledge remembers.” There is something about our shared experience around the table with the most compelling questions of humanity that expands and challenges our capacity to think and to reflect in a creative, collaborative way.

Kathy Brownback, another senior colleague, wrote,

---

163 Tom Simpson, email to author, July 20, 2014.
164 Russell Weatherspoon, email to author, August 27, 2014.
165 Jamie Hamilton, email to author, September 18, 2014.
Most other academic work is characterized by analysis, with the exception of the arts, which also have a key firsthand experiential dimension (and often relate to religion, or the sense of the sacred or most revered/valueed, for that reason). The study of religion and philosophy (and often of the arts) is part analysis and part internal reflection. The Harkness classroom has an experiential dimension that you describe in your [dissertation], especially the section on Pierre Hadot, and is particularly well-suited to this kind of internal reflection both individually and as a group. In my view, this kind of internal reflection (both individual and group) is an essential part of learning. The highest forms of thought require something beyond purely objective study. Creativity and new levels of synthesis depend on it—even in disciplines such as the sciences (as Zajonc points out with Palmer in *The Heart of Higher Education*) and historical or literary analysis. The added value of religion, in my view, is that such study includes all levels of our experience, including those we do not cognitively grasp. Other fields often could, but they don’t (as with an English class I observed on the Grand Inquisitor which left undeveloped the essential nature of the difference between Jesus and the Inquisitor, other than the comment by one senior that the kiss “was such a Jesus-like thing to do,” and never raised questions like whether “mystery” is solely a form of manipulation. Yet, in the context of teaching English here, I could understand why this might not be raised. It would seem, well, “like a religion class”).

Tom Ramsey shared this:

The best reason why I think academic study of religion should take place at the secondary level is that students at this age are already asking the questions that religion and philosophy address. Once students recognize that religion courses are not about proselytizing, but are concerned with understanding the ways that human beings address questions of value, purpose, and meaning *and* the ways in which the human concern about matters relating to these questions expresses itself in myth, ritual, scripture, and other forms, students are eager to learn. In studying religion and philosophy, secondary school students can see reflections of their own concerns, test out worldviews and ways of thinking, and better understand themselves and their culture in the process.

Tom Simpson responded as follows:

I’m convinced that it is incredibly important to teach religion, ethics, and philosophy to young adolescents. It is such a formative stage of life and development. Students are developing tremendous capacities: the ability to

166 Kathy Brownback, email to author, July 13, 2014.

167 Tom Ramsey, email to author, August 19, 2014.
narrate their stories, the sexual power to create life, the intellectual and artistic power to reshape their world, and the emotional power to create strong bonds with others—as well as to wound them deeply. In any educational setting, but especially at a boarding school, leaving students to navigate these minefields alone would be wholly irresponsible (in my humble opinion!). Adolescents need spaces for mature, open, peer-to-peer and intergenerational discussions—face-to-face—about what gives life meaning, purpose, and value.\textsuperscript{168}

The newest member of our department, Rabbi Jennifer Marx Asch, writes about her experiences as a new teacher in these words:

I believe that the students at [Exeter Academy] are at that elusive “sweet spot” of ripeness where they are intellectually sophisticated enough to unpack and think critically about life’s most challenging moral complexities, yet they are still unformed enough to be malleable and open and willing to explore; they have not yet developed the cynical, harsh shells worn by many adults to protect them from the cruel realities of our world. Along with this intellectual readiness is also a relentless desire to find meaning and purpose for one’s own life, a hunger to find one’s way in the world, to “matter.” . . . It is this vibrancy that they bring to the Harkness table and earnestly engage in the moral debates, insisting, “Yes! My choices matter!”, “Yes! I matter!” Unlike younger grade-school students who do not yet have the intellectual sophistication to engage such conversations or adult students who are already set in their worldviews and opinions, high school students are primed for questions of meaning, value and purpose.\textsuperscript{169}

Here is how Russell Weatherspoon explained why he teaches these subjects to secondary school students:

Religion and philosophy are part of everyday life. People, including students, behave and think about themselves and others through the lenses of religion and philosophy. Although people cannot prove that their beliefs or positions are “best” among all available or possible, they sometimes believe this deeply and act accordingly. Sometimes the cognitive dissonance between belief and action is the focus of our study. The high school student is often searching for or testing faith or philosophical positions. Why would a well-rounded education not provide more objective information about a subject so important to humans at this point of their development? We are familiar with religion or philosophy

\textsuperscript{168} Tom Simpson, email to author, July 20, 2014.

\textsuperscript{169} Jennifer Marx Asch, email to author, August 14, 2014.
presented to adolescents as the model or form they should accept. While that has its place in a sectarian environment, any school owes curious young people the opportunity to think objectively about practiced religion and to question themselves about their worldview. This is a critical period in their emotional, intellectual and spiritual development, a time when they are trying to figure how to live a principled life. Some will arrive with clearly defined faith and/or philosophical positions. Our mission is not to undermine them. Our mission is to provide the opportunity to think.\textsuperscript{170}

What I note about these various definitions of religion, and why teaching religion and philosophy to the secondary school age group is important, are the similarities of vision of the different members of the department. Perhaps that is to be expected when most of us have taught alongside one another for more than twenty-five years, but it also speaks to a shared sense of mission and understanding of our work. In Phillips Exeter’s Course of Instruction, the school’s listing of its various curricular offerings by department, the introduction to the Religion Department’s courses includes this sentence: “While the subject matter can vary widely from one area of study to another, all religion courses reflect a similar concern: the relation of the students to fundamental questions of meaning, purpose and value in their lives.” That statement is more than fifty years old; it was the departmental philosophy when I arrived, and it has remained our guiding star as each successive generation of teachers has joined the department and come to understand what it means to teach religion and philosophy at this level. As the unofficial departmental historian, I can attest to the fact that, over the decades, there has always been a common goal in our classrooms, namely, to lead each student in our care deeper into an understanding of him- or herself, to come to “know thyself.”

\textsuperscript{170} Russell Weatherspoon, email to author, August 27, 2014.
CHAPTER TWO
“Know Thyself” as the Philosophical Basis of the Exeter Religion Department Curriculum: Seven Curricular Muses

In this chapter, I present my own canon for the teaching of philosophy and religion to adolescents, a group of texts drawn from my studies of these topics and honed over decades of teaching them to young people. The figures I have selected, my so-called seven muses—Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bonhoeffer, and Buechner—enacted in their thought and lives particular principles that naturally lend themselves to teaching adolescents to consider the deeper questions of meaning implied in the study of the humanities. Each of these seven figures offers a slightly different perspective on some issue that is crucial to adolescent spiritual identity formation; thus, each figure is a piece of the puzzle that I am calling the emerging adolescent self. This constellation of seven muses has further been divided into two groups—a group of four whom I regularly teach to adolescents (Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Buechner), and a second group of three (Hegel, Schleiermacher, Bonhoeffer) who can teach educators important lessons about adolescents and what they need.

When teaching students this first group, I focus attention on the following, which I perceive to be the most valuable lesson that each can offer to adolescents:

• Kant’s lifelong quest to understand how we think, how we should act, or what we can believe;
• Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the non-systematizable and individual nature of the meaning of life;
• Nietzsche’s lifelong search for sources of meaning apart from traditional religion to be found in man’s overcoming of himself, from the individual self to something more transcendent; and
• Buechner’s claim that we, especially those who are adolescents, need to “listen to our life” and what it is saying to us.

These, and many other similar questions, form the basis for class conversations with adolescents about the meaning of what are defined in this dissertation as religion and philosophy.

Of the second group, I believe that they offer Harkness teachers the following insights, which they in turn can share with their students, even if not by directly teaching texts from these authors:

• Hegel’s understanding that truth is an ever-evolving matter, formed in dialogue with other ideas and other people;
• Schleiermacher’s desire to locate religion, as he understood it, in the affective part of the person to protect it from any rationalist or moralist critique; and
• Bonhoeffer’s perception of an integral link between one’s theological thinking and the need to act upon such ideas in real-life situations.

These lists, though hardly exhaustive, indicate some special qualities each thinker possesses—certain strands in their thinking or life histories—which are of indispensable pedagogical value when teaching adolescent self- and faith-formation. Particular aspects of each of the seven’s life and thought, as I was taught those ideas over the course of my own theological education, have provided me over the years the inspiration to engage in this important work of assisting
adolescents in coming to know themselves and realize whatever it is which gives meaning to their lives. In the seven sections that follow, each of these thinkers is examined individually, with special focus given to how I theorize that they are uniquely well-suited to initiate Harkness teachers and students into an understanding of adolescent self-emergence via the practical study of philosophy and religion.

I. Muses for the Harkness Student

A) Immanuel Kant: Learning to Think for Yourself

If what Alfred North Whitehead said is true—that “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it is a series of footnotes to Plato”—then Immanuel Kant wrote many of those footnotes, or, to use a different metaphor, Plato and Kant are the two bookends of the Western philosophical tradition, particularly in the areas of metaphysics and epistemology.2 Despite this, it is very rare that any student at Phillips Exeter has even heard of Kant before taking Introduction to Western Philosophy; Plato yes, for sure, but not Kant. By the end of the course, however, students certainly are familiar with Kant, who is a crucial figure in assisting the students to develop critical thinking skills.

---

1 In some ways, the three key questions Kant frames in his First Critique are the three key questions for this section of the dissertation, and those same questions exercise the imaginations of adolescents as well. As Kant writes, “All the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the three following questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope?” His more precise understanding of these questions notwithstanding—see below for more on those issues—his three questions metaphorically frame the debate of adolescent self- and faith-formation. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1929), 635 (A805–B833).

In Introduction to Western Philosophy, we read only primary source materials, which are arranged topically rather than chronologically. In the first unit, on the twinned topics of metaphysics and epistemology, we encounter Kant for the first time, reading the introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason* (written 1781, revised 1787). There, the students read these famous two sentences, the first two in the book: “There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. . . . But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that all [knowledge] arises out of experience.” A careful analysis of those two sentences provides the students with crucial insights into how the mind works and what it means to think.

---

3 In general, there are two ways to organize the materials for a course on the history of Western philosophy, especially if the students are reading all or mostly primary source materials: one can follow a chronological or a topical approach. Having tried both over the years, I find the topical approach makes more sense, and makes the issues more accessible. There are numerous college textbooks which have titles such as *The Western Philosophical Tradition from the Pre-Socratics through Derrida*, but I find there is no necessary connection between what person A said and then what person B said who lived after him, or at least the connections are not always readily apparent. Other texts organize the materials and readings into “core questions,” and I have tried that approach as well. But I have found the best approach is to take all the primary source materials from various college-level textbooks and organize them according to the classical subdivisions of Western philosophy: metaphysics and epistemology (as one unit), free will and determinism, the problem of evil, the classical proofs for the existence of God, philosophical ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, and logic. Organizing the materials so that a student can read four to six assignments on the same issue helps make the issues clearer than if we read person A and then go to person B who by chance focused on a different set of issues. Our readings packet is drawn from Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann, *Philosophic Classics: From Plato to Derrida*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000); Robert Paul Wolff, *About Philosophy* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997).

4 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 41 and following.

5 This discussion of the introduction to the First Critique, and its first two sentences, does not do justice to the larger program of Kant’s project in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. After an extended discussion of the differences between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, synthetic and analytic judgments, and positing the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, Kant outlines four questions which pose his task in a critique of how we reason: 1. How is pure mathematics possible? 2. How is pure science of nature possible? 3. How is metaphysics, as natural disposition, possible? 4. How is metaphysics, as science, possible? Those four questions give him the plan for the remainder of the critique. The first question (about mathematics) will be answered in the Transcendental Aesthetic; the second (about science) in the Transcendental Analytic, first division; the third and fourth questions (about metaphysics) in the Transcendental Dialectic and the Transcendental Method. For the larger plan of the critique and its purposes, both in its stated as well as less clear objectives, see the comment by A. C. Ewing about the overall plan of the First Critique: “To pass on to the content of the work itself, the Critique may be said to have had two main aims, (1) in the Aesthetic and the Analytic, to provide a philosophical basis for physical science, which assumed an a priori knowledge that was necessary for its very existence, yet hard to defend, (2) chiefly in the Dialectic, ‘to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.’ The second purpose, which was for Kant even more important than the first, may seem obscurantist, but faith does not for Kant mean belief on authority or belief without grounds, but believing what we have adequate ground for believing but cannot absolutely prove. The grounds for the belief in God and immortality, however, being ethical, are not given here in detail but, chiefly, in the *Critique of Practical*
Naturally, students have done much thinking before they enter Introduction to Western Philosophy, but the course, and Kant in particular, provides them with the opportunity to think about thinking, and that self-reflective act is very important in coming to understand what it means to be a person. Having spent considerable time on the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* in the prior several classes, when the students turn to Kant’s two sentences, they are perplexed by their simplicity.\(^6\) We start by parsing the three key terms in the first sentence, “knowledge,” “begins,” and “experience.” The typical student translation is that Kant is saying that “everything we know comes from experience.” That is, the content of what we know comes from our sensory experiences. In that sense, it looks like Kant is agreeing with the empiricists before him who made that same claim—a claim we had explored in detail before reading Kant. Only after some prodding on the teacher’s part do the students see that the word “experience” can have a double meaning, not simply content but the “thinking process,” the act of beginning to think. If one adopts this second definition, then the first sentence could be construed as meaning, “I, Kant, am proposing that the act of thinking begins with, is triggered by, is catalyzed by some firsthand sensory experience,” a claim with which the empiricists would agree: we do not just begin thinking from nothing, something has to set off that process.\(^7\) But, alas, Kant does not stop there.

The second sentence is also key: it starts by repeating the first—in effect saying that “everything I told you in the first sentence is true, but there’s more to the story.” The independent clause—“it by no means follows that all [knowledge] arises out of experience”—suggests, so the students eventually see, that the use of the word “knowledge” in sentence two is

---


\(^6\) For more on how the course addresses Descartes, see the discussion of Religion 420 in the next chapter.

\(^7\) For more on Kant’s understanding of the word “experience,” see Ewing, *A Short Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 16 and following.
different from its usage in sentence one. Whereas in the first sentence, knowledge means the
*process* of knowing, in the second sentence it means the *content* of our knowledge. In short, Kant
is saying that we know some things which are not experientially-based.\(^8\) Now, the students think
that this sounds like what the idealists (whom we’ve also already studied) have been claiming.

At this point in class, we do several real-time experiments to try to see if we can think
aspatially, atemporally, acausally, and we replicate Hume’s billiard ball experiment (with actual
billiard balls on the Harkness table) which caused Kant to “awaken from his dogmatic slumber.”\(^9\)
From this, it becomes clearer what Kant means by the “categories of the understanding.”\(^10\) There
are “filters,” categories in the mind and in understanding which reshape the incoming sensory
data, such that it is no longer raw data, but reshaped by these categories which are innate to the
human mind. In that sense, the mind is active—or, to use the students’ vocabulary, is a
“player”—in the knowing process. The mind is not simply receiving data but reshaping it in the
process. Thus, in one sense, the idealists were correct that we know some things which are not
based on experience, but there is no content to this knowledge until sensory experience sends in
signals to be filtered. At the expense of the quicker students in class who say that “all Kant did
was to agree with both sides, the empiricists as well as the idealists,” we move to Kant’s key
distinction here, that of the noumenal versus the phenomenal.\(^11\)

Having previously discussed Plato’s Allegory of the Cave from *The Republic* (VI.514),
the students know that Plato has a four-part epistemology and metaphysic—shadow, puppet,

\(^8\) Ibid., 20 and following.

\(^9\) In Kant’s rewrite of the First Critique, he wrote, “I openly confess my recollection of David Hume was the very
thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of
Carus (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), 8.

\(^10\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 111 and following, “The Pure Concepts of the Understanding, or Categories.”

\(^11\) Ibid., 257 and following, “The Ground of the Distinction of all Objects into Phenomena and Noumena.”
object itself, and world of universals or Platonic “forms,” what is sometimes called the world of “ness-nesses” (donkeyness, treeness, etc.). There was the donkey shadow in the cave, the donkey puppet, the donkey outside the cave, and then donkeyness, the last being the “form” of all donkeys. Now with Kant’s three-part epistemology—sensory data, understanding, and reason—the noumenal/phenomenal split opens the students’ eyes to the idea that there is a difference between raw data coming in “noumenally” and the same data post-processed “phenomenally,” with the mind able to know only the latter and not the former. We know the external world exists, the noumenal world, as the mind is receiving data, but the only world we can know is the phenomenal world, the post-filtered world. We can say absolutely nothing about the external world, for to do so is to pretend that one can be in two places at one time with one’s mind, thinking phenomenally and noumenally at the same time, thinking of content after it has been filtered, and thinking of content before it was filtered. This is not only a binary, but the first half of the binary is unknowable. We cannot take off our phenomenal mind and pretend to know the unfiltered, noumenal world.

Why is this distinction so important to Kant—and, for our purposes, why is it so important to beginning philosophy students, and to adolescents in general? This seismic shift in Western philosophy, this Copernican revolution in reframing the way we see the world, changes the focus of our thinking, from believing that our mind conforms to the world “out there” to seeing that the world is knowable only to the degree that it conforms to the categories of our minds. Kant wants to delimit the bounds of reason, and, in doing so, he completes the Cartesian revolution, the shift to prioritizing epistemology over metaphysics. Philosophy now looks at the operations of our minds to see what is knowable and what is not.\textsuperscript{12} That shift is of fundamental

\textsuperscript{12} As for the other objectives of the First Critique, Ewing writes, “The Critique had another main purpose, namely the provision of a philosophical basis for science. It is this purpose that is predominant in the Aesthetic and Analytic.
importance to adolescents, for it may be one of the first times that they are confronted by the
nature of their own thinking and the way their minds shape their perceptions of the world.
Philosophically and developmentally, that is a significant step, and Kant provides an
underpinning for that realization.

For Kant, the implications for the noumenal/phenomenal split are immense, for such a
distinction puts a large question mark next to traditional metaphysics: no longer can one speak
knowledgably about the world “out there”—its nature, who might have created it, how it
operates—but rather, the focus must be on the way the mind operates. That takes us (in class)
rather seamlessly to Kant’s disproofs of the classical arguments for the existence of God, and his
“moral argument” for the re-proof for God. 13

In this connection we should remember that Kant was deeply interested and well versed in the physical sciences, and
that in his early years he made original contributions to theoretical physics as well as to philosophy. . . . When
thinking of science, the science which he had most in mind was Newtonian physics. This presupposed the validity
for the physical world of mathematics, the law of conservation of matter, the law of universal causality and the
principle that every particle of matter interacted with every other. The problem for Kant was that these principles
seemed necessary for the very existence of science, but could not be justified empirically, and had not yet been
successfully justified a priori by any philosopher. The main aim of the Aesthetic and Analytic is to explain the
occurrence of this a priori knowledge and provide its justification.” Ewing, A Short Commentary on Kant’s Critique
of Pure Reason, 11.

13 Ewing explores how the First Critique allows the disproofs to set up the re-proof: “What Kant maintains on this
subject in the Critique of Pure Reason is only that (1) we cannot settle religious questions either positively or
negatively by using the categories which we use in thinking about objects of science, and therefore cannot prove
God and immortality by means of premises which are scientific or metaphysical but not ethical in character; (2)
neither can we ever disprove God and Immortality; (3) science can recognize no limits in the sphere of Nature, its
categories, and its categories alone, are to be recognized there. This left it open for him to use ethical arguments in
another work to establish the existence of God and immortality, not indeed as something proved with conclusive
certainty, but as a reasonable belief. Further, Kant claimed in the Critique of Pure Reason to have solved the
problem of freedom, which was a necessary presupposition of ethics and yet hard to reconcile with causality, and to
have solved it without denying the unbroken reign of law in the natural world. The importance of the ethical and
religious motive for the Critique of Pure Reason in Kant’s mind has often been overlooked. The main thing which
Kant thought his work accomplished was to make religion and ethics forever secure against the skeptic, and he no
doubt regarded even the complicated analysis of the Aesthetic and the Analytic as a means without which that end
could not be adequately attained.” Ewing, A Short Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, 10–12.
As to the first—the disproofs—Kant starts by classifying the proofs under three categories, the physico-theological, the cosmological, and the ontological. The ontological argument of Anselm et. al. rests upon a false assumption: Kant famously says, “existence is not a real predicate.” The physico-theoretical and the cosmological arguments can both be shown to share the same line of reasoning, and thus share its deficiencies. Each of these proofs oversteps the bounds of reason, and Kant’s program is to show the limitations of pure reason in the First Critique.

That leads us to the second way that Kant is instrumental in understanding and aiding adolescent development, namely, through his understanding of God as represented in his re-proof. The argument in its various forms runs as follows, and it is connected to Kant’s understanding of the moral life (hence its name as the “moral argument for the existence of God”): In exercising our free will, our freedom, we appeal to the unconditional character of the moral demand, the “categorical imperative,” so we must acknowledge that we are able to do what reason demands—that we can, in fact, achieve the highest good, even if it is not clear

---


15 Ibid., 504. Kant’s refutation of the ontological argument rests upon the distinction between synthetic and analytic judgments. In an analytic judgment, the predicate is contained within the subject and is therefore a tautology (“goldfish are fish”); in a synthetic judgment, the predicate adds to the subject, is outside the subject, is not contained in the subject (“goldfish eat bread crumbs”). Synthetic judgments yield new knowledge, something we did not know before. Kant then examines the idea “God exists,” as either synthetic or analytic, outside or inside the subject. If the ontological argument is analytic, as is claimed, then it is true only because the words mean what they mean, but Kant claimed that was only a tautology. If the statement, however, is a synthetic judgment, it does not work, as the existence of God is not contained within the definition of the word God. Ibid., 500–507.

16 Additionally, with the physico-theological and the cosmological arguments, God exists outside the realm of nature and human experience, and thus cannot be experienced as such. So how would one know God through experience? Material concepts can be experienced by the senses, but not God. Ibid., 507–14.

exactly how that achievement may come about. Thus, Kant has to make three postulates of practical reason—three unprovable suppositions to be assumed—in order for the quest for a moral life to be undertaken. First, we must assume that we have free will, else why strive at all.\(^\text{18}\) Second, we must think the quest for happiness will eventually succeed, if not sooner than later, thus immortality of the soul.\(^\text{19}\) Third, that there exists some agent or being who apportions happiness equally among all, and that agent is what we call God.\(^\text{20}\) Just because these postulates

---

\(^\text{18}\) In some ways, freedom is not of the same order as the other two postulates, and Kant is clear about that. In the preface to the \textit{Critique of Practical Reason}, he writes, “Freedom, however, among all the ideas of speculative reason is the only one whose possibility we know a priori. We do not understand it, but we know it as a condition of the moral law. The ideas of God and immortality are, on the contrary, not conditions of the moral law, but only conditions of the necessary object of a will which is determined by this law, this will being merely the practical use of our pure reason. . . . Thus, through the concept of freedom, the ideas of God and immortality gain objective reality and legitimacy. . . .” Kant, \textit{Critique of Practical Reason}, 4. In the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, Kant explains the antinomy of pure reason (§A445–B473 and following), then he explains his reasoning more fully: “With the pure practical faculty of reason, the reality of transcendental freedom is also confirmed. Indeed, it is substantiated in the absolute sense needed by speculative reason in its use of the concept of causality, for this freedom is required if reason is to rescue itself from the antinomy in which it is inevitably entangled when attempting to think the unconditioned in a causal series. For speculative reason, the concept of freedom was problematic but not impossible; that is to say, speculative reason could think of freedom without contradiction, but it could not assure any objective reality to it. Reason showed freedom to be conceivable only in order that its supposed impossibility might not endanger reason’s very being and plunge it into an abyss of skepticism. The concept of freedom, in so far as its reality is proved by an apodictic law of practical reason, is the keystone of the whole architecture of the system of pure reason and even of speculative reason. All other concepts (those of God and immortality) which, as mere ideas, are unsupported by anything in reason now attach themselves to the concept of freedom and gain, with it and through it, stability and objective reality. That is, their possibility is proved by the fact that there really is freedom, for this idea is revealed by the moral law.” Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 3.

\(^\text{19}\) On the immortality of the soul, Kant writes, “This infinite progress is possible, however, only under the presupposition of an infinitely enduring existence and personality of the same rational being; this is called the immortality of the soul. Thus the highest good is practically possible only on the supposition of the immortality of the soul, and the latter, as inseparably bound to the moral law, is a postulate of pure practical reason. By a postulate of pure practical reason, I understand a theoretical proposition which is not as such demonstrable, but which is an inseparable corollary of an a priori unconditionally valid practical law.” Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 127.

\(^\text{20}\) In Kant’s words, “the same law must also lead us to affirm the possibility of the second element of the highest good, i.e., happiness proportional to that morality; it must do so just as disinterestedly as heretofore, by a purely impartial reason. This it can do on the supposition of the existence of a cause adequate to this effect, i.e., it must postulate the existence of God as necessarily belonging to the possibility of the highest good (the object of our will which is necessarily connected with the moral legislation of pure reason). . . . Hence there is not the slightest ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and proportionate happiness of a being which belongs to the world as one of its parts and as thus dependent on it. . . . We should seek to further the highest good (which therefore must be at least possible). Therefore also the existence is postulated on a cause of the whole of nature, itself distinct from nature, which contains the ground of the exact coincidence of happiness with morality. Therefore, the supreme cause of nature, in so far as it must be presupposed for the highest good, is a being which is the cause (and consequently the author) of nature through understanding and will, i.e., God. As a consequence, the postulate of the possibility of a highest derived good (the best world) is at the same time the postulate of the reality
make the moral life possible does not mean any of the three can be known by theoretical knowledge; they are objects of moral faith, not speculative reason. As is often the case with arguments against the classical proofs for the existence of God, Kant wants to argue that speculative proofs are coercive by nature—they give us no choice but to believe if their logic is valid—whereas Kant wants man to believe out of free will.

The impact that this moral argument for the existence of God has on adolescents cannot be overestimated. Leaving aside Kant’s considerable intellectual achievement in his disproofs and re-proofs, the practical effect for the students is to open a vast door to seeing what we label “God” as a kind of human construct, an idea, a postulate of the human mind, and not simply an “external heavenly being.” Developmentally speaking, it is the same Copernican shift for an adolescent mind as the noumenal/phenomenal shift was for adolescent thinking (and the philosophical world in general). The moral arguments for God’s existence move the conversation from “out there” to inside, in the mind, and to what’s going on in the mind. The idea that the external God of the noumenal world may be unknowable does not deny His/its existence, only His/its unknowability. Nothing can be said with certainty about the noumenal world except that it is there. Who might have created it, or who governs it, or what said being’s nature might be cannot be discussed. Such discussions about an unknowable noumenal God can be threatening to some students, but equally liberating to other students who now find the conversation shifting to Kant’s moral argument or “postulates of practical reason.” For the latter group, such thinking

---

of a highest original good, namely the existence of God. Now it was our duty to promote the highest good; and it is not merely our privilege but a necessity connected with duty as a requisite to presuppose the possibility of this highest good. This presupposition is made only under the condition of the existence of God, and this condition inseparably connects this supposition with duty. Therefore, it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God. . . To assume its existence is thus connected with the consciousness of our duty, though this assumption itself belongs to the realm of theoretical reason. Considered only in reference to the latter, it is a hypothesis, i.e., a ground of explanation. But in reference to the comprehensibility of an object (the highest good) placed before us by the moral law, and thus as a practical need, it can be called faith and even pure rational faith, because pure reason alone (by its theoretical as well as practical employment) is the source from which it springs.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 128–31.
opens the door to all kinds of possibilities not hitherto considered—who creates what god or
gods in our head, and why, and what is their nature, and how do they serve us, and we them? In
effect, Kant’s moral proof opens the intellectual and personal door to all the various definitions
of religion enumerated earlier in this dissertation.

The third strand of Kant’s thinking that is of pedagogical value to us is his categorical
imperative. While much of the First Critique is devoted to figuring out how we think, in his later
writings, Kant is equally concerned with how we are to act. Just as he was searching for a priori
truths about our thinking, so was he looking for a priori truths about our acting: what ought I to
do? This is the subject of much discussion in The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, but
those views were developed, and in some cases modified, in later works such as The Critique of
Practical Reason, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, and Religion within the
Boundaries of Reason Alone.

A priori moral truths are, for the most part, foreign to adolescents, so discussing Kant’s
efforts can feel like uphill intellectual work for them. At this age, most students appear to be
functional teleologists, with “functional” having a double meaning: the operating moral principle
of adolescence is “it depends”—it depends on the circumstances, it depends on the situation, it
depends on who is asked to do what, and it depends on what will be the outcome of such an

---

21 This idea calls to mind a quotation from Hesse’s Demian, where the title character says, “We create gods and
struggle with them, and they bless us.” Hermann Hesse, Demian, trans. Michael Roloff and Michael Lebeck, with an

materials by Theodore M. Greene, Hoyt H. Hudson, and John R. Silber in the cited edition of Religion within the
Boundaries of Reason Alone offer invaluable commentary on how to interpret this book where most of Kant’s moral
argument is outlined.
action or choice. The other operative sensibility is what we might term the “non-interference” principle: Who am I to tell anyone else what to do? Who am I to judge anyone else’s behavior? Your business, and your decisions, are yours alone—just as mine are mine alone—with each of us basing our choices on the circumstances involved.

Thus, to a student encountering the person we jokingly call “Mr. Deontology,” it can be a difficult sell. For Kant, however, the demands of reason allow no other choice. Ethics requires that we analyze our moral concepts. If we look at those terms involved in decision-making—a good will, obligation, duty, and so on—and analyze them as an *a priori* matter, that makes ethical reflection an *a priori* discipline. If we begin with the premise that the only commonsensical thing we should never forfeit is our moral goodness, we come quickly to the idea that the only thing without qualification is thus a “good will.” In an axiomatic line from *Foundation of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant writes, “Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world—can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a *good will*.” What makes a good person good is that he or she possesses a good will, and all of his or her decisions are based on, and determined by, the moral law.

That brings us to the questions of what that moral law might be. Whatever it is, the moral law cannot be teleologically applied, but must be true and applicable in every circumstance. It cannot be something such as “do not kill,” for such a prohibition is suspended in war and in self-

---

23 Most students come across as having just stepped out of the pages of a book popular when I was in seminary: Joseph Fletcher and John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation Ethics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966). Glossing Lawrence Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development, I am not sure I would want to say that all of the students I have taught are at Kohlberg’s Second Stage—self-interest, in effect, moral relativism—but there surely are affinities between situational ethics and Kohlberg’s second stage. Lawrence Kohlberg “The Claim to Moral Adequacy of a Highest Stage of Moral Judgment,” *Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 18 (1973): 630–46.


25 Immanuel Kant, “First Section: Transition from the Common Rational Knowledge of Morals to the Philosophical,” *Foundation of the Metaphysic of Morals*, 9, italics in original.
defense. The only moral law which is \textit{a priori} true, true in every circumstance, is thus the
categorical imperative, meaning it must be true in every circumstance—it is categorically, not
hypothetically, true—and it must be an imperative, meaning its command is obligatory, rather
than optional. The only moral law which would satisfy these conditions is thus as follows:

\begin{displayquote}
Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will
that it should become a universal law.\footnote{Kant, \textit{Foundation of the Metaphysic of Morals}, 39. Kant had several other versions of this same imperative. A few sections later in the same book he writes, “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end and never as a means only.” Ibid., 47. This second version builds on Kant’s concept of nature as outlined in the First Critique. The mind structures nature, and laws of nature cannot be contradictory, so if an imperative cannot be willed to be a law of nature, it is not moral. The third version suggests all people possess a rational will that is of unconditional worth. In that sense, each person is an end in him- or herself and not a means to someone else’s end. As Kant phrases it, “Every other rational being thinks of his existence by means of the same rational grounds which holds also for myself; thus it is at the same time an objective principle from which, as a supreme practical ground, it must be possible to derive all laws of the will.” Ibid.}
\end{displayquote}

Were such a law to depend on some specific situation or content—say, “Do as God would want
you to do”—such a law would be hypothetical, or dependent upon what one believes about God.
Rather, for the law to be always true, it must be logically true, \textit{a priori} true, and not dependent
on any other circumstance or belief or fact. It is categorically true.

When we discuss the Categorical Imperative in class, I ask the students to compare it to
the Golden Rule of “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” I inquire whether the
two are the same or are different, and whether it is possible that both or either rule could be
interpreted differently by different people. Here, for adolescents, is an important truth: Two
people could interpret the Golden Rule differently, say if you were a sadist or a masochist. But
Kant admits no such possibility of individual variation in that—and this is crucial to Kant’s
argument and to his entire theory of human reason—all people at base reason alike, and any
individual variation is due to the will, the good will, being tainted by emotion. Kant was clearly a
child of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{27} Regardless, Kant’s Categorical Imperative is still a very high standard, and—leaving aside whether it is attainable or not—thus a wonderful introduction for adolescents to what it means to think, and to think rationally.\textsuperscript{28} So much more could be said about Immanuel Kant and what he has to offer secondary school students, but in an overfull curriculum where difficult choices must be made about the allocation of time, these three strands or themes—the nature and limits of pure reason, the moral proof for the existence of God, and the rational Categorical Imperative—have proven their merit, again and again, as productive tools to engage adolescents to undergo radical shifts in their thinking.

B) Søren Kierkegaard: “But How Am I to Live?”

There are several key threads in Kierkegaard’s thinking which are crucial to aiding adolescent development, and thus he is a major figure not only in his own right but also as a pivotal thinker behind our curriculum at Exeter. Put in today’s vernacular, students and I often comment in class that the two main issues facing them on a daily basis are “So what?” and “Who cares?” The long form of these questions would be something like: What does all this which we read and discuss mean to me personally? These are all great ideas, but when class is over and I have to exit this classroom and live my life, what am I supposed to do? Kierkegaard cared

\textsuperscript{27} In regard to man using his reason, one is reminded of the opening paragraph of Kant’s essay “What is Enlightenment?”: “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! ‘Having courage to use your own reason!’—that is the motto of enlightenment.” Immanuel Kant, \textit{On History}, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 3.

\textsuperscript{28} Kant’s understanding of the Categorical Imperative as untainted by emotion, as purely rational, suggests a level of rationality not all may be able to attain. In that regard, Kant’s idea, or ideal, may be closer to Kohlberg’s Sixth Stage, that of using universal ethical principles derived from rationality alone, a far cry from an adolescent’s Second Stage, but note that Kohlberg, when asked to identify any individuals who had reached Stage Six, was hard-pressed to name one. Anne Colby, J. Gibbs, M. Lieberman, and Lawrence Kohlberg, \textit{A Longitudinal Study of Moral Judgment: A Monograph for the Society of Research in Child Development} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).
passionately about the “so what” questions in life. Few writers whom we teach cared more deeply about that, and thus reading Kierkegaard opens the door to many important conversations about how to perceive meaning in quotidian events.

One of the best entries into Kierkegaard’s thinking, other than reading a biography, is to examine closely his conflict with the major philosopher of his time, Hegel, which we do in several of our courses by reading sections of *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), as well as other selections from his writings excerpted in Walter Kaufmann’s *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*.

Admittedly, Kierkegaard’s vocabulary and “coding” can be off-putting to some students, as can his humor. With effort, students come to see that Kierkegaard uses every tool at his disposal, including subtle satire and outright ridicule, to frame his arguments. However, when students are prompted by the teacher to look closely at what Kierkegaard is saying, and then to translate that coded language into everyday English, Kierkegaard’s meaning becomes much clearer.

Kierkegaard’s issue with Hegel can be framed for students by a comment he once made in his *Journals*, a quotation helpful to beginning students to get inside his thought-world: “If Hegel had written the whole of his *Logic* and then said in the Preface that it was merely a thought-experiment, then he could certainly have been one of the greatest thinkers of all time; as

---

Kierkegaard also remarked, “Hegel is like a man who builds an enormous castle and lives alongside it in a shack.” These two quotations speak to Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel and Hegelianism, the dominant philosophy of the day. This critique turned out to be a major turning point in Western philosophy, and Kierkegaard used every weapon at his disposal

30 Cited in Lowrie, A Short Life of Kierkegaard, 16.
31 Cited in Mark C. Taylor, Journal to Selfhood: Kierkegaard and Hegel, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003 [1980]), 35. My thinking about Kierkegaard has been shaped by my longstanding friendship with my doctoral classmate, Mark Taylor, and in numerous conversations with him while we were students together. A version of his dissertation would eventually appear as Mark Taylor, Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975). The preface to the second edition of Journal to Selfhood indicates that, in the intervening twenty years, Taylor has changed some of his thinking after considering Hegel and Kierkegaard in light of Derrida’s deconstructionism. Taylor has tried to mediate (read: offer a new understanding of) the relationship between Hegel and Kierkegaard. As Grace Jantzen writes in a review of Taylor’s book, “Hegel and Kierkegaard are traditionally seen as polar opposites, Hegel and the onward march of the Absolute and Kierkegaard insisting on the solitary individual as a paradigm of authentic selfhood. Taylor’s thesis, however, is that we can only understand this opposition in a context which first takes seriously all that the two philosophers have in common: he hopes to create ‘a dialogue between them which plumbs the depths of the issues they jointly probe.’” Grace Jantzen, “Review of Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard,” Religious Studies 19, no. 1 (1983): 111–13. There is not unanimity, however, that this common journey Taylor describes actually exists. Jantzen does not think so, but others, notably Robert Perkins, are more sympathetic to Taylor’s task. Robert Perkins, “Taylor’s Journey to Hegel: Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard” [review], The Journal of Religion 63, no. 1 (1983): 57–63. However, as another reviewer notes, “Taylor offers neither an analysis exclusively from the standpoint of Kierkegaard’s polemics nor a historical study but a constructive study of the two thinkers’ fully developed thought. Taylor claims that this ‘inquiry is guided by the conviction that the distinctive features differentiating their viewpoints can emerge clearly only within the framework of their shared presuppositions, assumptions, and intentions’ (12). Setting himself in direct opposition to Thulstrup, who argued that ‘Hegel and Kierkegaard have in the main nothing in common as thinkers, neither as regards object, purpose, or method, nor as regards what were for each indisputable principles’ (18), Taylor strives to demonstrate that in fact it is at precisely these points that the two share much in common.” John W. Elrod, “Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard” [review], Journal of the History of Philosophy 21, no. 1 (1983): 113–15. I would admit that most Kierkegaardians see Hegel polemically, and most Hegelians have tried to defend Hegel from such attacks. However much one can see a common theme of a “journey to selfhood” as guiding the thinking of each of these two men, proving that interpretation with Hegel’s works is more difficult than with Kierkegaard’s. While each may be seeking some “self-conscious authentic selfhood in relationship to God,” they may not agree on the role religion takes in human life. Traditionally, Hegel is seen as placing religion as subordinate to the political ends of the state. As Perkins notes in his review, for Hegel, “The state is the divine will, in the sense that it is mind present on earth, unfolding itself to be the actual shape and organization of the world.” Georg W.F. Hegel, Philosophy of Right, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), ¶270, cited in Perkins, “Taylor’s Journey to Hegel.” To reconcile the individual and community may only provide the “crowd” man; so thinks Kierkegaard, who wishes (see the discussion of Fear and Trembling below) to see the individual discover his true self only as he stands naked before his God. As Perkins notes, mirroring the way our department approaches Kierkegaard, “Kierkegaard must insist on a paradox which can only be held together by the free decision of the existing individual; no triad waltzing of the Absolute through time can bring about true reconciliation. The religious implications are, of course, enormous. Hegel emphasizes a harmony between God and man in the ultimate rational self-consciousness of the Absolute, while Kierkegaard stresses the otherness of God, the gigantic cavern between man and God which cannot be bridged by reason and calls for a leap of faith.” Perkins, “Taylor’s Journey to Hegel.” In an important sense, it is more helpful for students at the secondary-school level to read Kierkegaard the traditional way, as his ideas are a crucial model for a journey to selfhood that is more easily accessible to our students than it is in Hegel’s iteration. Kierkegaard also offers important insights into the process of adolescent spiritual identity formation, as will be explained below.
to attack Hegel. Students often struggle to understand the humor of some of Kierkegaard’s idea. In the end, Kierkegaard thought of Hegel as a comic figure for he, Hegel, misunderstood the nature of his philosophical system and even the nature of the philosophical enterprise itself—shades of Hadot’s criticism of academic philosophy rearing its head again. The parody of Hegel’s grandiosity is clear even in the title of Kierkegaard’s book, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which says, in effect, let me add a footnote here, an unscientific one, as your Hegelian “scientific” system cannot be systematized (as a way to live life, as a way to give meaning to your life), in spite of all your efforts to do so and think you have done so. No such system is possible, which leads to Kierkegaard’s dialectic, itself a parody of Hegel, which reads, “And so we will here posit and expound two theses: ‘(A) a logical system is possible; (B) an existential system is impossible.’”32 Kierkegaard is clear that, in spite of the best efforts of philosophers before him, one cannot think one’s way to the meaning of life; one can only think one’s way to the meaning of thinking. In the end, what is important is not thinking *per se* but living, and how one lives one’s life. Kierkegaard writes, “Only when reflection comes to a halt can a beginning be made, and reflection can be halted only by something else, and this something else is quite different from the logical, being a resolution of the will.”33

In yet another parody of Hegel’s dialectic, Kierkegaard comments that there are really two choices for the person who wants to find some meaning in life: “Two ways, in general, are open for an existing individual: *Either* he can do his utmost to forget that he is an existing individual, by which he becomes a comic figure, since existence has the remarkable trait of compelling an existing individual to exist whether he wills it or not”—meaning that, as much as one tries to forget that each of us must somehow live a life in this world, we have no choice but

---


33 Ibid., 103.
to live—“Or he can concentrate his entire energy upon the fact that he is an existing individual”—meaning that, in the end, each of us really has no choice but to live and find meaning in our living.\textsuperscript{34} Continuing his running critique of Hegel, Kierkegaard goes on to say in the next sentence, “It is from this side . . . that objection must be made to modern [read: Hegel’s] philosophy; not that it has mistaken presupposition, but it has a comical presupposition, occasioned by its having forgotten, in a sort of world-historical absent-mindedness, what it means to be a human being.” Were that not clear enough, Kierkegaard then adds, in a typical Kierkegaardian turn, “Not indeed, what it means to be a human being in general: for this is the sort of thing that one might even induce a speculative philosopher [again, read: Hegel] to agree to; but what it means that you and I and he are human beings, each one for himself.”\textsuperscript{35}

In short, all types of “thought-systems” are possible, and logically defensible, as Kant and Hegel proved, but in the end, each of us must live in the world, and the way we do that cannot be systematized, that is, turned into some abstract formula applicable to all. Each individual must find meaning for him- or herself. Here is how Kierkegaard put that issue in one of his journal entries:

\begin{quote}
What I really lack is to be clear in my mind \textit{what I am to do}, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true \textit{for me}, to find \textit{the idea for which I can live and die}. . . . I certainly do not deny that I still recognize an \textit{imperative of understanding} and that through it one can work upon men, \textit{but it must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognize as the most important thing}.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 107–9.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 110–11.

An existential *system*, meaning a system of how to exist, how to live, is impossible. The quest for Kierkegaard, and for adolescents, is to work out personal and individual meaning, as each student develops his or her own spiritual identity—and in the end no task could be more central to the process of adolescent maturation, and by extension to the work of our curriculum.

Lest that be understood as a simple or easy quest, Kierkegaard reminds his readers of a favorite quotation from Lessing: “Lessing has said that, if God held all truth in his right hand, and in his left hand held the lifelong pursuit of it, he would chose the left hand.”37 When that quotation is taken up as a subject for discussion in the Harkness classroom, to illustrate Kierkegaard’s point, I take out a small box and tell the students that inside the box is the “meaning of their life.” I then ask them, if each of you had the choice, would you open the box to see your individual meaning? This exercise often then consumes the rest of the period, as there is a heated debate about the wisdom of opening the box, and what might be found inside. This is a quintessential Harkness exercise, as the students take turns explaining and debating the ideas behind Kierkegaard’s claim that an existential *system* is impossible. It is a spiritual exercise in the style of Hadot to discuss and debate whether there is such a thing as a meaning to life, and whether each student would want to know it if given the chance. That is a very different pedagogy from a lecture describing what Kierkegaard was saying; in this case, the students live the experience of trying to figure out what Kierkegaard meant and whether they would actually want to know the meaning of their lives.

Only recently, I used this exercise again to teach Kierkegaard in Religion 421: The Literature of Existentialism. For fifty minutes without one further word from me, eight Exeter seniors engaged in the most fascinating and at times furious conversation arguing about whether each would open the box. Three were adamant that they would, and five said no. Back and forth

---

37 Ibid., 97.
the discussion went, and it covered a multiplicity of topics: *What is the meaning of life? How can anyone else tell me the meaning of my life? There is no meaning to life. God gave me the meaning of my life. Open the box, and let’s find out. No, even if the meaning were in the box, it would make no difference to me. God gave me free will. No, he didn’t. Don’t you remember what we learned from Waiting for Godot? No, that’s not what the play was about. Yes, it was. Here’s what I think the meaning of my life is. How can you say that? Let’s look at what I think the meaning of my life is as opposed to yours. It has to be subjective; there is no objective meaning to life. My meaning is not your meaning; No, there is one meaning for all of us.* And so the conversation went for the entire period. I have rarely seen students so animated, leaning across the table as they fully engaged in the discussion. No one was silent; they all participated by both listening and talking respectfully. Then the bell rang, and not a person moved. On the conversation went, until finally I gave them their homework and dismissed them. In a different pedagogical system, one could lecture students on Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel. But in this class of eight students, this small hands-on exercise of a box with the alleged “meaning of life” in it led to a completely different kind of educational experience, one where they learned not from me, not via lecture, but by actually engaging with each other and processing through Harkness-style discussion. They experienced firsthand what Hadot meant by describing philosophy as a *manière de vivre.*

The second strand of Kierkegaard’s thinking that is relevant to our students, and studied as part of our curriculum, is the distinction he makes between organized religion as manifest in the institutional church versus a personal relationship with the divine; he finds the former to be most problematic, while he claims that the latter should be the goal for each individual. Although that telos may be uncomfortable for some students, the split between institutional and personal is
an important one. Kierkegaard claims that meaning for the individual can be found in a subjective relationship with the Christian God. As he says in the Postscript, “On the contrary, the subjective acceptance is precisely the decisive factor; and objective acceptance of Christianity is . . . thoughtlessness.”\(^{38}\) He adds, “Christianity proposes to endow the individual with an eternal happiness, a good which is not distributed wholesale, but only to one individual at a time.”

