


MOST PHILOSOPHICAL STUDENT IN AMERICA**WINNER OF THE JAMES W. BUCHAN AWARD FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE****Marianna Zhang, New York****12**

We are a lonely race. The yawning cosmos is terrifyingly vast compared to our pale blue dot. Civilizations rise and collapse, life is born from stardust and turns back into stardust . . . all is meaningless against the indifferent backdrop of time. What is the value of life, that unhappy and futile struggle? We constantly strive to fulfill some insatiable desire for a fleeting spark of contentment before we set off again, living a tragically unfulfilled life. We struggle and we die, mere trifles compared to the infinite universe. “All is vanity and a chasing after wind,” proclaims Ecclesiastes. “Hope made a fool of him until he danced into the wind!” Schopenhauer laments. “Why must Sisyphus persist?” cries a reader of Camus.

The very absurdity of our short lives forces us to confront our mortality and create our own set of values. Death is brushed off easily in our society. As Heidegger would put it, “People die” has turned into the assumption that nobody dies. The very presence of death is hidden, forcing people to conform to societal morality. This constant self-objectification and bad faith viciously perpetuates stereotypic values in society. It is only when an individual faces the readiness-to-hand of their own death that they are able to escape these values and forlornly act as a being-for-itself. But how is one to live without societal morality? “God is dead!” Nietzsche’s

madman proclaims. Meanwhile, Sais lifts the dreaded veil, revealing a terrible, unblinking, and meaningless void. We have left conventional morality and cast ourselves adrift in this infinite sea. How can a lonely soul find their way in the cold indifferent universe without any stars to guide him? He creates his own stars, of course. He does not leap overboard and drown himself in the harsh sea. He does not wait calmly for God to deliver him back to land. No, he continues to struggle and fight and live. He lives for possibilities. He draws upon everything he has ever experienced. Every wisp of memory, every surge of passion, every caress of love. In the darkest of nights, he forges his own individual set of values, something enduring that he can live by. He faces death, but boldly faces the challenges of life anyway. He emerges from the twilight intact, having created meaning, radiant stars as fluid as the sea. He is not lost. He sails on, resolutely soaring through the relentless waves. Newborn stars constantly rise from the horizon until he finally slips away, fading into stardust. It is this colossal and passionate struggle that we hurl into the yawning abyss that gives our existence significance. We are responsible for creating our own meaning in this terrifyingly vast and empty universe. As Stanley Kubrick declares, “However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light.” 

Cogito ergo sum rectam (I Think Therefore I am Right):***A Student Misconception about Philosophy*****Tim Fisher**

When Susan walks into a biology classroom she knows that she will learn about the systems of the body, animal life, microorganism and the like. When Thomas walks into a history classroom he knows he will learn some dates and will have to understand the causes of events in the past. When Arjun walks into an English classroom he expects to read books, analyze poems and write.

All this is familiar and predictable for the high school student.

But if Susan, Thomas or Arjun walked into a philosophy class for the first time they probably will not know what to expect.

At least this is my experience teaching high school in South Carolina.

Of course, this can be exciting for a teacher—clean slates are rare.

But, as it turns out, this clean slate is actually not so clean; while students may not know exactly what to expect in a philosophy classroom, *they know just enough to have already formed strong misconceptions.*¹

I recently conducted a brief survey of sophomore, junior and senior students. I spoke both with students who have never studied philosophy, and with those who have taken my philosophy class. Here are some responses students expressed:

Anything is right in philosophy. (Male, 10th grade student)

I don’t think anyone is “wrong” in philosophy because opinions aren’t right or wrong, they’re simply what you believe. (Female, 11th grade student)

There is no way to prove if you are right or wrong in philosophy. (Male, 11th grade student)

COGITO ERGO SUM RECTAM (CONTINUED)

These comments—made by students who have not taken a philosophy class—reveal what is probably (in my experience) the most common misconception about philosophy: that it is just about your opinion—that *you can never be wrong*.

Why is this a problem? *Is this a problem?* Well, while encouraging discussion and expression of viewpoints is very important—especially in pre-college level philosophical inquiry—I think it is a mistake to allow the claim that “you can never be wrong” to be an acceptable defining characteristic of philosophy. Rather, what I want students to leave my class understanding is this: even if there is no agreement on one answer to a philosophical problem, it does not follow that the choice between competing answers is subjective. What matters are the reasons you have for believing what you believe. What matters is how reasonable those beliefs are.

This problem is not trivial. It is not the same as a student misremembering the name of the author of the ontological proof, or confusing the definitions of *a priori* and *a posteriori*. As unsatisfactory as those mistakes might be, the belief that you can never be wrong is a misconception about the framework in which philosophical skills are learned and developed. For example, if Jack believes that he cannot be wrong—that philosophy is just about his opinion—then he is not likely to struggle to justify his answers. If every belief is held-up as equally valuable—no matter how poorly defended, or how unreasonable—then why would a student struggle to find reasons? (In his mind he has not made his beliefs any the more valuable by giving good reasons.)

While we may expect this from a student who has never taken a philosophy class, here are some worrisome responses from students who *have* taken a philosophy class with me.

It really just depends on what you think. (Female 11th grade student.)

You cannot really be wrong: you can think one thing and I can think another thing and we can both be right. (Female 11th grade student.)

Being right is subjective. Your answer may not be my answer, but they are both equally good. (Male 12th grade student.)

These comments are surprising and quite discouraging. Not only was I faced with the fact that students who had never studied philosophy held this significant misconception about the discipline, but, *also*, I was faced with the fact that students who I have taught *still* hold this misconception. Clearly, something I thought I was communicating to students was not getting through. This made me think about how I could better structure a lesson that had the primary purpose of unpacking and highlighting to students this misconception.

