

# Toward a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt

A Teagle Foundation White Paper

SEPTEMBER 2008

UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

# Toward a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	3
List of Participants (title and affiliation)	4
<u>I. Project Overview</u> Sydney Watts	
Introduction	5
Project Goals	8
Defining a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt	16
<u>II. Theoretical Approaches</u>	
Evidentialism and a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt Steven Hendley	22
Responsible Believing Miriam McCormick	32
Film and Literature in a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt Terry Lindvall and Terryl Givens	41
Professor as Believer... and Doubter? Brian Doyle	47
<u>III. Course Design and Assignments</u>	
"Religion and Its Critics" Scott Davis	54
"Psychology 206: Why We Believe Weird Things" Shane Pitts	62
"Principles of Macroeconomics" John Kamiru	74
<u>IV. Classroom Experiments</u>	
Uncovering Barriers of Belief through Personal Responses to Big Questions Ori Belkind	85
Teaching Tough Courses: Mediating Belief and Doubt through <i>Moodling</i> <sup>™</sup> On Line Andrea Simpson	96
<u>V. Measuring Learning Outcomes</u>	
Comparative Assessment of Teagle Courses Mary Camac	106
<u>Appendix</u> Selected Sources	112

## Acknowledgements

This project is the result of many conversations and carefully planned events over two years. I am indebted to many of the following people who helped me think carefully and broadly about how we teach our students to think about the knowledge they seek and why that pursuit is worthwhile. The ideas for this project were initiated by a small group of faculty at the University of Richmond whom Betsy Cutler brought together with a clear purpose in mind. Many of these colleagues continued to contribute to the success of the project long after it had been funded either as members of the Working Group or as presenters at the June 2007 Faculty Seminar. They include Ori Belkind, Scott Davis, David Leary, and Raymond Hilliard. Peter Smallwood and Doug Hicks from the University of Richmond as well as David Rutledge from Furman University also played important roles in designing this project and suggesting speakers. I am grateful for the support from the Virginia Association for Independent Colleges and the Associated Colleges of the South for helping me publicize this project and attract an excellent pool of teacher-scholars who applied to participate in the Working Group. As this report makes clear, the project represents a collaborative effort on the part of a very committed and extremely talented Working Group. My deepest gratitude goes to them for making this project a success. I would like to thank the Provost's Office and the Dean's Office at the School of Arts and Science at UR for supporting this work, as well as the contributions from the Lewis T. Booker Chair of Religion and Ethics held by Scott Davis. For their insights and inspiration, I would like to thank our seminar speakers: Nicholas Wolterstorff, Maggie Osler, Rodney Smolla, David Leary, Ray Hilliard, Rob Moore, Thomas Graves, Gary Creditor, and Muhammad Sahli. The work of planning and executing two faculty seminars would not have been possible without the administrative abilities of Debbie Govoruhk in the Department of History. I would like to thank Dianna Vincelli, Director of Grant Support, and her office at UR for their help with the final production of this White Paper, and the UR Accounting Office for their attention to our budget. Finally, I would like to thank President W.R. Connor and Vice-President Donna Heiland of the Teagle Foundation for their guidance and support of this project.

## **List of Working Group Participants**

Ori Belkind, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of Richmond

Mary Camac, Associate Professor of Psychology, Roanoke College

G. Scott Davis, Louis T. Booker of Religion and Ethics, University of Richmond

Brian Doyle, Assistant Professor of Theology, Marymount College

Genelle Gertz, Assistant Professor of English, Washington and Lee University

Terryl Givens, Professor of English and Religion, University of Richmond

Devonya Havis, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Virginia Union University

Steven Hendley, Professor of Philosophy, Birmingham-Southern College

John Kamiru, Assistant Professor of Accounting and Finance, Norfolk State University

Terry Lindvall, C.S. Lewis Professor of Communication and Christian Thought, Virginia Wesleyan University

Miriam McCormick, Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Richmond

Shane Pitts, Associate Professor of Cognitive Psychology, Birmingham-Southern College

Andrea Simpson, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Richmond

Doug Winiarski, Associate Professor of Religion, University of Richmond

Karen Zivi, Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond

Sydney Watts, Associate Professor of History and Teagle Project Coordinator, University of Richmond

## **Toward a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt**

### **Introduction**

Sydney Watts

In the spring of 2006, I joined a small number of college faculty to discuss the ways in which matters of belief played a role in liberal education. In these discussions, belief came to signal not only a religious tenet or a moral principle or simply what is “common sense.” But, more specific to the goals of higher education, it denotes a claim that must be carefully proven and substantiated with evidence. One takes ownership of a belief through doubt by arguing both sides of an issue and by reasoning dispassionately. Believing and doubting were habits of mind that many of us found to be at the crux of critical thinking and ethics. In our courses, we read, discuss and write about the great minds that evince these abilities, those whom we look to emulate in our own thinking. Yet, in classroom discussions, many professors are quick to put aside their students’ beliefs. Their teaching focuses on the interpretive questions of scholarly work rather than evaluative questions based upon personal points of view. For these faculty professors, it would be inappropriate to address topics in such a way that invites an open debate about one’s own beliefs – especially about controversial issues. Allowing personal convictions about race, sexuality, or religion enter into a discussion was not only “off limits” but “unproductive.” Why?