Kierkegaard further expounds on this idea, writing,

> Christianity goes on to protest every form of objectivity; it desires that the subject should be infinitely concerned about himself. It is subjectivity that Christianity is concerned with, and it is only in subjectivity that its truth exists, if it exists at all; objectively, Christianity has absolutely no existence.\(^{39}\)

This theme of subjectivity cuts through all of Kierkegaard’s thinking. As a class, we read sections from his Journals, and the key quotation, which students always quickly gravitate towards, is, “the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.”\(^{40}\) This second Kierkegaard strand, a personal relationship “grafted on to the divine,” is developed at considerable length in his 1844 Philosophical Fragments. On the title page of the book, Kierkegaard inquires, “Is an historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure have any other than a mere historical

\(^{38}\) Ibid., Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, 116.  
\(^{39}\) Ibid.  
\(^{40}\) Søren Kierkegaard, Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers, vol. 5, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), 638. This idea is not appreciably different from what Mark Edmundson writes: “This is what we do, or ought to do, with books: turn their signification into meaning, into possibility. So Emerson himself suggests when, asking what the purpose of books is, he says simply that they should contribute to the thing in life that matters most to him. Books should inspire. And the test of a book, from this perspective, lies in its power to map or transform a life. The question we would ultimately ask of any work of art is this: Can you live it?” Mark Edmundson, Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2013), 205.
interest; is it possible to base an eternal happiness upon historical knowledge?"\textsuperscript{41} Later, he poses as a “project of thought,” “How far does the Truth admit of being learned?”\textsuperscript{42}

With secondary school students, even very bright ones, it is helpful to point out that much of what Kierkegaard is saying in the \textit{Fragments} is written in special Kierkegaard code language. If one translates that code into standard English, there can often be a “Eureka!” moment when the student says, “Oh, that’s what he’s really saying; why didn’t he tell me in a more straightforward fashion that that was his point?” Admittedly, understanding the \textit{Fragments} requires some understanding of the Socratic issue of whether knowledge is recollection, or whether the “truth” must come from the outside. When I teach this text at Exeter, some students have already read Socrates, either on their own or in Introduction to Western Philosophy, but otherwise we have a priming conversation on what those issues mean. Only once students are comfortable with the context of the debate do we move to a discussion of this “project of thought,” as Kierkegaard calls it in the \textit{Fragments}, in which “from the standpoint of the Socratic thought every point of departure in time is \textit{eo ipso} accidental, an occasion, a vanishing moment.”\textsuperscript{43} To use the classroom as an example, in traditional philosophical language, the teacher is the accidental occasion for the student to learn—not the cause of such learning, as knowledge is recollecting. However true that might be for Socratic thinking, it is not what Kierkegaard thinks and is explaining in this piece; quite the contrary. He writes, “Now if things are to be otherwise, the moment in time must have a decisive significance, so that I will never be

\textsuperscript{41} Kierkegaard, \textit{Philosophical Fragments}, unpaginated title page.

\textsuperscript{42} The opening sentence of Kierkegaard’s “Propositio.” Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 13.
able to forget it either in time or eternity; because the eternal, which hitherto did not exist, came into being in this moment."

So begins an extended discussion of the fundamental difference between Socratic philosophy and Kierkegaard’s understanding of Christian theology. Man cannot recollect the truth, as man is in error—“let us call it sin”—so a historical point of departure is necessary: “What now shall we call such a Teacher [read: Jesus], one who restores the lost condition and gives the learner the truth? Let us call him Savior, for he saves the learner from his bondage and from himself; let us call him Redeemer. . . ” And when did this teacher appear? “Such a moment ought to have a distinctive name; let us call it the Fullness of Time [read: Incarnation].” Decoded, the language becomes much more accessible to students, but it takes work around the table to get to that point of understanding.

The Kierkegaard passage from the Fragments which we read in class also includes the king and maiden analogy, which, once the students understand it as a restatement of the Incarnation story of Jesus appearing as the Suffering Servant, allows them to appreciate Kierkegaard’s unusual way of retelling old truths in a new form. How does this second strand of Kierkegaard’s thinking assist the students to understand what it means to live one’s life? To begin, they come to see that, whatever the philosophical roots of the Hegel versus Kierkegaard conflict, there appears to be an emerging theme that, whatever truth is, it is subjective rather than objective, and that a philosophical system of thought is insufficient to provide the answers to how one should or could live one’s life. Kierkegaard’s supposition is that life’s meaning is to be found in a subjective relationship with the divine. The student begins to realize that meaning

---

44 Ibid., 16.
46 Ibid., 32–43.
must be individual rather than collective, and that one of the major tasks of maturation is
developing individual “religious” truths, as religion has been previously defined and used in this
dissertation.

The third and final strand of Kierkegaard that is of value to the adolescent maturation
process, and which we therefore teach in our courses, is the selection about Abraham and Isaac
in *Fear and Trembling*. To make it, and its context, clearer, when this section is read in class, I
assign Genesis 22 as a preamble, as most of the students do not know that story, upon which
*Fear and Trembling* is an extended commentary. In fact, I go even further and cover Abraham’s
biography—how he was born Abram and had his name changed as a result of entering into a
covenant with God, and how Abraham could bargain with God if necessary (for example, Sodom
and Gomorrah). In light of this background, I ask students to explore why God would be testing
Abraham now, *after* entering into the covenant with him. God has called him the “father of a
multitude,” but losing his son means having no descendants. Did Abraham tell Isaac or Sarah
what he was about to do, what did he think as he left home, what did he say as they marched off
together, when did Isaac understand what was going on, what did Abraham think as he brought
down the knife, etc., etc.? In effect, we recreate much of the conversation in *Fear and Trembling*
before we read it, doing for ourselves with Genesis 22 exactly what Kierkegaard did as he wrote,
imagining all the possible scenarios ourselves and acting them out around the table. Only after
this do we read the Kierkegaard selection for homework.

When we come to the Kierkegaard piece itself, we focus almost exclusively on the
meaning of the two titles for the selection, “A panegyric upon Abraham,” and “Is there ever such

---

Once the students understand that “panegyric” means an act of praise, we can begin with the premise that, whatever Kierkegaard wants to say, it will be in praise of Abraham, not anything to condemn him. When it comes to the second heading, we spend an entire class working on three key words, but first I rearrange the sentence so that it reads more clearly: “Are there ever circumstances in which the ethical is suspended because of the teleological?” Then we parse each of the italicized words. Writing on the board, I press the students to arrive approximately at defining ethical as the universal morals of mankind; suspended as meaning temporarily superseded, temporarily held in abeyance; and teleology as some greater good, some higher cause. This can be a tough slog around the table, but a rewarding one, and some of the students bring Kierkegaard’s three stages on life’s way—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—into the conversation. They use that progression to understand, as Kierkegaard says, the difference between the tragic hero and the knight of faith. If the conversation doesn’t quite arrive at the intended goal, I assign an overnight paper with a prompt examining Kierkegaard’s question more closely, asking that they provide a yes or no answer and furnish their rationale.

It is always surprising to me how many students fail to see that Kierkegaard himself gave a direct affirmative answer to this question in the reading: “The story of Abraham contains therefore a teleological suspension of the ethical.” He goes on to explain,

If such is not the position of Abraham, then he is not even a tragic hero but a murderer. To want to continue to call him the father of faith, to talk of this to people who do not concern themselves with anything but words, is thoughtless. A man can become a tragic hero by his own powers—but not a knight of faith. When a man enters upon the way, in a certain sense the hard way of the tragic hero, many will be able to give him counsel; to him who follows the narrow way of faith no one can give counsel, him no one

---

48 Ibid., 30 and following, 64 and following.
can understand. Faith is a miracle, and yet no man is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is unified is passion, and faith is a passion.\(^9\)

That answer, and Kierkegaard’s understanding of the three stages on life’s way, with the religious being the highest, provides an important model for adolescent development.\(^5\) It is not that we want to suggest to students that such a goal is the ideal, for that is much too simplistic an explanation and use of Kierkegaard. Rather, the telos is to understand Kierkegaard’s views on the nature of faith. When students read about Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith”—some of them have actually heard of the term even if they do not associate it with Kierkegaard—they usually assume that the leap is from rationality to irrationality, that is, from what we can explain or know through the power of reason to something which is the opposite, “unreasonable” or “irrational.”

That dichotomy, rational versus irrational, is typical of how many students understand religion as a whole: your faith, however formed or expressed, is either reasonable—based on reason—or irrational, which usually means “blind faith.” That term, “blind faith,” is a key one for them—and for many others—for it suggests a suspension of reason: one cannot use reason to explain faith, the thinking goes. One must simply abandon reason and believe blindly. This is not Anselm’s *fides quaerens intellectum*, not faith seeking understanding, but faith in spite of reason

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 77.

\(^{50}\) There is an important distinction we need to note, and that concerns Kierkegaard’s use of his pseudonymous authorship. The *Postscript* and *Fragments* were listed as being written by one author—Johannes Climacus—whereas *Fear and Trembling* by another, Johannes de Silento. Why publish books under different pseudonyms? For Kierkegaard, there was a dialectical progression through the three “stages of life,” and each stage with its concomitant thinking was represented by a different author who was writing from that point of view. Note, though, that these three stages were not entirely separate. In true Hegelian fashion, each is “sublated” into the next. The progression is not one of abandonment as much as reconciliation in a higher synthesis; each prior stage is both annulled and preserved. But even that last synthesis in the religious stage is only a *representation* of the religious in that its description by the self-confessed humorist Johannes Climacus is only an ideal of faith, not its actual lived experience. In that regard, it is helpful to note that, at the end of the *Postscript*, Johannes Climacus implies as much when he revokes everything he has just said—with the important rider that “to say something then to revoke it is not the same as never having said it in the first place.” See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Søren Kierkegaard,” July 27, 2012, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/. Presenting material in this aesthetic fashion invites the reader to make the same leap of faith personally and experientially, a move we in some ways replicate in our Religion Department courses. For more on the issue of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship, see Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship*. Mark Taylor, emails to author, June 16, 2014.
to the contrary. Moses did not literally part the Red Sea, Jesus did not literally walk on water, says reason; blind faith says just believe in spite of reason to the contrary.

When we discuss Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the Abraham and Isaac story, the students quickly and easily adopt the reasoned faith versus blind faith analysis, as such an analysis seems so intuitively correct, and that must be what Kierkegaard meant by the leap of faith, to leap from reason to irrationality. But if one looks carefully at the line Kierkegaard says with great frequency in *Fear and Trembling*—“This is the paradox which does not permit of mediation”—and one parses what Kierkegaard means by “cannot be mediated by reason,” it becomes clear that there is a third option, neither rationality, nor irrationality, but arationality. Reason is not applicable to what Abraham was asked to do in sacrificing his son. The faith he exhibited is neither consistent with reason, nor contrary to it. Rather, neither rationality, nor its correlative opposite, irrationality, apply. That is a false dichotomy: faith is to be understood as a leap outside the bounds of reason and non-reason entirely.

Conceptually and developmentally, this move by Kierkegaard is crucial for students who struggle to understand the place of faith in their lives. This third option liberates them to see that faith, religion, and religious experience might not be in the same orbit as rationality. By discussing Kierkegaard, we have cleared a space in students’ minds for religious experiences and a definition of religion to which neither cognition nor volition might apply. For Kierkegaard, of course, religion meant standing naked before his God, but for our students, it might mean radical acceptance of experiences they may have had but which they never understood before as religious, and which can then be folded back into our curriculum as material to explore in future classes. These three strands of Kierkegaard’s thinking—that the meaning of life cannot be systematized, as truth is subjective; that the key question is not what I think, but how I am to live
my life on a daily basis; and that whatever I ultimately believe based on my experience may not
be explainable rationally but perhaps only experienced as such—are, again, crucial in adolescent
spiritual identity formation.

C) Friedrich Nietzsche: Developing Your Own Value System

Nietzsche is a key thinker for adolescents. If we are to teach developmentally-appropriate
Harkness courses on religion, it is crucial to include in our syllabi someone who is highly critical
of traditional religion, to suggest to students that a healthy skepticism about inherited ideas is
appropriate and that one needs to learn to think for oneself. If all the students read were authors
or thinkers who are supportive of what they, the students, traditionally understand as
institutionalized religion, there could be the unspoken assumption that all people should believe
in established religions and not question that belief. While it can take considerable time and
reading to establish Nietzsche’s exact critique of organized religion, once the students
understand that issue, it liberates them to form their own ideas and develop a more individualistic
“religion.” That is a significant pedagogical move and an important part of our work as teachers.

Biographically speaking, Kant’s life was so routinized that the citizens of Königsberg
could set their clocks by his daily walk, and while some might think such a life "boring," the
deeper truth is that his very methodical walks were symptomatic of a very organized mind which
spent its time systematically working its way through a myriad of philosophical issues. For
Nietzsche, on the other hand (as well as for Kierkegaard), there is a different kind of link
between his personal story and the development of his ideas—and the more one knows about the
facts of his life, the clearer his philosophical thinking and its evolution become. Drawing upon
Walter Kaufmann’s Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist, Nietzsche’s life can be
summarized this way: As a child, within six months, he lost first his father and then his brother.\textsuperscript{51} As a university student, much to the surprise of his family, he shifted the focus of his studies from theology to philology, and, in effect, renounced his pastor father’s Christian faith, refusing to attend church anymore. While we will expand upon this idea shortly, for Nietzsche, it was the death of the otherworldly, moral God which so troubled him—the God who was the basis and underpinning of Western morality—and he spent the rest of his life trying to work out the consequences.\textsuperscript{52} As he wrote to his sister, “Hence the ways of men part: if you wish to strive for peace of soul and pleasure, then believe; if you wish to be a devotee of truth, then inquire.”\textsuperscript{53} For the next quarter century, he sought a more personal (to him) version of the truth, as he “shopped” in and among various value systems for truths more relevant to his own life and situation. At first, he was attracted to the thinking of Arthur Schopenhauer (particularly his 1818 book, \textit{The World as Will and Representation}), and he found his atheistic views compelling, coupled with Schopenhauer’s idea that meaning could be found in art, specifically music. That led to a conflicted decade-long personal relationship with the composer Richard Wagner and his music, a relationship which ended with the completion of \textit{Human, All-Too-Human} in 1878, and Nietzsche’s resignation from his university post in June 1879 due to deteriorating health. He had been a university professor for about a decade, and he had about a decade more of productive work until his collapse in January 1889.


\textsuperscript{52} As Mark Taylor writes, “What critics and commentators invariably overlook is that Nietzsche qualifies his proclamation of the death of God. The God who dies, Nietzsche declares, is the transcendent moral God: ‘At bottom, it is only the moral god that has been overcome. Does it make sense to conceive a god “beyond good and evil”? Would a pantheism in this sense be possible?’ . . . Nietzsche devoted his life to attempting to answer these questions. If God is dead, what are the meaning and purpose of life? Perhaps, muses Nietzsche, life is its own purpose.” Mark C. Taylor, \textit{After God} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 122, italics in original.

While it is not easy to summarize that final decade’s thinking in a few sentences, one can see that Nietzsche’s life work was to move beyond traditional religion, move beyond traditional religiously-based morality, to create something more individual, a kind of transvaluation of all values, a struggle which may have contributed to his mental breakdown, only to leave him unable to complete that task. The critique of traditional otherworldly religion, the quest for locating meaning and value elsewhere, the unfinished nature of his goal, are all fertile areas of attraction and discussion for secondary school students, and we pursue those issues with vigor and enthusiasm in the classroom.54

Regarding the specifics of Nietzsche’s ideas, it is helpful to delineate two related themes, what he was critiquing and what he was advocating in its place. Given the voluminous primary and secondary sources, such a summary cannot in any sense do justice to the fullness of his thinking, yet for the purposes of teaching adolescents, less may be more, in that a few bold strokes may be clearer that a busy portrait which tries to include everything. So many subsequent

---

philosophers, artists, writers, painters, and scholars of various fields have drawn inspiration from Nietzsche’s two main themes—the death of the otherworldly God and the revaluation of all values—that outlining his thinking on each for secondary students might encourage them to follow Nietzsche’s goal themselves, that is, to think not as he did but for themselves.

As for the first theme, the death of God, there is a cultural and historical context within which Nietzsche fit, and without understanding it, his ideas make less sense and may appear to be even more radical than they were. Because secondary school students are unlikely to be familiar with this context, it is important to cover it as we read Nietzsche. His biography notwithstanding—the death of his father and the loss of his brother—the larger cultural context would include what has been called the rise of modern science, specifically the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric universe; the conflict between the scientific explanation for supernatural phenomena (such as miracles) and the religious understanding of such events; the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in November 1859; and the application of textual criticism to Scripture as *Formgeschichte*, which radically altered the way the Bible was read and understood. All of this combined with nineteenth-century skepticism to shake the foundations of a traditional religious worldview, and into such a world, one can place the specific events of Nietzsche’s life and thinking. When he pens the following passage in *The Gay Science* in 1882, such thinking did not come de novo, but out of a developing cultural context within which his life and work should be seen. In the allegory that Nietzsche relates, a madman runs into the middle of a town square and, amidst the jeers of the citizenry, proceeds to tell them that they have murdered God.

“God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. . . . How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? . . . Is not the

---

55 Also of assistance in tracing the philosophical roots of Nietzsche’s ideas is Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967).
greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods
simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and
whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a
higher history than all history hitherto.” . . . It has been related further that
on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and
there struck up his requiem aeternam deo. Led out and called to account, he
is said always to have replied nothing but: “What after all are these
churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”

Perhaps this is the reading of a twentieth-century interpreter, but I have always read that passage
as meaning less that God has died than that man’s belief in an otherworldly God has diminished
to the point that such faith is no longer relevant, or perhaps even possible. The death of God, in
other words, says more about us than it does about God—for it is more the death of belief in
God, the God who was the basis of all morality.

This leads to the second teachable theme in Nietzsche’s work, namely, the loss of the
underpinnings for human morality. Depending upon one’s point of view, that could be seen as a
positive or a negative, the latter possibly leading to nihilism. In some ways, says Nietzsche, it is
neither; that is a false dichotomy. Here is how Kaufmann more poetically states the issue:

Traditional morality seems to Nietzsche ineluctably moribund—a dying
tree that cannot be saved by grafting new fruit on it. We may recall his
conception of the philosopher as a doctor—a surgeon. The health of our
civilization appeared to him to be severely threatened: it looked
impressively good, but seemed to Nietzsche thoroughly undermined—a
diagnosis which, though trite today, was perhaps no mean feat in the
eighteen-eighties. Under the circumstances, one could humor the patient
and let him die, or put hypocrisy and flattery aside, speak up in behalf of
one’s diagnosis, and “apply the knife.” In other words, Nietzsche believed
that, to overcome nihilism, we must first of all recognize it.

---


57 For an extended discussion on the biographical as well as philosophical background of Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*, see: Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 96 and following.

58 Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 109–10. It is interesting to compare Jean-Paul Sartre’s understanding of the same issues. In
his 1946 essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” note how Sartre sees the death of God as a positive: “And when we
speak of ‘abandonment’—a favorite word of Heidegger—we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is
necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end. The existentialist is strongly opposed to a certain
type of secular moralism which seeks to suppress God at the least possible expense. Towards 1880, when the French
In that sense, Nietzsche is not so much offering a new morality, a revaluation of values, as encouraging people to confront the inadequacy of the old value system.

Just a month before Nietzsche became incapacitated in 1889, he published a volume entitled Ecce Homo, with the subtitle of How One Becomes What One Is, his own “spiritual autobiography,” with four dramatically-titled sections: “Why I Am So Wise,” “Why I Am So Clever,” “Why I Write Such Good Books,” and “Why I Am Destiny.” He never got to complete a new multi-volume work for which he had in mind the title Revaluation of All Values, but in Ecce Homo, one can see where he thought he was going:

Revaluation of all values: that is my formula for an act of ultimate self-examination by mankind which in me has become flesh and genius. My lot is that I must be the first decent human being, that I know myself to be in opposition against the mendaciousness of millennia.59

He was claiming, in effect, that to confront the dishonesty and hypocrisy of the old value system was itself a kind of revaluation. Nietzsche’s final insight was that our morality is itself immoral:

professors endeavored to formulate a secular morality, they said something like this: God is a useless and costly hypothesis, so we will do without it. However, if we are to have morality, a society and a law-abiding world, it is essential that certain values should be taken seriously; they must have an a priori existence ascribed to them. It must be considered obligatory a priori to be honest, not to lie, not to beat one’s wife, to bring up children and so forth; so we are going to do a little work on this subject, which will enable us to show that these values exist all the same, inscribed in an intelligible heaven although, of course, there is no God. In other words . . . nothing will be changed if God does not exist. . . . The existentialist, on the contrary, finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good a priori, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that ‘the good’ exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote: ‘If God did not exist, everything would be permitted’; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point . . . For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism—man is free, man is freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behavior. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. — We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free.” Quoted in Kaufmann, Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, 353.

59 Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, IV:1, italics in original.
“that Christian love is the mimicry of impotent hatred; that most unselfishness is but a particularly vicious form of selfishness; and that ressentiment is at the core of our morals.”

In short, exposing secondary school students to even the most basic ideas of Nietzsche introduces them to a figure who was among the first philosophers to realize that the death of an otherworldly, morality-providing God would give birth to something completely new in human history—the freedom of man to be the sole measure of the universe. What he was discussing was the birth of modernity, the world within which our students live, a world where the moral certainties are loosened, and people can no longer be sure of what is good and evil, right and wrong. Up to this point in early modern history, the Church had been the arbiter of morals, the place where one could find Truth with a capital T, but the relativism of values, which we take as a commonplace idea today, was truly revolutionary when Nietzsche first advanced the idea. That one has to think for him- or herself, that life is what you make of it—those were brand new ideas when he first suggested them.

Not that that task is an easy one, for to be liberated from past moralities can also be a terrible burden. The death of such a God leaves a void where there once were certainties, and the fact that Nietzsche was unable to maintain his sanity long enough to complete his work suggests what a burden such a task is for any one person. In some ways, all those who look to him for inspiration today—students, teachers, artists, writers, musicians, people from all fields—are working out the implications of what he saw only darkly through his cloudy glass. Exposing secondary school students to his life and thought, even if briefly and cryptically, is a real shock

---

60 Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 113.
to the system, an energizing and healthy shock, which encourages them to think through these issues as he had done, and then think of the implications for themselves in their own lives.\footnote{The Nietzsche biographers who are in the cited episode of the BBC series \textit{Human, All Too Human}—Hollingdale, Chamberlain, and Hayman—make a number of these same points.}

D) Frederick Buechner: Listening to your life

In many ways, Frederick Buechner’s spirit permeates this dissertation as much as it has animated our Phillips Exeter Religion Department these last forty-five years, ever since he left the employ of the Academy in 1967. Hardly a day goes by without one or more of us in the department thinking about him and his voluminous writings, and seeing him as \textit{pater noster} of the Religion Department; that is especially true for me. There is not a novel, nonfiction book, or sermon of his that I have not read, or, as he says in \textit{The Alphabet of Grace} about a fictional student of his, but perhaps describing me, “[he’s] a student who under various names and various transparent disguises has attended all the religion classes I have ever taught and listened to all my sermons and read every word I have ever written, published and unpublished, including diaries and letters.”\footnote{Frederick Buechner, \textit{The Alphabet of Grace} (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), 46.} In the book, this is the beginning of a discussion of an internal dialogue Buechner has been having with himself his whole life, his believing versus his unbelieving sides—but I have spent my career having an internal conversation with both Buechners as I come to see over the years the profound wisdom of this man and his writings. There is no living theologian and writer whose ideas are more influential in how we as a department understand our work, and how we teach what we do every day in our classrooms. Buechner teaches mainly through a style of discourse now labeled “narrative theology.”\footnote{The Trinity Institute website uses that term: “The personal stories of Buechner, Maya Angelou, and James Carroll were examples of ‘narrative theology,’ a relatively new theological discipline that examines the role of ‘stories’ in}
from his own life, and whose import is theological. As he writes, “At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography.”  

Buechner is always writing about himself and his own experiences—drawing out their deeper theological significance. He is listening to the story his life is telling him.

One cannot help but think of Schleiermacher’s cultured despisers when reading Buechner’s descriptions of his students at Phillips Exeter in the late 1950s. While much has changed, there are many ways in which the struggles Buechner was pushed by his students to address remain questions with which our students perennially struggle.

It was a war to prove not just to my students but to certain equally skeptical members of the faculty and administration that religion both could and should be taught at all. . . . [W]hat gave me such a feeling of being embattled was that not just my subject was on the firing line, but I was on it myself. What those extremely intelligent, articulate, sophisticated young people were there to take potshots at were not just the religious ideas that I offered to their scrutiny, but my own recently acquired and little understood faith which was much of what gave meaning and purpose and richness to my life. . . . [The students] were as full of doubts as to who they were and what they believed in as the rest of humankind. . . . They were as hungry for something to enrich their lives with meaning and purpose, for something to worship even, as the very passion with which they rebelled against everything that claimed but failed to fill that hunger bore witness. . . .


64 Buechner, Alphabet of Grace, 3.


66 Buechner even went so far as to see himself as an heir to Schleiermacher. He may not have been overreaching when he wrote the following about his time at the Academy: “I was ordained as an evangelist, but apologist, I suppose, would have been, and continues to be, the more appropriate term. My job, as I saw it, was to defend the Christian faith against its ‘cultured despisers,’ to use Schleiermacher’s phrase. To put it more positively, it was to present the faith as appealingly, honestly, relevantly and skillfully as I could.” Frederick Buechner, Now and Then (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 47, italics in original.
wild hopes, and what little by little I learned from those years at Exeter was that unless those who proclaim the Gospel acknowledge honestly that darkness and speak bravely to the wildness of those hopes, they might as well save their breath for all the lasting difference their proclaiming will make to anybody.⁶⁷

Buechner goes on to write about a fateful encounter during a Sunday church service with a particularly incredulous student who wanted to know “what’s so good about religion anyway.”

I found myself speechless. I felt surely there must be something good about it. Why else was I there? But for the moment I couldn’t for the life of me think what it was. Maybe the truth of it is that religion the way he meant it—a system of belief, a technique of worship, an institution—doesn’t really have all that much about it that is good when you come right down to it, and perhaps my speechlessness in a way acknowledged as much.⁶⁸

Notice that Buechner—like Kierkegaard—moves away from an understanding of a doctrinal, institutionalized religion toward something else, a more fundamental and basic understanding of what it means to be religious in a world coming of age, perhaps even moving toward religionlessness. In many ways, the rest of Buechner’s life has been an attempt to figure out that answer, to overcome his speechlessness.

A year after leaving Phillips Exeter, Buechner gave a series of winter lectures, the Noble Lectures, at Harvard at the invitation of the University Minister, Charles Price. It was in those three lectures that Buechner began to find his voice. From those 1969 lectures on, Buechner began to insist that his own experiences of everyday life—of the humdrum events of his life, of your life, of my life—were the very places where God speaks to us, if God speaks to us. These Noble Lectures became the basis for The Alphabet of Grace, arguably his greatest achievement in narrative theology and a book that is taught in many of our Religion Department classes at all grade levels.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 45–46.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 72–73. Exeter dropped the compulsory chapel requirement a year after Buechner left, and moved the religion requirement to the classroom.
A clue to where Buechner will go in the book is found in the prefatory note “To the Reader.”

I am a part-time novelist who happens to be a part-time Christian because part of the time seems to be the most I can manage to live out my faith: Christian part of the time when certain things seem real and important to me and the rest of the time not Christian in any sense that I can believe matters much to Christ or anyone else.69

When we read the book in class, I ask the students to substitute “religion” or “religious” for the word “Christian” whenever Buechner mentions Christianity. Buechner is clearly a self-identified Christian, but there is a larger message in this book, and students find that message much more accessible when framed as religious rather than as only Christian. The book is constructed as a dialogue between Buechner and the reader. In the preface, he writes,

That is who I am. Who you are I do not know, and yet perhaps I know something. I know that like me you must somehow wake up each morning to a day that you must somehow live, to a self that you must somehow be, and to a mystery that you cannot fathom if only the mystery of your own life. Thus, strangers though we are, at a certain level there is nothing about either of us that can be entirely irrelevant to the other.70

In the next three chapters, Buechner weaves his personal stories of being a part-time Christian in with the other activities of his day, inviting the reader to contemplate how he or she too is only a part-time believer, and exactly how the dynamics of that tension work themselves out in daily life. In the chapter entitled “Gutturals,” Buechner outlines where and how in his own life God speaks to him, inviting student readers to contemplate the same in their own lives.

If there is a God who speaks anywhere, surely he speaks here: through waking up and working, through going away and coming back again, through people you read and books you meet, through falling asleep in the dark. If I talk about these things less as a lecturer than as a storyteller, more anticly than academically, more concretely than conceptually, it is not only because I can do no other but because it is also the way I believe I have


70 Ibid., viii.
heard my life talk to me, if my life talks to me, the way even God talks to me.\textsuperscript{71}

Conversations about this passage in class often compare the ways most students think of religion and God, and how and where God “talks with believers,” with the way Buechner thinks of the same issues. If today’s students think of God (at all) and where he talks, it is probably in church or synagogue or mosque, or through some scripture, or through miracles—all the places of traditional religion. They have a difficult times believing that, somehow, God might have something to do with daily life, and be speaking through quotidian events. By contrast, Buechner cites the clacking together of apple branches as the possible sound of the divine.

Those apple branches knocked against each other, went clack-clack. No more. No less. . . . And this is just what I want to talk about: the clack-clack of my life. The occasional, obscure glimmerings through of grace. The muffled presence of the holy.\textsuperscript{72}

Passage after passage, we discuss Buechner’s images, and it is clear that his metaphors catch students off-guard: this is not what they expect a “religion book” to be like, and yet his images are so memorable that, when I see Academy alumni years or even decades later, they often ask me if I am still teaching “that book by the guy who kept talking about the clack-clack of some apple branches.”

The book reaches its crux when Buechner tells a story about a student in one of his classes who finally got fed up with all this metaphorical verbiage—the very frustration I suspect many students have.

“You know, you were just getting down to the one thing people might be interested in,” he says, “because it is always interesting to hear why a man believes what he believes. But then instead of giving it to them straight . . . you lapse off into something that in the words of one of your early

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 12–13.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 7–8.
reviewers is either poetry or Williams’ Aqua Velva. . . . Why don’t you really tell them this time? Give it to them straight?”\textsuperscript{73}

This is really an interior dialogue that Buechner is having with himself— with the believing and non-believing/doubting Buechners debating each other. It is important to note Buechner’s response in the next passage:

> God. Jesus. The ministry, of all things. Why I believe. He cannot possibly want me to give it straight any more than I want myself to give it straight, get it straight. . . . “A question then,” he says. “Have you ever had what you yourself consider a genuine self-authenticating religious experience?”\textsuperscript{74}

When we discuss that passage in class, the most significant conversation typically focuses on whether the word “self” has as its antecedent Buechner or the experience: is it an experience which authenticates itself (which would be a miracle, as traditionally understood) or Buechner (meaning only he, Buechner, would find the experience valid, such as the clack-clack of the apple branches)? That discussion mirrors a much larger issue circling any conversation in a secondary school course on religion: when we talk about religion, do we mean some objective, even institutionalized religion, or something quite different, religion as personal and perhaps known only to me?

Buechner’s reply to the “student” in the next paragraph is instructive, and suggests an answer to the larger issue above as well.

> I can hardly even imagine what kind of an experience a genuine self-authenticating religious experience would be. Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 46–47, italics added.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 48.
This passage speaks directly to the difficulty with ever trying to provide a conclusive definition of religion; perhaps within or outside institutionalized religion, there are many “religions”—each person has his or her own version of that which gives meaning, purpose, and value to his or her life. And those personal “religions” may be wholly separate from institutionalized religion. This is an important issue to discuss with students as well as work out as a teacher, both curricularly and personally.

In the final chapter, Buechner offers some guidance.

At its heart, I think, religion is mystical. Moses with his flocks in Midian, Buddha under the Bo tree, Jesus up to his knees in the waters of Jordan: each of them responds to something for which words like shalom, oneness, God even, are only pallid, alphabetic souvenirs. . . . Religion as institution, as ethics, as dogma, as social actions—all of this comes later and in the long run maybe counts for less. Religions starts, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat, to put it mildly, or with the bush going up in flames, the rain of flowers, the dove coming down out of the sky. . . . Religion as a word points essentially, I think, to that area of human experience where in one way or another man happens upon mystery as a summons to pilgrimage, a come-all-ye; where he is led to suspect the reality of splendors that he cannot name. . . .

Students often find this experiential definition of religion—as opposed to a more technical, academic definition—more helpful, especially since it relates more to where they may be in their own lives at that point in their development.

If we as teachers are to take seriously where our students might be in their own spiritual identity formation, it is important to speak truth to their uncertainties. Whenever we read Buechner in class, regardless of the grade level, I assign the students the chapter “The Dwarves in the Stable” from his book called Telling Secrets. In particular, I like to assign this section

---

76 Ibid., 74–76.

because it allows me to show a video clip of Buechner. The book _Telling Secrets_ is derived from a set of lectures Buechner gave at the Trinity Institute in New York in January 1990, in a conference entitled _God With Us_. The chapter I assign the students is based on, and includes much of, a lecture I heard in person as a conference attendee. In his lecture, Buechner told the very moving story of his daughter’s battle with anorexia, and his helplessness in dealing with a dying child across the country in a San Francisco hospital, a story repeated in the chapter. What Buechner explained in person was the conflict in an anorexic’s mind between the twin adolescent desires to be both dependent and independent. A child craves independence, especially from the parents, and yet simultaneously desires to be taken care of, to be dependent on those same parents, and one place where that battle can manifest itself is in eating or not eating. The child knows the parent wants him or her to eat and can exercise independence by not doing so, yet as the internal conflict unfolds, and the child gets sicker and sicker, weaker and weaker, the child increasingly craves to be taken care of by the parents. As this scenario plays out, both parents, as caregivers, and child, the cared-for, are caught in a bind with no easy resolution. To see Buechner on the stage describe this event in his personal life brought the conference—which also featured talks by Maya Angelou and James Carroll—to a halt. I was fortunate to secure a video of the talk, and I show that clip in class. This motif is especially electric in the classroom because, if there is one psychological health issue which I know is on the minds of many of our students, it is that of eating disorders. Our school physicians report that, while physical health issues are minimal for this adolescent age group, psychological issues are important and

---

78 Wherever possible, I find it helpful to show video clips related to what we are reading. I think of how Kierkegaard criticized Hegel for thinking that what he was doing was simply an intellectual exercise, a thought experiment, and not something about real life and how it should be lived. For this reason, I always try to find a clip of a real person talking about the issues in personal terms—so as to suggest that what looks like an academic conversation in class is something out in the real world that people live and die for.

79 _Sacred Stories, with Frederick Buechner, Maya Angelou, and James Carroll: 21st Trinity Institute, Parish of Trinity Church, New York City_, directed by Jack Hanick (EcuFilm, 1990), VHS, 80 min.
common, particularly eating disorders, and especially for female students. While I would not want to reduce those myriad psychological issues to one theme, there is surely a connection between adolescent development and trying to find meaning, purpose, and value in one’s life.\textsuperscript{80} This video clip and reading provide an excellent entry into discussing these issues.

This can be a moving and profound class conversation as the students think through the issues Buechner describes as being at the heart of adolescence. As the class conversation on this example and Buechner come to a close, I add a footnote. What he did not include in the book is this addendum: One rainy night, as he despaired of his daughter ever getting well again, he was driving along a narrow Vermont road, unable to see clearly in the mist and fog. All of a sudden, a car came at him, and he just managed to read the license plate as it rushed by. It was a Vermont vanity plate, and on it was the word “TRUST.” As Buechner explained it, there was no more important act he needed to do at that dark moment in his life than to learn how to trust, trust that his daughter would get well, trust that God would help him handle his situation. Buechner went on to say that, having written up that story in another book—he published various personal stories of his in several forms over the years—one day he received a mysterious package from an unknown sender. Opening the package, he found a license plate, the license plate with the word “TRUST” on it. It appears that the car owner had read the story and decided to mail Buechner the plate as a souvenir—which he then framed over his writing desk. Buechner added that the driver was not a religious man, but the head of a local bank! Exploring the significance of such seemingly random stories, Buechner writes,

\begin{quote}
Maybe nothing is more important than that we keep track, you and I, of these stories of who we are and where we have come from and the people we have met along the way because it is precisely through these stories in
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{80} One must be careful not to suggest that eating disorders have a single cause. Since the time when Buechner related this episode, there has been an increase in our understanding of the complex neurological and psychological issues associated with such conditions.
all their particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God makes himself known to each of us most powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually.81

Reflecting on these four muses and the three more to come, and their role in my work teaching religion and philosophy to adolescents, I might view this dissertation itself as a form of narrative theology. I am myself observing Buechner’s command to “listen to your life.” I have done this in order to mine its theological import, but also to try to interpret that meaning for myself and others. That is why it is so important that I write this dissertation in the first person: this is what I know, what my own experiences have been, what I have to share with others. In our curriculum, the Phillips Exeter Religion Department asks students to engage in that same task with their own lives. Inspired by the NPR series, I routinely assign my students to write a “This I Believe” statement as their final paper in Religion 410: The Emerging Self: Psychology and Religion. In a sense, this dissertation represents my own “This I Believe,” but it also articulates what I believe my life has told me over these past fifty years of studying and then teaching religion and philosophy to secondary school students. We should encourage the students in our care, even though they have only begun their lives, to do no less.

II. Muses of Adolescent Development to Guide the Harkness Educator

As noted above, the following three muses are not directly read in class by our students, as either they do not fit within our course syllabi as currently designed, or their texts may prove to be too inaccessible for secondary school students—and sometimes, be it noted, even for college or graduate students. That does not diminish their seminal importance, however, as

81 Buechner, Telling Secrets, 30.
guiding lights for our curriculum and teaching pedagogy. For me personally, and for us as a
department, these three serve as inspiration for different aspects of what and how we teach, and
why we do so in our various courses. It is not unusual, in other words, for teachers to locate
resources which, while not read directly by students in their care, do provide the philosophical
and pedagogical underpinnings for how a given subject is approached or how a class
conversation might be framed.

E) Georg W.F. Hegel: Truth is Part of an Ever-Evolving Process

Owing to the difficulty of his prose, we do not assign Hegel in any Exeter classes, and it
is the rare student who has even heard of him—but his work has proven central to the
department’s and my own understanding of adolescent development. There is no question that
Hegel is one of the most significant figures of early nineteenth-century thought, playing a pivotal
role in concluding what came before him and laying the groundwork for the direction philosophy
went after him.82 For our purposes here, however, what is most significant about Hegel is how
his elusive dialectic continues to hover over and inform the pedagogy of the Harkness method.83
Hegel offers us a way to understand truth, and the correlative of self-realization, as a process, a
process which takes place over time, a process characterized by a series of steps and counter-
steps, without a finite end as the terminus. Similarly, Hadot perceives that the Socratic dialogue
was an oral exercise of philosophizing with only more questions as the temporary answers—thus

82 For more about the period between Kant and Hegel, and the issues leading up to Hegel, see: Sally Sedgwick, ed.,
The Reception of Kant’s Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University
Press, 2000); Dieter Henrich, Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 2008).

83 Walter Kaufmann wrote, “Whoever looks for the stereotype of the allegedly Hegelian dialectic in Hegel’s
Phenomenology will not find it. What one does find on looking at the table of contents is a very decided preference
for triadic arrangements. . . . But these many triads are not presented or deduced by Hegel as so many theses,
antitheses, and syntheses. It is not by means of any dialectic of that sort that his thought moves up the ladder
a process of inquiry which is never completed, any more than the process of self-realization is ever quite finished.

Hegel, who was a generation younger than Kant, was unhappy with Kant’s separation of the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, and saw his task as being to reunite them or overcome that dualism.\(^\text{84}\) Kant had taken the rational idealist world of the Continental Rationalists and the phenomenal world of the British Empiricists and tried, so thought Hegel, to effect a synthesis which, in the process, left the noumenal world of “the-thing-in-itself” (*das Ding an sich*) unknowable—an untenable proposition for Hegel, for, if it is unknowable, it is unknowable.\(^\text{85}\) He wanted to draw the two worlds back together with a different type of synthesis that would connect competing epistemologies and concomitant metaphysics. The link between the two worlds, Hegel’s idea of how to synthesize the two, was consciousness, which for him became the ultimate reality. Hence Hegel’s famous phrase, “What is real is rational—what is rational is real.”\(^\text{86}\) The two competing worlds unite in one metaphysical reality, the Idea, or Mind, or Spirit—with the German word being *Geist*, a multivalent term with several possible translations. Instead of Kant’s philosophy of “transcendental idealism,” we now have a philosophy of “absolute idealism” because all things that exist are related to mind or idea or spirit.

In his brief essay, “Who Thinks Abstractly?”, written between 1807 and 1808, Hegel outlines how this synthesis can be accomplished. Rationalism had left us with a classification

---


\(^\text{85}\) See W. T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (Toronto: Dover Publications, 1955), 43–49. Stace writes, “We can, therefore, positively deny the existence of an unknowable. And it follows that there is nothing in the universe which the human mind cannot know, neither the infinite, nor the Absolute nor the thing-in-itself. . . . The word existence has no meaning except the possibility of being known, the possibility of being an object to consciousness. . . . For we saw that this independent being which we ascribed to reality is only a logical being, a being for thought. It cannot, therefore have being apart from thought. It cannot be unknowable.” Ibid., 40, italics in original.

\(^\text{86}\) “Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das is vernünftig.” Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 10.
which saw all experience as lifeless, abstract universals, something called “Being.” As Hegel put it, “But this mere Being, as it is mere abstraction, is therefore absolutely negative: which in a similarly immediate aspect, is just Nothing.” When one moves away from the concreteness of actual experience, Hegel is claiming that we end up with a Being which is Nothing. But there is a process here, a movement, for if Being and Nothing are identical yet contradictory, there is a greater truth according to Hegel, and that is that “the truth of Being and Nothing is . . . the unity of the two; and this unity is Becoming.” We still have Being and we still have Nothing, but the two are synthesized into a higher unity, now called Becoming. This is the genesis of Hegel’s triad of the original Being, the contradictory Nothing, and the unifying Becoming—a dialectical triad of which Hegel had several versions: Being-Nothing-Becoming, or Being-Essence-Notion, or finally Idea-Nature-Spirit, none of which did it appear that Hegel completed.


88 Ibid., 3. Interpreting Hegel’s dialectic is a hermeneutic complexity, with the origin of the triadic dialectic in question. Even Hegel himself thought Kant was the source; see Hegel’s comment in the preface to his *Phenomenology*: “Now that triplicity, adapted in the system of Kant—a method rediscovered, to begin with, by instinctive insight, but left lifeless and uncomprehended—has been raised to its significance as an absolute method, true form is thereby set up in its true content. . . .” Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baille (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 107. More important than the source of the triad, however, is whether the popular understanding that Hegel had a thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad is correct. There has been much work recently—although not limited to the last few years, as this has been a continuing controversy—on the accuracy of that understanding. One of the controversies concerns the degree to which the triad “moves forward” by external or internal means. More traditionally, it was thought that external factors caused the movement, but Hegel’s larger point may be that the internal logic, internal contradictions, cause the re-evaluation, and thus movement forward. On that issue, see Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution: from Hegel to Sartre and from Marx to Mao*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). The title of her book suggests a line of interpretation used by a number of scholars, namely, that there is a direct link between the writings of Hegel, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Derrida; one cannot understand the latter two without the former. Cf. Michael Rosen, *Hegel’s Dialectic and Its Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Robert Stern, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Routledge, 2002). For our purposes, however, the idea of logical thought process working its way forward through internal contradictions is a significant intellectual enterprise, one with clear parallels to Harkness pedagogy—which is why Hegel serves as one of my muses.
Controversies about the exact source and nature of the dialectical triad aside, Hegel did, however, use a similar line of reasoning to explain consciousness, and occasionally with an advanced student I will point them to the appropriate section from *The Phenomenology of Mind*, written in 1807, the part entitled “Lordship and Bondage.”

90 Here is Hegel on the dual nature of self-consciousness:

Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it *is* only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized.’ . . . 91 Self-consciousness has before it another self-consciousness; it has come outside itself. This has a double significance. First it has lost its own self, since it finds itself as other being; secondly, it has thereby sublated that other, for it does not regard the other as essentially real, but sees its own self in the other. It must cancel this its other. To do so is the sublation of that first double meaning, and is therefore a second double meaning. First, it must set itself to sublate the other independent being, in order thereby to become certain of itself as true being, secondly, it thereupon proceeds to sublate its own self, for this other is itself. This sublation in a double sense of its otherness in a double sense is at the same time a return in a double sense into itself. For, firstly, through sublation, it gets back itself, because it becomes one with itself again through the canceling of its otherness; but secondly, it likewise gives otherness back again to the other self-consciousness, for it was aware of being in the other, it cancels this its own being in the other and thus lets the other again go free. 92

This dialectical nature of consciousness means that only by acknowledging an other is self-consciousness possible. But if there is an other, then the first self-consciousness could feel threatened and thus try to dominate the other. This leads to a struggle, in which the lord tries to dominate the bondsman. But there is a double dependence: the lord is dependent upon the bondman whom he has dominated—in that the idea of the lord’s self-consciousness is dependent

---


91 Note the exact usage of the terms “consciousness in itself and for itself” as appropriated by Sartre in his 1943 *Being and Nothingness*, where this distinction drives his analysis—a discussion we have in Religion 421: The Literature of Existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 73 and following, 22 and following.

upon the recognition of the lord by the bondsman—and the bondsman now creates goods or services, in the process of which creation the bondsman develops a self-consciousness as a creator. The master’s use of those goods or services is dependent upon the bondsman’s creation of them, so by controlling the bondsman, the lord is controlled by him. The solution to this double control-double domination contradiction is for each to acknowledge that neither is free, and that freedom is not possible in such a relationship. Only in understanding this dynamic of double domination can the mind, internally, free itself.\textsuperscript{93}

Hegel went on to apply this same logic to the workings of history. As Hegel wrote in the introduction to his 1832 \textit{The Philosophy of History}, “the history of the world . . . has constituted the rational necessary course of the World-Spirit—that spirit whose nature is always one and the same, but which unfolds its one nature in the phenomena of the world’s existence.”\textsuperscript{94} History, in other words, is the story of the World-Spirit (\textit{Weltgeist}) coming to self-consciousness of itself as free.

It must be observed at the outset, that the phenomenon we investigate—Universal History—belongs to the realm of Spirit. The term “World,” includes both physical and psychical Nature. Physical Nature also plays its part in the World’s History, and attention will have to be paid to the fundamental natural relations thus involved. But Spirit, and the course of its development, is our substantial object.\textsuperscript{95}

This would suggest that there are three parts to this process of the World-Spirit manifesting itself in history through human consciousness:

1—The abstract characteristics of the nature of Spirit.
2—What means Spirit uses in order to realize its Idea.


\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 16.
Lastly, we must consider the shape which the perfect embodiment of Spirit assumes—the State.\(^{96}\)

Looking east, and looking west, Hegel saw the gradual increase in the number of people who were conscious of their freedom.\(^{97}\) This process of gradual evolution has a necessity to it, in that its own internal logic drives it along.\(^{98}\) The history of philosophy is therefore really a philosophy of history, the self-actualization of World-Spirit in human consciousness over time.\(^{99}\)

Universal history . . . shows the development of the consciousness of Freedom on the part of Spirit, and of the consequent realization of that Freedom. This development implies a gradation—a series of increasingly adequate expressions or manifestations of Freedom, which result from its Idea. The logical, and—as still more prominent—the dialectical nature of the Idea in general, viz. that it is self-determined—that it assumes successive forms which it successively transcends; and by this very process of transcending its earlier stages, gains an affirmative, and, in fact, a richer and more concrete shape. . . .\(^{100}\)

For Hegel, the final embodiment of Spirit as freedom, the final realization for freedom, is in the State. But his understanding of the State and the individual’s relation to the State is crucial. The individual \textit{qua} individual is unimportant in the end, for the individual and his or her freedom need to be restrained. It is only within the unified self-consciousness of a people known as a State that the individual finds freedom.