A sample lesson that directly tackles the misconception that you cannot be wrong in philosophy—that all views are equally reasonable follows. The activity is one I developed initially

for second graders. This is interesting. I clearly believed that second grade students needed direct instruction on this kind of topic, while I assumed it was unnecessary for an older student. Perhaps assumptions I made about the older students reflects a broader belief that students in high school have an existing awareness of what constitutes proof or evidence.

1. Take some string and set it up like a clothesline.
2. Label one end of the line “extremely reasonable” and the other end “very unreasonable.” (You can adapt the language according to the age of the student).
3. Next, write down a series of claims, each on a separate piece of paper. These should include the very obviously true (“ice is cold”) the very obviously false (“cats can drive cars”), and a good number of debatable claims (“lying is always wrong”).
4. Divide students into pairs. Give each pair several claims. Have the pair discuss whether or not they agree with the claim written on the paper and, *importantly*, why.
5. Have one pair of students pick one of the claims they have been given and have them peg the paper somewhere on the line.
6. The next pair should do the same. But, they have to explain why they have chosen to place their claim closer or further away to one of the ends than the already-pegged claim. That is, they need to explain why the claim is more or less reasonable than ones already pegged.
7. Continue until all the claims are pegged on the line.

This simple exercise has been successful in forcing students to face the question of why a claim is reasonable—why *they* believe a claim is more reasonable than another. The exercise works because students are shown the distinction between the cause of a belief and the justification for a belief. Detaching personal opinion from reasons is key here, and surely key in philosophy.

It has become a very quick way to remind students about the fact that a mere personal opinion is not a guarantee of credit or praise.



“Remember the reasonable line,” is now often the cry when a student claims what they are saying is as robust as another student’s argument.

All this is only a start. I have only begun to be aware of the importance of being intentional in uncovering and addressing student misconception about philosophy. I make no claims to expertise. But it is probably something all teachers of the discipline should give some thought to.

At least, that is what I think!

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Becoming, Learning, Being

Tim McCarthy and Lucas Jackson

Becoming


Milton Darville was on the brink of creating a consciousness from a computer. He had been working on the Human Brain Project for years. The HBP team had recently programmed all innate capabilities that were currently known to be in human brains into the brain they were designing. This way, the synthetic brain would have a background grid through which to perceive information. They had gotten as close as they could to the emotional response system of an organic brain as possible. This synthetic brain was functionally identical to a natural human brain, but lacked a consciousness.

The team had tested the brain so they could be sure all the synthetic neurons fired in the correct sequence with a given input. They could input nearly anything: the sight of an animal, the sound of a car horn, the concept of danger, the state of yearning, the feeling of love. Whenever an input was activated, the neurons fired across its synaptic gaps just a human brain does. However, the team was always able to stop the sequential neuron firings after a sufficient time and erase associating neurons that formed memories with the push of a button. A human brain never stops firing and can’t erase memories, because a consciousness begins the process of “experiencing.” The only things missing were the machine’s capacity to receive input by itself through sensory organs as humans do, the ability to communicate, and most importantly, the sense of “me.”

Darville believed after years of studying the human brain that he had the correct configuration of neurons to create the self-awareness complex. As an object, it was fairly simple: a cluster of neurons arranged in a very rare, very specific way. The human brain is extremely complicated, but Darville eventually found the exact spot where self-awareness is generated. The team made it their top priority to make an exact replica of it, and working late, Darville had perfected it. He was ready to implement it into the machine after it was given a means to communicate. They were giving the machine language initially so it could communicate with its creators as easily as possible.

Darville installed the language bank, then the self-awareness complex, and proceeded to spark the brain with power.

Endnotes

1. By “misconception” I mean a view that is held to be true but which is actually false because it is based on a faulty or erroneous understanding or assumption. 

A synthetic, biologically similar human body had also been prepared for connection to the brain. The body was quickly installed and its artificial sensory organs activated. The charts of activity in the synthetic brain exploded with activity. It moved its limbs but wasn’t able to escape bindings around its chest. Once it realized this, it stopped flailing, and instead slowly and with curiosity moved its hands in front of its eyes. Neurons were firing, and the button to stop them could no longer work because of the self-awareness perpetuating it, just as expected.

The neurons fired independent of direction from the outside, but they still fired in fully predictable ways. Just like when the testers input experiences, the neurons acted in the sequence they were designed to. Everything occurring in the brain was mere cause and effect. The addition of a consciousness didn’t create a being with free will. The brain, including the consciousness, could not be raised above physical laws.

It soon calmed to a point where it could communicate. “I am uncomfortable,” spoke the mouth, which it had learned to use. Darville hastily made to undo the strap across the machine. It looked at him with unabashed curiosity, the same way an infant would. After the machine associated Darville with increased comfort, its innate smile appeared. “I am uncomfortable,” it said again. Charts showed that the synthetic stomach was hungry. Darville retrieved a sandwich from the nearby refrigerator and held it out. It stared back with a quizzical look, and he realized the machine didn’t know what to do with it. He took a bite of the sandwich, and did his best to exhibit swallowing. Once he’d shown it, its innate ability to eat was actualized without much further trouble. “I am happy. What do I call you?” it said.

“I’m Milton.”

“What do I call me?”

“What would you like to be called?”

“What do I liked to be called?”

Darville thought. “The HBP.”

“I am the HBP.”

“What am I?”

“You are a living creature.”

“Where am I?”

“The place where you were created.”

“What do I do?”

“What do you like to do?”

“What do I like to do?”