

Situating Core Analytic Philosophy within the Liberal Arts Curriculum

Philosophy should play a central role in a liberal education: it takes up longstanding questions of human concern, approaches them from varied perspectives, and acquaints students with basic methods of argumentation that are essential for all other subjects. Yet our introductory courses in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind -- the so-called “core” of philosophy-- are not playing this role as well as they should. We face two major challenges. *First*, these areas of philosophy are dominated by men, and this gender imbalance is self-perpetuating: while most introductory students are women, the majority of our majors are men, and it is precisely in these “core” courses where many women become discouraged, in part because so few women are included on traditional syllabi. *Second*, the highly abstract style and dense material in the “core” makes for challenging pedagogy in the context of a liberal education. From a student’s perspective, philosophy sits awkwardly between the sciences and humanities: less empirical than the former, yet surprisingly more formal than the latter. As a result, students are often tempted to dismiss classic philosophical debates as “mere semantics” or else disengage with a sigh of “Oh, it’s all relative anyway,” or “These are impossible questions, so what’s the point?”

We propose a two-day workshop at Reed College in the summer of 2016 designed to address these two challenges. Most of us are recently out of graduate school, where these challenges are hardly mentioned, but we have also been teaching in liberal arts colleges long enough to appreciate them, and to have attempted various remedies. Our overarching goal in the proposed workshop is to share our best practices for creating inclusive and engaging introductory “core” courses in a liberal arts setting, and to discuss how such practices can usefully be integrated into our scholarship.

The workshop will have three basic components: (1) suggestions about how to modify the traditional, male-dominated syllabus; (2) strategies for counteracting the dismissive reactions mentioned above; and (3) new ways to approach our research in light of (1) and (2). Each day will have three sessions: two guided discussions about how to teach a particular course, and then a research presentation in the late afternoon. More specifically:

First Day: Metaphysics (Cross), Epistemology (Cruz), Research Presentation (Avnur)

Second Day: Philosophy of Language (Lewis), Philosophy of Mind (Morrison),
Research Presentation (Prettyman).

The result of this effort will be improved teaching in the philosophy “core” across our respective institutions, and integration of these improvements into scholarship. Specific outcomes include (a) a repository of diversified syllabi that will be posted online for philosophy faculty across the country, (b) all participants will continue to upload their revised syllabi in these areas for the next two years, (c) an email list including all participants in which drafts of papers are circulated for comments. We hope this will not only encourage others to diversity their syllabi, but will also encourage us to continue our collaboration.