The perpetually recurring misapprehension of Freedom consists in regarding that term only in its formal, subjective sense, abstracted from its essential objects and aims; thus a constraint put upon impulse, desire, passion—pertaining to the particular individual as such—a limitation of caprice and self-will is regarded as a fettering of Freedom. We should on the contrary look upon such limitation as the indispensable proviso of

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{97}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 20, 26.

\(^{99}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{100}\) Ibid., 63.
emancipation. Society and the State are the very conditions in which Freedom is realized.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 41. Also see Kaufmann and Baird, \textit{Contemporary Philosophy}, 3. This final passage was significant to Kierkegaard for its devaluation of the individual. It became an important part of Kierkegaard’s critique of the Hegelian philosophical system.}

With this understanding of the nature of the philosophical task, we see how Hegel differs from his immediate predecessor, Kant. While Kant saw the categories and forms of intuition as universal, for Hegel, reason has a history. Kant’s universality of reason was historicized by Hegel, and, in the process of contextualizing it, it becomes relativized. In that move from universal to relative, we find the crux of Hegel’s contribution to philosophy.

Hegel’s sense that truth and self-realization play out over time in a series of steps and counter-steps is central to an understanding of adolescent student development which Harkness teaching seeks to guide. While many of Hegel’s critics rejected the notion of a World-Spirit—Marx among them—his triadic dialectic offers the teacher, thence the student, a model for intellectual engagement in a process which has no terminus. For an age group just learning how to think, and think deeply, the notion that the thinking is never finished is an important concept to understand. The act of philosophizing does not have a terminus; likewise, coming to know and be a self is work never completed, and surely not during the transitional stage of adolescence.

\textbf{F) Friedrich Schleiermacher: Religion and the Affective Side of the Self}

Another great nineteenth-century thinker crucial to our understanding of self-discovery and spiritual identity formation is Friedrich Schleiermacher, in whose thinking a significant space is marked out for the affective or emotive component of religion—as opposed to its intellectual or moral dimensions. For adolescents, it is important to understand that, whatever we are calling self-formation, it involves the entire self, the whole person, not just one or another
part of the self. Discussion of Schleiermacher can begin with this remark from Wayne Proudfoot:

“Some have adopted the traditional tripartite division of the mind into intellectual, volitional, and affective components and have tried to assimilate religious experience to the affections or emotions.”

As discussed in detail in the discussion of γνῶθι σεαυτόν in the Platonic dialogues, Plato was working with a tripartite model of the soul, namely mind, will, and emotion or desire. When it comes to religion, and the nature of religious experience, it is clear—as the Proudfoot citation suggests—that the same issue persists: is religion essentially an intellectual experience, an exercise of cognition; is it volitional, in that it is the way we act; or is it affective, in that it is something we feel? Schleiermacher argued that it is all three, with dimensions in each, rather than being confined to just one. In that sense, it is more appropriate to think of a Venn diagram with *religious experience* placed where the three overlap, rather than a more discrete pie chart with an extended discussion of which piece of the pie religion fits into.

That is to say, religious experience is not just a concept of the mind, religious experience is not just an action of the will, and religious experience is not simply a raw phenomenological affective experience. It is something we feel, yes, but it is also something we can talk about, and something we can act upon, and therein is the paradox. Why this issue is so important, especially for developing adolescents, is that any attempt to keep the three parts separate does an injustice to adolescents’ emerging identities, in which all three parts are constantly in flux, and the relation of the three, one to another, is always in process—never completed, and surely not at that age.

---


103 Drawing upon my priestly experience, I could add that attending church is an experience of all three parts: the intellectual part is engaged by the sermon; the volitional part is involved when, either in the sermon or the confession or the absolution, the worshipper is encouraged to act in a different way once the service is over; and the affective part is found in the overall experience, the music, the splendor of the building, the emotions engendered by the act of worship, and so on. For that same reason, attending church involves all of one’s five senses: hearing the sermon, the sanctus bells, the music; tasting the Communion wafer; touching the neighbor in the offering of the peace; seeing the worship service; and smelling the incense.
Prior to encountering the academic study of religion in our curriculum, some adolescents may well have had a variety of religious experiences, and those experiences may have impacted the way they act. However, they probably have not thought in any systematic way about how to conceptualize those experiences or how to talk about them around a Harkness table. Thus, educators can use Schleiermacher as a model for how to give permission to talk about the cognitional and volitional aspects of what was once the pure experience itself. While Schleiermacher had a more specific agenda vis-à-vis Kant and the cognitionists and volitionists—not to locate religion as only an intellectual exercise nor only as a function of the will, to immunize himself from their attacks—for our purposes, he points to a key component of adolescent religion: namely, it is something one experiences in the affective part of the soul, directly and intuitively, and which moves us in the deepest recesses of our being, then moves us to act and think differently.

When thinking about Schleiermacher and his ideas, I am reminded of a quotation from Jonathan Edwards, who wrote in his 1736 *Treatise on Religious Affections*, “He that hath doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion.” Likewise, Schleiermacher wrote in *On Religion: Speeches to its cultural despisers*,

---

104 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards: A Reprint of the Worcester Edition*, vol. 3 (New York: Leavitt and Co., 1851), 6. See the comment below by John E. Smith about Edwards’s theory of a two-part soul, more similar to Plato’s *Phaedrus* than his *Republic*: “The soul has two ‘faculties,’ the understanding and the will [thus he dismisses a long-standing three faculty understanding of human nature]. The understanding is that by which the soul is capable of perception, speculation, discernment, and judgment. The will is that by which the soul is inclined one way or the other (attracted or repelled, likes or dislikes) with respect to the object of its consideration. The two have a separate but somewhat equal status, and they necessarily function together, so that human being is neither merely rational nor merely volitional. There is no pure reason, uncomplicated by value, and there is no capricious act of the will, free from some perception of the good. The affections are not a third faculty but are, in effect, the center of the self, underlying both the mind and the will, giving a non-rational beginning point for the understanding and a non-volitional beginning point for the will. The affections neither reason nor will themselves, but they provide a fundamental perspective, a point of view, a basic orientation of the self, and an approach to life, and it is on this basis that the soul (or self) does all understanding and willing. By way of contrast with the passions, which are typically short-lived, the affections have a more abiding quality.” Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 96.
“religion’s essence is neither thinking nor acting but intuition and feeling.” On Religion is an important book for our purposes, especially given its intended audience, the “salon society” of Schleiermacher’s Berlin—an audience not dissimilar from the students in our courses. Schleiermacher’s audience included Romantics and skeptics, followers of the Enlightenment who were opposed to orthodox Christianity, and yet who were dissatisfied with the Enlightenment rationalistic understanding of religion. To this diverse, disaffected group of cultured despisers, he addressed the book’s five speeches. To an audience not unlike many of today’s youth, Schleiermacher wanted to provide a locus for, and understanding of, religion that was more innate, intuitive, and affective. To those who “despised” religion, he would claim that neither human immortality nor even God are necessary to religion, and to those who had difficulty with the contemporary versions of religions, their objections could be construed more as problems with religion’s cultural and societal manifestations than with religious experience itself.

Schleiermacher makes a critical distinction between the original and personal religious experience and the outward social manifestations and institutionalizations of such experiences. Doctrines, social activities, and religious organizations are in some way inspired by religious experiences, but for Schleiermacher, this does not necessarily mean that they manage to actually


107 Schleiermacher, Religion, 112 (5th speech).
contain the goodness of the original private religious experience. The original experience is pure, whereas the doctrines and organizations are impure, yet the two are mixed together.\textsuperscript{108}

These outward and socialized structures—the beliefs, practices, and organizations built upon the original religious experiences—are what Schleiermacher admits most people think of when they think of religion. But Schleiermacher’s intention is to remind his readers that “in the religions, you are to discover religion.”\textsuperscript{109} One cannot overemphasize the truth in that sentence: it is not mere wordplay, for his point is that the former should not be confused with the latter. The latter is what really matters, and the historical, culturally-specific accretions built up over time are but impure manifestations of the original experience.

There is a significant issue here that is applicable to adolescent students. While it may or may not be the case that our students have had any experiences which Schleiermacher might consider an affective religious experience—we in the Phillips Exeter Religion Department would contend that they often have—many Exeter students come to us with the mindset of Schleiermacher’s “cultured despisers.” Such students have often had less-than-positive experiences, if they have had any at all, with organized traditional religion. At the least, when they think of religion, they think not of the original experience itself but of the cultural accretions of it to which they have been exposed, and in which they have sometimes been forced by their parents to participate against their will.

In that sense, their understanding of religion is actually an impediment to the academic study of it. There is often a threshold of negativity and misunderstanding over which we must first step before we can begin our work, and sometimes that threshold can be so high that the student never quite manages to cross it. It can be a significant curricular hurdle to assign a

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 96 (5th speech).

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 111 (5th speech), italics added.
student a paper prompt about some aspect of his or her spiritual autobiography only to have him or her collapse the assignment into a discussion of bad experiences had as a child in a church, synagogue, or mosque. In their “religions,” they often cannot discover their “religion.” An analogous problem presents another difficulty: assuming students can clear the hurdle of thinking of religion in only its institutionalized forms, they often think that a “religious experience” has to be something very dramatic, on the order of the Exeter River parting on their way to sports, or the shrub in front of their dormitory going up in flames without being consumed. Disabusing them of that misconception is not always easy, either, so it takes considerable effort on the curriculum’s part to bring them to an understanding of religion anywhere near Schleiermacher’s “religious affections.”

Much more could be said about Schleiermacher, but the significance of his central idea—that the locus of whatever it is that we define as the religious impulse has its origin in the affective part of the self—cannot be overstated. That understanding of the nature of religious experience is a key component in the formation of the adolescent emerging spiritual identity.

G) Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Social Justice and Practicing Your Values

As a teacher of adolescents, I find that Bonhoeffer has proven an enormous inspiration to me through the way that his biography serves as an object lesson on the relationship between theory and action, theology and praxis.110 As was the case in my own life—studying religion and then seeing religion in practice with Martin Luther King, Jr.—there is a considerable difference

110 The following biographical outline of Bonhoeffer’s life comes from Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography, trans. Eric Mosbacher (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). There is a chronological table on 839–41, but the basic facts are drawn from throughout the biography. Bethge was completing the German edition of this definitive biography the year I studied with him while he was a visiting professor at Union. I then worked with him that summer, as well as during the following academic year in 1968 while I was studying in Tübingen as he prepared the English edition of the biography.
between studying religion as an academic discipline and acting out those core ideas in real life. As someone once remarked to me years ago (I’ve long forgotten who), “the academic study of religion and philosophy is not simply intellectual ping-pong, but we need to remember that real people live and die for these ideas in their own lives.”

Having already completed two doctorates by the age of twenty-five, Bonhoeffer came to the United States in 1930 on a postdoctoral fellowship at Union Seminary in New York. There, he studied with one of the most famous ethicists of his generation, Reinhold Niebuhr, and then saw religion in practice when he and another seminarian, Frank Fisher, a black American, went to Harlem and heard Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. at his Abyssinian Baptist Church. Exposed to a world he had hitherto known little about, and listening to Powell’s sermons—often about the injustices directed towards blacks in America—Bonhoeffer came to see the world from the point of view of those in the pew and not merely as an academic theologian. He returned to Berlin in 1931 to take up his former position at the University of Berlin, but other events in Germany would change the trajectory of his promising academic career, and his life, when Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933.

Within two days, Bonhoeffer was on the air giving a radio address which opposed Hitler, but the talk was cut off before Bonhoeffer could finish. During this same period, a furious battle for the control of German Landeskirche (Protestant established churches) ensued, a battle between the Hitler-supporting German Christians (Deutsche Christen) and the young reformers, with whom Bonhoeffer sympathized. By September 1933, Bonhoeffer and his colleague Martin Niemöller helped form the Pfarrernotbund—which the next year was to become, with the

111 Three decades later, I too went to the same church to hear the same preacher, then a United States Congressman, and experienced the same reaction as he did. I also did my first year seminary fieldwork in the same section of New York City, reinforcing Powell’s message as for Bonhoeffer as for me.

112 Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 193–94.
drafting of the Barmen Declaration by Karl Barth, a forerunner to the Confessing Church, the major religious opposition to Hitler. The Declaration stated that Christ was the head of the Church, not Hitler. Thus, in the several years since returning from New York, Bonhoeffer had moved inextricably from the academic into the political arena. As a Lutheran pastor, he was thus also disagreeing with, and moving away from, Luther’s idea of the two realms or kingdoms, Church and State, and never the twain shall meet.

That is not to say that Bonhoeffer was not conflicted about that move, and his doubts are important for others to understand. In Fall 1933, in the first of two attempts to leave Germany to sort out his thinking elsewhere, he spent eighteen months in London as the pastor to two German-speaking congregations. His time was not, however, solely devoted to these two parishes, for he also kept in touch with Martin Niemöller and did some ecumenical work in England on behalf of the Confessing Church—including meeting Bishop George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, who would later provide the anti-Hitler conspiracy an important contact in England to negotiate with Allied governments.¹¹³ Still, he was conflicted about his vocation and future role in Germany. As Bethge notes,

Hence from now on there were to be two different sides to Bonhoeffer. On the one hand, the man who was to dare more for the sake of the Church than most of his friends; to whom the German church opposition plans . . . were to mean just that little bit more than they meant to his fellow militants. . . . On the other hand, there was the Bonhoeffer who sometimes seemed so reserved as almost to be a stranger to these struggles. . . .¹¹⁴


¹¹⁴ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 256–57.
In 1935, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to lead an underground Confessing Church seminary in Finkenwalde, but the circle was closing around the Confessing Church.\(^{115}\) It is also during this time that he made contact with several figures of the German Resistance in the \textit{Abwehr} (an intelligence unit similar to the CIA), some of them relatives, who six years later would form the nucleus of the July 20, 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. From his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, he learned of Hitler’s plans for war; as a pacifist, Bonhoeffer was opposed

\(^{115}\) The Finkenwalde Seminary was funded in good part by Ruth von Kleist-Retzow. Given the difficulty of running an underground seminary, Bonhoeffer and some of his former students and their wives often sought shelter in von Kleist-Retzow’s Pomeranian estate. Bonhoeffer later fell in love with Kleist-Retzow’s granddaughter, Maria von Wedemeyer, to whom he became engaged three months before his arrest. In some ways, this is where two biographies cross: while walking along the Rhine one day near Bethge’s home in Rengsdorf in the summer of 1967, I mentioned to Bethge that there “was little mention of women in Bonhoeffer’s life,” to which he responded that Bonhoeffer did have a “girlfriend” and he had become engaged to her on January 17, 1943, just before his imprisonment. I inquired if she, too, had corresponded with Bonhoeffer while in prison, and, surprisingly, Bethge responded, “Yes, he did, and she probably has some letters, too.” Here I was, a twenty-three-year-old seminarian, who had the good fortune to be studying with the recipient of the very enigmatic “letters and papers from prison” of one of the century’s most famous Christian martyrs, and he was now suggesting that there might, in fact, be other letters which might help solve the riddles of the letters with Bethge. Bethge told me that Maria had fled to America after the war, and had had a troubled life there. She married twice, and had two sons, and thus Bethge thought she may well not wish to identify herself publicly as Bonhoeffer’s fiancée. He did, however, give me her address in Sudbury, Massachusetts, so upon returning to the States, I wrote to her. Surprisingly, she replied to my letter and invited me to her home. Upon broaching the topic of whether she might have some letters from prison, she said that she did, and even volunteered to allow me to publish some of them in the \textit{Union Seminary Quarterly Review}, of which I was then the book review editor. In separate issue devoted entirely to articles and materials about Bonhoeffer, we published an article about her letters, excerpting from some of them. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, “The Other Letters from Prison,” \textit{Union Seminary Quarterly Review} 23, no. 1 (1967): 23–29. What began as an idle conversation with Bethge along the banks of the Rhine made the front page of \textit{The New York Times} that Monday, November 20, 1967, and I subsequently turned the \textit{USQR} issue into an edited book published a year later: Peter Vorkink, ed., \textit{Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968). Edward B. Fiske, the religion editor of the \textit{Times}, commented in his article, “Mrs. Wedemeyer-Weller’s identity has been practically unknown in this country, even among theologians writing on Bonhoeffer.” Edward B. Fiske, “New Letters Reveal Martyr’s Hopes,” \textit{The New York Times}, November 20, 1967. Helping to have her letters see the light of day has been my small contribution to Bonhoeffer scholarship. About the same time of the \textit{New York Times} article, Maria donated thirty-eight of the letters to Harvard’s Houghton Library, with the stipulation that no one be allowed to read them without her permission; see “Harvard Library Gets Bonhoeffer Letter Collection,” \textit{The Harvard Crimson}, November 27, 1967, http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1967/11/27/harvard-library-gets-bonhoeffer-letter-collection/. When Bonhoeffer was executed on April 9, 1945, during the last chaotic days of the Third Reich, Maria searched all over Germany to try to learn the fate of her fiancée, and it was only on July 27 that she (and Bethge and Bonhoeffer’s family) learned his fate when the BBC broadcast a London memorial service for him on the radio; see Elizabeth Raum, \textit{Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Called by God} (New York: Continuum Press, 2003), 151. Subsequently, Maria came to the United States in 1948 and enrolled in Bryn Mawr College, where she studied mathematics. She later had a career in the early stages of the computer industry, working for both Honeywell and Remington Rand. Before her death on November 16, 1977, she entrusted her letters to her sister, Ruth-Alice von Bismarck, and gave permission for their publication (Ibid., 159–60). Those letters were published in book form: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, \textit{Love Letters from Cell 92: The Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, 1943–45}, ed. Ruth Alice Von Bismarck, trans. John Brownjohn (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).
to war, yet he knew that refusing to swear allegiance to Hitler, if drafted, was a capital offense.

As Bethge describes this fateful turn in Bonhoeffer’s life,

For Bonhoeffer, as a German theologian and a Lutheran Christian, the step into political action, over which he still hesitated, meant going into new and untraveled country. It was certainly a momentous step when one went over from silent opposition to open ideological protest. . . . But that is what happened in Bonhoeffer’s case. For a long time he merely knew and approved of what was going on, till that knowledge and approval developed into cooperation.  

That step was not without several fits and starts, however. In March 1939, Bonhoeffer traveled to England for several meetings, and while at first he only “playfully voiced the idea of staying abroad,” that idea took on more reality when he thought about what lay ahead back home in Germany.  

As he wrote to Bishop Bell while in England,

I am thinking of leaving Germany sometime. The main reason is the compulsory military service to which men of my age (1906) will be called up this year. It seems to me conscientiously impossible to join a war under the present circumstances. . . . In spite of much reading and thinking concerning this matter I have not yet made up my mind what I should do under different circumstances. But actually as things are I should have to do violence to my Christian conviction, if I would take up arms “here and now.”

Returning to Germany, he was there only two months before he left again, this time at the invitation of Paul Lehmann and Henry Sloane Coffin, President of Union Seminary, to lecture there during the summer and at other educational institutions after that, as well as to supervise German refugees in New York. On June 2, 1939, he departed for America. No sooner had he arrived, however, than his doubts and uncertainties caught up to him. As he wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr about the decision which in many ways sealed his fate,

---


117 Ibid., 540.

118 Ibid., 541–42 (March 25, 1939).
I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people. . . . Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice in security.\textsuperscript{119}

I remember numerous conversations with Bethge in the several years I studied with him about the significance of that decision and the idea that Bonhoeffer’s Christianity demanded his political involvement. It was not that Church and State were separate realms, but the religious required secular involvement—involvement which, upon returning to Germany several months before World War II broke out, would inevitably and inexorably lead Bonhoeffer into his participation in the plot to assassinate Hitler.\textsuperscript{120} As a seminarian myself, I was deeply moved to consider the relationship of the religious and the so-called secular worlds. Here I had been thinking religion was an academic subject one studied, but then my experiences—first with Martin Luther King, Jr., and then with the most famous social activist college chaplain of my generation, Bill Coffin—formed the clear idea in my head that religion was also something people lived out in the real world, even going so far as to participate in an assassination plot. I could not help but think this was an understanding of religion, and religious involvement in the world, which I wanted to make my own. It is not that I knew what lay ahead in my own career at that point—any more than Bonhoeffer knew what returning to Germany would eventually entail. However, my lifelong passion for the teaching of ethics to secondary school students was formed

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 559.

\textsuperscript{120} As part of my “gap” year (1968–69) spent in Germany, I worked with fellow seminarian Larry Rasmussen (who became the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, and an eminent Bonhoeffer scholar) interviewing surviving Bonhoeffer family members and friends, of whom there were a diminishing few still alive twenty years after the war’s end. That research on Rasmussen’s part led to his \textit{Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance} (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972).
in the cauldron of the influences of these three men (King, Coffin, and Bonhoeffer) and that was a legacy of ethical involvement and responsibility I wanted to pass along to students.

Two months after Bonhoeffer’s return, war broke out, and, in the next year, his activities became more and more constricted by the Nazis, while his involvement in the resistance grew. He began work on his *Ethics*, a good portion of which is an attempt to work out the ethical theory to justify his increasing involvement in political activities. On October 30, 1940, he connected with the *Abwehr* office in Munich, in which his brother-in-law worked, and which would become one of the centers of anti-Hitler resistance. It was thought that Bonhoeffer’s international ecumenical contacts might prove useful in sounding out the Allies on how they would respond to the fall of Hitler were any of the plots to prove successful. Bonhoeffer made several journeys to Switzerland in 1941, and to Norway and Sweden in 1942, to meet with Willem Visser’t Hooft (the first secretary general of the World Council of Churches) and others (including Bishop Bell again) to discuss the possible peace terms for a post-Hitler German government. On March 13, 1943 and again on March 21, there were two unsuccessful assassination attempts on Hitler’s life, and, on April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer’s house was searched and he was arrested and imprisoned in Tegel Prison—a minimum security prison where he was held for eighteen months—on suspicion of currency violations related to his having helped Germans flee to Switzerland. His direct involvement in the assassination plots was as yet unknown to the Nazis. As 1944 unfolded, various members of the *Abwehr* were dismissed or arrested, and the *Abwehr* was disbanded, folded into the Reich Security Head Office.

---


122 For more on the various attempts on Hitler’s life from the *Abwehr*, and Bonhoeffer’s role in their planning, see Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy: The Secret Resistance to Hitler in the German Army* (London: Heinemann, 1969).
On July 20, 1944, there was the unsuccessful assassination attempt against Hitler involving Claus von Stauffenberg placing a bomb inside Hitler’s bunker. The bomb was accidentally moved to the opposite side of a thick table leg, thus having the furniture absorb most of the blast and only wound, not kill, Hitler.\(^\text{123}\) By September 22, Gestapo Commissar Sonderegger discovered files in the *Abwehr* bunker at Zossen which implicated many of the members of the *Abwehr* in the plot. Many members of Bonhoeffer’s extended family were arrested, and while Bonhoeffer had a friendly guard who would have assisted him in an escape plan, Bonhoeffer abandoned the idea, fearing reprisals against his family members. On October 8, 1944, Bonhoeffer was moved by the Gestapo to the detention cellar in their prison on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse. As the collapse of the Third Reich accelerated, and the Allies and the Soviets moved on Berlin from opposite directions, Bonhoeffer was moved from Berlin to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp, then moved south in the direction of Regensburg, Germany. However, upon reading the recently discovered diaries of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of the *Abwehr*, Hitler issued an “annihilation order” for all members of the suspected plot.\(^\text{124}\) After a summary court-martial during the night, Bonhoeffer was hanged in the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp on April 9, along with a number of other members of the plot—Canaris, his deputy Hans Oster, and German resistance figure Ludwig Gehre, among others—only weeks before Hitler committed suicide. As Bethge writes, citing the words of the camp doctor who did not know who Bonhoeffer was, and who wrote these words ten years later,

\(^{123}\) This is the subject of a Hollywood film with the title of the plan: *Operation Valkyrie*, dir. Jo Baier (2004; The Weinstein Company, 2009), DVD.

\(^{124}\) The last few days of Bonhoeffer’s life are movingly described in Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 827–31. There, Bethge mentions that, when Bonhoeffer was found by the agents sent to locate him as he was moving south, he had just completed a religious service for his fellow prisoners at the school in Schönberg. As he was led away to be sent to Flossenbürg, he asked an English prisoner, Payne Best, to remember him to Bishop Bell if he should ever reach his home: “This is the end—for me the beginning of life.”
Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.  

Bonhoeffer’s life, and his death, held much attraction for me when I first read his work in seminary, but it was his smuggled letters and papers written from Tegel Prison that really caught my attention. What always fascinated me about Bonhoeffer’s letters are the cryptic yet powerfully suggestive ideas he penned more-or-less randomly to his alter ego, Eberhard Bethge, as he sat in cell #92 of Tegel Prison. At first, his thoughts were not at all systematic, and it took him months to settle down and realize he might not be released anytime soon. Here and there, for more than a year, Bonhoeffer only hinted at some of his theological thinking, usually by way of reference to some previous conversation he and Bethge might have had before his imprisonment. But from late April 1944 on—until his transfer to the Gestapo prison on October 8, 1944—Bonhoeffer was more detailed and more systematic in his theological reflections, even going so far, by August 3, as to sketch out a new book he would like to write someday outlining this new thinking, his new ideas about the fate and future of Christianity. As I put it in the introduction to the 1968 book I edited on Bonhoeffer, his prison thoughts are “like the answers elicited by a Rorschach Test—no two commentators see the same things.”

Different people read his embryonic thinking about the prospects for contemporary Christianity in a “religionless world,” “a world come of age,” quite differently.


126 Vorkink, Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age, ix.
After sitting in his cell for more than a year, pulling together his random thoughts, Bonhoeffer himself was surprised by his own thinking and the conclusions he seemed destined to draw.

We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as ‘religious’ do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by ‘religious’. . . . If religion is only a garment of Christianity—and even this garment has looked very different at different times—then what is a religionless Christianity? . . . The questions to be answered would surely be: What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world? How do we speak of God—without religion, i.e. without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on? How do we speak (or perhaps we cannot now even ‘speak’ as we used to) in a ‘secular’ way about God? In what ways are we “religionless-secular’ Christians, in what way are we the ἐκκλησία, those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favored, but rather as belonging wholly to the world?127

Phrases in that letter, read in the context of Bonhoeffer’s life and developing thinking about the role of Christianity and the Church in the modern world, have excited scholars and others to wonder what he meant by “religionless Christianity.” Reading those same words now, seventy years after he wrote them, I can see in my own classrooms the truth about which he was speaking. It would be fair to say that, for the students who have crossed my threshold over the last four decades, there has been less and less attachment to any form of organized religion in an increasingly secular world. Yes, a few would still self-identify as members of some religious group, but for the vast majority, traditional organized religion is simply not relevant to their young lives. They are not aggressively anti-religious, but more apathetic; traditional religious issues do not concern them. While some of that may be age-related, and perhaps they will “grow

---

out of” their apathy later in life, it is more likely a phenomenon of the larger world in which organized religion appears to have decreasing relevance. In that sense, Bonhoeffer’s embryonic thinking put a finger on what would subsequently be a significant cultural issue in the next half-century. It should be added, however, that diminishing attachment to organized religion does not translate into less interest in “religious issues”; it is simply that those concerns find their outlet elsewhere.

Bonhoeffer himself sensed, I suspect, where his own thinking might be taking him and what lay ahead for his Church. When Renate and Eberhard Bethge had a son, whom they named after Bonhoeffer, Bonhoeffer sent the Bethges a baptismal sermon about the meaning of this event in their son’s life. In it, Bonhoeffer predicted that the Church’s form would change greatly in the future. Bonhoeffer seemed to be suggesting a Church, or an understanding of religion, which entailed extensive “worldly involvement.” Such worldly involvement was seen by Bonhoeffer as a positive, not a defensive, move. In fact, Bonhoeffer was troubled by the numerous attempts to “sniff after people’s sins” to validate their need for religion.

The attack by Christian apologetic on the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second place ignoble, and in the third place unchristian. Pointless, because it seems to me like an attempt to put a grown-up man back into adolescence, i.e. to make him dependent on things on which he is, in fact, no longer dependent, and thrusting him into problems that are, in fact, no longer problems to him. Ignoble, because it amounts to an attempt to exploit man’s weakness for purposes that are alien to him and to which he has not freely assented. Unchristian, because it confuses Christ with one particular stage in man’s religiousness, i.e. with a human law. . . . Thus the world’s coming of age is no longer an occasion for polemics and apologetics, but is now really better understood than it understands itself, namely on the basis of the gospel and in the light of Christ.

---


129 Ibid., 178–82 (June 8, 1944).
The phrase *Die Mündige Welt*—the world coming of age, as a process now unfolding—has been forever linked to Bonhoeffer’s thinking at this period in his life.\(^{130}\) Just as Kant spoke in his essay on “What is Enlightenment?” about the need to “*Sapere audere*: Have courage to use your own reason,” so Bonhoeffer is saying, “Have courage to work out the implications for Christianity of a world coming of age which no longer needs traditional Christianity or the Church, and is, in fact, a religionless world.”\(^{131}\)

Four days before the abortive July 20 plot on Hitler’s life, an event about which Bonhoeffer knew only in the most general terms, he summarized his developing reflections.

> God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8.17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.\(^{132}\)

That phrase, *etsi deus non daretur*—“as if God did not exist” or more literally “as if God were not given” (was not an issue or factor)—was Bonhoeffer’s way of saying that not only does modern man live in a religionless world, but a Godless one as well, Godless in the sense that God cannot be the working hypothesis which bails man out of unsolvable problems, “the God out of a machine” who is trundled out, when all else fails, as a final explanation. In a world coming of age, that understanding of God will no longer work. In the sense of which Bonhoeffer is speaking, a religionless world, a Godless world, there are shades of Nietzsche’s same thinking,

---

\(^{130}\) The phrase became the name of a Bonhoeffer scholarly journal, *Die Mündige Welt*, published by Bonhoeffer and Bethge’s publisher in Munich, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, and several volumes of essays were published in the late 1950s and early 1960s in this series.

\(^{131}\) Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”, *On History*, 3.

however far apart they might have been in other regards. But, more importantly for our thinking, in articulating the idea of a *religionless Christianity*, I would propose that what Bonhoeffer really meant was a *Christianity-less religion*, meaning an understanding of how one lives in a world not only without the prop of God, but also without the support of organized, established religions. That understanding of establishmentless religion is at the heart of this dissertation’s definition of religion, and raises anew the issue of how one is supposed to live in such a world.

Trying to answer that question for himself, Bonhoeffer pondered the place of faith in his own life.

I remember a conversation that I had in [America] thirteen years ago with a young French pastor [Jean Lasserre].\(^{133}\) We were asking ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it is quite likely that he did become one). At the time I was very impressed, but I have disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith. For a long time I did not realize the depth of the contrast. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. . . . I discovered later, and I am still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith, that is *metanoia*; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian (cf. Jer. 45!).\(^{134}\)

In many ways, this passage expresses my own understanding of what it means to be a religious person in today’s world. Yes, Bonhoeffer was talking about what it meant to him specifically to be a Christian, and I interpreted it that way in seminary when I was training to be an Episcopal

---


\(^{134}\) Written the day after the unsuccessful July 20 plot. Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, 201–2.
priest, but over the years that understanding has broadened in my mind to include the obligation of any religious person to be involved in the world, to be a social activist for the causes one believes in—for “it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith.”

In short, Bonhoeffer teaches us that we, as religious people in any sense of the term, are called to a worldly involvement which is obligatory if we are to have the faith we do, and that would include adolescents as well. There is a moral imperative attached to being a religious person. We are compelled to act out our faith in the world, as are the students in our care. That understanding of the role of religion, that view of what it means to be the ἐκκλησία—those called, not out of the world but forth into the world, as Bonhoeffer phrased it—is the reason why I decided not to study religion as a scholar but rather to live it as a teacher, to communicate that same value to students as part of their own spiritual identity formation. As Bonhoeffer wrote in one of his last letters, “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others.”

While, on the surface, the lessons gained from Bonhoeffer may appear to be more about my own life rather than that of an adolescent, if we as teachers—to use Parker Palmer’s phrase—“teach ourselves,” then this vision of a religion engaged in the world through social activism is also a central component of the spiritual formation we encourage in our students. Personal piety and quietism are appropriate parts of religion, but, in the end, we are all citizens of a larger world, and that world needs to see our religion acted out in it, manifested in our daily lives.

To summarize, then, the role of these seven curricular muses, each provides, either via direct study or through their ideas and inspiration, the various issues or components for an adolescent trying to come to know him- or herself. These seven major figures have provided me and our Religion Department an agenda to be used in our courses to assist the adolescents in our care to come to know and address the specific dimensions of their spiritual identity formation.

135 Ibid., 211.
The figures discussed, my so-called seven curricular muses—Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bonhoeffer, and Buechner, arranged in chronological order—embodied in their thoughts and lives particular principles that lend themselves to teaching adolescents to consider the deeper questions of meaning implied in the study of religion and philosophy as defined in this dissertation. Each of them offers a slightly different perspective on some issue that is crucial to adolescent spiritual identity formation; thus, each offers a piece of the puzzle that I am calling the emerging adolescent spiritual self.
CHAPTER THREE
“Know Thyself” in Curricular Practice:
A Commentary on Exeter Religion Department Course Syllabi

This chapter provides an in-depth examination of how the Phillips Exeter Religion Department courses embody the ideas explored in this dissertation about why and how one should teach religion and philosophy to adolescents. To enter into this discussion, it is a helpful preamble to look briefly at the history of the religion program at the Academy, to better understand how it arrived at its unique curriculum and pedagogy.¹ Although founded in 1781 as a secular school, the Academy had required attendance at some type of religious service well into the twentieth century, when, pushed by cultural changes, a discussion was held in the late 1960s on whether obligatory church attendance had outlived its usefulness. The decision to drop weekly required attendance was not made lightly, and, as part of a larger alumni survey conducted in 1967–68, the alumni were asked to evaluate the requirement. Seven thousand alumni responded to the survey. The results of that survey were summarized in an article in the Exeter Bulletin.² Included in that Bulletin article is the trustee statement communicating their decision to drop the church requirement and replace it with an elective classroom course requirement. That classroom religion requirement, voted into the curriculum by the faculty,

¹ In addition to the booklet I edited on materials about the Harkness plan at Exeter, I also edited a second booklet on the history of the religion program at the Academy: Peter Vorkink, ed., “Religion at Phillips Exeter (various articles, reports, notes from the Exeter Bulletin and the Faculty Papers) 1913–1993,” Phillips Exeter Academy Archives, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH.

served as the institutional basis for the development of the subsequent academic religion program as it has evolved into what it is today.\(^3\)

This vote, in effect, moved the religion requirement from the church to the classroom, and several curricular revisions later, there is a religion distributional requirement (any two courses for an incoming freshman, any one for a sophomore, any one for a junior, and none required for an incoming senior) which brings the department today about one-third of its enrollment, with the other two-thirds being students taking religion courses as electives. We in the department are mindful of the charge given us by the trustees, who felt that by “discontinuing the requirement of church attendance, [it would] enhance, rather than diminish, the opportunity to place religious experience in a context of significance to students both at the Academy and in later life.” With that charge, we can turn to a discussion of specific Religion Department courses to see how one translates the ideas and philosophies of this dissertation into the practical task of teaching religion and philosophy to adolescents at the secondary school level.\(^4\)

---

\(^3\) Eckland, “Compulsory Church Attendance.”

\(^4\) Traditionally, many religion department curricula at universities and seminaries followed the classical divisions of the discipline/topics with which most of us were familiar. That would include scripture (Hebrew Scripture/Old Testament, New Testament), church history, systematic theology, ethics, world religions (the area where there has been the greatest change), “religion and . . .” fill in the blank, and finally practical theology/religion (or the practice of religion). Given the shifting definitions of religion, however, there has recently been quite an expansion of what falls under the academic rubric of “religion.” Thus, there are more and more thematic courses which cut across disciplinary lines. In my time at Phillips Exeter, I have seen our own curriculum undergo that same shift. What was once a Christian-centered curriculum has now changed into one offering courses across the global as well as thematic spectrums. If one tries to be academically and philosophically “responsible” in setting up a religion and philosophy curriculum at any level, in theory there should be courses in many subdivisions. When one looks at Exeter’s Religion Department curriculum, one sees a set of courses which very much mirrors that “traditional” model of theological education in some areas, and yet which expands into many newer areas formerly not taught here. In that sense, our twenty-three courses are similar to what one would see in the religion department of a small college. We have courses in Hebrew Scripture/Old Testament and the New Testament; numerous courses at various grade levels in religion and literature; separate courses in each of the major Western and non-Western religions/philosophies (including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Japanese Zen Buddhism); courses in social, business, and global ethics; several courses in philosophy (e.g. Introduction to Western Philosophy, The Literature of Existentialism); courses on mysticism, the Holocaust, religion and popular culture; and finally psychology and religion. Although religion department curricula at other levels are sometimes based on the research interests of the professors involved, we at Phillips Exeter have tried to be as attentive as possible to the fact that we are offering courses in all the appropriate areas necessary for a high school student to understand the
Teaching Using Open-Ended Harkness Questions

Each faculty member in the Religion Department at Phillips Exeter has developed a battery of course-specific, open-ended questions which we use to start class discussions, or to stimulate or redirect class discussions that are underway, or to use on tests or in paper assignments. These questions, paired with reading assignments, constitute the bulk of each Harkness course syllabus, for which reason the following courses may seem quite different from those which are typical of most classrooms. The following exegeses of Phillips Exeter courses are included in detail to illustrate exactly how a Harkness course is constructed, how the syllabus unfolds day-to-day into a class, and exactly how one initiates or continues a Harkness discussion.5

That said, there is a crucial caveat: if we seriously believe, as our department does, that the focus in a Harkness classroom must be the living exchanges around the Harkness table, no summary of a lesson plan can either fully capture or predict what actually transpires in the classroom on any given day. Just as Hadot emphasizes that Socratic exchanges were never really meant to be written down, but were living oral “spiritual exercises” whose nature and focus could change with each occurrence, so any description of a Harkness class is only an example of a possible approach to any given text or topic, rather than what actually might transpire in class that day. It would be a mistake, in other words, to read and follow the lesson plans too slavishly, as if the following were exact procedures for teaching these topics. Rather, to use Plato’s

allegory of the cave, these lesson plans are but a shadow of the real thing as experienced in class by the teacher and the students, and not meant to be literal descriptions of how any given class might run. Or, to use a different analogy, to read a cookbook and follow the recipes to the letter does not make one a great chef, and no recipe can convey exactly how to become Julia Child or Thomas Keller.⁶

Religion 421: The Literature of Existentialism

REL421: EXISTENTIALISM What is the meaning of life? Does life have any meaning? Is traditional religion still relevant? Is God dead, or how do we live in a world where it appears God is absent? Focusing primarily on the 19th- and 20th-century literature of that group of writers called the existentialists, this course explores philosophical and theological issues associated with the problem of faith and meaning in today’s world. Reading authors such as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, as well as Kafka’s short stories, Sartre’s novels and plays, Beckett’s plays, and Camus’s novels, students compare a traditional understanding of God, humanity, and the world with other views that challenge, confirm, or translate these concepts into terms more relevant to the contemporary world. Open to uppers and seniors.

How one “packages” a course can make all the difference in the world. It is possible, in other words, to design the most academically and philosophically responsible curriculum, but if no one signs up for the class, the course serves no particular purpose except as a placeholder in the catalog. Packaging and marketing, although often perceived negatively, do have their place. In the case of this particular course, there is something about the subject itself—existentialism—

---

⁶ To use an analogy from a different arena, Zen koans in the T’ang Dynasty period in China developed over time as written examples of exchanges between Zen masters (roshi) and apprentices. Such exchanges were originally private and completely personal to the individual undergoing training, and were never meant to be written down. But there turned out to be more trainees over time than roshi available for one-on-one instruction, so former roshi/novice exchanges were transcribed and collected for future training purposes. That is how the many koan collections came into existence. However, koans as we know them today are but a shadow of the original exchanges, originally always oral, and Hadot would see the relationship of a koan to its transcription as much like the relationship between a Socratic dialogue and its written record, with problems arising when either is utilized slavishly.
which is attractive to adolescents just coming to realize that there is a life of the mind, that one can think “big thoughts” and sustain such thinking for some period of time (say, for the duration of a class meeting). There is, therefore, an age-appropriateness to this course. Ever since this course was first offered more than thirty years ago, it has attracted a steady stream of students, usually one or two full sections per term all year.

There are at least two possible approaches to the topic of existentialism, one through its philosophy, the other through its literature. As an undergraduate, I took a course on the “philosophy of existentialism,” in which we read extensively from Kierkegaard, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Husserl, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, some Marcel, and so on. That is fairly turgid prose for high school juniors and seniors, however talented they might be. The more accessible approach to the ideas of this school of thinking is through its literature, and very readable literature it is on the whole, especially for secondary school students.

In the course, with the exception of starting with Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, all the materials are read in chronological order. It is important sometimes to start a course with a piece of literature which catches the students’ interests, such as a famous play or novel, especially when there is the possibility of enrollment changes the first couple weeks of the term. As an added twist, the first day of the course, the students are told that, given the controversial nature of the term “existentialism”—with some authors strongly opposed to their even being such a thing as a school of philosophy called existentialism, and others gladly accepting the designation, at least for themselves—there will be a prohibition against using the term in class. Only on the very last day of class will use of the term “existentialism” be allowed, at which point we can look back and see if there are any recurrent themes in what we have read which might be labeled as such.
As for Beckett’s play, while there is never only a single correct interpretation of a piece of literature, the students find this introductory reading presents them with a multiplicity of “religious” issues. Here is the story of two men, both older, who have waited for what appears to be years—“at least a million years”—for someone named Godot, whom, it turns out, they have never met and would not recognize. They don’t know what he will do for them, and his arrival date and time is unclear, except that he “may come tomorrow.” The play is one extended episode of waiting, and the question quickly surfaces in class of whether “waiting is doing something or doing nothing.” The opening line of the play has one character saying, “Nothing to be done” (probably in reference to removing a boot, but suggesting much more is at stake). The other character responds, “I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I have tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.” Is this the story of two men who are essentially doing nothing—“Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let us do something while we still have the chance!”—or who are doing something constructive to fill the time—“We have kept our appointment and that’s an end to that. We are not saints but we have kept our appointment. How many can boast


8 Beckett, Waiting for Godot, 7.
as much?” In that Hegelian dialectic between the two main characters, the audience (and class) see the two sides of the larger question Beckett may be raising: Does life—which Beckett describes in the play as “birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more”—have or not have any intrinsic meaning?

Beckett fills his play with biblical imagery and quotations, some complete, others only hinted at in fragments—for example, “Hope deferred maketh the something sick.” Early on, one of the two main characters contemplates that, “One of the thieves was saved. It’s a reasonable percentage”—the poor odds Beckett may wish the audience to entertain concerning whether life has any meaning. That leads to a discussion of whether the thieves should have repented.

“Repented what?” “Our being born,” is the reply. In an extended discussion about the phrase, “it’s too much for one man,” the characters debate whether they should have jumped from the top of the Eiffel Tower—“what’s the good of losing heart now?”—when it was first constructed “in the nineties,” but decide it is too late. “We were respectable in those days,” they think. “Now it is too late. They wouldn’t even let us up.” These interchanges, all in the first few pages of the play, suggest to the students that what we are really talking about is the search for meaning, what is of value in this life.

The characters’ search for meaning in life is complicated when Beckett has another character enter the stage to give what must be one of the most rambling and nonsensical speeches ever written, namely, Lucky’s speech. For three pages, he mentions various sports, Shakespeare characters, several bodily functions, steamship lines, and a host of other ideas almost impossible to sort out. Encouraged by their teacher, however, to take the apparent nonsense seriously, the students start to see that this might be the first half of a possible “if-then”

9 Ibid., 51a–b.
10 Ibid., 28b and following.
speech, an unfinished protasis of a theological or philosophical argument, wherein Lucky might be asking the audience if “there is a personal God with a white beard . . . who is outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell,” might such a God have abandoned us and left us to our own devices? Without a traditional source of meaning, where does that leave us? Sorting through these various theological images, the students come to see that Beckett might be asking the audience where man stands if there is no personal God anymore for people to believe in; if there is no God, then how do we discern meaning in life?

Even in the first few minutes of a class discussion of this play, students come to realize that Beckett is asking them a series of questions they may not have thought about before, but which take on a particular urgency for this age group. In the transition from child to adult, the questions of meaning—whether one is doing something by growing up, or doing nothing but waiting until the process of maturation is complete—are never far from the surface. Godot never arrives, yet the main characters, and we the audience, are still unclear about whether he will ever come, tomorrow, or perhaps the next day. In a play in which, as one critic wrote, “Nothing happens—twice,” we are left to wonder whether Beckett’s glass is half full or half empty? For a final assignment on this play, the students are asked to write a short paper on the meaning of the play, a kind of Beckettian Rorschach test. As an addendum to our discussion of the play, I tell the students the story of a student in the course years ago who, prior to Beckett’s death, somehow got a very reclusive Beckett on the telephone at his home outside Paris, and told Beckett that we were reading his play in class. He asked what meaning Beckett himself would ascribe to the play, and was told by the playwright, “Beats me; I only wrote it,” and then he promptly hung up.
The next author read in the class is Søren Kierkegaard, backtracking to commence following a chronological approach to existentialism. The students start with the Kierkegaard selections from Walter Kaufmann’s *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre.*\(^{11}\) The reading is a mishmash of Kierkegaard pieces, but in class, when asked to state themes or key passages they remember, the students can still identify quite quickly that Kierkegaard is “pro-religion but anti-established church,” and that he seems to be interested in the various issues surrounding the definition of truth, subjectivity vs. objectivity, the individual vs. the crowd, and so on. We also place Kierkegaard in the context of his time and biography, and note that, as the “father of existentialism,” he directly or indirectly influenced many after him, some of whom might claim him as their father but of whom he might prefer to disavow paternity.

The second day spent on Kierkegaard, we read a longer selection from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the “Philosophical Fragments.”* We then read the *Philosophical Fragments* itself the following day.\(^{12}\) The pedagogical value of these texts has already been discussed at length in the previous chapter; however, not noted earlier was Kierkegaard’s particular understanding of an individual’s relationship to the Christian God. If truth is subjective for Kierkegaard, the students find it paradoxical that Kierkegaard can claim that meaning for the individual can be found in a subjective relationship to the Christian God. As he says at the end of this section from the *Postscript,* “on the contrary, the subjective acceptance is precisely the decisive factor; and objective acceptance of Christianity is . . . thoughtlessness.”

---


This idea serves as the bridge to the last Kierkegaard reading in this course, an excerpt from the *Fragments*’ “Postscript” in which he writes, “Christianity proposes to endow the individual with an eternal happiness, a good which is not distributed wholesale, but only to one individual at a time.” In the same paragraph, Kierkegaard goes on to explain:

In this way Christianity goes on to protest every form of objectivity; it desires that the subject should be infinitely concerned about himself. It is subjectivity that Christianity is concerned with, and it is only in subjectivity that its truth exists, if it exists at all; objectively, Christianity has absolutely no existence.\(^\text{13}\)

On that same theme, for the third day spent on Kierkegaard, the students are assigned passages from his *Journals*. The introduction to these readings also mentions Kierkegaard’s three stages of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Such mention confirms the impression from the previous several days’ readings that, in the end, Kierkegaard is a religious figure in the sense that, unlike others we might read in the course, he comes out in favor of religion, however he defines it—which, of course, is part of the reason we read him, namely, to see exactly how he does understand religion. The key quotation in the reading from the *Journals*, which the students latch onto quickly, is, “the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.”\(^\text{14}\) The major part of this discussion then deals with the main issues raised in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*: “Is an historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure have any other than a

\(^{13}\) Baird and Kaufmann, *Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, 274.

mere historical interest; is it possible to base an eternal happiness upon historical knowledge?"\textsuperscript{15}

And the second important quotation: “How far does the Truth admit of being learned?”\textsuperscript{16}

What do these three days on Kierkegaard help the students understand in a beginning course on the literature of existentialism? For starters, they come to see that, whatever the philosophical roots of the Hegel versus Kierkegaard conflict, there appear to be the emerging themes that truth is subjective and that a philosophical system of thought is insufficient to provide the answers to how one should or could live one’s life. Even if Kierkegaard’s answer that life’s meaning is to be found in a subjective relationship of the individual with the divine—as he says at the end of the “Postscript,” “Faith is the highest passion in the sphere of human subjectivity”—the student in this course begins to realize that meaning must be individual, not collective, and that one of the major tasks of maturation is developing that individual meaning.

The next author on the syllabus is Dostoevsky, by whom we read the first half of his short story “Notes from the Underground,” as presented in Walter Kaufmann’s book \textit{Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre}. (Some students have already or are concurrently taking Religion 420 in which they read the “Grand Inquisitor” section from \textit{The Brothers Karamazov}, so we try to avoid duplication.) When the students come to class on the day when we discuss Dostoevsky, they are given a brief in-class writing assignment. This kind of assignment is typical in many of the courses I teach; they substitute for longer papers, help focus the discussion, and serve to allow the quieter students to frame their thoughts before the conversation begins. Here is the prompt I give for the Dostoevsky in-class writing task:

\begin{quote}
There is in “Notes From The Underground” a very famous quotation which summarizes Dostoevsky’s philosophy of life. Taking 5-10 minutes and the space below, note the first and last words of the quotation, and the page,
\end{quote}
and explain why it is the key to his ideas? Guessing the exact quotation is less important than your defense of what you selected.

Harkness teaching is an art, not an exact science with a formula for how to conduct class each day, but unquestionably one of the indispensable skills the Harkness teacher must develop is the ability to pose open-ended questions that stimulate good class discussions. With a prompt like the one above, there is obviously no single correct response, and the conversation which follows allows the students to explain and defend their choices, as well as learn from others how they thought and what they chose. In comparing possible quotations, a conversation ensues which allows all to join and explain, defend, rethink their quotation, and interpret the story.

“Notes from the Underground” concerns a man who has to wrestle with the problem of consciousness, whether it is better to be an unthinking “piano key” or become more conscious, with all the unhappy problems that attend greater awareness. Admittedly, in debating possible quotations with the students, some are better choices than others. Several students will usually land on “suffering is the sole origin of consciousness,” a key notion for Dostoevsky. By the end of the class, although there is no forced resolution, the students have identified the themes of the value and burden of consciousness, the desirability of personal freedom, the envy by the underground man of those who don’t think of the larger questions in life and are happy to be like an “organ stop”—but for the underground man, “two plus two is a charming idea.” Were there no overlap in the students who take this course and Introduction to Western Philosophy, we would also read and discuss the “Grand Inquisitor” section of The Brothers Karamazov. In that longer excerpt from the novel, Dostoevsky’s emphasis on the value of free will and individual choice are even clearer, but in this short story, the students can still discern a developing theme of the course—personal freedom and what one shall do with it.

17 Kaufmann, Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, 78.
When we come to a figure as important as Nietzsche, on whom we could easily spend many days, if not a term or two, some difficult curricular choices have to be made. Given the number of books he wrote—also true for Kierkegaard—it is difficult to even select representative excerpts that do justice to the breadth of his ideas. Then there is the problem that he tended to write aphoristically, so reading a collection of those aphorisms may not give the students a flavor of the whole. I have tended to solve the Nietzsche curricular problem another way: there is an excellent fifty-minute film on his life with interview clips from his major biographers and interpreters.\(^\text{18}\) I show this film to the students over the course of several days, pausing it frequently to talk as a class about Nietzsche’s ideas as they are being presented. I also give the students several standard philosophy textbook handouts about Nietzsche’s writings.\(^\text{19}\)

The pedagogical goal is not simply to tell the students what Nietzsche thought, but to show the evolution of his ideas as he experienced them so that they, the students, can enter into Nietzsche’s world as he lived it, and join him as he worked out his theories.

The Kierkegaard-Dostoevsky-Nietzsche unit, admittedly a fast read through three major figures in nineteenth-century thought, provides a historical context for the rise of existential thinking in the decades to come. Obviously, the ideas of existentialism were not entirely new in the world; Walter Kaufmann has identified “existential themes” in periods prior to the nineteenth century.\(^\text{20}\) Nonetheless, it needs to be clear to students just coming to this period of thought that specific forces were at work in the early nineteenth century which culminated in this novel approach to some of the grand questions in life. Existentialism did not arise \textit{de novo}, but within


\(^{19}\) The packet is a selection of Nietzsche primary source materials drawn from Baird and Kaufmann, \textit{Nineteenth-Century Philosophy}, 443–85.

and in reaction to specific historical forces at work in the world. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, we must skip Marx, Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, and many others, and take Kierkegaard-Dostoevsky-Nietzsche as representative of a larger whole.

A mention of Darwin in the Nietzsche film, however, provides an opportunity to talk about some of those historical forces at work in the nineteenth century which influenced the rise of existentialism, or at least led to a break with past ways of thinking. Nietzsche was not alone, in other words, in reacting against institutionalized Christianity. Depending upon student background and interest, we stop to discuss the effect that the rise of modern science had on religious thought—first in cosmology with the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric universe, then in biology with the promulgation of the idea of evolution—and how the development of the rise of biblical criticism undermined the authority of Scripture.

Once we finish our Nietzsche discussions, we move to the first of the “big three” of the course, Franz Kafka (the other two being Sartre and Camus). Kafka is one of my favorites to teach, as his stories are so much more accessible to students than some of the other writers we have read up to this point—accessible both because less background information is needed, and because the writing is more straightforward. It is possible to start class, in other words, with a question as simple as “What did you think of last night’s story?”

In the course, we focus on Kafka’s short fiction.\(^{21}\) We start with *The Metamorphosis*. For the first day’s conversation, I begin class with this imaginative exercise:

> Attempt to reconstruct Gregor Samsa’s life up to the evening before his metamorphosis, highlighting the possible reasons behind the change.

What is fun about such questions is that there are no precise answers. Kafka gives us some clues as to why Gregor is “transformed,” with the emphasis on the passive voice, but it is left to the

---

reader to fill in the blanks. In discussion, we construct possible explanations. As we do so, we zero in on the first sentence: “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.” We try to construct the scenario in Gregor’s life in the days and hours before the first line and overnight transformation. My role here is to ask a series of open-ended questions, and let the class continue with them for the period. We spend the first part of the period speculating on Gregor’s life pre-metamorphosis. As the students respond, I interject comments like, *Was this transformation sudden or gradual? Did he have arm-buds the night before, or was he fully human twenty-four hours ago?* Some, of course, say Gregor is not really a bug, but still a human, so we debate what Gregor sees when he looks in the mirror. He clearly still thinks like a human—he needs to get to work, so it is not a total transformation—but some think he is not actually physically an insect. Then I call the class’s attention to the passive voice of the opening sentence: “was transformed.” Who did this to him, whatever form he is now in? Why did Kafka say “was transformed”? Did Gregor do this to himself, or did someone, or some outside force, do it to him? Most of the class is usually perplexed by the agency question. As the period unfolds, we move to such questions as to whether this change was to be understood as “liberation” or “punishment” or “promotion/demotion”? Is Gregor better or worse off after the change? The standard student’s beginning interpretation of the story—that Gregor Samsa had somehow done something wrong and this is his fate—is now challenged, and we have many other possible interpretations for his predicament.

The next day, I start with another short in-class writing question: “To what does/might the title of this story refer? Why is it called *The Metamorphosis*?” Before we begin the discussion, I show a nine-minute cartoon version of the story, to help the visual learners picture
the situation, and so the class as a whole has more material with which to work.\textsuperscript{22} Once we turn to the topic of the title, we have an extensive conversation about how the title might not refer to Gregor’s transformation, which took place \textit{before} the story began, but perhaps to that of his family, whose lot seems to be changed by Gregor’s metamorphosis, and for the better—better for them, but not for Gregor! This second day allows us to explore anew all of the unresolved issues of the prior day, given that the students have now read the entire story. As is always the case, class discussion does not resolve any of these outstanding issues; it merely raises a series of key questions for the class to think about as we turn to a second Kafka short story.

The assignment for the next class is to read “In the Penal Colony,” and for extra credit to bring in a two- or three-dimensional model of the “apparatus.” We start class with another brief in-class writing task:

1—In the beginning of the story, what was the specific offense the condemned man committed? What was his crime?
2—Explain/think through/expand upon/discuss the deeper significance of that offense/crime. What’s really going on here?

The story concerns an “explorer” from what appears to be a European country traveling to a distant island where there is a penal colony whose method of punishment is to be examined and possibly judged as enlightened or not. There is a huge machine—the apparatus—which administers the punishment, and it works in a curious way: the accused, the victim, is placed on the machine, and as a harrow writes with needles the crime the victim committed onto the victim’s body—as a kind of tattoo—the victim is momentarily “enlightened” as to what he did wrong, just before a spike is driven through his head and he dies. And what was the accused’s crime, the subject of the question above? The soldier had a required task: “It was his duty, you

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa}, dir. Caroline Leaf (National Film Board of Canada, 1977).
see, to get up every time the hour strikes and salute the captain’s door.”

It may take some time in class to analyze that sentence, but eventually the students realize that the soldier was being condemned to death for not being able to salute the captain’s door twenty-four hours a day—an impossible task. The man is condemned, in effect, for being human, for no human could ever complete that task. Often, one of the students will remember the Beckett line in *Waiting for Godot:* “Suppose we repented of our birth?” Here is a penal justice system, on this far-away island, where all are condemned, and all are put to death as the only penalty. We often discuss implementing such a penal code in our school, or in society at large, but those conversations inevitably back into discussions of our guilt or innocence for merely being alive. The question is planted as to why we are here and what life might mean—issues present since the beginning of the course.

The next Kafka story that we read is “A Country Doctor.” We begin class with the students writing on the following prompt:

In this Kafka short story, there is a trick or catch which, once you see it, may well make quite a difference in how you interpret the story. What is that trick or catch, and what evidence is there in the story itself to “prove” or document that trick? Partial credit will be given for the evidence, even if you miss the trick/catch.

That question produces a class guessing game—which is the purpose of the exercise. One of the skills a Harkness teacher needs is patience, lots of it. Visitors often wonder, or marvel, at how Harkness teachers can keep quiet, especially for so long. A Harkness teacher must be able to resist the urge to intercede, give a predetermined answer, or cut short a longer student conversation in which there will be discovery. As I often say to students, “One of my roles is to be your cheerleader. Talk to one another; put your heads together, and talk about what each of you sees in this story, and you’ll be able to figure it out.”

---

In the discussion of “A Country Doctor,” students often make notice of the clipped style of the prose: it is all one long paragraph, and the sentences are separated by semicolons. Then there are the unusual features of the narrative. The basic story concerns a country doctor who goes in a buggy on a call to assist a boy with very strange symptoms.

In his right side, near the hip, was an open wound as big as the palm of my hand. Rose-red, in many variations of shade, dark in the hollows, lighter at the edges, softly granulated, with irregular clots of blood, open as a surface mine to the daylight. . . . Worms, as thick and as long as my little finger, themselves rose-red and blood-spotted as well, were wriggling from their fastness in the interior of the wound towards the light, with small white heads and many little legs. . . .

Simultaneously, the doctor realizes that his groom is probably raping his female friend Rose. In this conflict between two acts of saving—the boy as his patient or the girl back at home—the doctor finally declares as the story ends, “Betrayed! Betrayed! A false alarm on the night bell once answered—it cannot be made good, not ever.”

The entire story is only seven pages long, so it affords an opportunity to engage in close textual analysis. We discuss what a night bell is; what a false alarm on such a night bell might be; how, in a half-awake, half-asleep state, the doctor might think he had heard the ring of the bell when really no one was there. Blearily, one might then drift back to sleep—to dream, to have perhaps a nightmare, and that perhaps this entire story is that dream or nightmare. That may explain the herky-jerky motion of the story, the absence of transitions from one event to another, the conflict between the professional and the personal, and many other ways one might use the possibility of a nightmare to open up new avenues of interpretation for the story. While I forbid the students from using any outside sources to interpret anything we read—no internet, no research—I do mention that Kafka was engaged four times in his short life, twice to the same

24 Ibid., 141.
25 Ibid., 143.
woman, and when I ask teenagers how they would interpret that, their automatic response is, “Commitment problems.” Could there thus have been a possible conflict between his professional life as a writer and his personal life as a potential spouse?

We commence the discussion of the next story, “A Hunger Artist,” by having the students respond to the following in-class writing prompt.

You will find that, in the literature of “existentialism,” there are often famous/significant/meaningful first or last sentences. Think of the first line of *The Metamorphosis*, among the most famous in all of Western literature. For today, please analyze the first sentence of this story: “During these last decades the interest in professional fasting has markedly diminished.”

The students discover that, in the history of fasting, so to speak, there were two general types of fasting, either for religious or political reasons, and that to fast as a “profession” may be an oxymoron, taking a sacred act and commercializing it. Moreover, and crucial to several Kafka stories, there is a contradiction in the central act of the story, perhaps similar to the problem the soldier faced in “In the Penal Colony”: namely, one cannot complete the assigned task, for he or she who wins at fasting—breaks the world record—loses his or her life. Conversely, he or she who loses at fasting lives. To win is to lose, and to lose is to win. What is Kafka saying in these stories? As we analyze the hunger artist’s predicament, we discover that his fate is tied to changing times—“during these past decades the interest . . . has markedly diminished”—perhaps suggesting a Kafka commentary on the loss of religious meaning in the modern world, a theme we have seen repeatedly in this course. Moreover, not only does the profession become less interesting, but the hunger artist himself seems to lose his life, only to be replaced by a panther. So both person and profession are being replaced, displaced by something newer, something other.
The next short story continues the Kafka conundrum of betwixt and between. Having read “A Report to an Academy,” the students are given this prompt:

1—The main character in this story is a what? Precise answer please.
2—So what (in relation to this story and in relation to the other stories)?

“A Report to an Academy” is the story of a happy chimpanzee in the Gold Coast who is captured by hunters from a European zoo, and who “seeks a way out” of his predicament as he travels back to that continent. At first he transforms himself into a human—or a quasi-human, in that he is still physically a chimp, but one who dresses in human clothes. In the story, he gives a report to some academy comparing the virtues of his former and present life. During that report, he appears to express the sentiment that, given his druthers, he would prefer being a free chimp back in the jungle—hardly an endorsement of human life.

No less bizarre is the next Kafka story we read, “Hunter Gracchus.” We begin with the students writing on the following:

Is the main character of this story dead or alive? Explain. And how might that issue have larger significance for other Kafka stories and themes?
Extra credit: Did any of you think about where Kafka might have gotten the title for this story? What exactly is a gracchus?

The main character of the story is a man who was hunting in the Black Forest for chamois when he fell to his death—“was there no sin in that?”—and who now is on his death-ship to the next world, but a wrong turn of the rudder leaves him, the hunter gracchus, coming ashore to have a conversation as a dead man with the local mayor in a port named Riga. In one sense, the protagonist clearly died, in that he fell off that cliff, but, in another sense, he is not completely dead because he carries on an extended conversation with the mayor on his way to some other world, “up the staircase.” But “a wrong turn of the rudder can never be undone,” so where does that leave our hero? These stories of spiritual disorientation, whether autobiographical or not
(graculus is Latin for raven, and raven in Czech is kafka), contribute to a building theme in the class of the loss of traditional sources of meaning in life, and the search for what might replace those older values. This could be said to be the Ariadne’s thread of the readings in this course.

The final Kafka story that we read is “The Judgment,” and we use the discussion of it to also piece together some of the larger themes in Kafka’s work. This is the prompt we use to start the class:

What is the “gimmick” in this story? What’s so special about “The Judgment”? This gimmick is really quite important to understanding this story. If you didn’t know/understand it, you might interpret this story in a wholly different way.

It turns out that Kafka, like many students in our schools, wrote this story as a “one-draft wonder,” starting, as he noted in his diary, one night at about 10:00 PM, and finishing the next morning by 6:00 AM.26 As one might expect in a story produced under these circumstances, Kafka poured his feelings into the story, in which the central conflict involves a recently-engaged young man doing battle with his father, and by the end of the story the young man is condemned to death by his father, and jumps to his death off a bridge. Thought to be the most autobiographical of all of Kafka’s stories, “The Judgment” might be read alongside Kafka’s twenty-five page letter to his father, which begins as follows:

You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you. . . . And if I now try to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very incomplete, because, even in writing, this fear and its consequences hamper me in relation to you. . . .

In class, we discuss the connection between Kafka’s personal problems with his father and the events in this story, and sometimes we even read some of the Kafka parables in Kaufmann’s

26 From Kafka’s September 23, 1912 diary entry. Ibid., 468.

book, discussing them in class. If we do read them, I will start class by showing them the
opening scene of Orson Welles’s *The Trial*, which includes Welles reading one of those parables.
But in the end, we turn more toward tying together the several Kafka themes across the various
short stories we have read as we look ahead to the next author.28

Moving squarely into the twentieth century—Kafka was born in 1883, and Sartre in
1905—we turn to Jean-Paul Sartre. We begin with the one-act play *No Exit*, often performed
here at Phillips Exeter by various student drama groups.29 Three characters, all having committed
some dastardly act in life, are sent to hell—but hell is pictured as “up there,” suggesting Sartre’s
possible questioning of traditional faith—where they will languish forever, tormenting one
another. As the most famous line of the play states, “Hell is other people.” I start class the first
day with this prompt:

> Here we are with Jean-Paul Sartre, a new author, a new country, a new
language, and now a new piece of literature. But in this course, you never
quite leave the old issues behind. A question for you then: Are the main
characters in *No Exit* dead or alive? Lest you think, “Been t
that,” this is a new author and what he does with this idea may be different

---

28 Many years, I have tried assigning a final Kafka paper, but I have found it difficult for the students to assimilate
all this material and write a coherent paper on the larger message. The most recent paper prompt was as follows:
The word “Kafkaesque” has some special meaning relating to the ideas of Franz Kafka as found in his three
main novels plus his collected short stories. We have discussed the idea that few other authors have an
adjective named after them. Have you ever heard anyone mention “Camuvian” or “Kierkegaardian” as a
description of something related to these other famous people or their ideas? Probably not, yet Kafkaesque
seems to be used fairly frequently, as if the meaning were self-evident. The dictionary says no more than
this: “relating to or in the manner of Franz Kafka or his writings.”
Using this word as a touchstone for this paper, try to piece together a holistic interpretation of the man and
his vision/worldview. With specific reference to at least five of the seven stories we have read, how would
you complete any of these topic sentences?
—Franz Kafka’s world is one characterized by. . .
—The adjective “Kafkaesque” means. . .
—In Kafka’s world, there are the following common themes . . . and together they. . .
This 250–350 word paper is to represent all of your own ideas as you think back over the stories we have
read and how they might fit together into some larger whole which comprises whatever is meant by the
term Kafkaesque.
Sometimes students cannot make those lines of connection, so recently I have abandoned the longer paper, and in its
place inserted the various in-class writing assignments to begin each class. Breaking up the Kafka that way has led
to better class discussions, and, I think, a more complete understanding of his work.

from Kafka. Why does this question make any difference in the interpretation of the play?

Since we’re beginning a new author, with potentially a new set of themes, I do not push the conversation the first day, and let the confusion over Sartre’s text gradually resolve over time. But one of the questions I raise in the class conversation of the play is to ask what might be Sartre’s definitions of “to be alive” and “to be dead.” I joke with them that one of Vorkink’s Rules for Life is, “If a teacher asks the same question several times, or several days running, it is probably because the class has not answered it appropriately.” So I keep that issue of the definition of dead or alive on the table until there are more satisfactory responses.

The next of Sartre’s plays that we read is *The Flies.* The prompt below draws out some of the issues we might focus on:

1—Did any of you stop to think where Sartre might have gotten the title of his play, especially since it is a rewrite of an earlier play?
2—Speaking of *The Flies* being a rewrite of an older play, why might Sartre have done that? If you go on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, why might you steal/borrow your play—characters, plot, and basic story—from Greek drama, and rewrite it and claim it as your own?

In beginning our discussion of *The Flies,* we note how the title might have been borrowed from one of the plagues in Exodus 8, and that Sartre was writing this play during the time of the Nazi occupation of France, at least in the area where Sartre was living, and thus he had to pass any play by the Nazi censors. If he had written a play with a new storyline, the censors might have rejected it, but making it look like an older play rewritten may have been a way to make it appear to be innocuous. Its theme, however, once analyzed, appears more radical and is, in fact, consistent with Sartre’s developing philosophy of this period of his life. As is said about the main character, Orestes, “Once freedom lights its beacon in a man’s heart, the gods are

---

30 Ibid.
powerless against him.” In his rewrite of sections of the House of Atreus tragedy cycle, Sartre has chosen parts that emphasize man’s freedom and his responsibility to use that freedom. A character such as Electra in *The Flies* tiptoes up to the edge of utilizing it, but backs away—a “salud,” Sartre calls her—whereas the play ends with Orestes triumphantly taking on the burdens of the citizens of Argos by killing his mother’s consort, Aegistheus, and freeing the Argonauts from the stench of guilt left from never acting to avenge the death of Agamemnon. As Orestes says as the play ends,

> You see me, men of Argos, you understand that my crime is wholly mine; I claim it as my own, for all to know; it is my glory, my life’s work, and you can neither punish me nor pity me. That is why I fill you with fear.  

While there has been some suggestion that the play was written to criticize the collaboration of the Vichy government with the Nazis, and for the French to understand and act on their freedom, for our purposes, the play continues Sartre’s developing idea that man is free, a theme that has surfaced again and again throughout the course readings.

Next, we read Sartre’s book *Nausea*, which is typically a significant challenge for the students. Although only 178 pages long, it takes at least four class sessions to read. While the class starts reading *Nausea*, class time can be used to clarify some other issues. Here is the prompt for the first class after the students have read the start of the novel:

One of the following two statements is a famous summary of Sartre’s philosophy during the war-time period of his life, and is, in fact, an often-used motto for all of existentialism. Using what you know of his two plays, *The Flies* and *No Exit*, and the philosophy therein, would you explain below which of the two statements best summaries his views:

a. essence precedes existence
b. existence precedes essence

---

31 Ibid., 104.
32 Ibid., 126.
(The direct answer will be found later on in our other Sartre readings and discussions, and remember, if nothing else, “it’s a reasonable percentage.”)

The difference between these two, and which comes first, makes for an excellent class discussion. The question is a perfect Harkness question in that, while there is a correct answer (in this case, but not always with all Harkness questions), how you answer this question depends in some part on how you define your terms. Thus the class can delve into the conversation as they discuss the meaning of the terms as well as realize that the terms can be defined in several different ways. The class often has trouble, but a good time, differentiating essence and existence, but starts to come to the idea that existence has something to do with existing, purely existing, whereas essence has something to do with finding meaning in one’s life. Without fully resolving that difference, the students next tackle the unnoticed third term, “precedes,” which has at least two possible definitions: it can mean that something comes before either chronologically or in order of importance. Now a whole new conversation ensues: which is it? This discussion is important in that it allows us to review the materials of the course thus far, and to do a mid-term summary, so to speak, of the issues covered so far.

While we read more sections of Roquentin’s diaries—the vehicle for the novel—and discuss the reasons and occasions for its author to become nauseous, we also watch two helpful videos in class. The first is a kind of joke, but with serious intent. If you as a teacher ever thought it would be a good class exercise to pretend you were actually the philosopher the class was studying, and put on a beret, and affect a French accent—voilà, you have the film I show them in class.34 One of the benefits of showing a brief part of this film is that it allows someone else to explain the correct answer that “existence precedes essence.” The second video I show is from

---

34 The Existential Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, dir. Ken Casey (University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 1983), VHS.
Thelma Lavine’s series *From Socrates to Sartre*.35 The thirty-minute Sartre episode offers an excellent summary of *Being and Nothingness*, and using it in class gives the students a shorthand way of covering the main ideas in that tome without having to read it. Lavine places the philosophy of Sartre in a Cartesian context, and she introduces the students to the Sartrean concepts of “being-for-itself” and “being-in-itself,” as well as the idea of “bad faith.” Without making the students experts on that longer philosophical piece, she does present the basic philosophical underpinnings of the various plays and novels we have been reading. That allows for a more thoughtful and deeper reading of *Nausea*.

After these four days spent reading and discussing the novel, as well as working our way through these videos, we turn to the essay entitled “Existentialism is a Humanism” (included in Kaufmann’s volume).36 I then have a choice: either I give the following essay prompt, or I show the final episode of the series *Human, All Too Human*, which is about Sartre.37 Some years I do both. If I show the fifty-minute film, that allows the students to see the full range of Sartre’s ideas. If I give the paper assignment, this is the prompt I use:

In front of you on the table is the box for an anti-nausea prescription medicine commercially known as “Emetrol.” If you were Jean-Paul Sartre and you were writing the “directions for use,” and you had no more than 250 words with which to work, what would you say? This will require a little imagination as you try to apply Sartre’s philosophical ideas gleaned from the two plays and this novel to the cause of and treatment for nausea. To do this well requires some creativity plus a careful reading of Sartre and the issues, especially because I’m not sure we as a class have come to terms with what Sartre means by nausea. You may wish to think through carefully, in other words, exactly what nausea is in Sartrean terms before you start writing your directions for use. (Note that “directions for use”


36 Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 345–68.

often include indications, dosage, cautions, warnings, ingredients, and so on.) Have fun.

If the students write this paper, they need to deal with the issue that, while nausea may sound like it is a negative—something one wants to get rid of, an undesirable condition—for Sartre, it may be a positive, or at least a necessary evil. Thus, writing the “directions for use” in the above essay may be harder than it first appears. If I assign the essay, I am reminded that the most creative paper I ever received in my career was a paper for this assignment, and it was a brown medicine bottle—the boy’s mother was a physician—with “the paper” shrink-wrapped around it in tiny letters.

After Sartre, we turn to Camus, reading The Stranger as well as The Fall, plus a section in Kaufmann’s book on “The Myth of Sisyphus.” With the first of these several Camus pieces, The Stranger, we focus on three key sections of the book. A number of students have read the book before, often in French class, so we can move more rapidly. We start with the opening line, “Mother died today” («Aujourd’hui, maman est morte»). Much of our conversation focuses on the various possible translations of that four-word sentence, and the controversy about how to translate the whole (short) first paragraph. As Ryan Bloom highlights in his New Yorker piece, the convention of translating “Maman” as “Mother”—which in fact is closer to the English “Mommy”—has made Camus’s opening seem more formal than it should, leading English readers to perceive the protagonist’s relationship with his mother as less tender than Camus intended. “Mother [Mommy] died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure. The telegram from the Home says: Your Mother Passed Away. Funeral Tomorrow. Deep Sympathy. Which

38 Ibid., 375–78.
leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday.” Lest the students think this is a minor translation problem, we discuss how, in many ways, the different translations mirror the much larger issue of the protagonist’s relationship to his mother, and others. The entire story of the novel can be seen as an extension of the way Meursault views his relationship to various people—mother, friends, and others. The second day of class, we focus on the end of Part One, in which Meursault goes on three walks on the beach, and how and why he kills the Arab.

Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. And so, with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began. I shook off my sweat and the clinging veil of light. I knew I’d shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this beach on which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more into the inert body, on which they left no visible trace. And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing.

We give much attention to the passive voice of “the trigger gave,” raising the question of whether this was a conscious act by Meursault or an accidental firing of a faulty gun. Then we discuss the time interval between the various shots, and what may or may not have been going through Meursault’s head at the time.

The next day is spent on the second part of the novel, especially its closing paragraph.

With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. No one, no one in the world had any right to weep for her. And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the

---


40 Camus, The Stranger, trans. Stuart, 76.
universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly, made me realize that I’d been happy, and that I was happy still. For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.41

Discussing whether there is any character development from the opening to the closing lines of the novel, the students try to determine if Meursault on the verge of the gallows is any different from the apparently indifferent character of the opening scene. Has his trial and encounter with the prison chaplain changed him at all? Is he as passively accepting of his fate at the end of the book as he was at the beginning? And who or what is the “benign indifference of the universe” to which Meursault opens his heart? And finally, on the brink of dying, why would Meursault want the crowd to shout to him in their cries of hatred—we act that out in class—and what would be the protagonist’s last words? Asking students not only to discuss a book, but to be the character himself, and to think and speak like him, allows them to get inside Camus’s mind and try to figure out his message to the readers.

We turn next to Camus’s later novel, The Fall, the only book he set in Amsterdam, or, in fact, anywhere other than Algeria.42 The students are assigned the first half of the novel for the first night’s reading as the story comes to a climax halfway through. To start the first class, this is the prompt:

Several warm-up questions:
   a—What literary “form” does this novel take?
   b—Where did Camus get the title for this novel?
   c—What is the name of the protagonist?
   d—So what about his name?
Now for the real questions: The protagonist in this novel was at one time a successful Parisian attorney and now he sits in Amsterdam. Several questions:

41 Ibid., 154.

1—Camus could have set this novel in any place in the world. Why of all places did he choose Amsterdam? Why not London, Berlin, Rome, or New York?
2—Very specifically, as it affects one’s whole understanding of this novel, exactly what happened between Paris and Amsterdam, that is, why is he no longer in Paris and now in Amsterdam?
3—What does the answer to Question #2 have to do with what this novel is about, both on a superficial and deeper level?

The novel is a confession by the main character, Jean Baptiste Clamence, who is in Amsterdam because he once heard a woman jump or fall off a bridge in Paris and did nothing to save her.

This formerly very successful (and self-centered) Parisian attorney is now filled with guilt and flees to that city—with its concentric ring canals reminding him, and us, of Dante’s Hell—to seek pardon from anyone who will listen.

For the following day, the next quarter of the book is assigned, with the following prompt providing inspiration for class discussion:

1—This whole book hinges on one key event without which the rest of the book would not have happened. What is it?
2—You need to know the Bible to understand this novel. On page 112, Camus mentions a certain “Slaughter of the Innocents.” Explain that reference. What’s the story in the Bible?
3—Assuming you know/remember/looked up the biblical story, what is the relation of the story of the Slaughter of the Innocents to this novel? The overall point of the novel is closely tied to the mention of this biblical story.
4—There are at least two main passages in this chapter in which the narrator explains/makes reference to his eponymous background. Can you tell me exactly what either or both of those references were?

The story of the Slaughter of the Innocents (Matthew 2:13–23) is crucial to understanding the novel, so we go over it line by line. Why would the narrator be interested in making what was thought to be the most innocent person in Christian history and theology guilty of some crime, in this case complicity in the killing of all the young male babies by King Herod? The more we discuss the latter part of the novel and the protagonist’s desire to find anyone and everyone guilty
of something, the more the students start to see that, if everyone is guilty of something, even the infant Jesus, then no one is guilty, including the apparently contrite Parisian attorney.

That brings us to the last section of the novel, about which the following prompt is assigned:

What is the last word of *The Fall* and how does it affect the interpretation of the novel? Extra Credit: There was a passage in what you read for today in which yet again Camus “explains” the meaning of Clamence’s first name as it relates to the overall meaning of the book. Explain this reference and passage.

Together as a class, we then discuss the last sentence—“Fortunately!”—as the class moves toward an understanding that the entire confession is a kind of charade, not genuine. Were a woman to jump off another bridge, Jean Baptiste Clamence would again ignore her, and feel no guilt about doing so.

As we head into the last Camus reading, we discuss whether Camus between *The Stranger* and *The Fall* somehow “got religion”—whether, between the “benign indifference of the universe” of *The Stranger* and all the biblical imagery of *The Fall* (including the title), Camus had become more supportive of organized religion, specifically Christianity. The irony of Clamence’s confession suggests otherwise.

We end the formal reading of the course with a selection from Camus’s essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus.” The next day, the prompt is,

If you look up the word “Sisyphean,” you will find that the definition reads something like “futile” or “useless, unsuccessful.” The word clearly, in other words, has taken on negative overtones. Sisyphus is condemned to roll the rock up the hill forever; such is his fate, and it has become the meaning of his name in English. Yet Camus ends his piece about Sisyphus by saying, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” Please explain why Camus thinks of Sisyphus as—of all possible terms—happy? (Hint: There is more going on here than meets the eye, and it has much to do with *The Stranger* and Camus’s general philosophy found in his writing. This is not
a question just about this sentence, or even just this story, but about Camus.)

After extended class discussion of whether Sisyphus is happy on the way up, way down, at the top, or at the bottom of the hill, the students come to see that Camus is suggesting that to be aware of man’s fate is to rise above it, and that the title of his collected essays—*Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*—may sum up his evolving philosophy of life.43

After we have read the various authors in this course and never used the term “existentialism” in class once, the assignment for the very last day of the term is to write one’s own definition of the word—in an inch. Suggesting to the students that many people define the word differently, and that some of the so-called existentialists refused to use the term at all (remembering Kierkegaard’s “(A) a logical system is possible; (B) an existential system is impossible”), I ask each student to reflect on what he or she thinks the proper definition is. Here is the assignment:

Offer me your definition of existentialism in an inch. That is, type out your own working definition of existentialism based on the books we have read and the conversations we have had around this table over the course of the term. Your definition should be no longer than about seven lines of type. It can be shorter but not much longer so they collectively will fit all on one page as a summary of this course. Do not forget to submit your definition on time so I can photocopy them for you for our last class.

Below are a handful of sample definitions the students have written.

Existentialism is the belief that we, as humans, are our own masters. There is no higher power to judge us or predicate our fate. In every moment we have the opportunity to make a choice, and the choices that we make empower us as well as define us. This empowerment however is also a large responsibility. In every moment you must make a choice, there is no higher power to make that choice for you, or tell you which one is right or wrong. We are the ones who must decide for ourselves, because ultimately we are the only ones to judge one another.

---

Existentialism is the acceptance of the burden of freedom and the responsibility that accompanies it; a responsibility for all that we are and all that we do. Individuals are free to choose anything within the bounds of their will, and so they are a product of their own choices and all consequences hence are their own. From claiming responsibility, one can interpret his/her conditions as they will. Existentialism is therefore complete autonomy over the meaning of our lives; human beings have self-control over what they are in every present moment of living. Existentialism values human consciousness above all else. Some existentialists challenge man to use his own consciousness to rise above blind collectivism and find freedom in life; at the same time, others realize the pitfalls of consciousness and the unbearable burden of creating one’s own freedom. When man is conscious of his own life but does not know what to do with it, he finds himself to be lost, as in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* or Sartre’s *Nausea*. However, existentialism places control in the hands of man, even if he is lost: no god or external system can dictate his life any more than he can.

Existentialism is the subjective philosophy, the effort to fill the void left after you dismiss objective truth. Instead of relying on the certainty of systematic philosophy or religion, existentialism starts with the subjective human experience.

When you compare these answers to those found in standard college philosophy dictionaries, it is surprising, even impressive, how alike they are to ones assembled by professional scholars. That says something significant about both the sophistication of the students’ minds and the age-appropriateness of the material.

Religion 420: Introduction to Western Philosophy

REL420: INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY What is really real? How do I know what I know? Do I have free will? What is the good? These and other speculative questions have troubled the Western mind for millennia. This course follows a topical approach to the history of Western philosophy and focuses on such issues as metaphysics, epistemology, the problem of evil, the existence of God, and the philosophical roots of ethics. Students will read from the works of ancient and modern writers such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, Hume, Bentham, and Locke to assist them in coming to their own understanding of these topics. Students will discover
what philosophy is and how philosophers question and reason. Open to uppers and seniors.

This is one of the most popular courses offered by Phillips Exeter’s Religion Department. This course is the best illustration in our curriculum for the theoretical framework behind this dissertation: Hadot’s spiritual exercises and view of philosophizing as a _manière de vivre_ are at the heart of this course’s understanding of adolescent spiritual identity formation, and can be seen daily in this course. I explain to the students that the nature of philosophy as a discipline is such that there are no right answers, no completely correct responses to any inquiry, and that “the answer to any philosophy question is always another question.” This issue can be deeply unsettling to some students who come to the class with a math-mindset, wherein they think there is an exact response, a perfect equation, or a precise formula for every issue or problem. It is an important intellectual adjustment for them to encounter philosophical issues and questions that are best answered not in the style of _either/or_, but _both/and_. In that sense, as I explain to the students, there is no better subject for Harkness open-ended discussions—for _oral spiritual exercises_—than an introduction to philosophy class. The spirit of Immanuel Kant—let us think about the way we think and reason—and the spirit of Georg Hegel—the truth emerges in a dialectic of idea, counter-idea, and newer truth—are never far from our classroom discussions, and Pierre Hadot shadows every conversation around the table.

The students and I also discuss how such critical thinking skills are invaluable in whatever career the students might select after college: a lawyer needs to be able to view any issue from multiple angles and see the implications of deciding this way or that; a doctor needs to see a patient’s problem from various points of view, and sort out the proper diagnosis by trying various theories; and a business person needs to sit in a room of employees and tackle a company problem through analysis and conversation in which one listens, learns, persuades, and
comes to a synthetic (in the Hegelian sense) solution. Introduction to Western Philosophy as taught around a Harkness table, in other words, teaches the students very important and useful critical thinking skills. It is not so much the content of the course which is so important (as helpful as that might be), but rather the process, which teaches significant life skills.

In general, there are two ways to organize the materials for a history of Western philosophy course, especially if the students are reading all or mostly primary source materials, as here. One can follow a chronological or topical approach; having tried both over the years, I find that the topical approach makes more sense to introductory students, making the issues more accessible to them. I have found the best approach is to take primary source materials from various college-level textbooks and organize them according to the classical subdivisions of Western philosophy: metaphysics and epistemology, free will and determinism, the problem of evil, the classical proofs for the existence of God, philosophical ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, and logic. Organizing the materials so that a student can read multiple assignments on the same issue helps make the issues clearer.

I tell the students on the first day of class that there are two agendas in the course: we will pay attention to the exact thoughts of the major figures in the history of Western philosophy as arranged topically, but we will also regularly ask what they, the students, personally think about the issues. How would they handle these problems? An attraction of this course, in other words, is that the students learn the art of “philosophizing,” and then have a chance to practice it. It is not just understanding what others have thought over the centuries, but trying one’s hand at the same topics to see how one would analyze the issues and propose some response. I am always surprised, impressed, and encouraged when students arrive on their own at analyses that match, sometimes step for step, those of professional philosophers who worked on these same issues.
centuries ago. The students may not use the correct technical vocabulary, but if one listens carefully to their ideas, they are saying the same things. That is why it is so fascinating and heartening to teach this course again and again: the students have minds equal to those of the best philosophers.

The course begins by reading Plato’s *Meno* over two days. The attraction of starting Introduction to Western Philosophy with a Platonic dialogue is that the dialogical method so closely mirrors what we as a group hope to do around our seminar table. We aim to question each other on what we know and don’t know, what we understand and don’t yet understand, and, through the process of mutual inquiry, come to some newer and larger truth—just as happens in Platonic dialogues. It is a perfect way to suggest to beginning philosophy students that the discipline of philosophical inquiry goes hand-in-hand with the Harkness method.

Socrates’s discussion with Meno on the streets of the Athenian agora involves two major issues, with several sub-questions. The major issues are the definition of virtue, and whether virtue can be taught. The sub-questions include a discussion about the difference between education (to draw out from the learner) vs. instruction (to impart to the unknowing); and the question of whether virtue is a form of knowledge, and, if so, whether it be taught, particularly by example. Exploring these issues gives the beginning students a feel for the dynamics of philosophical analysis. Wherever the conversation goes between them, we are modeling the very nature of philosophy, and developing critical thinking skills at the same time.

Take, for instance, the question of what is happening when Socrates tries to assist the slave boy in understanding the idea behind the square of the hypotenuse.44 In a discussion around the table about the difference between the teacher being the “cause” or the “occasion” for the boy

---

to learn this math lesson, the students come to understand Plato’s point about differing theories of pedagogy and even differing understandings of the theory of knowledge. Is Socrates the cause of the boy’s learning—is he instructing him—or is he merely the occasion for the boy to recollect—to re-collect—as Socrates draws this innate knowledge out of him? This leads us into a conversation about Plato’s theory of the immortality of the soul and his belief that all learning is, in fact, re-collecting what one already knew. That discussion can easily segue to a conversation about what the students think they have been doing during their years sitting around Harkness tables at Phillips Exeter: have they been receiving instruction, or have their teachers been simply drawing out what was already there, unknowingly?

At the end of two days on this dialogue, the students see that open-ended questions by Socrates to Meno produce no specific correct answers, any more than our own conversations resolve in predetermined “correct” answers, and that every philosophical conversation seems to entail asking more and more questions. Nonetheless, Socrates assists Meno in becoming more virtuous, even if they can’t agree on its definition, just as we around the table come to appreciate the art of philosophizing even if we can’t resolve any of the major questions we have been debating.

Commencing the first unit on metaphysics and epistemology, we next turn to the question of what is real and how we know what we know. The students are assigned to read Plato’s Allegory of the Cave from Book VII of *The Republic* (VII.514A–521B). As part of their

---

45 As many teachers do, I have put together a photocopied course reader for Introduction to Western Philosophy, all primary source documents drawn from college-level philosophy textbooks. I give out these readings one per class, rather than bind them into a booklet and distribute them that way. My rationale is that it is better for the students not to see all the readings at once, but to take them one at a time. Those readings are for the most part drawn from three college textbooks: Robert Paul Wolff, *About Philosophy* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997); Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann, eds., *Philosophic Classics: From Plato to Derrida*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000); Burton F. Porter, *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974). In each case, there is a brief, often biographical, introduction to the philosopher’s life and times,
homework, they are asked to come to class with a sketch or model of the cave and its contents, and the first thing we do the next day in class is have the students transfer their sketches to the board for all to see and compare. In non-Harkness pedagogy, one might explain the cave analogy to students, but here with the various sketches on the board, a series of questions on the teacher’s part helps the students to walk through some of the issues Plato may be raising, so that they actively participate in their own learning; thus, they “own” the educational process.

After the students compare sketches, I ask them to look closely at the chained prisoner gazing at the show cast on the wall in front of him or her. I ask the students what they imagine the prisoner thinks about the shadows. Some typical responses are that the shadows are all the prisoner knows, or that the prisoner thinks the shadows are real. After exploring what might be meant by “real,” I stop the conversation and ask the students to think for a moment about whether they personally think shadows are real. A long conversation usually then ensues about what we mean by real, and whether shadows exist as such or are dependent on something else. Next, I ask what the prisoner would think if he or she were unchained and could turn around and see the puppets casting the shadows, and then compare the puppets to the shadows of the puppets. When I ask what the students personally think about the reality of the puppets versus the reality of the shadows, someone always introduces the idea that there may be “levels” to reality. After I introduce the word “ontology” or “ontological status of shadows,” a long and furious conversation follows about the nature of reality, whether it has levels, parts, pieces, segments, types, and so on. From there on, typically only minimal comment on the teacher’s part is necessary to keep the conversation on track, as the students understand the issues and can debate the meaning behind the various suggestions and responses.

and a synopsis of the issues the philosopher faced, but the reading is then a longer primary source document taken from one or more texts of the philosopher him- or herself.
The next day’s reading is the section of *The Republic* which precedes the Allegory of the Cave in Book VII, the story of the “divided line” (VI.509D–511E). I tell the students that, given how brief the reading is, there will be a short in-class writing assignment on the two *Republic* readings. For that assignment, I use this prompt:

It is clear that Plato’s story of the divided line is, in some sense, an epistemological metaphor—that is, it speaks to how Plato understands the nature of knowledge or the process of knowing. (Epistemology is the study of how we come to know what we know.) The story of the divided line comes immediately before the allegory of the cave in Plato’s *Republic*; they are paired or part of one piece. As you think back on your artistic rendition of this allegory and our discussion of that first reading in class, in what sense is the allegory of the cave also an epistemological metaphor or is it really a metaphysical metaphor (metaphysics being the study of the nature of reality, of what is really real), or is it both? What do you take to be the true meaning of the allegory of the cave: is it making an epistemological or metaphysical statement or both, and if so, what is/are that statement or those statements? The allegory of the cave is an allegory of what?

In the conversation which follows, we circle the issue of whether, for Plato, there are parallel, correlative hierarchies, one epistemological, the other metaphysical. The previous day’s conversation about levels, parts, and segments turns into a deeper analysis of what is really real, how we know what we really know, and whether Plato is suggesting that some things are more real than others, that we know some things better than others. As this two-day conversation comes to a close, with the metaphysical and epistemological issues introduced but not at all resolved, I remind the students of A. N. Whitehead’s comment that “all of western philosophy is a footnote to Plato,” and the centrality of the issues Plato bequeathed us.\(^{46}\) While Plato may not have resolved any of these issues any more than any other philosopher in the Western tradition, he at least identified for us the issues on which we need to work.

\(^{46}\) The exact quotation: “It was Plato who formulated most of philosophy’s basic questions—and doubts. It was Aristotle who laid the foundation for most of the answers. Thereafter, the record of their duel is the record of man’s long struggle to deny and surrender or to uphold and assert the validity of his particular mode of consciousness.” A. N. Whitehead, “J.H. Randall’s Aristotle” [review], *The Objectivist Newsletter* 2, no. 5 (May 1963), 18.
The next four readings serve as the segue from Plato to the longer discussions on Descartes and Kant. After we read Plato himself, I give the students a rare secondary source to tie up some loose ends, Elmer Sprague’s *What is Philosophy: A Short Introduction.* I also diagram Plato’s four-part epistemology/metaphysic on the board again—as donkey shadow, donkey puppet, donkey, and donkeyness—and we see how the lower two or three “levels” of the four-part hierarchy morph over the centuries into the empiricist tradition, while the upper two or three “levels” morph into the idealist tradition. The students see both the genesis of that split as well as the general definitions of each camp—not necessarily static terms, but trends in understanding reality and how we come to know it.

To that end, we next read a selection from a modern philosopher, Richard Taylor, who is an out-and-out materialist, so the students can see the writing and thinking of someone who reduces everything to pure biochemical processes of “stuff,” of matter. There is no such thing as an idea, at least independent of the matter from which it is made. The prompt for class after the Richard Taylor reading is,

This article uses two correlative terms, mentalism and materialism. In a few well-chosen sentences, would you please explain the difference between “mentalism” and “materialism,” as the article uses these terms, and then state where Richard Taylor stands on the issue?

Introducing the students to a radical materialist is helpful in setting up the contrast between archetypal ways of doing both metaphysics and epistemology in Western philosophy, especially when we next read and discuss Bishop Berkeley’s *esse est percipi.* Perhaps the world is not simply stuff, but rather ideas, mental ideas, and stuff does not exist as such. Encountering these

---


philosophers and their issues assists the student in tracing out some of the philosophical links between ancient and modern philosophy.

For the day on Locke, we take a break from the historical work and try something else as a change of pace. We do an in-class exercise to give the students a firsthand feel for what it is that philosophers do, what it means to “philosophize.” As homework, they read Locke’s writing on personhood, and then I give them a series of philosophical problems and ask them to work their way through whatever philosophical issues they might identify with each problem.  

This is the handout:

Five Personhood Problems

1—Most of you are about to apply to college. One of the issues most colleges are interested in, and it is often a key part of their decision, is the idea of potential, that you have the capacity to grow to be a better person in a variety of ways down the road. On the one hand, something in you is already established or fixed, and they can base their judgment on it; yet something else is also in flux and can change over time. If nothing could ever change—the you today is the you tomorrow—they probably would not be interested in you; on the other hand, if you are completely changing all the time, you will have to fill out a new application every day or every hour. What is it that makes you a “person” such that you are essentially the same one day to the next, yet different at the same time? What’s different? What’s the same?

2—Some of you might become lawyers someday. You might want to note that U.S. law applies only to people, not to rocks or carrots or cardboard boxes. If a rock falls off a cliff and kills someone, you cannot arrest it for murder or manslaughter. What is your legal definition of a person? Do remember that, in the 1890s, U.S. law expanded to allow U.S. corporations to be considered persons under the guise of the law; that is, corporations can enter into contracts, can hold property, can sue, and have all the rights and privileges of a person—they are just like people in the eyes of the law, yet they are clearly not people. How would you define a “person” legally?

3—In the medical ethics debates about both abortion and euthanasia, the question of what is a person surfaces quickly. How one responds to the ethical issues surrounding care at either end of the life spectrum often depends upon how one defines personhood. At what point, for example,

---

does the embryo/fetus become a person, such that it has all the status of a post-natal person, and at what point might an older person in a nursing home with a severe case of Alzheimer’s disease, or a critically injured person in the intensive care ward of a hospital after a car accident, no longer be thought of as possessing personhood? Do we use two different definitions of personhood, one for the beginning of life and one for the end? Can you suggest for us one definition of “person” that applies to both? (You might note that when the U.S. Supreme Court dealt with the question of personhood in the abortion debate, they said the issue was not so much a legal issue but a philosophical one, and best left to philosophers! That’s you.)

4—Peter Singer, a controversial philosophy professor recently appointed to the faculty at Princeton, maintains that there is “no substantive difference between humans and animals.” There is, he claims, a bias in our culture toward members of the human race, a bias he calls “speciesism,” an “-ism” similar to racism or sexism. Is it true that animals and humans are essentially the same? That animals have rights? The right to be treated “humanely”?

5—On my table is my computer. What is the difference between it and a person? Each is capable of mental activity, thinking, performing mental operations, even emotions as it utters sounds when I make mistakes, etc. And with voice recognition software, it can even listen to me and talk back; I can carry on a conversation with it, in other words. Are we computers, are computers people?

Those five personhood problems often lead to energized conversations about the definition of person, whichever one of the five we focus on, and they also introduce the beginning students to the idea that philosophy has practical applications in the real world.

In general in my courses, I assign only one-page papers, on the theory that it forces the student to be precise and choose his or her words very carefully. Additionally, I see such short papers as a conversation between teacher and student, to help me gauge where the class is in its understanding of the materials. For this reason, I also return every piece of student writing by the next class meeting. Before we start Descartes, the students are assigned this one-page paper:

About what can I/we be absolutely, 100%, beyond a shadow of a doubt certain/sure? Admittedly, there are many ways to answer this question, including saying there is nothing about which we can be absolutely certain.
Whatever your answer, including nothing or something or many things, please take one page to explain your reasoning. As with all philosophy papers, short or longer, the key is often not your “answer” per se, but more your reasoning and how you explain/defend your response/position. You will be evaluated not on your answer itself, but your reasoning and how you explain it in logical, coherent philosophical prose.

The conversation the next day is often lively as the students explain their thinking and engage others around the table on this topic of absolute certainty. At an apt moment, I make a chart on the board. I draw two columns: at the top of the left column, I write “100% certainty,” and at the top of the right column, I write, “99.99% down to 2% certainty.” I explain to the students that, when you try thinking of things that you know with 100% certainty, many of the potential responses really fit in the less-than-100% certain column, some very close to absolute certainty, and other very far from it—examples ranging from “tomorrow is Tuesday,” to “Exeter is better than Andover,” to “vanilla is a better flavor than chocolate”—but the key issue is, of what can we be 100% certain? About that, the students wrangle for most of the class, and the answers are varied. One of the more common responses is that “nothing goes in the 100% certainty box.” That leads to a conversation about the difference between leaving the box empty and writing “nothing goes in this 100% certainty box.” Students—some, not all—are quick to see that the latter is a self-contradiction.

The reading for the next class is a selection from Descartes’s Meditations.51 When the students come to class, I explain that Descartes’s famous cogito ergo sum (mentioned several times in the readings) is frequently cited as self-explanatory, but its meaning may be much more opaque than they think. Instead of asking the students point-blank what Descartes really meant by the key phrase, I give them this handout:

---

Circle the correct interpretation(s) as Descartes would have understood the phrase “cogito ergo sum.” Which paraphrases correctly interpret his desire for 100% certainty?

1. I think I exist (but I’m not sure)
2. I believe I exist
3. I know I exist
4. I think I might exist
5. I thought I existed
6. I’ll think tomorrow so I’ll exist tomorrow
7. I once thought I existed
8. I think I have a body
9. My thinking proves I have a body
10. I think, therefore, my body exists
11. I have a body which thinks
12. My mind thinks so I know I exist
13. I can prove to you that I exist
14. I can prove to me that I exist
15. Descartes can prove to you that he exists
16. Descartes thinks, therefore, he exists
17. Descartes can prove you exist
18. I am thinking of you, therefore, I exist
19. I am thinking of you, therefore, you exist
20. I am thinking ill of you, therefore, you don’t exist
21. You are so am I
22. To the degree that I am thinking of you, I am
23. When I am asleep, I don’t exist
24. When I dream in my sleep I am
25. When I dream in my sleep about philosophy I exist
26. When I am thinking of a Big Mac, I know I exist
27. Because I just thought a second ago, I know I am
28. At the very moment that I am thinking of my thinking, I can be sure I exist as a thinking thing
29. I think, therefore, I’m here
30. Only God knows what I am thinking when I don’t think about my thinking, but at least he thinks of me

After they have circled what they take to be the appropriate paraphrases, I then ask them “to box the most egregious misunderstandings,” so we can compare the good and bad interpretations of Descartes’s central idea. On the board, I write two columns and solicit their answers, the circled and the boxed, and soon it becomes clear that the paraphrases that some students circled are the
same ones that others boxed. How can that be? What did Descartes really mean by *cogito ergo sum*? We wrestle with Descartes for the rest of the period. The students are invited to fully philosophize, to think through an issue with good, better, and best answers, but with no one response that is automatically correct.

Knowing that we are unlikely to come to a common resolution, never the goal of a Harkness class, I give the students the following “final exam” on Descartes, telling them that, similar to the SAT or GRE, the questions are arranged in order of increasing difficulty, and they are to write a one-page paper on the most difficult question that they feel confident answering. The paper will be scored similar to diving, in which the degree of difficulty is multiplied by the execution of the dive. Here is the exam:

**Final Exam on Descartes**

Similar to the SAT and other standardized tests, the following eleven questions are arranged in order of difficulty. Select any one question, the highest one about which you are confident, and write a one-page paper explaining your answer to that question. Note that the best answers answer all previous questions as well.

1—Descartes’s first name?

2—What adjective did Descartes contribute to English?

3—Does “cogito ergo sum” work in
   a—first person singular
   b—third person singular check all which apply
   c—first person plural

4—Does “cogito ergo sum” work in
   a—the past
   b—the present check all which apply
   c—the future

5—Would Descartes accept as a suitable substitute for “cogito ergo sum” any or all of the following?
   a—sum
   b—cogito check all which apply
   c—sum ergo cogito
   d—“cogito ergo sum” cannot be reduced; the three words are as concise as his philosophy allows
6—Breaking out 5c as a separate question, would Descartes accept the flipping of the wording in “cogito ergo sum” to be “sum ergo cogito”\textsuperscript{5c}? Are the two equivalent/interchangeable in his philosophy?
7—Is “ergo” necessary in “cogito ergo sum” or could it just as easily be left out? Is this a two-step process, in other words, or all one? Is it grammatically as well as philosophically “I think therefore I am” or “I think, pause, therefore, now that I realize that I am thinking I can subsequently conclude that I am”\textsuperscript{5c}?
8—Does it make any difference in “cogito ergo sum” what you’re thinking about? Big Macs? Thinking about thinking? This is the content vs. process question to which I/we keep referring. Is Descartes 100\% certain of the content of his thought or the process of his thinking? And what is the difference between the two? And how does the “Evil Deceiver theory” fit into/relate to this distinction?
9—What did he mean by “sum”\textsuperscript{5c}? I am what? I exist how?
10—Is Descartes more interested in the cogito or the sum? Which came first in order of importance not chronology: the cogito or the sum? In short, is Descartes more interested in proving his thinking or his existence?
11—It has been said by almost all historians of Western philosophy that up until Descartes ________ reigned supreme, whereas after Descartes ________ reigned supreme. (Insert the words ‘epistemology’ and ‘metaphysics’ in the correct place in the sentence. Note: You are being asked to answer this question based solely on your reading of Descartes and the answers to the ten questions above, \textit{not} based on any internet research nor readings/knowledge of all previous Western philosophers which you have not read. Don’t cite philosophers you have never read; work your way through the previous ten questions and you will be able to prove the answer to this question.)
Extra credit: Descartes was a pesky fellow to hang around with, for he kept asking his pat question, “Are you sure?”\textsuperscript{5c}, to every single comment anyone else made. You would not want to go on a camping trip with someone who kept saying the same thing over and over. What one word could any other person say in his presence which would leave him henceforth speechless?

These dozen questions provide the template for several more days of conversation on Descartes and his philosophy. Slowly we work our way through each of the above questions in order, and the students wrestle with and try to come to terms with the issues embedded in each question.
Depending on the section and year, we may go through these questions more slowly or quickly, but the students come to understand how Descartes reframed the focus of Western philosophy by placing the epistemological question before the metaphysical. That thought serves as a bridge to the next philosopher we read, Immanuel Kant.
For specifics on how we process Kant around the Harkness table, I refer the reader to the section on Kant in the second chapter, where it is explained in detail. When the students come to class the first day that we are discussing Kant, I often find they are more interested in entering “the house of Kant” through the attic window—as I describe it to them—rather than through the front door. As much as I suggest to them that they focus on just the two opening sentences, they are fascinated with the *synthetic/*analytic and *a priori/*a posteriori distinctions, and want to discuss those ideas. No Harkness teacher should ignore a student’s natural enthusiasm, so I have to gently steer them back to the first two sentences, and tell them that we can do the *synthetic/*analytic materials later. Once we start to focus on the opening two sentences, however, they see how complex they are, and we spend at least three entire classes on Kant before bringing this unit on metaphysics and epistemology to a close.

Not explained previously, however, are some specific Harkness exercises and class demonstrations used to assist students in understanding Kant. Between classes one and two, I give this homework assignment on Kant’s first two sentences:

*Kant exercise*

“That all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt. But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it by no means follows that all arises out of it.”

These are the two most famous sentences in Western philosophy. The trick is to figure out what they mean. Here is a series of questions in increasing order of difficulty, to help you prepare for class.
1—In the first sentence, what does he mean by “knowledge”? Is it the process of knowing or the content of what we know, and what’s the difference?
2—When Kant talks about “experience” in that same first sentence, what does he mean?
3—Having answered questions #1 and #2, paraphrase the meaning of the first sentence.
4—Which group of philosophers jumped up and down and high-fived Kant when they read that first sentence?
5—The second sentence begins with an important conjunction, “but.” So what?
6—The second sentence repeats the claim of the first sentence in its entirely, then what?
7—There may be a missing or implied word after the “all” in the second sentence; all what?
8—Whatever the “all” refers to, is it possible that “all whatever” is using the word differently in the second sentence from the way the same word is used in the first sentence? (Note: Teachers do not ask questions like that unless there is a difference.) What’s the difference?
9—Having answered #5–8, paraphrase what Kant really meant by the second sentence.
10—Similar to question #4, which group of philosophers jumped up and down and high-fived Kant when they read that second sentence? Extra credit: When you add these two sentences together, what is Kant really saying about the knowing process or the process of knowing? What is his real point here, which effectively stopped Western epistemology and metaphysics?

Admittedly, this is a tough slog for students, trying to follow Kant here, and it does not get any easier when I assign them the “shorter version” of the First Critique, saying that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was such a dense tome that Kant revised it and published a *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, equally opaque. That takes us to day three on Kant, when we try to put together what we have seen and learned thus far.

I start class on day three by taking out two billiard balls and announcing that today we will see that the course of Western philosophy was altered by Kant reading about a little experiment, which we will duplicate here on our Harkness table. Kant wrote that reading about the experiment caused him “to awaken . . . from my dogmatic slumber.” I take the two billiard balls and set one at a short distance away from the other, and then roll the first ball toward the second so it strikes it and drives it away. I then ask the students to describe what they just saw by painting a word picture of this action. Many descriptions are tried, and usually someone will say, “The orange ball caused the black ball to move away.” At that point, we stop to ask an unusual question: not what is cause (and effect), but where is cause (and effect)? Where does the idea of
cause and effect originate? We arrive at the idea that cause and effect are not in the billiard balls themselves, not in the motion of my arm, not in the physics of moving objects, but “in my head.” Hume, as an empiricist, was stymied by the idea that there is a series of discrete events, one following the other, but the connection between them—what we call cause and effect—is made by and in our heads. Our mind is not passive in the knowing process, but rather a “player” in the process. Similarly, Immanuel Kant was awakened to the idea that our minds do not passively receive data from the outside, as the empiricists had thought, but take in that data and reshape it in the process, running it through what Kant calls the “categories of the understanding.” Cause and effect are in the mind; they are operations of the understanding. Knowing this, we can explore what Kant might have meant in that second sentence when he says that we know some things which are not experientially-based. There is more to the content of our knowledge than what comes in from the outside. That something “extra” is what and how the categories of the understanding reshape, or filter, the raw data coming in from the outside.

I then ask the students to close their eyes and think of the classroom aspatially, without regard to up being up and the door being over there. Upon opening their eyes, they admit that they can’t do it. I then hold up my watch and ask them what it measures. I ask them to think of their world atemporally. An extended conversation follows about the nature of time and space. We talk about the difference between the Greek *chronos* and *kairos*—the difference between “clock time” and “having a good time at a party.” Quantity does not automatically equal quality. These three examples open the door to a student understanding of what Kant meant by his “categories of the understanding.”

From there, I place Plato’s four-part allegory of the cave back up on the board, a chart they have seen many times before, with its hierarchy of donkey shadow, donkey puppet, donkey,
and donkeyness. Next to it, I place Kant’s three-part epistemology of sensation, understanding, and reason. Taking the two famous sentences with which we have worked for several days now, we turn to Kant’s crucial distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, the prefiltered versus the post-filtered, and explore what those two worlds are all about. At this point in the discussion of Kant, I can usually see by the looks on some of the students’ faces that we are losing the weaker/less interested, and the stronger are following but not exactly understanding the full depth of what Kant was attempting. The benefit of a section of twelve or fewer in a discussion class is that the teacher can see and judge each student’s level of understanding fairly easily, just by the looks on their faces.

We finish the Kant discussion by talking about the Copernican shift in Western philosophy once the distinction was made between the noumenal and phenomenal. Prior to Kant, it was thought by philosophers that there was a “world out there” which one sought to understand, whereas with and after Kant, it was accepted that one could only know the external world as it conforms to the categories of one’s understanding. The whole focus shifts from some external world to the world within and as understood by one’s own mind. I often joke with the students about what I call “Vorkink’s Rules for Life”:

Rule #1: If ever asked a question, say, “The Bible.”

Rule #2: If the teacher gives you a dirty look, say, “Sorry, I meant Shakespeare.”

Rule #14A: If asked any question about Kant, say, “It’s all within your mind.”

Even with high school seniors, we do not read the rest of the First Critique, but several days on Kant’s complex ideas give the students a real taste for what he was trying to do in reorienting Western metaphysics and epistemology. Some of the more adventurous students will still insist that we discuss the synthetic/analytic and a priori/a posteriori distinctions, so before we close
the books on Kant, we go over those four possibilities and show where pure mathematics and
pure science fit within that schema.

The next unit of the course, on free will and determinism, begins with an introductory
reading on the circumstances under which we can hold someone responsible for his or her
behavior. This sets the stage for our subsequent five days of conversations. In class, we discuss
the scenario of one person shooting another, in which six different possible explanations of guilt
or innocence are proffered, including:

1) The accused was not even there; he didn’t do it.

2) The accused was there but unconscious and someone put his finger on the trigger.

3) The accused did it, but his action was caused by a brain tumor.

I put a sketch up on the board and we work our way through the scenarios. There is a chain of
connections to consider when assigning blame: There is the dead person, behind whom is the
person who shot him, behind whom is the gun dealer, behind whom is the gun manufacturer,
between which is the gun manufacturer’s metal supplier, behind which is the metal supplier’s
trucker, behind whom is the trucker’s gas station attendant, and so on. Around whom should the
“responsibility box” be drawn? Just around the shooter? Or is responsibility a kind of continuum
in which several parties share responsibility in fractional parts—from 92% for the shooter to
.0003% for the gas station attendant? Is responsibility a binary, so to speak, all or nothing, or
something spread out over a spectrum? This conversation takes most of the first class.

The next day, the students will have read both Baron d’Holbach’s strict determinism
argument, as well as a compatibilist piece by David Hume. The prompt for that class is,


In a few well-chosen sentences, write out Hume’s understanding of the issues in the free will vs. determinism debate. When is a person free?

As the students write at the beginning of the class, I go around the room and ask them to define “free will.” I get a variety of responses, but many are variants of “to be able to do what you want.” I put that definition on the board—along with all the others—and then split that definition into two parts: 1) to do (meaning to carry out); 2) what you want (the choice itself). I ask the class if real free will equals #1 or #2 or #1 plus #2? We try to establish the difference between these options. Is it the choice itself which makes all the difference? What if I choose but can’t carry out my choice? I can choose to jump six feet straight up, but what if my known vertical leap is measured in millimeters? Am I free? One of the purposes of a class conversation such as this is that it assists beginning philosophy students to understand that much of the art of philosophizing is simply trying to determine the issues under examination and how we might define our terms. In the end, the students see, for example, that Hume comes down hard on the “able to carry out the choice” side, whereas others might think the choosing itself is the key issue. You could get two philosophers, in other words, defining the important issues oppositely, and thus talking right past one another.

The next two readings, by Moritz Schlick and C. A. Campbell, are paired because they dialogue with each other’s arguments.54 The pieces are not easily accessible to the students, so the class prompt is very carefully worded:

In the debate over whether or not humans have free will, there are the determinists (no free will) and the indeterminists (we have free will), plus the compatibilists (something in-between). When all is said and done, however, the issue is probably not free will vs. no free will, but something else. What is that something else? What is really at stake in the free will debates? I know philosophers care about this topic, but why should I/the

---

average person on the street care about this issue? What’s the issue behind the issue of free will?

That prompt leads to a class discussion on the complex and sometimes tenuous link between free will and responsibility. If determinism negates responsibility, so does chance; there must be some link between man and his actions for responsibility to be maintained, and Campbell calls that “creative activity,” admittedly a slippery concept. But it does suggest that, as beginning philosophy students try to sort out some difficult ideas, more nuanced relationship need to replace simple linkages.

We then move to a person whose work and thinking always provokes much discussion, if not controversy—namely, B. F. Skinner. The first day, we do background work, getting acquainted with Skinner’s special vocabulary. 55 Class starts with this prompt:

In Skinner’s thinking, which works best, negative or positive reinforcement? Explain why he thinks so.

We then go over terms such as operant behavior, operant conditioning, shaping, stimuli, and reinforcement schedules. The fun part of the class comes when we then try an interactive Skinnerian experiment ourselves, thus trying to get inside of the head of the philosopher by replicating what he did in his research. We try to train an imaginary Harvard Square pigeon to peck a red disk inside a Skinner box. I draw the box on the board, and put two cords running out from the box, one to a food magazine, and the other to an electrical charge attached to the box’s sub-floor. The students are asked to design this experiment so the pigeon pecks the disk continuously. Taking the rest of the period, the class figures out the best way to push whichever button to accomplish that goal, some obviously understanding that positive reinforcement and increased variable ratio reinforcement schedules will do the trick, while others spend the period shocking the hapless and confused bird.

55 “Skinner’s Utopia: Panacea, or Path to Hell?,” TIME (September 20, 1971), 47–53.
I give them a second Skinner reading, and the next day in class, I show them an interview with him done approximately at the same time that the reading selection I gave them was written. Skinner is a very skilled interpreter of his own views, and the class discusses his various theories, debating their validity. Most students come away quite critical of him but, ironically, subsequently cite his ideas positively the rest of the term.

From here, the course moves to a very different kind of reading, with Matthew 4 serving as a prelude to reading the “Grand Inquisitor” section of The Brothers Karamazov. The Matthew selection—the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness—is the basis of the Brothers Karamazov passage, and to understand the second, it helps to have read the first beforehand. On the first day, we debate the nature of the three temptations; what each meant; whether, in fact, Jesus made the correct choice; why he made the choices he did; and whether the three are interchangeable. The key issue that arises again and again in the conversation is whether or not Jesus had free will, the topic of this unit.

The next day, having had the students read the Dostoevsky selection as homework, I start class with this prompt, the purpose of which is to make as clear as possible the two sides of the debate:

In the space below, outline as clearly as you can the two sides in the debate between the Grand Inquisitor and Jesus? What is each saying/claiming/arguing? Jesus doesn’t say a word, but his argument can be constructed from what the Grand Inquisitor says and implies. Pretend each is up on a soapbox. What is each selling?

We spend the whole period going over the two sides, and why the Cardinal of Seville, who spends his waking hours worshipping Jesus, would have him arrested, and for what? We rehearse the Matthew story again, and put the Cardinal on Jesus’ shoulder in the wilderness, having him

---

advise Jesus on what to do and why. We are still debating whether Jesus had free will or not. If, at the end of the period, the two sides of the argument are still not clear enough, we take another day on the debate, and I give them this homework:

In no more than one page, prepare two thirty-second TV ads, one for the Grand Inquisitor and the other for Jesus, in which you write out the voiceover each says while trying to sell us his view of the world? Assume there is a photo of each on the screen, and your job is to write out the pitch each uses to get us, the audience, to buy his point of view.

The extra day is spent clarifying the two sides of the debate. Then I send the students off to write a short paper on a topic they are not normally assigned in this class: not what the given philosopher thought, but whether they agree with what he or she said. In this case, they pick one side in the Grand Inquisitor debate and defend it.

In no more than one page, discuss who, in the great debate between the Grand Inquisitor and Jesus, is correct in your opinion, and why. This is your own assessment of each side’s views. Please state your position in an opening thesis, and then take the rest of the page to defend your position/interpretation.

The class often splits down the middle on which side has the better of the two arguments, whether it is Jesus, who argues for the preservation of free will for the benefit of the limited number of people who are strong enough, or the Grand Inquisitor, who asks that he and the Church alone be given free will, with which they will provide “miracle, mystery, and authority” for the masses who cannot handle it. Some students can see by the end of the period that this is one of the great debates of our culture: this particular iteration is a religious/theological debate (between Jesus and the Cardinal), but if you turn the two sides into a political system, you have something akin to democracy (Jesus’ side) versus totalitarianism or socialism (the Cardinal’s side, depending on how you define your terms). Likewise, if you turn the two into economic
systems, you have capitalism (the free market in which a few succeed and many suffer) versus
communism (in which basic needs are met by the State but individual initiative may be lost).

From here, we transition from the section on free will and determinism to the section on
“the problem of evil.” To start that set of conversations, I assign the following paper, and give
the students a short reading from Leibniz to be completed after the paper has been written.57

“Do we live in the best of all possible worlds?”
This question, posed by Leibniz, has, in its simplicity and complexity, 
fascinated Western philosophy ever since he asked it a number of centuries 
ago. Philosophers have tried many, many ways to answer it. Write a one-
page response to the question, explaining your answer.

I start the next class with a short humorous prompt, but one which has a serious point: It is
generally important to look up words you do not know, and specifically, the definition for
supralapsarianism is important in understanding the issues in this unit on the problem of evil.

Did you follow mom’s advice that, when you don’t know a word, you
should look it up? Please provide the definition for supralapsarianism.

We then discuss whether or not we live in the best of all possible worlds. The group debates all
the possible ramifications of answering the question in the affirmative as well as the negative. It
is one of those genuine open-ended questions which so characterize both philosophy and the
Harkness method, in that there is no one right answer; yes, there are some answers better than
others, but still not a single, all-would-agree correct response.

The next day’s reading is a selection from Voltaire’s Candide, as well as a Time cover
story on evil.58 First, I give them another humorous opening quiz.

OK, my bright ones. Did you follow dad’s advice that when mom tells you
to look up words you don’t know, and you didn’t, and your teacher calls
you on it, then you might want to look it up for next time? Please give the

57 Gottfried W. Leibniz, excerpt from Discourse on Metaphysics, in Porter, Philosophy, 144–50.

definitions for, and difference between, supralapsarianism and sublapsarianism.

We then move on to the topic of the day: “Where in ‘the problem of evil’ is the problem?” Why is it that every philosophy textbook, and every layperson on the street, thinks of evil as a problem? No one really talks about “the problem of good.” What is it about evil that seems to be so problematic? This predictably leads us to have a conversation about the definition of evil. I also remind them that theodicy is a problem not only for theologians, but for philosophers.

Partway through the class, I introduce St. Augustine’s quiz about sin.59

1—*posse peccare* = to be able to sin = to have the capacity to sin
2—*posse non peccare* = to be able not to sin = can resist sin
3—*non posse peccare* = not able to sin = do not have the capacity to sin
4—*non posse non peccare* = not able not to sin = must sin

Which one (or more) was Adam before the Fall?

Some students select #1 and #2, whereas others (occasionally but rarely) select #4. #3 is ruled out quickly, as he did sin. Eventually, I point out that the #1 and #2 people are the sublapsarians—God, in effect, gave Adam free will and he goofed and sinned; the Fall was out of God’s hands. The people who selected #4 are the supralapsarians—God planned the Fall ahead of time, Adam really didn’t have free will, and he was destined to fall so Jesus could come and save those who had been “elected” to be saved.

After, I ask the students a second question, in some ways more important here: “What did Adam know *before* the Fall?” That question opens the door to one of the central issues in the unit, namely, is paradise really paradisiacal? Is Eden edenic? If one really only knew good, what would that mean? What would you actually know? Adam can’t say, “What a beautiful morning,” because all he knows is, “It is a morning.” The conversation about the definition of the word evil,

St. Augustine’s quiz, and then this last question raise numerous issues about the need to have an opposite in order to be sensible.

The last readings in this unit are Genesis 22 and a selection from Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. My process for teaching both of these readings is discussed in full in the second chapter. After spending one class day acting out Genesis 22, the students read the Kierkegaard for homework. I start the next class with one of the following two prompts:

Prompt #1
If you can understand the two subtitles in the Kierkegaard reading, you have pretty well understood the whole piece. The main subtitle is, “Is there ever such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?” The other is, “A panegyric upon Abraham.” What is a “panegyric”?

Prompt #2
1. What is a “panegyric,” as in, “A panegyric upon Abraham”?
2. Without using the words “teleological,” “suspension,” or “ethical,” would you please restate/explain/paraphrase what Kierkegaard meant by the subtitle, “Is there ever such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?” Exactly what does that question mean—not what was Kierkegaard’s answer, but what was he asking?

In the discussion which follows, learning the distinction between rational, irrational, and arational faith is the primary goal.

When we come to the unit on classical proofs for the existence of God, I begin with a few introductory remarks. First, the purpose of the unit is not to try to convince anyone of God’s existence, but to examine the logic in the various proofs to see what kind of reasoning is employed by each. It is the logic which is so important for the beginning student, rather than the efficacy of the proof. Second, I note that much ink has been spilled on these proofs over the centuries, in part because many of the philosophers involved were also theologians: if one is going to philosophize, it is natural to start at the beginning, and the beginning often involved proving God’s existence. Third, we will examine the so-called classical proofs, the classical

---

disproofs of the proofs, and one classical re-proof. (We will not, however, look at disproofs of God *per se.*) Fourth, we talk about the difference between an *a priori* proof and an *a posteriori* one, and hold in reserve the question of which each of these proofs might be.

With that as introduction, we start with Thomas Aquinas’s five proofs. 61 Instead of simply starting with the standard line, “What did you think of the proofs?”, I begin the first day with a more directed conversation. After indicating that Aquinas had read Aristotle and borrowed most of his reasoning from him—what today might be called plagiarism—I start with Aquinas’s first proof, the argument from motion. I draw a moving hand on the board, and then make a series of arrows in reverse across the length of the board. Then I indicate that, at some point in this series of arrows, we come to a potential junction, and either the arrows go back to infinity or to some starting point. It is for Aristotle either A, to infinity, or B, to a starting point. If he could disprove A—the “to infinity” hypothesis—then, logically, it had to be B: there was some starting point. I ask, therefore, whether Aristotle was correct that A was impossible, and second, are the only choices A or B? Could there be a C? And what would C entail?

If A went back infinitely, some students reason, it would *still* be going back, and if it is still going back, it wouldn’t *yet* be going forward—hence no forward set of arrows, and no hand moving in the present. That might rule out A. If that line of reasoning does not catch the students’ attentions, I try the domino theory: suppose there is a very long row of dominoes running out the classroom door, and all the dominoes are still standing, and as we speak, they start to go over. Could they have been going over, in a very long line, forever, with no starting point? Then we shift to the plausibility of the B argument. How can you have, so they ask, something which moves but is not itself moved? An unmoved mover? Isn’t that a logical

---

contradiction? If every single thing has a prior mover, can you have something outside that chain of moved/mover?

On the second day discussing Aquinas, we move to his third proof, the argument from contingency and necessity. I put a seven-step true-or-false quiz on the board, and we talk our way through its seven questions.

1. true/false: At one time, you did not exit.
2. true/false: At one time, all the other “things” in the world had the potential not to yet be.
3. true/false: In theory, there could be one moment in time when all the not-yet-exists might have coincided.
4. true/false: If #3 is true in theory, given infinite time, it is true in fact.
5. true/false: Since there is presently something, not nothing, when #4 occurred (that one moment in infinite time when all the contingencies coincided in fact), some “thing” might have pushed the nothing into something.
6. true/false: That something of #5 which pushed the nothing into something has to exist necessarily, not contingently.
7. true/false: #6 is what “we all call God.”

Every year when we go through this little quiz, we get into the most furious debate on certain questions. Depending on the students’ scientific knowledge, or willingness to discuss physics, we get a different kind of debate—but one has to remember that the purpose of this quiz and class discussion is not simply to tell the students what Aquinas was thinking, but to invite them inside his reasoning and have them reason out his proof to understand his thinking for themselves. This is one of Hadot’s spiritual exercises, literally. As we go through these seven questions, generally #1 is not a problem—unless someone wants to talk about the conservation of mass and energy in physics. #2 can present a problem, but I put a bar graph on the board, and draw bars for various events—such as their lifetime, the history of the classroom building, the history of the school, etc., and ask if we might be able to go back before any of these bars was running? #3 is a continuation of that issue. When we discuss #4, as the students debate its
validity, I give them the classic (and somewhat trite) example: “If you gave a monkey lots and lots of bananas, and a laptop, would the monkey eventually, in infinite time, type out *Hamlet* word for word?” Advanced math students will sometimes respond by putting charts up on the board, discussing the nature of infinity, arguing back and forth, but in the end, the students are getting inside Aquinas’s (actually Aristotle’s) mind—the purpose of the class. When we arrive at #5, students usually realize then, if not sooner, that Aquinas’s third proof is similar in reasoning to his first proof, the one we had discussed the day before; the logic being employed is identical. #6 leads to a discussion of the difference between contingency and necessity, a distinction on which this whole proof rests. When we get to #7, I share that Aquinas was essentially canonized for taking Aristotle’s various proofs for an “Unmoved Mover” and adding the phrase “and this we all call God,” after each one of them. Some students immediately jump into the discussion and say that what this proof proves may not be “God” but something else, so we then have a good discussion on the nomenclature argument, historically an important argument. If one has made it successfully through the first six steps and pauses on the seventh, in a way, Aquinas has convinced you; by then, we are not disputing the *existence* of this God, only its *name*.

The next course reading is the ontological proof of Anselm.\(^{62}\) I tell students that these are some of the most famous eight words in the history of Western philosophy: “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” I also indicate that, as flawed as this proof by Anselm might be, this proof has more lives than the proverbial cat. Ever since it was first penned in 1078, no matter how many times it has been refuted, it has resurfaces again and again as one or another philosopher has discovered some new side to the argument, with the debate continuing well into our own century. It is one of the most important pieces of Western philosophical reasoning. I put

the eight words up on the board, in slightly rearranged fashion, and say that, while with Aquinas there were seven steps, here there are only two:

Statement #1: Think of the greatest possible conception.  
Statement #2: Existence is “greater” than non-existence.

As we discuss these two steps in order, we start with what he might have meant by the first statement, to think about the greatest possible conception. This is, I remind the students, a statement about the plausibility of an idea, not a statement about reality. So we discuss what Anselm might have meant by this possibility of a “greatest possible conception.” We arrive at the conclusion that, if anyone comes along and proposes a bigger or greater conception than the last, Anselm’s response is always the same: “No problem,” as the definition itself sweeps up any possible “greater than.” Whatever is added to the greatest, it is still the greatest by definition.

Then we move to statement #2: Which is greater, says Hamlet, to be or not to be, existence or non-existence? If statement #1 was a statement about an idea, clearly statement #2 is a statement about the nature of reality; this is why this is an ontological proof, having to do with the nature of ontos, being. I remind the students of the precedents for this difficult concept. The verb “to be” is almost always irregular in Western languages, and when Moses tried to extract God’s name on Mt. Sinai, he was finally told that the deity’s name is YHWH (יהוה), a form of the verb “to be,” meaning either “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” Ontos is always a problem, and its use and understanding here by Anselm may be no less so.

We then discuss Anselm’s second claim, that something which is the greatest in idea alone is less great than something which is an idea and actually exists. Generally, the students buy into this—although occasionally some students wonder if the argument applies only to positive things and not to negatives: is the idea of a devil less great than a real devil? What is
always so encouraging about these Harkness discussions is that introductory students, without any formal training in the history of Western philosophy, can—on their own with their own insights and analysis—arrive at the same arguments, objections, and lines of reasoning which professional philosophers have used over the centuries, even if the exact vocabulary of the reasoning is not correct. Participatory reasoning allows the students to think the very thoughts of professional philosophers, in effect what makes Harkness teaching work.

When we discuss the classical proofs for the existence of God, I tell the students that we should hold off on the weaknesses in the proofs’ arguments until we get the full proofs out on the table. In our discussion of the proofs, we certainly see some of the potential weaknesses, or counterarguments, but pedagogically, it is always better to give one side our full attention, to get the argument out in the best possible light, before we try to air the objections. Going too quickly to the other side in any discussion short-changes a fuller understanding of what the original argument meant.

For the next class, we start by reading William Paley’s restatement of the cosmological/teleological proof in his 1802 Natural Theology, and the argument from design.⁶³ I give them this homework assignment:

Find a number of people (dorm mates, an adviser, Facebook friends, family, someone on the street, anyone but this teacher) and tell them you are doing an interview project for your philosophy class. Ask them if they believe in God. If they say no, just say thanks and walk away. If they say they do believe in God, ask them why. Please write up any three people’s answers for why they believe in God. You are simply transcribing their responses, not commenting on them. Just write up in some detail their reasoning, roughly a paragraph per person.

I ask them to look over their responses to see if anyone had volunteered anything like Anselm’s proof or even some of Aquinas’s first four (all similar in their line of reasoning, with the fifth

being identical to Paley’s). Upon examination and discussion, they see that many interviews come up with a line of reasoning very similar to Paley’s and the teleological proof. No matter how many times that proof is knocked down, it pops right back up, and makes a contemporary appearance in the intelligent design argument, as well.

Next we move to some of the disproofs, starting with Hume and his 1779 *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. The students are good at picking out the key lines of reasoning used by Hume against the teleological proof—such as it does not prove a monotheistic god, that there could have been a design team, that the world might have grown organically rather than being created *de novo*, and so on. We also discuss Kant’s disproofs, but given the choice of which Kantian arguments to use, we steer toward the noumenal/phenomenal split rather than the “existence is not a predicate” argument from the *First Critique*. The former is much more accessible to the students. The God most philosophers thought they were proving was the one who created the noumenal world as Kant understood it, and that split disallows us from saying anything about that world except that it must exist to be sending us signals, but we surely can’t say who created it.

For the more intellectually curious students, however, I do assign sections of Kant from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in which Kant re-proves God’s existence in his very unusual and typically Kantian fashion. Those arguments—the three postulates of practical reason—were discussed at length above, but suffice to say that claiming that God is a construct of the human mind opens the door to serious reflection about their own definitions and understandings of God, both in organized religion as well in the multiplicity of their own personal religions. This

---


section of the course often leads to a number of conversations, in and after class, about faith, religion, God, and where the students are individually in their own religious experiences—all part of the larger process of spiritual identity formation.

When it comes to the penultimate unit of the course, philosophical ethics, we start with an introductory section from a college philosophy textbook, then read a section of Bentham’s ethics of utilitarianism.66 The purpose of these two readings, and the next by Immanuel Kant, is to set up a contrast for the introductory student to consider, and then leave the materials for a later course.67 The contrast is between the deontologists and the teleologists. The introduction from the textbook explains those terms and frames the conversation. We start the first day with this prompt:

In the readings of the last several days, there have been a number of key ethical terms with which one must be familiar in order to discuss the issues of this unit. Taking a few minutes and the space below, please define each of these terms as best you can:
1) deontological ethics
2) teleological ethics

In class, we move right to discussing the following case study.

Honesty: The Damaged Goods
Ellendale School is a large day school in the suburbs of a major city. Classes run from kindergarten through twelfth grade and the school enjoys the respect of the community for its congenial atmosphere and high academic standards. Several years ago, member of the senior class met with the school’s head to request a special room for seniors as a lounge and smoking room. The request was reasonable, but space problems in the school were so severe that nothing could be done about the suggestion.

This past fall, a small house immediately adjacent to Ellendale School came on the market. The headmistress immediately realized that she might well have an answer to the space problem, including the need for a senior lounge. She proposed to the school trustees that the house be purchased and renovated to serve two purposes: the admissions and college


counseling offices could move into half the house, and the senior lounge could be located in the other half. The trustees agreed that this was a fine move, and the house was purchased.

The head called members of the senior class council together and told them that space for the lounge was now available, but that they would have to be responsible for painting, decorating, and furnishing the lounge. It would be their own class project, and everyone was delighted with the availability of the space. The senior class president immediately appointed a special committee to handle decoration, and all seniors rallied around the project. Funds for paint and curtains were raised, and special task forces worked evenings and weekends stripping the walls and painting.

As word of the project spread, everyone connected with the school became interested. A local paint store donated paint, and a parent who was a carpenter supervised the building of bookcases and relocation of room partitions. The question of furnishings was unresolved, however, since the class treasury could not afford expensive couches, tables, lamps, and so forth. While class officers were discussing how to raise funds for furniture, a most unusual event occurred. The head received a telephone call from a senior’s father who wanted to help with the project. He owned a large trucking company and regularly transported furniture from North Carolina manufacturing companies to large stores in southern cities. Mr. Baker said he thought he could donate whatever furniture the students needed for their lounge. Naturally, Ms. Jaynes, the head, was delighted and said she was sure the seniors also would be overjoyed.

When Ms. Jaynes asked Mr. Baker if he would like a receipt for the gift, he said it would not be necessary because the furniture would really be damaged goods. “Damaged goods? What in the world does that mean?” asked Ms. Jaynes. Mr. Baker explained that every load of furniture carried in his trucks was covered by an insurance policy that anticipated a ten percent loss or damage factor. Thus, he would “make sure” that some furniture in a load was “damaged” and would then drop the items off at Ellendale for use in the senior lounge.

Ms. Jaynes was stunned, but Mr. Baker explained that this was “normal business practice” and, in fact, he was actually paying for the furniture because his insurance premium expected the loss in the transit of goods. His company’s insurance claim record had been much lower than others in the trucking industry and he thought the least he could do for the senior class project was to offer free furniture.

Thanking Mr. Baker for his offer, Ms. Jaynes added that she thought the decision to accept the damaged furniture should be made by the senior class council. The next day she called the class officers into her office, told them of the father’s offer along with all the details, and left the decision up to them.68

68 Originally a Council on Religion in Independent Schools case study.
Near the end of the class, we clarify the difference again between teleologists and deontologists. Some in the class have viewed this case in an “it all depends” light, while others see it as simply wrong to take the furniture. That latter approach—there are rules, and rules are rules—is the segue to the second reading, from Kant’s *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. This is the section where Kant explains in considerable detail the idea of the categorical imperative. When we come to class the next day, I use this prompt:

1. What is the difference, as Kant understands it, between an imperative which commands hypothetically and an imperative which commands categorically?
2. Which of the following is correct? Explain why.
   a. The Golden Rule is one of several categorical imperatives as Kant understands the categorical imperative
   b. The Golden Rule is the same as the categorical imperative
   c. The Golden Rule is not an example of the categorical imperative
   d. The Golden Rule contradicts the categorical imperative

In a way, this second question is a trick question, but that is the point of the exercise. If the main point of the day is to try to understand what Kant meant by the categorical imperative, one of the most important ethical theories in Western philosophy, we need to be clear about our terms. We start with the difference between a hypothetical and categorical command, about which there is often much confusion. Then we go to the key issue of how many categorical imperatives Kant thought there were. It is clear that there is only one categorical imperative, so says Kant himself in the reading. Then we put this line on the board: “Act only according to the maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” We translate that mouthful into what has been called the “principle of universalizability.” What you should do is what you would want others to do as well. So far so good, but now we get to the second part of the conversation, namely, exactly what Kant might have meant when he claimed that “the categorical imperative is the same as the Golden Rule.” We start this part of the conversation by
clarifying what the Golden Rule is (Matthew 7:12). Then I let the class go on for a considerable amount of time comparing the two. After they have wrestled with these issues for a while, I move to the point of the day: it all depends on how you define your terms as to whether or not the two are the same. I ask if the Golden Rule “admits to individual variation of interpretation.” Can two people interpret it differently? Most admit, yes, that could be the case. Then I ask the same question for the categorical imperative: Does it “admit to individual variation of interpretation”? Can two people interpret it differently? Here, Kant’s larger point becomes clear. Kant assumes all people are rational, with the same reason in each, so to the degree that each person uses the same reason to make the decisions, the two—the Golden Rule and the categorical imperative—are the same, but to the degree that anything other than reason is allowed into the discussion, something like emotion, then the two are not the same. In short, the Golden Rule admits to individual variation as to the degree that emotion enters into the equation, but for Kant, there is only one possible interpretation of the categorical imperative because all people have the same reason. If there is extra time, and there usually is not, we might read selections from Edward Westermarck’s work on ethical relativism, which developmentally (if not philosophically) fits in nicely with many students’ personal ethics.69

When we had longer semesters—thirteen weeks as opposed to the ten of our current trimesters—we could do a much longer unit on philosophical ethics, then a unit on political philosophy (Kant, Hobbes, Marx), and finally several days on aesthetics. But with time running out, we condense those possible topics into one day on the question, “What is art?” The homework is a brief selection from Mortimer Adler’s Six Great Ideas, “Enjoyable Beauty,” a

---

piece which talks at some length about Kant’s idea of art as “disinterested pleasure.” In class, we do a small experiment to make these abstract issues and concepts come alive for the students. Ahead of time, I have printed up a business card with one student’s name on it, and asked that student to pretend that she or he is the director of a new museum of classical and contemporary art. At the moment, there is nothing in the collection, and he or she, along with the rest of the class as assistant curators, will get to decide what donations to accept to fill this new space. They have vast empty rooms, and wealthy donors will give them gifts of “art,” but they have to decide if they will accept such works.

I describe each piece in succession, and ask the class whether to accept this piece for the museum:

1) A large dark painting of a person with large ruffles around her neck, and only the face lit in the center, and something like “Rembrandt” scribbled in the lower corner

2) A huge painting of various biblical figures, voluptuous women, and much reddish-pink in the painting, with “Rubens” written in the corner

3) An even larger scene, lots and lots of blues and greens, sort of looks like water or water lilies, sort of abstract but not really, with “Monet” in the corner

4) A picnic-like scene, but it looks like it was done by a woodpecker with a brush taped to its beak

5) A grayish painting, very large, with horses and men, but the horses’ ears are coming out the sides of their bodies, and the men’s heads are funny, with noses on their legs, and arms in funny places, all looking like some battle scene

---

6) What looks like a drop cloth left from the construction and renovation of this new museum, sort of dribbles all over the place, but this piece of cloth has now been framed.

7) A canvas, all gray in color, solid gray, with a small artist sign in the center of the lower frame, and the sign reads “My mood,” no artist listed.

8) An empty frame, a nice frame—they must have shipped the painting in another box, but no, this is all there is—so we hang the frame on the wall, and notice that the sign on the lower frame says, “Art?”

9) An icon-like picture of the Madonna, but she appears to have something like dung all over her face.

10) A urinal; it looks like a very old urinal, but it has Marcel Duchamp’s name written on it [actually it says “R. Mutt 1917”]

11) A Braun toaster

Is putting any object on a pedestal in an art museum enough to turn it into art? We debate whether or not, in essence, anything is art, everything is art, and the Waste Management truck should just back up to the unloading bay and dump its load once a week. Kant’s definition is referenced by students in the conversation, but we have a full class period trying to figure out what constitutes beauty, disinterested pleasure, and what is art.

Since these are high school students, and we need to be creative and occasionally have some fun in class, I tell the students that, for their final exam, they need to find all their reading packets and put them in order and review them for one hour. I then give them a final exam which has several formats and they may choose one (blindly):
1) Take at least a dozen philosophers we read and illustrate how all of Western philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato, as A. N. Whitehead claimed.
2) Explain how all of Western philosophy leads to Winnie the Pooh.\textsuperscript{71}
3) Match the philosophers we have read all term with their pictures.

Given Exeter’s student body, even when I tell those who selected the first option—the Whitehead exercise—that this is a joke, and that they can do the photo exam, some insist on completing it and sending it to me later!

When I first came to Phillips Exeter Academy, I was told that a philosophy course would be far beyond the abilities of our student body, even our brightest seniors. An introduction to Western philosophy using only primary source materials would be much too difficult for high school students. Forty years of teaching this material—materials often assigned in college or graduate school due to their difficulty—to a hundred sections and more than a thousand students has convinced me that our students are fully capable of understanding these issues and engaging in these spiritual exercise. It is not simply the content of this course which is so crucial, but the critical thinking skills which an introductory philosophy course uses, encourages, and promotes.

Religion 410: The Emerging Self: Psychology and Religion

REL410: THE EMERGING SELF: PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION
This course offers varied psychological and religious perspectives on human nature and experience. Students will consider the role of religion in relation to the development of the sense of the self. Readings include selections from the writings of major figures in psychology and religion, as well as works of memoir and fiction. Authors may include Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Carol Gilligan, and readings may include Peter Schaffer’s Equus, Hermann Hesse’s Demian, and Anne Lamott’s Traveling Mercies. The course culminates with a reflective writing assignment.

\textsuperscript{71} See Frederick C. Crews, Pooh and the Philosophers: In Which It Is Shown That All of Western Philosophy Is Merely a Preamble to Winnie-The-Pooh (New York: Dutton, 1996).
This course is a perfect place to explore issues of adolescent development and the maturation process, especially as it is influenced by both psychological and religious issues. I have found that reading the play *Equus* is a perfect place to start. The play tells the story of a teenage boy who works in a stable and who blinds six horses, for which he is committed to an asylum for treatment. From the start of the play, the opening soliloquy, it is clear that the protagonist’s predicament—Alan’s blinding of the horses—is the occasion for the psychiatrist to reexamine his own value system, and the two stories run in tandem throughout the two-act play: Alan’s treatment and Dr. Dysart’s sorting out of his own issues. As the story unfolds, while Dr. Dysart describes in increasing detail the nature of his personal and professional dilemma (read: crisis), we find that Alan Strang, the boy, is caught in a conflict between two very different parental attitudes, his father being a very anti-religious printer, while his very pious mother reads to him numerous passages from the Bible, especially those about horses in the books of Job and Revelation. As the doctor treats the boy, we learn more and more about the history and nature of this parental conflict, and how it has influenced Alan’s attitude towards religion. The horse has, in effect, become a surrogate savior figure for the boy, *agnus dei* turned *equus dei*. Meanwhile, Dr. Dysart realizes that Alan and his personal equine religion inject much more passion and meaning into the boy’s life than the doctor finds in his own vapid relationship to his wife and in his armchair worship of Homeric Greece. As the first act ends, Alan goes on a naked midnight ride which is full of religious as well as sexual imagery.

The second act opens with Dysart caught in his own personal, professional, and religious conflicts.

. . . what am I doing here? I don’t mean clinically doing or socially doing—I mean *fundamentally*! These questions, these Whys are fundamental—yet they have no place in a consulting room. So then, do I? . . . This is the

---

feeling more and more with me—. . . ‘Account for me,’ says staring Equus. First account for me!73

In the remainder of the second act, we see Alan actually blind the horses while he is trying to have sex with a young female stable hand, yet the focus is on Dysart’s predicament. As the doctor explains to his hospital companion,

Look . . . to go through life and call it yours—your life—you first have to get your own pain. . . . [T]hat boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it. . . . [T]hat’s what his stare has been saying to me all the time: ‘At least I galloped! When did you? . . . I’m jealous. . . . Jealous of Alan Strang.74

Dysart adds, “Real worship! Without worship you shrink, it’s as brutal as that. . . . I shrank my own life. No one can do it for you.”75 As the play comes to a close, the psychiatrist wonders if Alan’s “religion” (of equine passion with its various quasi-religious rituals) is, in fact, better, more appropriate, more meaningful, than traditional religion and the “religion of normality,” which the psychiatrist practices. The play provides an excellent forum for students to explore and discuss the age-appropriateness of exploring spiritual identity formation issues.

Samuel Terrien provides an incisive analysis of this play by analyzing what he sees as the three central conflicts, parental, adolescent, and professional.76 Using the grid of Terrien’s three conflicts, I guide the students through each scene, trying to ferret out the religious meaning of both Dysart and Alan hunting for someone or something to worship. As out textual analysis comes to an end, I give the following paper assignment:

73 Ibid., 87–88.
74 Ibid., 94.
75 Ibid., 94–95.
76 Samuel Terrien, “‘Equus’: Human Conflicts and the Trinity,” The Christian Century 94, no. 18 (1977): 472–76. Terrien was the aforementioned James Muilenberg’s successor at Union, the person who was instrumental in Buechner’s career plans, as well as his understanding of Scripture.
If you had to select one and only one character, who in your opinion is the main character of the play Equus, and why? Creative—but supportable by the text—answers are welcome. Who is the single most important/main character, how can you demonstrate that in the text, and what does that character’s main role have to do with what the play is about? Hint: Since you have only a page, formulate a thesis quickly and clearly and get right into it. I suggest you plan this assignment by writing a one-sentence paper first, then allow yourself two sentences, then a one-paragraph paper, then write out a one-page paper.

The next day, we have a conversation on this topic. Most students always select Alan or Dysart—but the most provocative suggestions are those of the several students who reliably select Equus itself, Equus being the projection of anyone who needs something to worship. As Terrien writes, “Equus is not really a horse. . . . Equus is the image of God. More specifically, Equus is the image of the particular god whom everyone conceives in his or her own consciousness and unfulfilled fantasy. Equus is the polymorphic symbol of the projections into the ultimate.”77

The next book we read is The Alphabet of Grace by Frederick Buechner. Having already addressed it at length in the second chapter, I will not discuss this book in any detail here, except to note that students have a difficult time believing that God might have something to do with daily life and be speaking through quotidian events. As we discuss Buechner’s images, it is clear that his metaphors catch students off guard. This is not what they had expected a “religion book” to be like. By extension, there may therefore be many forms of “religious experience” the students had never considered. This is an important issue to discuss as well as work out, both curricularly and personally.

77 Ibid., 476.
The next assignment is Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*. While the issues of geriatrics are not of particular interest to teenagers, *Krapp’s Last Tape* is a wonderful intergenerational play. It is the story of a man in his late sixties who annually records on his reel-to-reel tape recorder the highlights of his past year, but he does so by first listening to some of his past years’ recordings. Therefore, Krapp is listening to recordings made while he was in his late thirties thinking about what his life was like in his late twenties. The play is thus a conversation between three different Krapps. I begin class with this exercise:

When we began *The Fall*, I asked you what literary form the novel took, and some of you answered correctly that it was a confession of sorts. Now, in regard to this Beckett play, a similar question. What literary form does this play take? And so what? What’s the significance of the answer to this question in relation to the larger questions of the meaning of the play or Beckett’s overall point?

Beckett is fun to read, and the play provides a good interlude to some of the heavier materials on either side of it. Nonetheless, it is another piece of literature which might lead the students to reflect on who they are and from whence they have come to arrive at this point in their lives.

The next book we read is Hesse’s *Demian*, one of the greatest *Bildungsromans* of the twentieth century. Even though it was a “hippie manual” of the 1960s, it still moves students to profound conversations, and the teacher can mine its many levels for virtually endless conversations. The novel tells the story of a young man, Emil Sinclair, about age eight or nine, who lives in the “realm of light” (read: childhood), and who, through a story he makes up involving stealing apples (read: Garden of Eden) to impress the local bully from “the dark realm,” finds himself cast out into the turbulent world of adolescence, where he is forced to set...

---


off on the path towards maturation. Alternating between the two realms of childhood innocence and youthful transgressions, dreaming Freudian dreams of killing his father, the protagonist finally is saved by a mysterious older boy named Demian who appears to have special powers over others. The two of them go through confirmation class together, during which Demian suggests some provocative and unusual interpretations of biblical stories. Emil then goes off to boarding school, where again he alternates between being the righteous adolescent and the drunken student. Meeting an old organist, Pistorius, Emil finds his way back to a more pious life, aided by thoughts of a young woman, Beatrice, whom he sees but never actually speaks with. Meeting Demian’s mother, Frau Eva, Emil learns more about the process of growing up, at which time he is drafted and goes off to fight in World War I. Wounded in a battle, Emil mysteriously encounters Demian while the two of them lie in a field hospital, and after Demian speaks to Emil, it appears that Demian dies or disappears, and the novel ends with the enigmatic closing line,

But sometimes when I find the key and climb deep inside myself where the images of fate lie aslumber in the dark mirror, I need only bend over that dark mirror to behold my own image, now completely resembling him, my brother, my master.  

80

When we come to that last sentence, I give the students the choice of several paper topics from which they may choose. After the papers come in, several more days of conversation ensue, and in those conversations, it often becomes apparent that this last sentence of the book may hold the key to understanding the novel. In order to see the meaning of the last sentence, we back up a few pages and go through the last scene of the book once again—but with the benefit of the students having spent considerable time on their own trying to work out the meaning of these pages and their symbolism.

80 Ibid., 140–41.
After having mostly read literature thus far, we turn to selections from Paul Tillich’s *The Dynamics of Faith*. Today’s students know little about, and seem even less interested in, denominational issues, or even the basic Roman Catholic/Protestant distinction—and, as much as it seemed a lively topic when I was in seminary, to talk today of the “Protestant principle” introduces into the conversation an element of unneeded confusion. Perhaps it is my own limitations, but as important as Tillich is in modern Christian thought, his basic ideas of faith and doubt, and symbols versus signs, need a more modern vehicle to be accessible to today’s high school seniors—so we read just the first few chapters and move on. On the topic of Tillich, I assign this short class exercise:

Assuming for the sake of this exercise that Tillich is correct in his description of what symbols are and how they function, exactly what is Equus a symbol for? A symbol points to, stands for something else, and in the case of this play, what?

Next, we read two chapters from Erik Erikson’s *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, one of the key texts for the course. His theory that adolescence is the time in a person’s life when an identity is formed—“identity versus identity confusion”—is a crucial part of the spiritual identity formation process outlined earlier in this dissertation. After the first day’s reading, I use this prompt in class:

Define in your own words exactly what Erikson means by these terms: 1—The “epigenetic principle” 2—“Crisis”

We spend the rest of the period going over the chart in which Erikson blocks out his version of the eight stages of man and what the normative developmental crisis—turning point—is for each of the ages. We note that the first several stages draw on Freud’s ideas, but emphasize the shift with Erikson from purely psychological to a focus on the psychosocial. After this, we focus on

---


Stage V—identity versus identity confusion. We note Marie Jahoda’s definition of a “healthy personality,” “according to which a healthy personality actively masters his environment, shows a certain unity of personality, and is able to perceive the world and himself correctly.” Then, since “crisis” is often understood as a negative word, we have to resuscitate its more positive meaning for Erikson, and see that the issues of identity versus identity confusion are not defined by Erikson as abnormal or unhealthy. That leads us to the key part of the reading, Erikson’s definition of the process of identity formation, admittedly one of the longer and more complex sentences the students will ever read. We carefully deconstruct that sentence, and try to unravel its various levels of meaning. Some sketches on the board of the reflecting typologies helps, but I have often found that rereading Demian again in light of Erikson is also of great benefit. The novel is, in many ways, a perfect case study of Erikson’s theory.

Depending on how much time is left at the end of the term, we often turn to a novella by Nathaniel West, Miss Lonelyhearts. It involves an advice columnist for a local newspaper who starts to take his work too seriously, or at least the problems of his readers too serious, and, in the face of a mocking editor named Shrike (like the bird of prey), Miss L tries various possible solutions or responses to those problems. Compounding his problems, Miss L has a girlfriend whose default response is escape to the country, so most of the story concerns Miss L’s battles to find a more appropriate answer to these pressing personal problems. As the story unfolds, Miss L takes on more and more of a messianic complex, until finally he is shot dead by the disgruntled husband of a letter-writer with whom Miss L had slept. Written in 1933, the book contains a sharp social commentary on the rising skepticism in the media about religion’s capacity to “solve man’s problems,” a commentary just as valid today, if not more so. We spend several days on

83 Nathaniel West, Miss Lonelyhearts & The Day of the Locust (New York: New Directions, 1971).
this sixty-page story, and then I give the students a short paper to write, to draw out the unusual way the story ends.

Given all the possible endings available to him, why did West select this particular one? Why did he have the main character killed at the end of the story?

Next, we read some secondary source materials about C. G. Jung so the students can get a feel for this important figure. Some years, we read Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*, as well as Jung’s *Psychology and Religion*, but more recently, I have moved to several chapters from Frieda Fordham’s *An Introduction to Jung’s Psychology*. We read the Introduction, Chapter 3 on “the archetypes of the collective unconscious,” Chapter 4 on “religion and the individuation process,” and Chapter 8, which offers a biographical sketch of Jung’s life. We summarize Jung’s many important ideas by watching segments of the Laurens van der Post 1972 movie on the life of Jung. The movie is an excellent introduction to the life and thinking of Jung by someone who knew him personally and who records the scenes of Jung’s life on location at Jung’s various homes alongside Lake Zürich.

For the course’s final paper, I pattern the assignment on the NPR radio show, *This I Believe*. I give the students more space than the pieces presented on the show, up to 1500 words, but the paper still has the same general philosophy. What is helpful about the radio show is that the pieces are “religious” in the way that the term is used in this dissertation: the aim is not to present official doctrine, but to tell stories that illustrate something about what one personally

---


86 These radio talks have been published in two volumes: Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, eds., *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006); Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, eds., *This I Believe II: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010).
believes. I give the students an assignment sheet which includes a few sample “This I Believe” essays, and concludes with my own set of instructions, including the grading matrix for the paper.

This I Believe

This is not an assignment one could do only once; this is only the first. You might keep in mind nine issues as you write your “This I Believe” paper.

1. Principle of selection: Have I selected and discussed what’s important, or have I spent too much time describing things of little or no value to me? In other words, did I pick the right experience(s) to illustrate whatever point I may be making?

2. Personal not confessional: Have I described events, people or places in such a way that I say something important about me but not in such a way that I violate my privacy? There can be a thin line between something which is personal and confessional, and at no time in doing this assignment should you say something which you consider private. A good “This I Believe” essay does not mean a public confession, and, in fact, I hope you would avoid doing so. Don’t be uncomfortable and don’t make me uncomfortable.

3. Affirmation not criticism: Have I told the reader/listener what’s important to me in a positive sense and avoided an extended criticism of what I find wrong or what I don’t believe? Be positive. Don’t unload on something or someone and leave it at that. This is what I do believe, not what I don’t.

4. “Religion” or “religious” broadly understood: Have I allowed my imagination to range broadly across all issues of meaning, purpose, and value in my life, and not confined my thinking to traditional religious issues or what I may know from a religious institution? You need not mention God, church, or the Bible anywhere in this essay. In fact, there is no expectation that you will. You will be talking about what we in class, in other words, constantly refer to as “big R religion,” not “little r religion.”

5. Show not tell: Following the adage of English teachers to show, not tell, have I illustrated what I want to say by way of examples and not simply made my point through theory or concept alone? A “This I Believe” essay is a personal story filled with personal examples, with the theory or concepts being mentioned only in passing, if at all, when I generalize from my case to that of the reader. Your essay, in other words, will be almost exclusively stories drawn from your life, first person stories in which you are showing us by way of example what you wish to say, not telling us. That means you need
to be subtle, not so subtle we can’t follow, but don’t hit us over the head either.

6. Coherency: Does the essay hang together? Have I written it in such a fashion that it seems to be one story, with a beginning, middle, and end? Does it read smoothly, both in terms of mechanics as well as content?

7. Creativity: Have I written up my essay in an interesting fashion so that the reader wants to read more and is caught up in what I am saying? This doesn’t mean you need to have Moses-type experiences, but would I be interested in listening to my own essay were someone else reading it?

8. Structure: An essay such as this has some kind of introduction—some hint of your topic, perhaps a quotation or a poem or song lyric or a little catchy story—which sets the tone and tells the reader where you’re going, and then at the end there is some kind of a conclusion, the final sentence being “This I believe,” or some variant which says “I believe….”

9. Originality: You may not use anything for this essay previously used or submitted in any other class or on a college application. To plagiarize yourself is still plagiarism, with all the attendant penalties. You need not invent a new life for this assignment, but you must invent something new to complete this assignment successfully. You might think about the books and issues we have been discussing this term. Who am I and what do I believe? Where does my set of beliefs originate? As my developing self changes, what constants can I hang onto? Did the readings we did and the discussions we had cause me to rethink or reformulate any of my ideas or beliefs? You have seen a common theme running through the materials this term, namely, folks struggling with issues of meaning and purpose in their lives, what is really important, and what really counts. This essay is one way to locate and state what some of those beliefs might be.

This assignment may be given a number of weeks before the course is over, with the essay due near the end of the term as the capstone for the course. While it is not my place to push a grand summary or synthesis of all these materials on each student at the end of the term, I can safely assume with this assignment that each student is making some kind of connections between the readings in the process of writing it. That is sufficient. They will have many years, God willing,
to work out the rest of that synthesis—the very issues at the heart of this dissertation, namely, what it means to grow up, discover a self, and develop a spiritual identity.

Religion 311: Global Ethics: What’s Wrong with the World?

REL311: GLOBAL ETHICS: WHAT’S WRONG WITH THE WORLD?
Melting polar ice caps, oceans filled with plastic and empty of fish, soon-to-be-exhausted fossil fuel sources, the continued scourge of global diseases, increasing disparity between the rich and poor in the face of exploding population growth, and other intractable world problems—what kind of a world do we live in? What kind of a world should we live in? This course will read authors in the forefront of social and ethical analysis, such as Jared Diamond, Peter Singer, Lester Brown, and Bill McKibben, as we develop appropriate responses to the global crises of this and the next generation—in population, the environment, energy, pollution, climate, health, wealth, food, and many others. The course will include work with current news sources—both national and international—as well as numerous DVDs and online clips to illustrate some of the problems as well as proposed solutions. Open to uppers and seniors.

In some ways, this course is directly informed by Bonhoeffer’s theology of ethical social engagement. For more than thirty years, one of the most popular courses in our Religion Department curriculum was a course called Social Ethics, which dealt with issues of abortion, reproductive rights, treatment termination, affirmative action, multiculturalism, gun control, immigration reform, welfare reform, obscenity—the gamut of social issues one reads about in newspapers or hears about on the evening news. However, other departments at the Academy started to address global ethical issues in their own curricula, so we decided to offer a course focusing on a number of these larger topics, all those subjects usually included under the heading of environmental ethics. Social Ethics would still be taught, but we would offer a new course covering such topics as population issues, finite natural resources, peak oil, food supplies and distribution, world hunger, and a host of ethical issues raised by such authors as Peter Singer,
Bill McKibben, Lester Brown, Jared Diamond, Paul Hawken, and Michael Pollan. The purpose of this new course, introduced about six years ago, was to educate and sensitize students to the ethical issues of being a global citizen in a globalized world.

More than most other syllabi, the materials for this course vary from year to year, as there is a constant updating of readings and issues. What is discussed below, therefore, is but a sample of what has been done one recent year. Thus, this section will be different from the previous three examples, and much briefer—intended only to give the reader a sense of what might be possible for such a course. Having noted that, however, one constant in the course, namely, reading *The New York Times* as part of class. I generally find that students know almost nothing of the larger world. In their defense, they may rarely have time to read a daily newspaper, or are of the generation that gets its news from elsewhere, often over the internet, and often in little bites at the bottom of some social media screen. Even the most elementary question in class about some current event usually elicits a blank stare, and we have to stop and explain the event. Therefore, I insist in any ethics course I teach that the students read a national paper of record on a daily basis, in this case *The New York Times*, and then have them do something constructive with that reading. Over the years, I have tried different approaches to using the newspaper in class. The one I have used with success for the last decade involves each student keeping a scrapbook of articles with commentary, at least one article a day for the duration of the course. Without fail, students tell me after the course that reading the paper and keeping a scrapbook of interesting articles—and, most importantly, writing all the commentaries—was one of the most valuable educational experiences they had while at Exeter. They thank me, again and again, for (in their words) “forcing them” to read a newspaper and learn about the larger world around them. What is more, by the end of the course, what seemed at first to be a fairly random
scrapbook often turns out to be a document illustrating their own progress in identifying and understanding the various global ethical issues upon which this course focuses.

The social justice component is front and center with this assignment. This assignment, and its evaluation by me, encourages the students to become thoughtful, sensitive social commentators on the many ethical issues in the global world in which they live. There is a subtext to the work in this course, and it is grounded in one of Phillips Exeter Academy’s three mottoes, *non sibi* (“not for self”). Whatever a given student’s position on any particular issue, each student is encouraged to become both knowledgeable of the plight of others in the world, and sensitized to the obligation to use one’s particular talents to alleviate that suffering. While *non sibi* is tied into the larger mission of the school, and while this course and our department do not have a monopoly on the teaching of it, this course takes seriously the teaching of that virtue.

In regard to the exact syllabus, I present below the current list of day-by-day class topics, with the source of the reading selection next to it, but this is just a sample of the way a course such as this can be structured, and not meant to be a definitive syllabus.

*Religion 311 Global Ethics: What’s Wrong with the World?*

**Introduction**

Opening Day current events quiz

#1 An article about the Pacific gyre.\(^ {87}\)

#2 selections from *Bottomfeeder: How to Eat Ethically in a World of Vanishing Seafood*; introduction to what’s happening to the world's fisheries and oceans\(^ {88}\)

**Theory: Part One**

#3 Garrett Hardin’s 1968 essay “The Tragedy of the Commons”; selections from *Moby-Duck*\(^ {89}\)

---


Population issues

#4 Jared Diamond’s *Collapse* prologue; Easter Island

#5 Jared Diamond’s *Collapse* concluding chapter

#6 web materials on population growth plus population packet

#7 Second population packet from *Nova*

#8 National Geographic *Human Footprint* website activities

#9 Lester R. Brown’s *Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization*, Chapter 7 on “Eradicating Poverty and Stabilizing Population”; triage class simulation game

Energy issues

#10 Paul Roberts’s *End of Oil* prologue; concept of peak oil

#11 Paul Roberts’s *End of Oil* chapter 2

#12 Lester Brown’s *Plan B 3.0* chapter 2, “Deteriorating Oil and Food security”

#13 Fracking: Tom Wilber’s *Under the Surface: Fracking, Fortunes, and the Fate of the Marcellus Shale; Earth: The Operators’ Manual* selections.

#14 Lester Brown’s *Plan B 3.0* chapter 11, “Raising Energy Efficiency”

#15 Lester Brown’s *Plan B 3.0* chapter 12, “Turning to renewable energy”

---


91 Ibid., 419–40.


97 Ibid., 44–65.


Theory Part Two

#16 Peter Singer’s “The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle” and “What Should a Billionaire Give—and What Should You?”

#17 Zell Kravinsky case from The New Yorker

#18 Two excerpts from Peter Singer’s The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty

#19 Two excerpts from Bill McKibben’s Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future

Case Studies

#20 Colin Beavan’s No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process and Elizabeth Kolbert’s “Green Like Me: living without a fridge, and other experiments in environmentalism”

#21 Annie Leonard’s The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff Is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health—and a Vision for Change

#22 The sources of “our stuff”: Fred Pearce’s Confessions of an Eco-Sinner: Tracking Down the Sources of My Stuff

#23 Garbage and waste: Elizabeth Royte’s Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash

101 Ibid., 237–61.


108 Fred Pearce, Confessions of an Eco-Sinner: Tracking Down the Sources of My Stuff (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

Food issues

#24 Lester Brown’s *Plan B 3.0* chapter 9, “Feeding Eight Billion Well”\(^\text{110}\)
#25 Paul Roberts’s *The End of Food*\(^\text{111}\)
#26 Peter Singer and Jim Mason’s *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*, “The Way We Eat Introduction to Food and Ethics,” and “The Ethics of Eating Meat”\(^\text{112}\)
#27 Michael Pollan’s *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*, “Introduction,” and “Escape from the Western Diet.”\(^\text{113}\)
#28 Speciesism and eating meat: Peter Singer’s *Practical Ethics*, “Equality and its Implications”\(^\text{114}\)

In addition to the above reading packets, I have also assembled a battery of DVDs and YouTube clips which I either show in class or have the students watch as homework.\(^\text{115}\) These clips and films are very helpful in a course such as this because they both educate the students about the issues and show them that real people face these issues on a daily basis. It thus drives home that this is not simply an academic problem for scholars.

As becomes apparent, almost every author we read for the course notes that, while these are problems that have been building slowly over the last decades (or centuries or even millennia), the responses need to happen in the immediate future. Whether the issue be exponential population growth, peak oil (fossil fuel depletion), finite natural resources, declining water resources, world food problems, or climate change, the window of opportunity to deal with


the problems is about one or two generations long before we reach a tipping point and it is too late. It becomes evident to the students that the period of response time is essentially their lifetimes, and with this knowledge, the students become energized by a sense of purpose.

Religion 220: Faith and Doubt

REL220: FAITH AND DOUBT This course encourages students’ curiosity about religious experience across the spectrum from traditional belief to atheism. By reading the works by authors such as Elie Wiesel, Alice Walker, Frederick Buechner, Sue Monk Kidd, and Christopher Hitchens, students will engage questions of faith, belief, doubt, personal spirituality vs. organized religion, and the ultimate meaning of one’s life. The course ends with each student writing a personal meditation on a topic of his or her own choosing. Open to juniors and lowers.

This is an introductory-level class for ninth- and tenth-grade students, so the students have probably not previously taken a religion class at the Academy. This is their introduction, then, to the academic study of religion. Developmentally and personally, most students enter this course knowing little about religion, and what religion they know is usually connected to organized religion, rarely anything close to the understanding of “religion” used in this dissertation. The purpose of the course is thus to introduce them to the academic study of religion and to expose them to a broader understanding of the religious. I do that by selecting books and classroom exercises which allow the students to encounter others struggling with issues of faith and doubt. The average student in the thirteen-to-fifteen age range has little exposure to, or appreciation for, the idea that religion and faith might entail any struggle on the believer’s part. At the end of the term, I assign students to write about their own struggles utilizing this broader definition of religion. While others in our department have used many different books over the years drawn from many different sources and religious traditions, for
me, the following five or six books have worked best.\textsuperscript{116} I have selected two or three books from a Christian perspective (\textit{Barabbas}, \textit{The Alphabet of Grace}, and \textit{Miss Lonelyhearts}), one from a Jewish perspective (\textit{Night}), one from Hinduism/Buddhism (\textit{Siddhartha}), and one from Zen (\textit{The Empty Mirror}).

I begin the course with Pär Lagerkvist’s novel \textit{Barabbas}.\textsuperscript{117} This is a fictionalized account of the life of the person released instead of Jesus. The novel takes its inspiration from the Gospel story that there was a prisoner, perhaps a robber or murderer, whom Pontius Pilate, at the insistence of the crowd, pardoned instead of Jesus (Matthew 27:16–26). The rest of the book is drawn from Lagerkvist’s imagination. We go over the biblical episode in class, scant as it is, and sometimes for context I assign the entire book of Matthew to be read as homework.

We start the discussion of the book with an in-class writing assignment asking the students to do a close reading of the novel’s first paragraph. Ninth and tenth graders at the Academy have often not done much close textual analysis, so one of the skills we work on in a literature course such as this is assisting students to learn how to read a text carefully. In an upper-level class, one might start a class with a question such as, “What did you think of the reading for today?”, or “What would you like to talk about?” But with younger students, the opening questions have to be more directed. Almost the entire first class period is spent on the novel’s first paragraph, starting with such questions as, “Who are the ‘theys’ of the first sentence?” This one is easy for the students: it is the three people on the crosses, Jesus and the


two others being crucified with him, the two Marys, Veronica, Simon, and Joseph. Next, we go to the person “rather to one side,” and his “rivet-eyes” on the dying man. Who is he, I ask? The students volunteer that it is Barabbas. But why, I ask, have we thus far had seven occurrences of “they,” “him,” “he,” or “his”? If you win the Nobel Prize for Literature, why don’t you fill in all those pronouns and possessive adjectives? Wouldn’t the opening paragraph be clearer?

Then we move to the last sentence of the paragraph: “This book is about him.” Who is the him? Again, the answer is obvious: It is Barabbas. I ask if anyone knows what the name Barabbas means. Occasionally, someone knows, but I get to the issue by asking if anyone in the class has had a Bar Mitzvah and know what the term means. A mitzvah is a good deed, and bar means son, so Bar Mitzvah means “son of the good deed.” Someone usually knows that abba means father, so we can deduce that Barabbas means “son of the father.” It must be observed that Harkness teaching is slow; it takes time to cover the material, but in this conversation in class, the students learn that this is their conversation.

Having laid the groundwork, I can now pose what students in the upper grades at Exeter jokingly call a “deep hidden meaning” question: “How many sons of the father are there?” Some in the class get to the point of realizing that there might be many, with “sons of the father” understood in many different ways. Jesus was the son of the Father, Barabbas was the son of some father, the boys in the class are the sons of numerous fathers; there are lots of sons, just as there are lots of fathers. This book is about Barabbas, but that means the son of the father, and in the first paragraph how many sons of the father are there? Well, there is Barabbas, the prisoner, and there is Jesus the son of the Father, and maybe there is us, some son of some father. So who does the author tell us that this book is about? Those students still following the conversation realize that we, the readers, have a problem here. The author has told us directly in the first
paragraph that the novel is about “him,” but the antecedent of the him has several possibilities: *bar-abbas* as son of the father could mean Barabbas, the prisoner, Jesus the son of the Father, or even, by a stretch, us the readers as some sons of some fathers. Is this book about the released prisoner, Jesus, or us?

As the students discover in the next several classes, there is a series of key passages in the book which each raise this same issue of indefinite antecedents. Starting with the novel’s opening, we ask why anyone in his right mind, released by a fickle crowd in front of Pontius Pilate’s porch on Passover Eve, would go to the scene of the Crucifixion. Wouldn’t you, as the released Barabbas, head out of town as quickly as you could and get as much distance between you and the condemned Jesus as possible? What is it in the released man which draws him to the Crucifixion? Is there something about Jesus? The next scene we analyze is when Barabbas appears at the Resurrection. Why is he there? What does he expect to happen? At the tomb of Jesus, Barabbas meets a hare-lipped girl, a believer in Jesus, who is also there to see the Son/sun rise. Later, it is clear that she witnesses the Resurrection, but about Barabbas, the text is completely ambiguous. “It all happened so quickly that he couldn’t quite follow it—now of all times when he really should have had his wits about him!” The students discuss the dilemma of a person being one of only two people in history to have actually been at Jesus’ resurrection.

Next, we analyze the scene in which the hare-lipped girl is stoned to death for her belief in Jesus. With Barabbas looking on, she gazes up from the stoning pit to proclaim, “He has come! He has come! I see him! I see him!” It is unclear if it is Barabbas she sees (as her rescuer) or Jesus (as her Savior). What is the point of such ambiguity in the novel’s pronouns? Why are Jesus and Barabbas, both sons of fathers, so constantly confused with each other?

---

118 Ibid., 36.
119 Ibid., 79.
Several scenes later, we learn that Barabbas killed his father, a man named Eliahu, a name derived from a Hebrew root meaning God, so he is the son of a man whose name could mean God. As the parallels between Jesus and Barabbas build in the remaining scenes of the novel—both go deep underground, “from which no one ever returns”—we finally come to the last chapter of the book in which it appears that, in fact, Barabbas finds his faith and becomes a Christian, and in joining the other Christians setting Rome on fire, he is captured and tried for his faith in Jesus. Condemned to death for his apparent faith, in the very last scene in the novel he is led out to his own crucifixion, a scene described this way in the book:

Only Barabbas was left hanging there alone, still alive. When he felt death approaching, that which he had always been so afraid of, he said out into the darkness, as though he were speaking to it:
—To thee I deliver my soul.
And then he gave up the ghost.  

What is the “it” in, “as though he were speaking to it”? Is it the darkness, or is it God? In other words, does he die a believer or an unbeliever? The students are then given this essay prompt for an overnight paper:

*First Barabbas Paper*

The last few lines of the novel continue the pattern of ambiguous pronouns/antecedents as well as the use of the phrase “as though.” Note that, when Barabbas dies, he speaks out into the darkness “as though he were speaking to it.” Then as he dies, he says, “To thee I deliver up my soul.” Depending on how you interpret the italicized words in these quotations, Barabbas dies either a believer or a non-believer. What do you think? Which side would you come down on? Defend your interpretation in a brief essay.

The next day, the students come to class with their essays, and we go around the table and compare answers. Almost without fail, about half the class has written an essay defending the
thesis that Barabbas dies a believer, the other half a non-believer. A long debate about the text ensues, each side defending the validity of its interpretation.

At the end of class, I then give them a second overnight paper assignment:

*Second Barabbas Paper*

If an author writes a novel with an ending that can be interpreted in two entirely different and even contradictory ways, it is fair to say that the author’s point is neither “interpretation A” (Barabbas dies a believer) nor “interpretation B” (he dies a non-believer), but “interpretation C” (something else). Thus, what is “interpretation C”? What is Lagerkvist’s real message? Write a one-page essay for tomorrow’s class on what’s really going on in this novel.

When we reconvene, a long class discussion follows about what “C” might be, and in the course of that conversation, students debate not only the textual evidence for Barabbas being a believer or not, but more importantly, and more germane to the purpose of the course, what evidence anyone would need to be a believer. Here was a man for whom Jesus died, who was at the Crucifixion, at the Resurrection, whose father was named God. Perhaps the book is the author’s Rorschach test for the reader’s own faith, for providing a mirror to the reader to discuss what kinds of evidence would be needed for the reader to believe.¹²¹

We then move on to Elie Wiesel’s *Night*.¹²² When discussing this book, we sometimes run into a lack of biblical as well as historical contextual knowledge. Therefore, for the first two days on Wiesel, the students read Genesis 1–9 and 11–22, and I give them a content quiz on the readings. Then the next day we read Exodus 1–20, with a second quiz. For many students, reading any part of Scripture is a new experience, and we spend some time in class just going

---

¹²¹ In the Gospels, it is always those closest to Jesus who have the most difficulty believing. Others believe instantly, but those who spend the most time with him and hear his words and see his works have so much trouble. Perhaps the larger message of the Gospels is that the “blindness” of the original disciples mirrors the blindness of contemporary Christians and the difficulties they have in believing. Faith is always a struggle, even in established religions.

over what happened, who did what, what a covenant means, how Judaism emerged in a polytheistic world, what a monotheistic faith means, and so on. The stage is set to understand how the Jews saw themselves as God’s chosen people, and what the reciprocal obligations were on each side of that covenantal relationship. Next, we may cover some background about World War II and the Third Reich. When we come to the actual book, a slim volume, we read it over three classes. While there are many technical terms specific to Judaism THAT we need to clarify—Kabbala, phylacteries, etc.—given the biblical and historical work we just did, we focus on those passages where the devout Wiesel discusses his Judaism and how it affects his view of events. It becomes clear to the students that what is happening to Wiesel puts a large question mark next to his faith. He writes, “For the first time, I felt revolt rise up in me. Why should I bless His name? The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the All-Powerful and Terrible, was silent. What had I to thank Him for?”123 He writes that, in the concentration camp, “Some talked of God and of his mysterious ways, of the sins of the Jewish people, and of their future deliverance. But I had ceased to pray. How I sympathized with Job. I did not deny God’s existence, but I doubted His absolute justice.”124 In class, we have extensive conversations about what Wiesel was thinking, and how he reacted to his time in the camps, and what transpired there for him and his faith. It is not that younger students do not understand how Wiesel seems to be losing his faith, but this idea is clearly a new thought for many of them.

In Chapter 5, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Wiesel writes of his unfolding and changing thoughts as the inmates gathered for this most important of High Holy Days.

This day I had ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone—terribly alone in a world without God and

123 Ibid., 43.
124 Ibid., 55–56.
without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty, to whom my life had been tied for so long. I stood amid that praying congregation, observing it like a stranger.  

A chapter later, the book ends with Wiesel’s survival (but not that of his father) and liberation from the camp.

This is a difficult but moving book for young students to read, but to leave Wiesel’s story there seems incomplete. Therefore, I have selectively edited the Wiesel corpus, not just his written words in other books, but the numerous video clips of him, to provide the students in this course with some examples of his subsequent thinking and journey. Sometimes I give the materials out as two or three packets, or all as one. Here are some of the written materials:

1) Two readings side by side: the first is the passage in Night where Wiesel tells the story of the small boy being hanged while he wonders where God is. Opposite on the same page is a passage from Wiesel’s The Gates of the Forest in which this exchange takes place:

   Auschwitz proves that nothing has changed, that the primeval war goes on. Man is capable of love and hate, murder and sacrifice. He is Abraham and Isaac together. God himself hasn’t changed.
   
   Gregor was angry. “After what happened to us, how can you believe in God?”
   
   With an understanding smile on his lips, the Rebbe answered, “How can you not believe in God after what has happened?”
   
   They argued passionately; Gregor believed he had won. But now he was ashamed of his victory, as if it were an offense, not to the Rebbe, but to this assembly to which he meant everything.

2) A Newsweek story on Auschwitz from January 16, 1995, mostly for assisting the students to understand the history of concentration camps in the Third Reich, but where the last two pages are a piece by Wiesel reflecting on his experiences in the camps.

3) A longer essay by Wiesel from the May 27, 1981 issue of the Christian Century in which Wiesel is quoted in the subtitle saying: “It is not because I don’t speak that you won’t understand me; it is because you won’t understand me that I don’t speak.” He goes on to add:

---

125 Ibid., 79.

126 Ibid., 75–76.


I felt particularly like a stranger. I had lost my faith, and thus, my sense of belonging and orientation. My faith in life was covered with ashes; my faith in humanity was laughable, childish, sterile; my faith in God was shaken. Things and words had lost their meaning, their axis. An image of the Kabbala described the state of my soul at that time; all of creation had moved from its center in order to exile itself. Whom was I to lean on? What was I to cling to? I was looking for myself, I was fleeing from myself, and always there was this taste of failure, this feeling of defeat inside me.\textsuperscript{130}

4) A profile of Wiesel and his wife from \textit{The New York Times Magazine} from October 23, 1986, in which he recounts the agonizing decision he and his wife had to make about whether or not to have a child, and to bring such a child into \textit{this} world.\textsuperscript{131}

5) A November 4, 1979 \textit{New York Times} article which recounts Wiesel’s first return to Birkenau after almost a third of a century, and why it took him that long to return.\textsuperscript{132}

6) The final page from the second volume of his 1999 autobiography, \textit{And the Sea is Never Full}, in which he writes as follows:

\begin{quote}
I am afraid of losing my way. Like Elhanan in \textit{The Forgotten} I am afraid of forgetting. I read, I re-read what I have written, what others have written. And God in all that? I stumble on three poignant word in the Book of Lamentations—the prophet says to the Lord, “Haragta lo khamalta.” You killed, You had no pity. Earlier the prophet said to the Lord, “In Your anger, You hid and persecuted us.” Why, God? Why? I am afraid to know the answer. I am afraid not to. But above all, I tremble at the idea that my memory could become empty, that I could forget the reasons that have allowed me to set one word after the other.\textsuperscript{133}
\end{quote}

7) A January 28, 2000 article from \textit{The New York Times}, entitled “Wiesel Urges Germany to Ask Forgiveness.”\textsuperscript{134}

In class, I show a video interview with Wiesel, filmed around 1979, in which he is asked about the concentration camps, and what, thirty years later, he understands about what happened

\begin{itemize}
\item[130] Ibid.
\item[133] Elie Wiesel, \textit{And the Sea is Never Full} (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999), 410.
\end{itemize}
there. After explaining that he cannot understand how the Holocaust happened—“all of the Jews were victims, but all of the killers were Christians; they are your [the interviewer’s] problem”—he then goes on to say, “You can be a Jew with God; you can be a Jew against God; but you cannot be a Jew without God.”

One day in the camp a number of learned men—sages—decided to put God on trial. I know. I was there. Arguments went back and forth for several days. Finally the verdict came back.

Guilty.

Then one of the men said, “Now, let us go pray.”

One day I would like to do a story based on what happened. But I would add another character, a character who would defend God; the only one who takes God’s side; the only one who says God’s ways are justified. And his name would be Satan.

As homework for the next class, I give students this prompt:

Write a one-page rough draft analysis of this story. Why do the “learned sages” put God on trial? Why, when he is found guilty, do they still go pray (and to whom)? Most importantly, when Wiesel rewrites the story someday, why is he going to include a new character whose role is to defend God, and why—of all possible names—is that new character named “Satan”? 

In Harkness, conversations are not fast, but the more we discuss the students’ responses to this prompt, the more we come to focus on the character of Satan, and why Wiesel would write Satan into this story as a person who defends God’s ways as just. The students gradually come to see that what is “satanic” about Satan is that he is the only one presumptuous enough to think he could understand the mind of God, that he could understand how God could see the events of the Holocaust as “just.” That is not an easy point for ninth- and tenth-graders to understand, but they get a firsthand experience of the relation of faith and doubt, belief and uncertainty.

---


136 Ibid.
The next day, I show a long 1986 interview with Wiesel. In this video clip, after recounting the story of how he wrote *Night*, he talks about how, after release from the camps, he moved first to Paris and then New York, to become an author in America. When asked to explain his career, Wiesel comments, “What is memory? It is a way to redeem the past and future. Why do we remember? Memory for a Jew is what air is for everyone else. I am not a judge. I am a witness, to write is to witness. We bear witness with our questions and our silence.”

As the culmination of the Wiesel section, I give the students an overnight paper on *Night*, the additional readings, and the videos.

**Wiesel Short Paper**

Elie Wiesel lived through the experiences described in *Night* when he was approximately your age, but he did not record those experiences in print until at least ten to fifteen years later, *Night* being published in the late 1950s. He always comments that all his other books (more than forty), and the rest of his life’s thinking, come out of that first book and the experiences it describes.

Using the materials from the several videos and the magazine and newspaper articles, prepare a paper which tries to describe/explain/decipher what you think Elie Wiesel believes today and how he got there. What is this man’s faith, if any? What does he believe? Who, if any, is his God? What role did the war play in his faith or lack thereof? What did the passage of almost sixty years and the writing of at least forty books do to his faith and his reflections on what he believes? Where is he in terms of religion? Is he a believer or a non-believer?

In their responses and subsequent conversations, the students sense that Wiesel lost his faith in the camps, yet, for the next sixty years, continued writing about and wrestling with the same set of issues as he tried to “bear witness” to the memory of those events. In short, a student could read an academic essay on the relationship between faith and doubt—as they might with Tillich’s

---


138 Ibid.
Dynamics of Faith, in part—but with Wiesel, they experience firsthand the agonies of that complex relationship.

Depending on the term and year, and my sense of the students’ maturity—some years this course is mostly ninth graders, but many years it is filled with tenth graders—I assign the Buechner Alphabet of Grace unit as described in the second chapter. Assuming we read Buechner, I then hand out the meditation assignment which is to be completed later in the term. I introduce it by saying, “You have seen others in the books we have read go through their own struggles to sort out their faith, and we have talked about finding meaning and purpose in one’s life. What about for you, in your own life? Here is your chance to do the same, to write about what you value, what gives meaning to you, your personal religion.”

Meditation Assignment

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight.* —Psalms 19:14

What is a meditation? Webster’s Third New International Dictionary offers the following definitions for the word *meditation*:

1. a spoken or written discourse treated in a contemplative manner and intended to express its author’s reflections or especially when religious to guide others in contemplation.
2. a private devotion or spiritual exercise consisting in deep continued reflection on a religious theme.

For this assignment, you are to do serious reflection on some personal theme of meaning, purpose, or value in your life, to think about your own “religion” or “religious experience,” using a very broad definition for what constitutes religion or religious experience. Looking at the readings we have done and will do, you should be able to see that we have spent most of our time reading about other people’s “religious experiences,” what other people think is important in their lives, what they value, what experiences they have had which have shaped them into the people they are today, who influenced them to develop the way they did. You read about their experiences; now try to think about your own. (Again, note that “religion” in this context does not necessarily mean God, Bible, church, or synagogue, but what’s important, what’s of value, what gives meaning.)
Suggesting to the students that this assignment does not lend itself to being a “one-draft wonder” written at the last moment, I charge them to go think about this assignment for a number of days, and as the course progresses, I walk them through each step of the thinking and writing process. Especially with younger students, I find it is better, and more helpful to them, if we take an assignment like this one step at a time.

The course turns next to Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. While there is considerable discussion in the scholarly literature about the degree to which this Hesse novel is really a book about Hinduism and Buddhism, or whether it is at base a Christian novel, the book is used in this course to introduce younger students to the world of Asian religions or, more properly, philosophies, “ways of life.” As little as today’s students know of Judaism or Christianity, they usually know even less about Asian thinking. This book serves as the vehicle to introduce student to “non-Western” religious thinking. Given the age of the students, and their general lack of background knowledge, a fair amount of time is spent just mastering the basic facts of the Buddha’s life. I give them vocabulary handouts with terms related to Hinduism and Buddhism. As we read the book, I show the movie *Little Buddha*. It is a movie within a movie, in that inside the story of the search for the reincarnation of a deceased Tibetan lama in Seattle, Washington, there is a full-blown biography of the Buddha, tracing his life from birth to enlightenment. We stop the film at regular intervals to talk through the events depicted in the

---


scenes. Several days of that are very helpful for introducing the students to the life of the Buddha.

When we turn to the novel itself, a *Bildungsroman*, we trace two parallel journeys, first that of the historical Buddha, who was on a journey toward enlightenment, and second, that of the main character of the novel, Siddhartha, who appears to be on a similar journey. Admittedly, with the protagonist of a novel entitled *Siddhartha* being named Siddhartha, yet meeting another character named Buddha, it is confusing to the students how Siddhartha can meet the Buddha. Once past that confusion, we trace the protagonist’s journey from one side of the river (read: asceticism) to the other (read: materialism), ending at the river, signifying enlightenment. Such an introduction to Asian philosophies can be a reach for some students, with concepts such as the simultaneity of all time, the idea of a non-self, of Nirvana as the extinction of the self—but the larger idea of each person being on some kind of journey of self (or non-self) discovery is consistent with the other books and discussions thus far in the course.

We return in class to a discussion of the meditation assignment, and to assist the students in knowing what is expected of them, I give them a series of assignments over the following days and weeks that includes built-in progress markers with deadlines they must meet to keep them on track.

*Meditation Assignment—Topic*
Write out a brief description of the exact topic you plan to use as the subject of your meditation. The more you can focus on what you’re going to write/talk about, the better. Responses like, “I’m going to write about my life,” are less helpful than, “I plan to discuss four people who have played a crucial role in my development. They are . . . and what each has taught me is . . .” Your topic description should be about one paragraph long.

*Meditation Assignment—Message*
Write what your meditation’s message might be. What will be your point? A meditation is a piece of writing whose purpose is to get the reader or
listener to think about some specific issue or idea. What would you like your listeners to be thinking about?

*Meditation Outline and Opening Paragraph*

Provide a detailed outline of your meditation. Specific sections, content of each section, approximately how much space/how many words per section would be much more helpful than a generic Roman numeral outline of beginning, middle, and end. The clearer you are about what you plan to say and the order in which you will say it, the better chance you will have of doing this assignment well. Also, attach the first paragraph of your meditation.

The writing of the meditations, and the reading of some aloud in class by the authors, can take the rest of the term, but if there is still time, sometimes I add a final book or two, not dealt with in the same fashion as earlier books, but more to whet the students’ appetites for further study and reflection. The book I often use is Janwillem van der Wetering’s *The Empty Mirror*. This nonfiction book concerns the adventures of a Dutchman who checks himself into a Japanese Zen monastery in order to become a Zen monk, and the difficulties he has in doing so. However little our students know of Hinduism and Buddhism, they know even less of Zen. Serving partly as promotion for another term-long Religion Department course on Zen, this book and its discussion introduces the students to a very different kind of religious journey—to non-self, to emptiness, to non-thinking, and to the mysterious world of the Zen training riddles called koans. To conclude the semester on an intriguing note, I take several of the more famous koans and try working through them with the students.

**Religion 494: Zen Buddhism**

REL494: ZEN BUDDHISM “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” and “What was your original face before your parents were born?” are two of the most famous Zen training riddles called koans. This course will

---

explore the religious tradition known as Zen Buddhism, especially as it is practiced in Japan. Through a reading of primary sources both ancient and modern, including many koans, students are introduced to the distinctive ethos and practice of Zen. The manifestations of Zen in Japanese culture—the tea ceremony, landscape gardening, the martial arts, Noh theater, flower arranging, and calligraphy—will also be studied to help introduce the student to a non-Western method of experiencing reality. Open to uppers and seniors.

There were two major issues in setting up a class on Japanese Zen Buddhism. First, it was apparent that most students knew next to nothing about any Asian religion, or philosophy, or way of life, so considerable background information would be necessary. Second, while that historical and geographical material would be important, it was probably the case that the students did not want to get bogged down in those issue—who did what, when, and where—but rather they would be more interested in being introduced to and thinking through what the so-called Zen mindset entailed. What is the Zen view of life? With that double objective in mind, the course was first launched in 1992, and I have taught it continuously ever since, with other colleagues also sometimes teaching sections—so the syllabus below is reflective of several people’s thinking. Over the two decades of offering it, it has become not simply a course on Zen—whatever that is—but a course that compares and contrasts Zen thinking with classical Western thought. Thus, it has become a natural complement to other religion courses that we offer, especially Introduction to Western Philosophy, which many of the students have taken the previous term.

The course begins by reading a short and popular book, Zen and the Art of Archery, written by a man very much in the same place as the students, namely, someone who had heard of Zen but who knew little of it formally. The author goes to Japan and checks himself into a monastery to see what Zen is all about. What is interesting about reading this introductory book,

---

evident in even the first day’s reading, is that the whole of Zen is always up for grabs at any moment, and that to understand a part is to understand the whole. Since Zen believes in instantaneous enlightenment, what is called *satori*, something which can happen all at once rather than gradually over a period of time, this idea poses a conundrum for the student of Zen. To get the whole is to get the pieces, and to understand a piece is to understand the whole. To illustrate that point and the idea of instantaneous enlightenment, the first day of class, after reading Herrigel’s book, we do an experiment in class. A student once gave me a rectangular block of wood the size of a book and on the block is cut the word “peace.” Explaining to students that this eye puzzle is like understanding Zen, I hold it up quickly and then for increasingly longer periods of time to see if anyone can read the word “peace” on the block. Some students instantly see the word, whereas other struggle and struggle to read what it says, and sometimes I can hold the block up and the whole class will point out the word to a disbelieving student and he or she will still not see it. By analogy, I tell the students that, as we work our way through the materials of this course, some will “get Zen” very quickly, whereas for others, it will come later (and occasionally not at all).

As for the discussion of Herrigel’s book itself, the students are dealing with something that is quite foreign to most of them, something which seems to negate most of what they had previously thought or been taught about religion. In fact, negation becomes the key word in most conversations around the table. Here is a man who doesn’t understand Zen and who agrees to check himself into a Japanese monastery—Engaku-ji Temple in Kita-Kamakura—and do whatever the Zen master tells him to do, day in and day out.¹⁴⁴ Herrigel approaches Zen through

---

¹⁴⁴ While on sabbatical in Yokohama, Japan during 1990–91, I spent many weekends visiting this temple, and took my international school class there for a field trip to do seated meditation.
one of its allied arts, archery, and his wife through flower arranging. Nonetheless, he is introduced to the concept of the “Zen mind” from day one. Students learn of this mind—or no mind—in the introduction to the book. Herrigel quotes D. T. Suzuki, the great interpreter of Zen to the West and whom we read later in the course, who wrote, “Zen is the ‘everyday mind,’ as was proclaimed by Baso. . . . [T]his ‘everyday mind’ is no more than ‘sleeping when tired, eating when hungry.’ As soon as we reflect, deliberate, and conceptualize, the original unconsciousness is lost and a thought interferes.” From this, the students learn that, in Zen, thinking and conceptualizing are understood to be problems, and that, whatever Zen involves, it has something to do with non-thinking and non-conceptualizing. The quicker students immediately sense, if not actually verbalize, the idea that to think and talk about non-thinking is a contradiction. As Alan Watts says in a book we read later, citing the famous Zen paradox, “Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know.” What is so helpful, and so inviting to the inquisitive mind, is that these paradoxes, these contradictions, are inducement to sort out what Zen might mean.

After this introductory book, we turn to a biography of the Buddha. In my experience, students know absolutely nothing about the historical Buddha, so we read a very short and basic biography, *Shakyamuni Buddha: A Narrative Biography*. During the reading of the book, I

---


148 N. Niwano, *Shakyamuni Buddha: A Narrative Biography* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1980). Having the students read a biography of the Buddha is not meant to disregard the significant historical and scholarly issue of whether Zen “Buddhism” traces its roots more to Chinese Taoism or Chinese Ch’ an; for more on that controversy, see Watts, *Way of Zen*, 29–56. Regardless of the roots, so many of the Zen koans involve events in the life of the Buddha that it is important for students to have at least a passing acquaintance with his life.
often show them the Hollywood film, *Little Buddha*, which has within it a biography of the Buddha.\footnote{Little Buddha, dir. Bernardo Bertolucci (Miramax, 1993).} We then move on to Watts’s *The Way of Zen*, a helpful introduction to the history of Zen Buddhism, from the death of the historical Buddha (around 483 BCE) to the rise of Japanese Zen (900–1100 CE) in Japan, including the significant historical period of “classical Chinese Zen” during the T’ang Dynasty (618–907 CE). Were this a college-level course, sorting out this complex history could easily be an entire course in itself, but, as I indicate to the students, that is probably not why they signed up for the course.\footnote{When I returned to the States in 1991 from our first of two sabbaticals in Japan, and the students suggested we offer a course on Zen, I wrote a number of college Zen scholars through their professional East Asian association, and many kindly responded with their course suggestions and syllabi. Almost every college course read Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History* (New York: Macmillan, 1988). However, reading its 850 pages would take a good part of the term, and such detail is not part of the rationale for this course. The students want to “experience and process Zen,” whatever that might entail, not necessarily become historians of Zen.} They are interested in the Zen experience, the Zen thought-world, what it means to empty one’s mind—not every historical detail of how Zen goes from seated mediation in India post-Buddha to medieval Japan and beyond. Watts offers a very teachable short history of that process.

The students then compare Asian and Western thought by reading side-by-side selections from Descartes’s *Meditations*—the *cogito ergo sum* passages—and D. T. Suzuki’s essay “The Oriental Way of Thinking,” wherein he also engages in some comparison with Descartes.\footnote{René Descartes, “The Nature of the Mind,” in Wolff, *About Philosophy*, 9–17, 264–69; Suzuki, *Essentials of Zen*, 39–48.} Western dualistic thinking—my thinking and my conscious reflection upon my thinking—is very different from Zen’s non-duality—not “one-ness,” but non-duality.\footnote{See Watts, *Way of Zen*, 77–112.} By now, students are usually beginning to wonder if all these ideas of non-duality and the Zen mind are just mental gymnastics with little relevance to daily life. Kierkegaard’s question, “but how can I live these ideas?”, is never far from an adolescent’s mind. Thus, I find it very helpful to read a “cartoon
book” about life in a Zen monastery, which shows real monks living out the ideas we had hitherto been discussing but not living. Therefore, we read Bardwell L. Smith’s *Unsui: A Diary of Zen Monastic Life*, while concurrently watching a documentary on life in a Zen monastery.\(^{153}\) This double dose of Zen reality helps the beginning student see that Zen is not simply, or even, a set of ideas in someone’s head, but a lifestyle lived according to certain clear and very demanding principles—including absolute obedience (to the Zen master, the roshi), infinite patience (while residence in a monastery is voluntary, the process of enlightenment can take a decade or longer and may never be “achieved” even then; to “seek” it is to push it further away), and serious deprivation (from sleep and a regular secular life). Surprisingly, however, the book and video usually whet the students’ appetites for more, not less.

This brings the class to the heart of the course, a firsthand experience of Zen—at least, as much as one can have in the classroom setting.\(^{154}\) For me, the core of this course is the study of Zen koans, those cryptic and enigmatic Zen training riddles, which often have their origins in the T’ang Dynasty. We plunge into serious koan study for the better part of a month. There are two major T’ang Dynasty koan collection, revised and edited over the centuries in medieval China: the *Pi-yen lu* of 1125 (often called the Blue Cliff Record) and the *Wu-men kuan* of 1129 (usually translated as the “Gateless Barrier” or “No Barrier.”)\(^{155}\) While there are approximately 1700 Zen koans from ancient times, for the purposes of this class, I choose approximately twenty or thirty koans from the *Wu-men kuan*, and then engage the students in study of those. I give the students three different versions of each koan (from three different editions of the *Wu-men kuan*), which

---


\(^{154}\) We do have an active Zen meditation program in the school church on Friday evenings, but while I encourage students to attend if so interested, it is not appropriate in my mind to incorporate required “religious practice” into the course. Not all my colleagues agree and some incorporate meditation into the classroom activities.

gives them the opportunity to compare the editors’ various commentaries written from three
different points of view. One of the commentators is a practicing roshi, the next is a scholar of Zen,
and the third is a translator of many Zen texts.\footnote{The three versions are: Robert Aitken, \textit{The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-Men Kuan} (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990); Thomas Cleary, \textit{No Barrier: Unlocking the Zen Koan} (New York: Bantam Books, 1993); Zenkei Shibayama, \textit{The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the Mumonkan} (Boston: Shambhala, 2000).} We read one or two koans per day, noting how
each of the three interprets the history, meaning, and application of these training riddles. It is
almost as if we were reading three different biblical commentaries on a verse or chapter of
Scripture and triangulating possible meanings for the text. It is fascinating work, applying the
insights gleaned from the historical and ideational background we have spent the first month of
the course covering. Some students, admittedly, “get” the koans very quickly, and others, similar
to the “peace sign” experiment in the beginning of the course, understand more slowly, and
occasionally there are even a few students who seem to understand them not at all.

Rather than rehearse each day’s conversation, it may better illustrate how the classes are
structured to list, as samples, some of the short in-class writing assignments I use when we work
our way through the koans. I am also including some of the overnight paper prompts, so one can
see the types of conversations we might have on any given day.

\textit{Paper Prompt #1: East vs. West}

Mustering all the insight you can from our various readings and discussions thus far in the term, try to say something significant about the following three statements:

1. \textit{Cogito ergo sum}
2. If the tree falls in the forest, does it make any sound?
3. What is the sound of one hand clapping?

You may try to compare and contrast, or organize your ideas in any way you wish, as long as you bring the insights of this course to bear on the three statements.

\textit{Paper Prompt #2: Koan exercise on Dog/Buddha Nature}

Koans are often stories left over from former master/pupil exchanges, later written down to use as teaching devices. What we have in the koan itself is the punch line or moral, the closing line or point. But there was a whole
exchange or scene before the story got to its punch line, which alas is now lost. The koan is often, in other words, only the last line or two to a more complete story. In a one-page paper, please construct a story in which this koan appears as the last few lines: Does a dog have Buddha nature? Mu. That’s the first half of the assignment. In the second part of the paper, try to interpret the koan. What do you take the question to mean, and what is the meaning of “Mu,” which is the Japanese word for no?

Paper Prompt #3: Overnight essay: Mountains as Mountains
What is the meaning of the title of the book Mountains as Mountains? In a one-page essay, “explain” the story he gives about the title and its meaning. Retelling the story is not the point; deciphering it, or commenting on it from a Zen point of view, is. What Zen truth does this little story illustrate?  

Paper Prompt #4: Another Initiatory Koan
Comment upon the meaning of the famous koan, “What was your original face before your parents were born?” Try to avoid generic statements about koans or Zen or life. Instead, say something specific about this particular koan and what issue(s) it raises or deals with.

Paper Prompt #4: Another Initiatory Koan, Third of the Big Three
Try to explain the most famous koan of all, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” You might also wish to discuss which type of koan this one is using the reading’s categories and use the category to help explain the koan.

In-Class Paper Prompt #5: A Comparison
Explain the following story using the insights from Watts’s chapter which you read for today. What is the Zen meaning of the story?
Two monks were arguing about the temple flag waving in the wind. One said, “The flag moves.” The other said, “The wind moves.” They argued back and forth but could not agree.
The Sixth Ancestor said, “Gentlemen! It is not the wind that moves; it is not the flag that moves; it is your mind that moves.” The two monks were struck with awe.

Paper Prompt #6: Another Koan
I will be persistent in giving you opportunities to demonstrate the degree to which you can put aside your normal thought and think Zen. Please try to see today’s exercise as another opportunity to apply what you have read and what we have discussed to yet another koan. Below is a story and a

---

157 This is the story from Watts: “Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it’s just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters.” Watts, Way of Zen, 126.
follow-up. Using the insights gleaned from class and your koan readings, explain what you think the story means. What is its Zen point? If you wish, you may comment on the commentary and what it might mean, and what it adds to the story.

A monk asked Chao-chou, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West?”

Chao-chou said, “The oak tree in the courtyard.”

Monks at that time were quite preoccupied with Chao-chou’s response. After his death, Fa-yen asked Chao-chou’s disciple Hui-chiao (Ekaku) about it: “I have heard that your late master had a saying: ‘The oak tree in the courtyard.’ Is that correct?”

Hui-chiao said, “No.”

Fa-yen said, “Anyone who has been around will say that a monk asked him about the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West, and that he answered, ‘The oak tree in the courtyard.’ How can you maintain that he didn’t say it?” Hui-chiao said, “He really didn’t say that. Please don’t slander him.”

---

Paper Prompt #7: A Modern Koan

Several years ago, a Zen monk named Sunim came to visit this class. It was well into the term when he visited, so the students had anticipated his arrival with considerable enthusiasm. We had done all our background historical work, then spent many a class struggling with Zen, and specifically the koans, so here was a chance to ask a real master some of the most pressing questions on our mind. I had told the students of his upcoming visit to class, and asked each to think of several questions they might wish to pose to an “expert,” so that they, and we, might better understand Zen. The day of his visit came and here was Sunim at the end of our Harkness table, fielding questions. There was a series of initial questions about the history or practice of Zen, but I could see on one student’s face a growing frustration about the larger issues, a frustration which had been building all term, especially for this one student, as we all struggled to understand this strange beast called Zen. Finally, this particular student got his chance to ask Sunim his question:

“Sunim, I have been working all term to understand Zen and I still don’t really get it. Sunim, can you give me a basic definition of Zen? What is Zen?”

At that point, Sunim without hesitation looked the student right in the eye as he simultaneously slapped the Harkness table as hard as he could right where he, Sunim, was sitting.

The student was dumbfounded. He sputtered something about what was that gesture supposed to mean? Slapping the table?

At that point, another student’s eyes lit up, and he exclaimed, “Ah, I got it, Sunim. Zen is slapping the table.”

To which Sunim replied, “I never did that.”
This is a two-part story: Explain/interpret each part, and their relation to each other. Why did Sunim slap the table in response to the question of what Zen is? Why did he deny slapping the table to the student who just saw him do so?

**Paper Prompt #8: Two Stories of Being Killed or Cut in Two**

There are two famous stories, one from Hebrew Scripture/Old Testament, the other a Zen koan, each of which seems to involve a similar event, namely someone killing a cat or cutting a baby in two—that is, killing some living thing to prove a point (I Kings 3:15–28 and Koan #14 from the *Gateless Barrier* about killing the cat). Please compare and contrast the meaning of the two stories, remembering that this is a course on Zen, so the relation of the biblical story to the koan is more important than the meaning of the biblical story *per se*. What is the point of the koan and what does that have to do with the biblical story about King Solomon? Do these two stories share a common point or are they different, and if so, how and why?

**Paper Prompt #9: Zen and Zeno in One Page**

Mustering your knowledge from the last several days’ readings and our discussions, comment upon the meaning of the koan, “What was your original face before your parents were born?” Compare and contrast it to the “paradox” of the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno (c. 340–265 BCE) concerning why the arrow never reaches the target, a paradox explained in class before you started this writing. What is each saying, and how do their messages/ideas compare and contrast?

After these numerous koan exercises, which should give the beginning Zen student a real feel for Zen thinking, I give them a visual Zen exercise: I give the students several copies of a standard set of Zen pictures or sketches sold in Zen bookstores, and ask them in an overnight paper to analyze the pictures for their Zen content or message.

**Sample Paper Prompt #10: Ox Herding Pictures Assignment**

Attached are two sets of Zen illustrations called the Ox Herding Pictures. Their origin is uncertain, but they are thought to go back about a thousand years into medieval China. They have always been associated with Zen, so much so that they are still being drawn by contemporary Zen artists, and, in their many forms, they are still widely sold in Zen bookstores as Zen art.

---

158 Case #14 reads, “The priest Nan-ch’üan found monks of the eastern and western halls arguing over a cat. He held up the cat and said, ‘Everyone! If you can say something, I will spare this cat. If you can’t say anything, I will cut off its head.’ No one could say a word, and Nan-ch’üan cut the cat in two. That evening, Chao-chou returned from outside and Nan-ch’üan told him what happened. Chao-chou removed a sandal from his foot and put it on his head, and walked out. Nan-ch’üan said, ‘If you had been there, the cat would have been spared.’” Aiken, *Gateless Barrier*, 94.
Whatever their history or their current popularity, I would like you to write a paper exploring what you think they might mean. In your paper, I want you to do two things, either simultaneously or consecutively, namely, say something about what the whole set of ten pictures means in its entirety, as well as what each picture means as a part of the whole. You may do either first or both together, but in the end you need to have explained the set as well as each part. Hint: these pictures are not a koan per se, but they have always been thought to embody some Zen truth or idea, so using all the materials at your disposal from the readings and class discussion, try your best to lay bare their Zen ideas.

After all these attempts to understand Zen, we use the last few classes of the term to examine the influence of Zen on everyday life in Japan. This is a perfect chance to introduce students to the topic of Zen aesthetics, how the Zen mind might visualize the world differently than does a Western mind. That takes us into Zen arts, and I have many objets d’art to show in class to illustrate Zen aesthetics. To introduce the topic, we first read Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers, a short, illustrated introduction to Zen and the arts.\textsuperscript{159} We also read D.T. Suzuki’s essay “General Remarks on Japanese Art Culture.”\textsuperscript{160} We read about and try our hand at Zen poetry, haiku.\textsuperscript{161} We examine Zen paintings and art.\textsuperscript{162} We work on the principles of Zen landscape gardening.\textsuperscript{163} We try our hand at Zen calligraphy.\textsuperscript{164} On the last day of the term, we perform the Tea Ceremony in class with all the accouterments.\textsuperscript{165}


\textsuperscript{160} In Suzuki, Essentials of Zen, 429–40.


\textsuperscript{162} Stewart W. Holmes and Chimyo Horioka, Zen Art for Meditation (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1973).


What is valuable about a course such as this is that it gets a mostly-Western student body out of their comfort zone and normal thinking patterns. Learning to think in different ways, and to philosophize about what some of those differences might mean, are helpful life skills to develop. As with the previous five courses described in this section, there is a specific content to each course, a specific syllabus and set of academic issues to study. Above that, though, the pedagogical process of piecing together an adolescent spiritual identity through the act of philosophizing about these issues of meaning, purpose, and value—what is really important in the students’ lives—is the larger goal and at the heart of the mission of the Religion Department curriculum at Exeter Academy.

Religion 490: Selected Topics in Religion

REL490: SELECTED TOPICS IN RELIGION Spring Book Club for 2014: This course reads selectively from The New York Times’ nonfiction bestseller list, searching for books which would make for lively Harkness conversations about meaning, purpose and value in one’s life. The primary focus of the class is on these discussions, specifically, gathering a group of energized and like-minded students who are interested in reading and talking about books and the issues contained therein. Drawing together the knowledge gleaned from their time at Exeter, and the various courses an Academy student might take, the students in this class will try to draw connections and synthesize the materials they have covered in other classes in their Exeter career as such information pertains to the various books this course might read. Recent semesters have read Malcolm Gladwell’s Outliers, Sheryl Sanberg’s Lean In, Levitt and Dubner’s Freakonomics, Roger Rosenblatt’s Kayak Morning, Wes Moore’s The Other Wes Moore, Amy Chua’s Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom, Katherine Boo’s Behind the Beautiful Forevers, Rebecca Sloot’s The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Joshua Foer’s Moonwalking with Einstein, Nate Silver’s The Signal and the Noise, and Walter Issacson’s Steve Jobs. Most written work will focus on self-reflections on the students’ time at the Academy and beyond. Open to uppers and seniors.
When students go from Exeter to college, even the most competitive colleges, they often return the following year to complain about the lack of “Harkness” in college, meaning the lack of meaningful conversations around seminar tables. The young alumni complain that “TAs and the other students don’t know how to talk,” and that small classes are difficult because there are no opportunities to participate in a meaningful conversation wherein the students can process the reading or lecture and compare it to their own ideas. This lack of ownership of the conversation bothers many young alumni—rightfully so, Exeter teachers would say. In effect, though, the strengths of an Exeter education and its pedagogy become a liability in college.

Five years ago, having reminded the students one winter term of this predicament faced by our young alumni, the students offered up the idea that perhaps we as a group—they and I—might like to do a course together which was, in effect, “one last crack at Harkness,” a spring-term course where we could focus on having a good conversation around the table, the conversation being more important than the specific topic. Sensing that this agenda had real curricular possibilities, and knowing we had Religion 490 as a placeholder to accommodate precisely such an offering, I proposed that we selectively read The New York Times’ bestseller list, picking books that would lead to a good conversation around the table. Thus was born what the students then called “the senior book club.” Such an agenda had immediate appeal to a growing group of Exeter seniors, and the first year I had about twenty-five students who took the class; in subsequent years, the enrolment swelled to almost forty every spring—three full sections of seniors.

What the students did not know, and I was not about to explain to them, was that I had been working closely with Phillips Exeter’s College Counseling Office to devise an “exit course” for seniors to help them effect the transition from the Academy to college. From previous
conversations, I knew that the College Counseling Office had wanted for years to offer such a transition course, but could not figure out how to package it, and as a non-academic department, they had no way to offer the class. Even though the books on the bestseller list would change from year to year, there were always enough books to put together a reading list which asked the students to think through what their value systems were, who they were as individuals, where they might be going in life, in college, and in their careers—all the questions of identity formation, in other words, which are up for grabs in the transition from secondary school to college and beyond. The rationale is to work through our department’s “trinity” of questions of “meaning, purpose, and value.”

The following are books I have or would choose for this course, with details about what has happened when we have read some of them. Given that it has been on the bestseller list for several years, we often start the course with Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers: The Story of Success*, a book chosen because most of the students were outliers in their previous schools.\(^{166}\) The subtitle of the book tells its real theme, how we define success in our society. This book has led to some excellent conversations on how our culture’s measures of success may or may not match the students’ working definitions. For a student about to go off to college, that may be an important set of issues to think through: How do I personally define success? What do I want out of my life at age forty? Sixty-five? I will consider myself successful when….? Although this kind of conversation could sound like “group therapy,” which I would admit in some ways it is, it is also a wonderful chance for a college-bound senior to stop and take stock of his or her life, and compare it to his or her classmates’, as well.

Then we read Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*, a book about becoming a “successful” woman in the business world.\(^{167}\) About half of the students in the class are usually female, and this book leads to some very helpful conversations about gender roles and about the relation of men and women in the workplace as well as at home. This is the kind of book which usually sparks heated exchanges around the table, and thus is perfect for this kind of course. These students will have to sort out, and live out, these issues all too soon in their personal and professional lives.

Sometimes I have the students read parts of William Poundstone’s *Are You Smart Enough to Work at Google*?\(^{168}\) The benefit of a book like this is that, while fun to read, it is also filled with interviewing tips and life-skills a departing senior might benefit from learning. Next, we might read Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom* or her more recent *Triple Threat: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America*, written with her husband, Jed Rubenfeld.\(^{169}\) The first book, which is very controversial, leads to heated exchanges about parenting styles and child-rearing techniques. What is important about this set of conversations is that it encourages adolescents to become more self-conscious about how they were raised and what values they were bequeathed—and, more importantly, how all that affects the person they are today. The second book, less lively, puts some other issues before the students, notably cultural stereotypes and their truth or inaccuracy. As with the first book, students can reflect on the degree to which they are a product of their culture.

We might next read Wes Moore’s *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*, a book which traces the story of two men in Baltimore who have the same name and who both grow up

---


in the same housing project: one becomes a Rhodes Scholar, while the other ends up in prison for murder.\textsuperscript{170} The Rhodes Scholar discovers the other Wes Moore by accident, and takes the opportunity to meet his doppelgänger, thereafter writing a book exploring how and why the two of them might have gone such different ways. Since we have been talking about success, about the influence of one’s upbringing, these themes coalesce in our conversations about the two Wes Moores.

Last year, we read Katherine Boo’s \textit{Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity}.\textsuperscript{171} This is a stunning book, based on several years of living in and reporting from the Mumbai slum within sight of the Mumbai International Airport. What a book such as this does is sensitize the students—think of Bonhoeffer, our social activist muse—to the plight of the less fortunate in this world, and the students’ obligation to try to remedy their plight. Other possible books might include Levitt and Dubner’s \textit{Freakonomics}, Rebecca Sloot’s \textit{The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks}, Joshua Foer’s \textit{Moonwalking with Einstein}, Nate Silver’s \textit{The Signal and the Noise}, and Walter Issacson’s \textit{Steve Jobs}.\textsuperscript{172} There is no shortage of books to read in a course such as this, and while it may appear to the students that this is simply a “book club,” these books have been carefully selected to reflect many of those identity formation issues which they face now and into the transition into college.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[170] Wes Moore, \textit{The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates} (New York: Random House, 2010).
\end{footnotes}
Contrary to all other courses I teach, there are no daily in-class writing assignments, nor any other daily assessment—in some ways adopting what is typical of college classes. Instead, I assign the following three papers the last month of the term.

**Topic #1**
What will you miss most about Exeter once you graduate? Feel invited to reflect on your time at Exeter as it relates to that question.

**Topic #2**
What do you want to get out of college? What do you hope to do/accomplish in the next four years (or a gap year plus college)? Not what you wrote in an application essay, but what you actually hope to do.

**Topic #3**
Write a eulogy or statement which a friend would deliver at your memorial service, were you to die tomorrow. I admit that this is not an easy topic, and that you will struggle with this third prompt. When I have given this prompt in the past, the papers have sometimes veered in one of two (unhelpful) directions, so see if you can avoid those past mistakes: do not write a syrupy, tear-jerky piece which makes it look like you were a saint, and your name should be forwarded to the Vatican for canonization. And a statement to be spoken at your memorial service is not an obituary as it would appear in the local newspaper; this is not a catalogue of your life and its activities, and relevant dates and schooling, etc. Rather, you are asked to pretend that you are one of your friends or family members—do identify who is speaking—who is telling several stories about you and your relationship with the deceased. These stories seek to encapsulate your life, to give a sense of who you were and how you lived. You are not being asked to be comprehensive, to say everything you know, but rather to tell a few true stories so others can see who you were and why you would be missed.

These topics produce some of the most thoughtful and self-reflective pieces I have ever received as a teacher; they turn out to be senior spring spiritual exercises in adolescent identity formation, in coming to know oneself, illustrative of the students’ attempts to come to terms with who they are at a deep level of their being, and where they might be going in life.
Three Syllabi from Other Teachers in the Religion Department

In an effort to diversify this section and to make it multivocal, I offer here the annotated syllabi of courses taught by three of my colleagues in the Phillips Exeter Religion Department, the Rev. Jamie Hamilton, Rabbi Jennifer Marx Asch, and Thomas Ramsey. Their courses on Islam, Judaism, and Religion and Popular Culture, respectively, have proven to be crucibles of learning for our students. I am grateful to my colleagues for allowing me to use their work and for their willingness to reflect on it for the purposes of this dissertation.

Religion 270: Islam

REL 270 ISLAM In the daily news, the world’s second largest religion is often misunderstood or mischaracterized. Who are the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims? What is the history of Islam? How is Islam related to Judaism and Christianity as an Abrahamic faith? Students will study the life of the prophet Muhammad, read the Qur’an in translation, and learn about the origins, beliefs, diversity, and practices of Islam. The class also considers how issues of social justice, the role of women, the understanding of jihad, and interfaith dialogue shape the expressions of the faith. For a final project, students will consider the many ways in which Islam manifests itself throughout history with a study of a particular era or political issue, or in literature and poetry, art and design, architecture, dance, or calligraphy, and they may choose to work in a similar medium. Open to lower and upper.

I choose to feature this particular course, taught for almost two decades at Phillips Exeter by the Rev. Jamie Hamilton (a colleague from 1995 to 2014), because it represents a novel way to teach Islam to secondary school students. As she explains below in her own words, the traditional way to teach this subject is to focus on the history of Islam and its Five Pillars, with some attention to the history of Muhammad and Islamic theology, often comparing Muslim thinking to that of the other Abrahamic faiths. Almost no one teaching at a high school level
requires her students to actually read and discuss the Qur’an itself. Hamilton’s students spend the entire term reading the Qur’an and applying their Harkness interpretive skills to the scripture itself. Drawing from a speech, a book proposal, and other unpublished materials Hamilton has written, I have assembled a history about how and why she came to teach the course this way, a pedagogy for which she has now become famous in this country, as well as across Africa and the Middle East. I use quotation marks and single-spacing throughout the following to remind the reader that the words are hers, although I have synthesized them with her permission.¹⁷³

_The Rev. Jamie Hamilton on Religion 270: Islam_

“The Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur’an are revealed scriptures, which have shaped humanity’s understanding of monotheism, a belief in one God; of a covenantal relationship with God; and of prophetic messages that call a people to a committed faith. Whether believers or not, we can see that these scriptures have inspired the greatest accomplishments in civilization and the greatest atrocities. The racist theologies of the Ku Klux Klan, apartheid, Lehi, and the Taliban are countered by the Ten Commandments, the Constitution of Medina, the Declaration of Independence, and the Beloved Community. Such conflict, such clashes of thought, will always exist because ‘faith’ by definition accepts that one’s beliefs and interpretations are true. The only way to critique an interpretation of scripture is to put it under the scrutiny of reason. Any other approach digresses into righteous indignation. To this end, two schools of scriptural interpretation have developed: (1) historical socio-linguistic analysis, which treats scripture as created texts, and (2) devotional analysis, which treats scripture as divine revelation. Though both are important methods to advance interpretive discoveries, the first can honor objectivity to the point of sterility and the second can honor attachment to the point of sentimentality. Neither school interacts with the other, and this lack of engagement leaves each susceptible to its respective Achilles’s heel: the first misses the opportunity to discuss the True Reality, the purpose of scripture, and the second misses the opportunity to utilize analytical tools of inquiry, the purpose of the human mind.

“We need a new way to engage with scripture. This new school of analysis comes from an unlikely place: not a church or a university, but rather from a large oval table which invites bright articulate teenagers to sit and, with the different scriptures in their hands, to discuss what they see. Their academic commitment, curiosity, intellect, and delight reveals critical insights and movements, supported by empathy and defended by a radically new scholarship.

¹⁷³ The text below is drawn from several unpublished documents that Hamilton shared with me in a July 15, 2014 email: Jamie Hamilton, Unpublished book proposal on how to teach Islam to secondary school students, based on her experiences in Exeter’s classrooms (2009); Jamie Hamilton, “Spoken Forelock” (speech delivered at Academy of Self Knowledge 2013 Annual Conference, Pretoria, South Africa), March 8-11, 2013; and a number of student papers in Hamilton’s files demonstrating her students’ exegetical analysis of parts of the Qur’an. I have rendered transliterated Arabic terms in Hamilton’s texts in italics and made other minor editorial corrections.
“How is this different? In what ways does this provide a bridge between the two schools of scholarship? Why does it work? And who cares anyway? As a teacher and an Episcopal priest, I have been teaching high school for thirty years, with twenty of those years as an instructor of religion and philosophy at Phillips Exeter Academy. I have learned more from my students about the complexities of the world’s holy scriptures than I have ever learned in university or seminary. Key to our study: the twelve or thirteen of us who sit around a table, working collaboratively to discover what the text is revealing. We must build on each other’s contributions. The scriptures, no longer pressured by scholarship or burdened by testimonies, which were always meant to be read within a community, are now inclined to be discovered in new ways. We do not rely on any preconceived ideas of what the scripture is, but rather we explore the text on its own merit, and let it speak to us. Our naïveté becomes one of our best tools. Our ideas are fresh; we have nothing to prove. As we sit at our large classroom table and create an intellectual community, we listen carefully to each other’s observations, questions and insights. The more mixed we are as a group—agnostic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, undecided—the better. Even students who adamantly proclaim to be atheists find that they have an important role in identifying cultural and religious assumptions while confronting some of their own biases against religion. No question is off-limits, and all voices are honored, which ushers in a respect for the scripture.

“Whether we are believers or not, we treat the scripture as if it were the revelation of God. We know that believers know that their holy scriptures are the revelation of God, and so we use our own imagination to explore what it must be like to hear God through these words on a page. We become explorers on a treasure hunt trying to discover what the metaphors, loan images, stories, and rhythms of the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur’an have to tell us about the nature of God, humanity, and faith. We are empathetic and compassionate, which allows us to both suffer and take delight in the demands of the scriptures.

“Until a dozen years ago, the Qur’an was not part of my intellectual enterprise. With no knowledge of Arabic, I was not prepared to guide students in their exploration of these scriptures. And so I taught Islam like every other educator in America—focusing on the beliefs, rituals, and history. But that all changed after I was given a translation of the Qur’an in English by Muhammad Asad. Similar to a HarperCollins or Oxford Study Bible or an annotated translation of the Upanishads, Asad’s interpretation gave me access to the power of this scripture and for the first time I could read the Qur’an with understanding. Not only did I finally understand Islam, but also I was much more articulate about monotheism and the intellectual reasons for embracing a religious perspective. Accordingly, I relied on my expertise as a teacher and decided to teach Islam through the Qur’an, and through this experience, my students and I have gained a profound understanding of Islam. To understand Islam, one must read and study the Qur’an, and yet there are no books that introduce the beauty or insights of this monotheistic religion by accessing the foundational truths articulated through its scripture. For most Americans, for most Westerners, the Qur’an remains impenetrable.

“For the past dozen years, I have studied the meaning of the Qur’an with high school sophomores, and together, all seated around a c. 1930 large wooden table with the Qur’an as our guide and rigorous discussion as our methodology, we have learned about Islam in ways no textbook can inform. I tell my students that this type of discussion about the Qur’an is not happening anywhere else in the United States, perhaps not even in the world! They understand the importance of their study. We are delighted by our experience learning what the revelation

has to tell us, and of the knowledge we gain as we articulate some of the key aspects of Islam: inherent goodness and rightness of humanity (fitra), the singularity of God (tawhid), God-consciousness (taqwa), the straight path, spiritual insight, the illusion of self-sufficiency, the gift of the day of judgment, the freedom Muslims find through submission (islam) to God, the power of revelation (wahy), and the unity of the human desire to love, serve, and create. If you begin to discuss these ideas, then you are exploring the underpinnings of a religion practiced by one-fifth of the world’s population. As an added bonus, you become articulate about Islam, about monotheism, about intellectual inquiry, and the study of religion becomes rigorous and fun, not for the faint of heart or for the single-minded missionary.

“This course voices a multiplicity of analyses, which mirror the multicultural environment we have inherited. Cooperation and shared discoveries are a radical and refreshing break from traditional scholarship. This course describes six major themes of the Qur’an: Hospitality; Capacity for faith; God-consciousness; Submission; Day of Judgment; and the Straight Path, and each chapter’s significance is enhanced through a reflection of writings from students. These tafsirs/exegeses (interpretations of surahs and ayat) are unique. Not only is the student work beautifully written, each with its own profundity, but also each student’s work emerges out of a process in which a community of thinkers is committed to analyzing each verse. The Qur’an needs to be read within a community, not as a solitary act but rather as an act of engagement. In this context, the text becomes alive as it claims its authority; insights are revealed that previously were hidden within a private reading. The students are able to articulate their most pressing concerns about life as they struggle to understand how the Qur’an defines value, meaning, purpose, the human condition, fear, desire, and hope. Their encounter with scripture and with each other sharpens their critique. Our study matters because we rely on each other in order to articulate universal themes that global citizens of the world are eager to discuss.

“Herein lies the paradigm shift: My students and I have not been taught Islam; rather we have discovered it. The Islamic community first established this pedagogy 1400 years ago. Within halaqa, circles of knowledge, the Qur’an is studied. Successful halaqas require all members to be “students” no matter their expertise because the process of discovery requires a democratic approach, which ushers in the wisdom of the participants’ engagement and fervor over their conversations about the meaning of the Qur’an, rather than imposing a set instruction of a religiously defined authority. What a privilege to enter into this ancient and wise process. It is not easy because it requires a ‘light hand’ and an ‘intense drive’ and I am fortunate to have fourteen years of experience of creating thriving circles of knowledge (Halaqa/Harkness) with some of the brightest students in our world.

“Let’s look at the American context. Too often, Islam is taught in high schools, community centers, places of work, and worship centers across the country by beginning and ending with the ‘tenets of the faith.’ Churches across the country sponsor forums during their educational hour on Sundays and pass out handouts about the rituals of Islam. Well-intentioned police departments, hospitals, prisons, and city councils are teaching their employees how to meet the needs of their Muslim constituencies by describing dietary restrictions, daily rituals, and religious obligations. High school history or humanity courses teach the five pillars, the rituals, the holy days, the concept of the law (Shariah), and then, depending on the organization and time, possibly introduce (in the role of the apologist) the status of women and the abrogation of Islam by terrorists.

“All of this is adequate, especially as it confronts religious illiteracy, but there is something glaringly missing, which is the study of the Qur’an. To listen, read, and explore the
Qur’an is to enter into the heart of Islam. No one would think of teaching Christianity and leave out Jesus, and yet that is what we are doing as we teach Islam without the Qur’an. No one would think of teaching Judaism and leave out the Law, and yet that is what we are doing as we teach Islam without the Qur’an. The Qur’an is to Islam as Jesus is to Christianity. The Qur’an is to Islam as the Law is to Jews, and yet out of Americans’ own limitations, we couple Muhammad and Jesus and the Law together. Our first mistake. And, even though many of our citizens, including our senators, CIA agents, and official negotiators may understand Islam better, the religion still remains as ‘other’ or ‘foreign.’

“My students want to read the Qur’an. They are curious. What will it say? How will it take on all this misery? Who is this prophet who is both a ‘warner and a bearer of glad tidings’ (11:2)? Who is God where no human vision can encompass him, yet where he encompasses all human vision; who is unfathomable, yet all-aware (6:103)? Could there be a god who is The God, whose grace outstrips wrath (7:156)? And who are the enemies, where the earth is not wide enough for them to forsake the domain of evil (4:97), who lie in ambush on every road that leads to truth (7:88)? And who are the good guys who are patient in adversity and whose hearts are set on the straight path (3:186)?

“It’s as if we are hearing the Qur’an for the first time. Muhammad is in our midst, and the words are timeless, universal; there’s a call that knows no boundaries. And yet, this is not about becoming a Muslim. One may, one may not, but that decision comes much later. Our young people do not care about identification: it doesn’t matter to them if you are gay, straight, white, black, male, female, Muslim, Christian, Jew, young, old, Republican, Democrat, rich, or poor.

“Those are just labels. What matters is your essence, your passion, your stamina, your capacity to trust in abundance and to love, and your willingness to define the common good and live it with accountability. Frankly, they are suspicious of the ‘religious’ because they see too many hypocrites who pay lip-service to God, yet who wear their fear of scarcity around their necks (3:180). It’s not about identification, but rather identity, which seeks understanding in its own yeasty, effervescent way, with its own ‘aha’ moments that are thrilling and centering and profound. This identity needs to be discovered; it can’t be taught.

“Most adolescents think scripture is outdated, and so they are surprised when they start reading the Qur’an and feel honored and respected. For one simple reason: the Qur’an does not tell them what to think but rather invites them to consider their lives, their world, the mystery of creation, and their commitment to its making. The text becomes sacred to them not as a given, but as a process, because, above all, the Qur’an asks you to think, to ponder, to question, and to confront the answers that arise out of your own musings.

“And yet, all my students desire nothing more than to talk about ‘God Stuff.’ Who is God? A Being? An Idea? A figment of one’s imagination? Why do I care? What purpose does God serve? Why does this Idea survive the centuries and span the globe? How is God connected to True Reality (and does True Reality even exist)? How is God connected to science, to morality, to evil, to my freedom? Are angels, miracles, and the afterlife real? Why are people willing to risk their lives for their beliefs? Is there anything that I am willing to die for? Why am I so drawn to conversations about God’s existence? My students care about these questions, but not because they want to answer the question of whether God exists or not. They do care about what they think about God. But that’s not all of it. It’s also a way for them to ask if they exist. To wonder, to ponder.

“What does it mean to exist, anyway? Does God exist? If so, then does that mean God could not exist? Well, yes, if that’s the word we are using, but that doesn’t work, because God
always is. So, really God does not exist. Is that blasphemy or a really critically important idea about God? What about me? Do I exist? Have I always been, always will be? Who am I now? Is existence more than breathing, eating, moving? How do I exist, really? And why, and for what? How will I know?

“One of the gifts of teaching at Phillips Exeter Academy is the small size of the classes. No teacher has more than twelve students in his or her room, and we all sit around a large wooden oval table. We can see each other. I am not allowed to lecture. Every student who walks into every classroom must be prepared because the success of a class will depend on the work each student did the night before. If students come to class unprepared, the teacher sits in silence.

“My role as teacher is to guide, to help the students deepen their conversations, to make references to the texts before us, to struggle with paradoxes, incongruities, assumptions, and complexities. Our questions are just as critical to our conversations as our findings. Insights emerge from a collaborative process as we weave our ideas in and out of our efforts to discover, to connect, and to know. As their teacher, I do not come to class with lesson plans, or a set of questions, or an agenda of what we have to accomplish. I have ideas and hopes, but so do the students, and their questions, angst, frustration, and observations, as well as mine, become our starting point.

“We trust; just as the wisdom of the hadith reminds us, ‘the teacher kindles the light, the oil is already in the lamp.’ When students are offered a safe place to risk, to explore, to talk among themselves, to connect, they are eager to speak with each other, not just because it is the best way to learn, but also because they feel a heavy burden. They believe, more than any other generation before them, that if they are going to save the planet and themselves, and their future (and ours), they will need to cooperate with each other. Transform communication into conversations. Be critically conscious; think; grapple. It’s that simple, and that difficult. And they need a place to be.

“Muslims call this safe place Halaqa—a pedagogy that is as old as Islam, that circles students and a teacher around a subject, usually verses from the Qur’an, who then work together to discover insights and to live with inspiration. At my school, Phillips Exeter Academy, we call it Harkness. Halaqa/Harkness: we are learning how to think, in a hallowed-out place around the table of our minds, hearts, and spirits. Teaching has been trumped by the power and wisdom of inquisitive engagement. My students believe they have inherited a world in which so much is possible, and yet they fear nothing will be forgiven. They think they matter, but what if not? They want to be a part of something greater than themselves. Will they find it? Will they share tears, find forgiveness, be healers? They want to be confident that they will have a world to give to their grandchildren. They worry.

“They fear isolation, not as an aftermath of whom they hide, but of who they are. Is there a straight path? Will they know it when they find it? Who cares anyway? Why be good? Will they live in a healthy and stable community and know the peace that comes from an inner security? What’s really scary, Ms. Hamilton, is not the loneliness that comes from concealing who you are, but the kind that comes from being yourself. It’s like being wrapped up in clear plastic. You can see the world, you can hear the world, and you see yourself, but you can touch none of it.

“My students share these thoughts with me, as I sit with them at my Halaqa/Harkness table, but these longings belong to adolescents of the world, and if we don’t meet their fears, their angst, their beauty, and their anger as partners who long for the same, then we might as well...
get out the Saran Wrap and make their clinging bindings even tighter, to the point where they won’t even hear their names being called.

“And so what does this have to do with the Qur’an? Everything. My students, though living centuries later, are not that different from the young men and women who heard another man in seventh-century Arabia preaching on the streets about a new way to live. The prophet Muhammad (PBUH) faced similar issues: his world was disintegrating. Enfolded in his cloak, he contemplated over the despair of the inequities, the violence, the ignorance, the betrayals, and the abuse of his society.

“And then it came, God’s response, words beyond words, a poem, a call, an invitation to uncover and to discover the gift of God’s wisdom and guidance: the Qur’an. The first word: IQRA—Read! (96:1) My students, most of whom are not Muslim, want to read the Qur’an. They are curious. What will it say? The Qur’an becomes sacred to them not as a given, but as a process. It has an authority for them, something to be reckoned with, and whether or not they become religious is really none of our business. They would tell you to judge them by their acts, and leave everything else to God. Listen to them. Be kind; be respectful.

“And as a final thought: Halaqa, a circle of knowledge in Islam where the Qur’an is studied, is analogous to havruta, or the Hebrew word for fellowship (Hebrew: חנ sensual, from Talmudic Aramaic for fellowship), an ancient Jewish practice where two partners interpret the meaning of a biblical text in a dialogue with one another, and Harkness, where a group of inquirers sit around an oval table and debate the meaning of a given text or passage. Harkness may be special in America, but it has ancient exegetical roots in other traditions.”

***

Let me highlight two comments of Hamilton’s to suggest a continuing theme in many of our courses, if not the central one in all of them. Noting how the Harkness method is analogous to methods of study traditional to Islam, Hamilton writes, “Muslims call this safe place Halaqa—a pedagogy that is as old as Islam, that circles students and a teacher around a subject, usually verses from the Qur’an, who then work together to discover insights and to live with inspiration.” There is a further analog to be found in Judaic practice (see the comment immediately above about havruta [חנ sensual], the Hebrew word for fellowship) for gathering students around a table or across from one another to examine and discuss the meaning of a given piece of sacred scripture. In that sense, Harkness teaching is a secular form of Halaqa or havruta, a contemporary pedagogy with ancient roots, a point I sought to make differently by drawing comparisons between Harkness teaching and the original intent of Socratic dialogues.
As mentioned before, there are both content and process issues at stake in any such conversation. The content issue—especially with younger students—concerns understanding the basic facts of each religion. Reading scripture of any kind is often an acquired skill for many of our students, and an assumed reverence for the text as sacred can be off-putting to some. To cross the threshold of being free to analyze the text as one would any other piece of writing—to see its many possible literal as well as metaphorical meanings—may take some work on the teacher’s part, but that is where Hamilton’s specific pedagogy in this course is so strong, and, I would contend, appropriate. Yes, the Qur’an is “revealed” scripture, as many would consider the scriptures of other Abrahamic faiths, but a roundtable discussion of the various meanings of any surah allows the students “ownership” of their interpretation, as Hamilton noted above. In that process of allowing each student to share how he or she views the meaning of any passage in the text, there is also a silent dialogue taking place between the text and the individual student’s own life, both personally and spiritually. It is not simply a question of what the text means, but what might it mean for me and to me. That dialogue is yet another part of providing students in our care the place and opportunity to enter into discussion with others and themselves about what it means to be a person, what is of value, what gives meaning—all questions at the heart of knowing oneself.

Hamilton’s course raises the sometimes-delicate issue of having a teacher of one professed faith teach the religion of another. Occasionally, Hamilton will have a Muslim student in the course, but most of the students are non-Muslim. Over the years, she has faced sharp criticism from some conservative Muslim quarters about the appropriateness of having an Episcopal priest teach a course on Islam where the central exercise is reading the Qur’an. Likewise, note that Rabbi Marx Asch has taught the New Testament class, and I, an Episcopal priest, have taught the course on Zen Buddhism for years.
response—it is my response, as well—is that there is a difference between reading sacred scripture confessionally and reading it as part of an academic study of religion. Hamilton welcomes, as do others, the presence of Muslim students in the class, or students of any faith. While I would not want to suggest there is uniformity of interpretation among the faith communities on how their scriptures are to be read—that is hardly the case—the presence of “believers and non-believers” around the table makes for a much richer and deeper conversation, one in which both groups can enter into dialogue with one another and have their views examined, explained, challenged, and often greatly deepened by noting that not all students (or people) view the world in the same way. That is a healthy and vibrant mix, and some of our best classes have their origins in the diverse viewpoints of the students. Just as I am much more conscious of my own beliefs when living and working in another culture, so too does the presence of people different from me—whether in class or in my life—greatly enrich those internal conversations about who I am, what I think and believe, and where I have my being. All of our Religion Department courses invite that conversation.

**Religion 260: Judaism**

REL 260 JUDAISM This course focuses on the development of Judaism from the biblical period to the present, exploring the historical evolution of Jewish holidays, life-cycle rituals, and Jewish law. Students will read materials from the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic writings such as the Talmud, and contemporary Judaic scholars. Discussion topics include American Jewry, Zionism, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and the emergence of the State of Israel. Students will also have the opportunity to cook and eat Jewish food, experience Jewish arts and culture, meet a rabbi, and visit a local synagogue. Open to lowers, uppers, and juniors.

The description of Phillips Exeter’s course on Judaism, currently taught by Rabbi
Jennifer Marx Asch, in some ways parallels the Islam course description. As noted earlier, at the ninth- and tenth-grade levels, our courses tend to be more factually-based and less abstract, to be consistent with what we see as developmental issues particular to certain age groups. As the students mature intellectually, the content of our courses changes, with a different type of class conversation occurring based on different kinds of texts. The Judaism course is an unusual offering in that it is “pitched” between the lower- and upper-level courses in the department, being offered primarily to tenth and eleventh graders. The following discussion of the course’s content and pedagogy was written by Rabbi Jennifer Marx Asch, who is ordained in the Reformed tradition.\footnote{Rabbi Jennifer Marx Asch, email to author, January 3, 2015.}

\textit{Rabbi Jennifer Marx-Asch on Religion 260: Judaism}

“The course Religion 260: Judaism preceded me at Phillips Exeter Academy. When I began teaching the course about eight years ago, it resembled a ‘typical’ basic Judaism class that one might find at any local American synagogue—with the major distinction that Religion 260 was in no way catechetical, but rather an academic exploration of Judaism.

“The students who choose to enroll are from a wide range of backgrounds: strongly identified Jewish students who are looking to deepen (or continue) their learning about Judaism at a more sophisticated level than their hometown supplementary religious school; students of (some) Jewish heritage or mixed-faith backgrounds, many of whom are curious to learn about this aspect of their identity; strongly identified Christian students interested in learning more about their ‘parent’ religion; and various other students who may or may not identify with a particular religious tradition. This myriad of backgrounds makes it a challenge to ‘target’ the class to a particular demographic: I don’t want the course to be remedial, yet I don’t want to assume any previous knowledge as most students in our religion classes at Phillips Exeter Academy come in with little to no knowledge about religion.

“I was also committed to the inquiry method of the Harkness pedagogy, rather than a ‘show and tell’ class about Judaism, which was exacerbated by the fact that I (a rabbi) was teaching the class. I wanted students to frame their own questions and seek their own answers. Aside from the pedagogy, another challenge was the subject itself: there is rarely one definitive answer in Judaism. Rather, there exists a range of answers based on one’s placement on the spectrum of tradition. The Judaism class that I had inherited presented Judaism through the static, one-dimensional, historical perspective of a ‘normative Jew’: an Ashkenazic, American (Modern) Orthodox, heterosexual, married Jewish man.
“For years, I have been tinkering with the class, striving to include more voices in our Harkness conversations to demonstrate to the students how Judaism has historically evolved—and continues to evolve. I want Religion 260 students to appreciate Judaism as an organic, vibrant and relevant way of life for a diverse Jewish people, rather than an ancient and archaic religion, petrified since the biblical times. As author Rabbi Barry Holtz writes,

[Jewish] texts are linked by webs of interpretation, by readings, which expand and develop across time and space. Each generation rereads Torah in the light of its own experience and rethinks the meaning of these texts for the world in which it lives. In the same way, individuals find their own path into the sources and read the words in ways that speak most directly to their own situation. Jewish mystics expressed this idea by saying that there are thousands of aspects and meanings in the Torah and that each individual soul has its own particular way of understanding the sacred words.\(^{177}\)

Keeping these challenges in mind, what follows is the latest manifestation of Religion 260, a course that is in progress as I write. I require two texts that are supplemented by a variety of sources ranging from primary sources such as biblical and Talmudic texts, to writings by Jewish scholars and contemporary writers. The required texts are Ari Goldman’s *Being Jewish* and Michael Strassfield’s *A Book of Life*.\(^{178}\)

“We open the class, the first of six units, with the framing question: What do we mean by ‘Jewish’? I ask the students to come to class on the first day with their own definition (drawn from whatever sources they choose). We read the definitions out loud and then reflect on common tropes amongst them, as well as what might be different identifying categories. This discussion is followed by a viewing of a brief documentary called *The Tribe*, which explores what it means to be Jewish in the twenty-first century.\(^{179}\) It is a fast-paced, edgy documentary that poses more questions than it answers; however, it exposes the students to how diverse the (American) Jewish community is as well as the complexities of Jewish identity.

“From the closing question posed in *The Tribe*—“What does it mean to be Jewish today?”—we launch the class, exploring the tension between tradition and modernity, questions of authority and relevance, as well as what (if anything) is binding about commandments.\(^{180}\) The students take a field trip to the Phillips Church to look at a Torah scroll, reflecting on how and in what capacity this ancient sacred text still informs Judaism today.\(^{181}\)


\(^{179}\) *The Tribe*, dir. Tiffany Shlain (Citizen Film, 2005).


“My goal for this opening unit it to expose students to the complexity of Jewish tradition; most American Jews do not fall in line with ‘traditional’ orthodoxy (or orthopraxy). Rather, contemporary Jews must navigate their own ways through the labyrinth of sacred texts and mediate between these texts and their autonomous, rationalist sensibilities. We incorporate Holtz’s sentiments—as a rabbi and a contemporary Jewish scholar—into our Harkness discussions and in-class writings, debating how Jews should read their sacred texts.

When we read and study Jewish texts, we are involved in another task as well: an attempt to understand those who came before us. What did the rabbis of the past believe and care about? What did the Jews of the Middle Ages feel as they wrote their poetry and philosophy? What did the Hasidim of the eighteenth century need to create their own religious paths? We can study the Jewish classics in the manner that we read the Greeks, the Romans, the ancient Chinese, and that would be fine. Except for us there is something different here, too, something beyond an inquiry into history. These, after all are our predecessors. We trace these works the way we follow the lines on a family tree. It is where we come from. And like a relative one many not know very well, may be meeting for the first time in fact, we feel a kind of obligation to pause a moment to see who this member of the family really is. In that sense to study these texts is a debt we feel we owe to our ancestors.¹⁸²

To supplement these philosophical musings, students also read up on biblical history as a way to familiarize themselves on the ancient origins of Judaism, as well as learn about foundational concepts such as the patriarchs, covenant, revelation, God, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, prophets, the Temple (and sacrificial cult), the Promised Land, and Hebrew Bible personalities such as Abraham, Moses, and King David.¹⁸³

“Now that we have gotten our bearings a bit with the framing questions as well as Judaism’s ancient foundations, we explore, in unit two, how Jews live as Jews by following the commandments and traditions of Judaism. Since the home is the setting for much of Jewish living, we begin by examining how a Jewish home reflects a Jew’s ethical and religious values. I bring the students to my home to show them Jewish artifacts such as a mezuzah, Jewish art and books, rituals objects such as Sabbath candlesticks and a shofar, as well as a ketubah (Jewish marriage contract). Seeing these ceremonial objects in their proper context helps students appreciate how central the home is to one’s Jewish identity and practice, as well as understand Jewish values such as shalom bayit (peace in the home), hachnasat orchim (welcoming guests), and kibud avot (honoring one’s parents).

“We also study the laws of keeping kosher as a reflection of a Jew’s ethical values and religious commitments, ranging from a law-bound orthopraxy to a more progressive expression of one’s views on the environment and/or animal welfare. We read about how the discipline of keeping kosher serves as an (external) identifying marker for some Jews, or as a way to

¹⁸² Holtz, Finding Our Way, 8.

To end this unit, I have the students write a short paper to reflect on this Jewish practice of embodying one’s ethics, by addressing the following prompt:

This week, we have been learning about how Jews enact their ethics by living a Jewish life. Think about an ethical teaching or value that is important to you. How do you embody this ethic or value in your daily life? Give specific examples of how you “live” this value on a daily basis (the way Jews do by keeping kosher, for instance). Also reflect on where you learned this value and why it is so important to you. (You might consider: Are you “commanded” to act this way by your faith? Is it a “tradition” within your family? Or, is this something unique to you?) How does living by this ethic or value shape you as a person?

“The next unit, the third, shifts back to a historical lens, viewing the development of Jewish law, specifically the historical and religious forces that shaped the codification of the Oral Law with the Mishnah (200 CE) and the Talmud (500 CE) after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. Students peel back the layers of the texts to understand the historical process of interpretation of the Oral Law across space and time, as well as how the texts reflect their unique environments and at the same time transcend them.

“The students close out this unit with a ‘hands-on’ exercise where they practice the process of writing a page of Talmud (although speeding up the process throughout several hundred years), by creating a daf (page) of Talmud as a class. This exercise encourages students to compare the style and content of Talmudic discussions with our own Harkness learning process. Oftentimes, students will reflect on the similarities: the multilayered conversation, the various threads of inquiry, the plurality of voices, the weaving in of personal experiences and insights, and the ‘minority opinions’ that are preserved as part of the record of the conversation. This is a powerful moment for many of the students, as they may have previously considered Harkness to be something that is unique to Phillips Exeter Academy, not the way that rabbis have been learning and legislating for millennia. Also, by understanding how and why the particular page layout, plasticity, inclusivity, and evolutionary nature of the Talmud are so critical to its longevity and relevance, students find more value in their own Harkness learning.

“We then move into the next unit, on ‘Jewish time,’ where we focus on Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath) as well as the Jewish holy days. We begin with Shabbat as a way of understanding sacred time in Judaism. Our first reading is the classic essay ‘A Palace in Time’ by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, supplemented by an essay on ‘Sanctuaries in Time: The Jewish Calendar’ by Rabbi Harold Kushner from his book To Life! We also look at provocative understandings of Sabbath from authors such as Judith Shulevitz and the website The Sabbath Manifesto.

“To balance out these philosophical musings on the need for rest and sacred time, the students enact Shabbat rituals such as baking challah and joining the Exeter Jewish Community

---


for their weekly Shabbat prayers and dinner. Over a long weekend, students are asked to shape their own “mini-Shabbat” following the guidelines listed below, encouraging students to creatively interpret the meaningfulness of the Sabbath in an experiential yet thoughtful way.

**A Creative Expression of Shabbat**

- **DO:** This weekend is a “low homework weekend,” the perfect time to try to observe “Shabbat” in a creative way. Over the course of the weekend, take some time to “make Shabbat” for yourself by (thoughtfully) choosing a relaxing and meaningful activity to do such as playing music, creative writing, going for a walk outside, etc. (Something more than taking a nap.) Also, be deliberate about what you are NOT going to do, such as carrying your phone, texting, doing homework or chores. Plan on spending at least two hours enjoying your Shabbat.

- **WRITE:** When you are done enjoying your Shabbat, please write up a one-paragraph reflection on what the experience was like for you. Did you feel like you made “sacred time” for yourself? Why or why not?

- **SHARE:** We will be sharing our “Shabbat experiments” in class with one another.

“Rather than race through the Jewish calendar year, trying to cover all sixteen of the major Jewish holidays, I choose a few of the more well-known holidays to focus on as a way to more deeply consider the themes and teachings of the holidays, instead of a more superficial survey of rituals and practices. Like the Jewish year, we open with the Jewish High Holidays, highlighting the themes of *t’shuvah* (repentance), *tzedakah* (‘righteousness,’ but more colloquially understood as charity), and *tikkun olam* (repairing the broken world). The Jewish high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur act as templates for understanding how the Jewish (religious) practice of observing the holidays puts into practice the ethical teachings of the holy days.

“We close this unit with Passover, tracing back the holiday to its biblical origins (reading excerpts from Exodus in the Hebrew Bible) and participating in a ‘mock’ *seder* where students can experience the Passover rituals for themselves, as Jews are commanded to do so. The students are then asked to write a short paper exploring these connections between the Jewish holy days and Jewish values. During the winter terms that coincide with the Jewish holidays of Chanukah and Purim, we also include these holidays in our course of study, such as reading the Book of Esther and baking *hamantaschen* for Purim, as well as joining with the Exeter Jewish Community for Chanukah candle-lighting and a festive Chanukah meal.

“In the next unit, the fifth, on Jewish life, we trace a Jewish life from birth to death, all the while keeping in mind a diverse range of experiences for contemporary Jews. Students read chapters from Ari Goldman’s *Being Jewish* and Michael Strassfield’s *A Book of Life* regarding *brit milah* (ritual circumcision), Hebrew names, bar/bat mitzvah, marriage, love and sexuality (including premarital sex, homosexuality, and sex within a marriage), death, mourning rites, and Jewish views on the afterlife.¹⁸⁷ We also address more contemporary concerns, such as intermarriage and gay marriage.

“In the readings and our Harkness discussions, we include a range of Jewish life-cycle events to expand beyond the ‘normative’ Jewish life cycle (read: Orthodox, male, heterosexual), to include more liberal interpretations, as well as gender-inclusive celebrations. For example, I show the wedding video of my own Jewish wedding that interpreted Jewish traditions and rituals in egalitarian and modern ways.

“For our last unit of study, we widen our lens to look at the larger Jewish community, visiting the websites of the various Jewish denominations (Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism) to compare and contrast their members’ Jewish lifestyles and political and social stances. We invite a guest speaker to talk with the class about contemporary political and social issues in Israel (complemented by readings describing Jews’ religious and historical connection to the land of Israel). Also, we briefly touch on the history of anti-Semitism, viewing the documentary The Longest Hatred, and culminating in a brief class on the Holocaust.”

* * *

As one can see from Marx-Asch’s description of the course, the materials covered are more factual, rather than abstract, and the special pedagogy in this course concerns finding ways for the students to experience, through hands-on exercises, some of the larger concepts of what it means to be a Jew. It should be noted that, contrary to the Islam course above, many of the students in this class are self-identified Jews. Even though the ratio may be reversed from the Islam course, the belief remains that a mix of backgrounds and faith-stances around the table makes for richer conversations. Not all self-identified Jews share the same background or faith, and the presence of non-Jews in the class enlivens the conversation, with all parties engaging in a discussion about the diverse understandings of what, historically and currently, it means to be a Jew. This is not “teaching for conversion”—a phrase we in the department often quote—but teaching religion as an academic subject, with an aim of encouraging students of all backgrounds to consider the value—what Mark Edmundson would call the “livability”—of these ideas. Can I live by any of the ideas, rituals, and beliefs which we are discussing? The format of the course,

---


the readings, the table conversations, the written assignments, and the hands-on activities all invite the student to engage in that discussion—with others as well as with him- or herself.

Religion 240: Religion and Popular Culture

REL240 Religion and Popular Culture: Images, ideas, stereotypes, and symbol systems of religion surround us in popular culture, whether in movies, television shows, sports, fashion, the Internet, music, or literature. From Disney to Harry Potter, The Simpsons to House, M.D., the materials for this course will be drawn from a wide range of media. Through the lens of American popular culture, this course introduces students to the academic study of religion by exploring the world’s religions and such topics as the problem of evil, the afterlife, myth, and the nature of the sacred. The course will culminate with each student presenting his or her own project on one expression of religion and popular culture. Open to juniors and lowers.

In our Religion Department faculty discussions, we periodically revisit the question of whether the courses we offer our students are comprehensive enough, appropriate to their age group, and responsibly packaged as introductory secondary schools courses for students who probably have not previously studied religion as an academic subject. In our unofficial division of introductory ninth- and tenth-grade courses versus more in-depth eleventh- and twelfth-grade classes, we thought it appropriate to introduce a new lower-level course that moved away from the traditional scripture courses (read: Hebrew Bible or the New Testament) or religion and literature courses we had been offering. Since our religion curriculum in many ways mirrors that of a small liberal arts college, we noted that several colleges offered a “religion and popular culture” course. Thinking that such a topic might be an attractive “hook” for younger students, we introduced Religion 240, a course that turned out to be so popular that we have had to cap its enrollment every term at no more than three sections. I have not taught the course, so the
discussion of the hows and whys of it are from one of my colleagues, Thomas (Tom) Ramsey.\(^{190}\)

---

**Tom Ramsey on Religion 240: Religion and Popular Culture**

“Religion 240: Religion and Popular Culture is a one-term, ten-week course for ninth- and tenth-grade students that meets three to four times per week. The course has four parts. A brief introduction (two to three classes) raises and offers preliminary answers to key questions that occupy our attention throughout the term. *What is religion? What is popular culture? How do we study popular culture? How are religion and popular culture related to one another?* The second part of the course (three weeks) is concerned with providing basic information about the major world religions and discussing illustrative cases of how each of these religious traditions is represented in American popular culture. The third part of the course (three weeks) explores ways in which popular culture functions as a religion, considering, for example, sports fandom and mythic and ritual dimensions of pop culture. The fourth part of the course (three weeks) focuses on individual student projects. Each student chooses one example of the interaction between religion and popular culture, reads critical analysis of that example, leads a discussion of the topic based around a central question the student is pursuing, and writes a summary essay. Topics might include ‘Harry Potter as Christ Figure’ or ‘Fenway Park as Sacred Space.’

“An essay by Bruce David Forbes, *Religion and Popular Culture in America,* plays a significant role in how we, the teachers of the course, think about the course material and how students come to see the relationship between religion and pop culture.\(^{191}\) Forbes’s essay is assigned reading for the second day of the course. Forbes argues that this relationship consists of four main interactions: 1) religion in popular culture; 2) popular culture in religion; 3) popular culture as religion; and 4) religion and popular culture in dialogue. ‘Religion in popular culture’ encompasses religious ideas and themes as well as content about specific religious traditions that appear in popular culture (for example, how Hinduism is portrayed in an episode of a situation comedy). ‘Popular culture in religion’ includes ways in which religions are influenced by popular culture (e.g. WWJD bracelets or Christian rock music). ‘Popular culture as religion’ includes ways in which pop culture can be seen as religious or as a religion. Finally, ‘religion and popular culture in dialogue’ describes various examples of social concerns shared by religion and pop culture (e.g. violence).

“These four ways of seeing the relationship between religion and popular culture shape the course itself. After the introductory classes, which include reading Forbes’s essay and discussing his categories, the second part of the course deals with ‘religion in pop culture,’ while the third part deals with ‘popular culture as religion.’ Students frequently choose topics for their projects that deal with ‘popular culture and religion in dialogue.’

“While the structure of the course and the explanatory role of Forbes’s categories might suggest that the course defines religion clearly and specifically, that is definitely not the case. In the part of the course when students learn about the major world religions and how they are treated in American popular culture, we take for granted what is meant by ‘organized religion’ or

---

\(^{190}\) Tom Ramsey, email to author, January 10, 2015.

‘institutional religion’ or ‘developed religious tradition.’ But, especially in the third part of the course, defining ‘religion’ and related concepts becomes a central task of our discussions. If, to take a student’s project topic as an example, Fenway Park is a ‘sacred space,’ is Red Sox fandom a religion? What do we mean by ‘the sacred’? Are there secular sacred spaces, or is the sacred always religious? And can one be religious without having an organized religion? What about ‘faith’? Is it correct to talk about having faith in the Red Sox? Such questions arise when we consider the idea of a religious dimension to popular culture.

“The course, then, has three primary goals. First, we want students to acquire some basic knowledge of the world’s major religious traditions or, perhaps more accurately, we want students to know that there is specific information to be learned in order to begin to understand these traditions. The course does not purport to be a survey of the world’s religions, but we expect students to learn very basic information about them (e.g., the Buddha was an actual person who lived in the Indian subcontinent in the fifth century BCE) so students can begin to interpret representations of these religions, and ideas related to them, in pop culture. In short, the course is interested in promoting religious literacy, and in particular a literacy that recognizes the distinctiveness of different religions. Second, we are interested in raising questions about the nature and function of religion. Students, we hope, come out of the course understanding that the word ‘religion’ might not just refer to institutional or organized religion, but can be seen as a dimension of human culture in complicated and engaging ways. Students become familiar with ways in which scholars of religion use terms such as myth and ritual. Finally, we hope students who take this course thereby learn how to approach popular culture more critically and thoughtfully than they did before. While the course does not purport to be an introduction to cultural studies, exploring the religious dimension of popular culture should contribute to a deepened understanding of culture in general and mass media in particular.

“Religion 240, like all courses at Phillips Exeter Academy, is taught using the Harkness method and this pedagogy has important implications for how students engage ‘religion.’ While not every moment of every class takes the form of discussion (there are also tests, quizzes, explanation of material, question and answer, etc.), every moment serves the student and his or her engagement with the course material in discussion with peers under the guidance of an instructor. What this means for the teaching of religion at Exeter is that there is a significant degree of openness as students come to terms individually and as a group with the course material. In regard to the teaching of religion, Harkness discussion becomes the way students construct their understanding, not only of certain concepts or information but also of their own relationship to the course material.

“An example might help to illustrate how this works. The first day of Religion 240 is unique in that it is the one day all term when students have not prepared beforehand for the class meeting. We spend about half of this first class getting to know one another a bit and reviewing the course syllabus and requirements. I then begin the ‘lesson’ by playing a brief video, a four-minute clip of the opening scene of Disney’s 1994 animated film The Lion King. The scene opens with the sun rising over the savannah, and the singing of the song ‘The Circle of Life.’ Across the savannah, animals are streaming toward a central gathering place, a tall rock formation where the lion king, his mate, and their cub are waiting. A baboon figure approaches the cub, breaks a gourd in his hands, mixes the juice of the gourd with dust, and marks the cub’s forehead with the paste. He then takes the cub in his arms and raises him to the sky so that all of the animals can see the cub. A shaft of sunlight pierces the clouds at this moment as the animals kneel in obeisance.
“I ask how many students have seen this before, and everyone (perhaps with one or two
exceptions) says yes, and we usually talk about when they first saw it, how many times (one
student had seen The Lion King twenty-one times), etc. I then point out that we have just
watched it in the context of a course about religion and popular culture, which might raise two
questions: 1) do you think this is an example of popular culture?, and 2) do you think there is
anything religious going on in this scene? The discussion of this video clip and these questions
usually occupies us for the rest of that class meeting and the entirety of the next (for which
reading is assigned as well).

“Discussion typically addresses some key questions. Someone usually says that the
baboon is baptizing the cub. So what is baptism? (There is usually widespread confusion about
baptism, so we try to put some minimal content to that term.) But why doesn’t the baboon use
water? Often one student will say the baboon is a shaman. So what is a shaman? More confusion
and discussion of whether the term ‘shaman’ rightly applies to the baboon. Some students
usually note the shaft of sunlight and argue that it connotes divine favor on the cub. Others
wonder whether sunlight and divinity are necessarily linked. Isn’t this a political event, like an
inauguration, not a religious event? Perhaps there is nothing religious about this at all, and we are
just making this up because we are watching this in a religion class. Everyone agrees that, in
their previous viewing of the scene, they had never noticed anything religious about it. But
someone says that this scene shows a ‘pilgrimage’ by the animals to the rock and a ‘ritual,’ and
both are religious, right? And someone else points out that the song, ‘The Circle of Life,’ is
religious, isn’t it, because it is about reincarnation? More confusion and discussion: is it about
reincarnation or about something else, like ecology? And why would reincarnation be connected
to life on the African savannah? Isn’t reincarnation an Indian idea? And this leads to discussion
of the creators’ intentions. If there is religion in this scene, is it there on purpose? Is Disney
intentionally trying to connect the ceremony to baptism or to reincarnation? What point would it
be trying to make, if so? Is Disney religious?

“All of this discussion goes on in a very animated way as students try to figure out not
only what to think about the video, but what questions we need to ask. If I try to sum up this
discussion, I will usually do so by asking students to look at the kinds of questions we are asking.
There are matters about which we need more information (baptism, reincarnation, shamans,
Disney’s intentions). There are also conceptual problems (what do we mean by ‘religion’?, are
religion and politics separate things?, what makes something pop culture?). With that, all
provided by the students’ discussion, the course is set. In the weeks to come, we will get some
basic grounding in information about the world’s major religions. We will also learn terms like
‘ritual’ and ‘myth,’ and see how they are used. We will spend time thinking about what religion
is, as well as about the meaning of related terms that might have come up, like ‘devotion’ or
‘divinity.’ And we will consider all of these topics in relation to pop culture, with attention to
how we understand and study culture.

“I hope that this example illustrates the way Harkness pedagogy shapes the study of
religion. It shows the teacher’s role in defining the curriculum (selecting topics, materials,
reading, setting assignments, evaluation) and in guiding discussion by asking questions, pointing
out problems, and managing class dynamics. The teacher consistently seeks to turn the
discussion process back to the students. While there are generally predictable ways that ninth-
and tenth-graders will discuss religion, and there are ways the instructor can use his or her
knowledge and experience to inform and deepen discussion, the effort is always to keep
discussion open to the fresh concerns, interests, and ideas of the students at the table. In my
view, the construction of meaning that each group and each individual in the group undertakes and accomplishes is at the heart of the study of religion at Exeter. And, to the degree that religion itself is a meaning-making enterprise, student-centered discussion of religion mirrors its subject. “In this sense, there is a religious dimension to a Harkness discussion.”

* * *

This last comment by my colleague is, in many ways, a fitting summary of what may transpire in a Harkness classroom. While I would not want to suggest the same may not happen in other pedagogies, a class of a dozen students around a table facing one another, guided by an experienced teacher, may replicate what Hadot has described above as the spiritual dimension of a Socratic dialogue, a “spiritual exercise.” In the multivalent definitions of religion discussed at length earlier in this dissertation, a Harkness classroom becomes almost a sacred space, a sanctuary of sorts, for students to pause all the other issues in their frenetic lives and think, slowly and methodically, through some of the deeper and richer issues that we have labeled religious. While Religion 240 may introduce ninth- and tenth-grade students to the academic study of religion, it also provides a sacred space for the students to contemplate a host of questions about meaning, value, and purpose in their lives, a religious quest were there ever one. While in the end this quest is an individual one, doing so around a table of one’s peers, and under the guidance of a teacher, encourages a level of self-reflection not often found in our students’ otherwise very busy lives. That is our task as educators, and that is our challenge as Harkness teachers.
CONCLUSION

If one returns to the concentric circles analogy presented in the opening of this dissertation—from the larger theoretical issues, to the philosophy behind the curricular muses, to the actual course syllabi, all in service of γνῶθι σεαυτόν—there is still something missing in the very center circle, namely, the actual doing of Harkness teaching on a daily basis in an Exeter classroom. As Thomas Aquinas said in a different context, “I have seen things that make all my writings seem like straw.” Analogously, the prior three hundred pages are nothing for a lifelong teacher compared to the actual doing of γνῶθι σεαυτόν with students on a daily basis around a Harkness table. No description or discussion can ever do justice to the experience itself, and that is why, more than forty years after I left Harvard to come to Exeter for a temporary trial year, I have never left. Buechner admits that everything he has written about religion is only a “pallid, alphabetic souvenir,” and this dissertation likewise pales in comparison to actually engaging with adolescent spiritual identity formation in a classroom. In the final analysis, the real point of this dissertation is to be found in the doing of it, not the talking about it.

Having said that, however, and acknowledging that what is described herein is attempted on a daily basis in Phillips Exeter’s classrooms, is it possible that what we do at Phillips Exeter could be done in other secondary schools, in terms of the content of our courses as well as the process of using a Harkness-based pedagogy to do so? One could argue that certain resources are

---


2 Ibid.
necessary to accomplish the goals of a Harkness-based humanities education for secondary-
school students—such as sufficient funding so that it is possible for a school to offer only small
classes taught around a seminar table with Harkness pedagogy as standard. However, Phillips
Exeter has, for almost thirty years, run a variety of summer institutes which train secondary
schools teachers from around the world on how to “teach Harkness.” Those individuals return to
their sending schools to incorporate this pedagogy into their own classrooms. Currently, there are
hundreds of teachers across the country utilizing “Harkness pedagogy” in their humanities
classrooms.3 I am well-aware of the “savage inequalities” of educational systems and resources
in this country.4 In theory, though, there is no reason why an individual teacher, or even an entire
school system, could not attempt this kind of teaching—including the specific courses we in our
Religion Department teach—in a public school setting.5 In the end, the goal of education, and

3 According to the website The Harkness Table, there are more than one hundred schools in the country which have
incorporated Harkness teaching into their classrooms. The Harkness Table, “The Harkness Table: Schools,”
accessed March 12, 2015, http://www.theharknessstable.com/p/schools.html. Some of these schools are very public
in their adoption of the Harkness method, and advertise themselves as such, for example, the Stevenson School
(Carmel, California): Stevenson School, “Harkness Teaching Philosophy,” accessed March 12, 2015,
http://www.stevensonschool.org/academics/carmel/harkness/index.aspx. Note that this adoption is in a middle
school, grades 5–8. Additionally, the director of Exeter’s Humanities Institute has provided me with a long list of
schools which have sent teachers to the institute, and who have returned to their sending schools to incorporate
Harkness into their classrooms. In fact, so many schools have adopted or copied Harkness teaching that Phillips
Exeter has had to resort to trademarking all names with Harkness table or Harkness pedagogy in them, and has even
entered into a contract with a local New Hampshire furniture manufacturer to produce Harkness tables and chairs;
product-catalog/. It is interesting to note that the sketch I used as Figure 1.1—illustrating the difference between
traditional and Harkness pedagogies—comes from a school in India which has adopted the Harkness method.

more reflections on the issue of structural inequalities, see Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York:
167–91.

5 As an encouraging sign of public and charter schools adopting the Harkness method, one could note the Noble
Street Charter School in Chicago, founded in 1999 by two public school teachers, which has adopted the Harkness
method school-wide, and has sent its entire faculty to one of Phillips Exeter’s summer institutes to be trained in how
to do so. Phillips Exeter Academy has formally adopted Noble as a partner in implementing this pedagogy. Ethan
February 1, 2015, https://www.exeter.edu/exeter_bulletin/12984_15985.aspx. I am aware of the constitutional issues
of teaching about religion in a public school setting (as opposed to the teaching of religion). The best resource for
exploring those issues, as well as offering guidance on how this might be accomplished, is: Diane Moore,
our particular type of religion and philosophy course, should not be simply to assist the student in securing employment, but rather to help the student to know him- or herself better, to know how to think critically, to understand better what one believes, to learn what gives meaning and purpose to one’s life, and to be a more critical commentator about, and participant in, the larger world around us.6

Moreover, even if one puts aside teaching these courses via the Harkness method, which I cannot easily do, if there is truly a humanities crisis in this country, and we are moving more and more away from self- and soul-making toward a commodifiable education system wherein securing employment is the goal, woe to us in the humanities if we do not offer a more vigorous apology for an educational system which places coming to know oneself front and center in the classroom. This is not to suggest commodifiable skills are unimportant, for they surely are—this is not in any sense a simple binary—but if we do not encourage those students in our care to take time during their adolescence and early adulthood to find themselves, we run the risk of sending out into the world a generation of young people who have little idea of where they live and move

---

6 The issues of this dissertation are not limited to the secondary level. Take as typical, and local, the desire of some at Harvard to incorporate Harkness pedagogy into their classroom instruction. In the Harvard alumni magazine, there was a long article by the former dean of Harvard College, Harry R. Lewis, who had redesigned his introductory computer science class around small group discussion sections. Harry R. Lewis, “Reinventing the Classroom,” Harvard Magazine (September–October 2012). In the article, Lewis writes, “I should use the classroom differently. So I decided to change the bargain with my students. Attendance would be mandatory. Homework would be daily. There would be a reading assignment for every class. But when they got to class, they would talk to each other instead of listening to me. In class, I would become a coach helping students practice rather than an oracle spouting truths. We would ‘flip the classroom,’ as they say: students would prepare for class in their rooms, and would spend their classroom time doing what we usually call ‘homework’—solving problems. And they would solve problems collaboratively, sitting around tables in small groups. Students would learn to learn from each other. . . . A principal objective of the course would be not just to teach the material but to persuade these budding computer scientists that they could learn it. Student feedback was gratifyingly positive. Anonymous responses to my questionnaire included ‘I’ve found this to be the most helpful teaching method at Harvard’ and ‘Oh my goodness, the in-class problem-solving is beautiful! We need more of it.’” One of my former students—who had been chair of our school newspaper, the Exonian, and who graduated from Phillips Exeter in 2005—attended Harvard and chose to write her senior thesis on why Harvard should adopt the Harkness method: Lois Elizabeth Beckett, “Authority and Education: Evaluating Classroom Discussion in the University” (undergraduate senior thesis, Harvard College, 2009).
and have their being. To the contrary, as William Deresiewicz notes, “You’re here [in school] for very selfish reasons,’ the legendary Columbia professor Edward Taylor would say to his freshmen the first day of class. ‘You’re here to build a self.’”7 Wherever we are, however we teach, we in the humanities need to find more ways to assist the students in our classrooms to construct their selves. As Mark Edmundson puts the issue,

> Your professors will give you some fine books to read, and they’ll probably help you understand them. What they won’t do, for reasons that perplex me, is ask you if the books contain truths you could live your life by. When you read Plato, you’ll probably learn about his metaphysics and his politics and his way of conceiving the soul. But no one will ask you if his ideas are good enough to believe in. No one will ask you, in the words of Emerson’s disciple William James, what their “cash value” might be. No one will suggest that you might use Plato as your bible for a week or a year or longer. No one, in short, will ask you to use Plato to help you change your life.8

To the contrary, whatever we read with our students, and more generally, whatever we teach, we need to engage the students as if their lives depended on what we teach (Fig. Conclusion.1)—which, in the end, they do.

---


8 Mark Edmundson, Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2013), 64.
Figure Conclusion.1. The author with his class at Phillips Exeter Academy. Courtesy of Nicole Pelleton and the Exeter Communications Office, Phillips Exeter Academy.
Appendix A: The Religion Department Curriculum at Phillips Exeter Academy

Religion

While the subject matter can vary widely from one area of study to another, all religion courses reflect a similar concern: the relation of the students to fundamental questions of meaning, purpose, and value in their lives. Study in religion is offered in each of the four years. The courses assume no prior knowledge or study of religion.

Courses may be taken in any order appropriate to the student’s grade level:

**JUNIOR**
- Religion 110, 120, 210, 220, 240, 260
- Upper School: Religion 110, 120, 210, 220, 240, 260

**UPPER SCHOOL**
- Religion 120, 125, 270, 310, 311, 312, 320, 330, 340, 410, 420, 421, 480, 490, 493, 494
- Senior Thesis

The course in psychology, an affiliated course under the aegis of the Religion Department, is listed on the preceding page.

**RELI 110: HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT**

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth..." So begins one of the most influential books in human history. From ancient times until the present, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have grappled with the cosmic questions, universal myths, compelling laws, and dramatic narratives of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament. It is a book that is both timeless and timely. In this course, students will gain an appreciation of the historical, political, and social context from which the Hebrew Bible emerged, and will explore the narratives' eternal themes such as creation and destruction, rivalry and loyalty, love and betrayal, doubt and faith, freedom and captivity, forgiveness and revenge, as well as delve into the ethical and legal teachings that have served as a major foundation of Western civilization. 

**RELI 20: FAITH AND DOUBT**

This course encourages students' curiosity about religious experience across the spectrum from traditional belief to atheism. By reading the works of authors such as Elie Wiesel, Alice Walker, Frederick Buechner, Sue Monk Kidd, and Christopher Hitchens, students will engage questions of faith, belief, doubt, personal spirituality vs. organized religion, and the ultimate meaning of one’s life. The course ends with each student writing a personal meditation on a topic of his/her own choosing. 

**RELI 220: ONE NATION UNDER GOD?**

America has always been a mix of various peoples and faiths. This course examines the religious traditions that make up the American religious and cultural landscape, focusing on Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The distinctive ethos and practices of each are explored, along with their presence in the daily news. Extensive use of visual materials, guest speakers, church and other site visits, and first-hand experiences such as the opportunity to observe Buddhist meditation, a Passover Seder, or a Muslim prayer service assist students in experiencing and examining these religious traditions. Attention is given to the student's understanding of his or her own background in relation to the diversity of religious expression today.

**RELI 220: THE NEW TESTAMENT**

The Da Vinci Code and Holy Blood, Holy Grail have sparked questions about Jesus, the New Testament, and secret gospels from the early Christian period. In this course we will read and explore the New Testament, which has been called “the most widely read, quoted, debated, maligned, and beloved book in Western civilization.” We will study the life of Jesus, the travels and letters of Paul, and the book of Revelation; and we will consider these both in their historical context and in contemporary literature and films.

**RELI 240: RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE**

Images, ideas, stereotypes, and symbol systems of religion surround us as popular culture, whether in movies, television shows, books, music, or the Internet. From Disney to Harry Potter, from "House, M.D.", to The Simpsons to "House, M.D.", the material for this course will be drawn from a wide range of media. Through the lens of American popular culture, this course introduces students to the academic study of religion by exploring the world's religions and the role of entertainment in shaping the nature of the sacred. The course will culminate with each student presenting his or her own project on one expression of religion and popular culture.

**RELI 260: JUDAISM**

This course focuses on the development of Judaism from the biblical period to the present, exploring the historical evolution of Jewish holidays, life-cycle rituals, and Jewish law. Students will read materials from the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic writings such as the Talmud, and contemporary Jewish scholars. Discussion topics include American Jews, Zionism, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and the emergence of the State of Israel. Students will also have the opportunity to cook and eat Jewish food, experience Jewish arts and culture, meet a rabbi, and visit a local synagogue.

**RELI 265: CHRISTIANITIES**

What does it mean to be a Christian? Why are there so many different Christian groups (including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and dozens more)? Is every group that calls itself Christian really Christian? This course will explore
various definitions of what it means to be a Christian, from the early church’s efforts to eliminate heresy to contemporary disagreements about groups such as the Mormons. A second focus of the course will be to look at the different ways Christian groups define themselves in relation to the wider culture. As a final project, each student will have the opportunity to choose one group for an in-depth report on how that group understands its Christian identity and how the group relates to the culture around it. In addition to reading and discussion, the course will include site visits, meetings with religious leaders, and films. Open to lower years, upper years, and seniors with permission of the department. Offered: Spring Term.

REL270: ISLAM

In the daily news, the world’s second largest religion is often misunderstood or mischaracterized. Who are the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims? What is the history of Islam? How is Islam related to Judaism and Christianity as an Abrahamic faith? Students will study the life of the prophet Muhammad, read the Qur’an in translation, and learn about the origins, beliefs, diversity, and practices of Islam. The class also considers how issues of social justice, the role of women, the understanding of jihad, and interfaith dialogue shape the expressions of the faith. For a final project, students will consider the many ways in which Islam manifests itself through history with a study of a particular era or political issue, or in literature and poetry, art and design, architecture, dance or calligraphy, and they may choose to work in a similar medium. Open to lower years and upper years. Offered: Full Term.

REL290: SELECTED TOPICS IN RELIGION

This course is offered at student or departmental initiative. Open to juniors and seniors.

REL310: SOCIAL ETHICS: VALUES IN A CHANGING AMERICA

Look at the front page of a daily newspaper, watch the news on television, or check the crawl on your computer screen, and you will see people debating about how to resolve some of our society’s more basic conflicts. In this course, students examine various contemporary social issues such as changing birth technologies, abortion, genetic engineering, euthanasia, affirmative action, censorship, pornography, welfare reform, legitimizing drugs, animal rights, and the death penalty. The course may include reading a daily national newspaper and tracking issues of personal interest to the student. The course provides students with the conceptual tools and practical information necessary to understand, evaluate, and respond to the social issues of an ever-changing modern life. Open to upper years and seniors.

REL311: GLOBAL ETHICS: WHAT’S WRONG WITH THE WORLD?

Melting polar ice caps, oceans filled with plastic and empty of fish, soon-to-be exhausted fossil fuel sources, the continued scourge of global diseases, increasing disparity between the rich and poor in the face of exploding population growth, and other intractable world problems—what kind of a world do we live in? What kind of a world should we live in? This course will read authors in the forefront of social and ethical analysis, such as Jared Diamond, Peter Singer, Lester Brown, Bill McKibben and others, as we develop appropriate responses to the global crises of this and the next generation—in population, the environment, energy, pollution, climate, health and wealth, food, and many others. The course will include work with current news sources—both national and international—as well as numerous DVDs and online clips to illustrate some of the problems as well as proposed solutions. Open to upper years and seniors. Offered: Fall and Winter Terms.

REL312: THE ETHICS OF THE MARKETPLACE

Does a corporation have responsibility beyond itself? Should the bottom line trump ethical concerns? Who or what protects the public interest? This course considers these questions in the world of business and management. Students will debate the moral aspects of institutional policies and practices in such areas as the environment, fair labor, executive compensation, globalization and international sweatshops, consumerism and its opponents, advertising, insider trading, whistle blowing, and the corporate responsibilities of multinational firms. Readings will include ethical theory, along with multiple case studies and films illustrating current examples of ethical issues in business. Students also track issues as they appear in the daily national and international news. Open to upper years and seniors.

REL320: HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

Hindusism and Buddhism are having a profound impact on 21st century culture, through practices such as yoga and meditation, in the study of modern psycholgichy and in films, television, and other contemporary media. This course will introduce students to the distinctive ethos of Asian philosophies and ways of life, and to historical figures such as the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, and the Dalai Lama. Students will encounter concepts of ultimate reality, the self, and the purpose of human life that have informed diverse ethical systems and cultures in India, China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. In this course, we will study ideas, symbols, practices, and traditions that have shaped a continent and have found new expressions in today’s world. Open to upper years and seniors. Offered: Fall and Spring Terms.

REL330: READING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Students often discover that knowledge of the Bible is essential background for the study of literature, music, art, history, and many other subjects. This course, designed for those who have little or no familiarity with the Bible, gives students a knowledge of biblical narratives and characters, and an understanding of the larger themes that have made the Bible the greatest “best-seller” of all time and a major influence on every aspect of Western culture. Open to upper years and seniors. Offered: Fall Term.

REL340: GOD AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

The mosque at Ground Zero, “Intelligent design” and the teaching of evolution, the religious dimension of the Tea Party movement, the Ten Commandments in the courthouse, the Pledge of Allegiance in the schools, varied responses to the environmental crisis, and increasing religious diversity versus a vision of the United States as a Christian nation—it is hard to open a newspaper without seeing the controversial intersections of religion and public life in the United States today. This course explores the origins, development, and current expression of these conflicts and controversies, and examines some of the recent voices in religion that have influenced political and social life in contemporary America. Open to upper years and seniors. Offered: Winter Term.
REL 410: THE EMERGING SELF: PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION
This course offers varied psychological and religious perspectives on human nature and experience. Students will consider the role of religion in relation to the development of the sense of the self. Readings include selections from the writings of major figures in psychology and religion, as well as works of memoir and fiction. Authors may include Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Carol Gilligan, and readings may include Peter Schaffer's Equus, Hermann Hesse's Demian, Anne Lamott's Traveling Mercies, and Alex Haley's The Autobiography of Malcolm X. The course culminates with a reflective writing assignment. Open to uppers and seniors with preference to seniors in the Fall.

REL 420: INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY
What is really real? How do I know what I know? Do I have free will? What is the good? These and other speculative questions have troubled the western mind for millennia. This course follows a topical approach to the history of Western philosophy and focuses on such issues as metaphysics, epistemology, the problem of evil, the existence of God, and the philosophical roots of ethics. Students will read from the works of ancient and modern writers such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, Hume, Bentham, and Locke to assist them in coming to their own understanding of these topics. Students will discover what philosophy is and how philosophers question and reason. Open to uppers and seniors.

REL 421: EXISTENTIALISM
What is the meaning of life? Does life have any meaning? Is traditional religion still relevant? Is God dead, or how do we live in a world where it appears God is absent? Focusing primarily on the 19th- and 20th-century literature of that group of writers called the existentialists, this course explores philosophical and theological issues associated with the problem of faith and meaning in today's world. Reading authors such as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, as well as Kafka's short stories, Sartre's novels and plays, Beckett's plays, and Camus' novels, students compare a traditional understanding of God, humanity, and the world with other views that challenge, confirm, or translate these concepts into terms more relevant to the contemporary world. Open to uppers and seniors.

REL 480: MYSTICISM
It has been said that all religions converge in the contemplative tradition: the Christian mystics and Jewish Kabbalists, the Sufis of Islam, the sannyas and yogis of Hinduism, the core meditation practices of Buddhism. Are they all the same? Where do they lead? What can we learn about them from current research on the mind-body connection? Is it possible to quiet the mind? What is the role of the body and the breath? What does it mean to speak of expanded consciousness, or higher mind? What is the integration of masculine and feminine described in tantra? We will consider selections from the teachings of all the major faiths in an effort to understand more about these questions, with readings from works such as the Upanishads and significant teachers including the Buddha, Rumi, Ramana Maharshi, Tulku Thondup, Nhat Hanh, Mas-Gafni, Cynthia Bourgeault, Father Thomas Keating, and Pema Chodron. Open to uppers and seniors. Offered: Spring Term.
WORKS CITED


*The Existential Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*. Directed by Ken Casey. University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 1983. VHS.


——., *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Translated by Paul Carus. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950.


*King Corn*. Directed by Aaron Woolf. ITVS and Mosaic Films, 2007.


———. Thus Spoke Zarathustra. In The Portable Nietzsche, 103–439.


*Sacred Stories, with Frederick Buechner, Maya Angelou, and James Carroll*: 21st Trinity Institute, Parish of Trinity Church, New York City. Directed by Jack Hanick. EcuFilm, 1990. VHS, 80 min.