If, as practitioners of liberal education, our aim is to encourage our students to think broadly about the knowledge they seek, then shouldn’t the expectations for a responsible thinker include putting his or her own beliefs into question? Or at the very least, shouldn’t we ask our students to suspend judgment as they marshal evidence and formulate arguments that best support a given viewpoint? This exercise seems to be the very stuff of higher education. But very quickly there appear many obstacles to this task, especially as our students come to college with many undeclared (and unquestioned) assumptions about the world. Such beliefs may need to be suspended – or at least held at arm’s distance – in order to draw valid associations and inferences from them, to reason clearly and convincingly about them, and to judge opposing beliefs fairly and equally. To encourage a more creative, nuanced and rigorous articulation of thought and a more profound assessment of belief among students requires the professor to lay a great deal of groundwork in order to exercise such habits of mind in ways that are productive. In some instances, any civil discourse may be jeopardized by students (or professors) who come armored

with clearly delineated subject-positions on an array of topics: race, sexuality, faith, democracy, capitalism, poverty. Students arrive in a new academic and social environment, ready to shore up their defenses or to do battle with others for the sake of their identities. To doubt what a person has come to hold as true is, for many, to call his/her identity into question.

In the course of the two years working on this project, I have become more attentive to the role of the professor; I have seen the value of trust, courage and honesty in the classroom. I have also seen the rewards and the pitfalls of stepping away from the hard reality of evidence and the specificity of the text to head into the sweeping currents of opinion and viewpoint. As we practice the craft of teaching, we look to find better ways to bring meaning to what we ask our students to study, as much as we expect our students to draw meaningful conclusions about what they learn. I have often reminded my students that classroom discussions are “the practice sessions” where we explore meaning by “thinking out loud.” I give them a clear set of ground rules and keep them focused on the object of study while pushing the boundaries of what they know and how they come to know *and believe* it. In keeping with a liberal arts tradition that embraces active learning, it seems that the goal should be to expand and clarify our knowledge through a practice that asks each of us to suspend judgment and introduce doubt as we work to take ownership of our beliefs.

This White Paper sketches out the many ways in which we have come to define and employ a pedagogy of belief and doubt in a variety of classroom experiences. As the title suggest, our findings are not definitive as they move “*Toward a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt*” rather than espouse a uniform methodology. From its inception, this project was intended to examine the practice of believing and doubting in a range of subjects as a way to gain intellectual ground with our students. The project supported a number of college teachers in a variety of disciplines to revise their courses or create new courses with new pedagogies in mind. One of the goals of the project was to listen to, learn about and compare the diverse teaching and learning experiences across liberal arts institutions. Rather than have each participant work in isolation, I’ve urged collaboration and engaged them in debate. My goal as editor of this White Paper was not only to report our common findings and points of comparison, but also to maintain the heterogeneity of the Working Group’s experiences by giving each participant an opportunity to author his/her own section of the paper.

This paper follows the traditional format of a Teagle Foundation White Paper in that it presents a variety of theoretical understandings of belief and doubt as well as reflections on the application of this pedagogy in the college classroom. It also offers a number of findings based upon questionnaires and other assessment tools used in these newly designed “Teagle courses” that engage in questions of why we believe what we believe and how we put those beliefs into question. What differs from other White Papers is its collection of different views and experiences. Not only did this Working Group come from various fields of study in the humanities and social sciences, but its participants also taught at a range of liberal arts institutions, from an historically black college (Virginia Union University) to a Catholic university (Marymount), from a nationally competitive university fixed on diversifying its mainly white, upper middle-class student body (University of Richmond), to a regional liberal arts college with a strong Methodist affiliation (Virginia Wesleyan University), from a small, private, liberal arts college (Birmingham Southern) to a large, public institution (Norfolk State). In the two sections that follow, I sketch out the goals and initial findings of this project. The chapters that follow include essays on philosophical understanding of belief and evidence, reflections on the role of the professor, detailed analyses of new courses that were developed under this grant, and finally, an examination of the learning outcomes in a number of these courses.

## Project Goals and Initial Outcomes

Sydney Watts

When mapping out this project, we realized that many big questions related to belief point directly to the place of religion and spirituality in the lives of our students. Recent studies have focused on the significance of religiousness and spirituality among college students. Most notable among them is the Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI) project to examine the spiritual development of undergraduate students during their college years. This multi-year research project that began in 2003 surveyed 112, 232 entering first-year students attending 236 diverse colleges and universities across the country. Their initial findings based on the responses of those surveyed suggest a large percentage (37%) expressed a high degree of "religious commitment" as opposed to (2%) who had a low degree. As the report states, this dimension of belief includes "following religious teachings in everyday life, finding religion to be personally helpful, and gaining personal strength by trusting in a higher power." A larger percentage of those surveyed (24%) showed a low degree of "religious skepticism" than those who showed a high degree of religious skepticism (17%) which included beliefs such as "in the future, science will be able to explain everything." The dimension of "religious/social conservatism" which reflects "opposition to such things as casual sex and abortion, the use of prayer to receive forgiveness, and the belief that people who don't believe in God will be punished," also showed a high number of allegiances (23%) as opposed to those who scored low (4%). Finally, those surveyed responded to the category of "religious struggle" which indicates "feeling unsettled about religious matters, feeling distant from God, and questioning religious beliefs," revealing a greater number of those who scored low on the scale (36%) than those who scored high (11%).

While these studies suggest that religious belief and the spiritual lives of undergraduates should be taken seriously, how many of us are willing to enter into discussions that highlight the personal beliefs of our students? At the outset of this project, we questioned whether, in putting aside moral or religious viewpoints, professors who claim a liberal stance practice a restrictive pedagogy. Or, do those professors who, in a spirit of inclusion, allow all viewpoints in a discussion immediately negate the credibility of students who hold certain tenets of belief as unquestioned truth? Finally, we asked how we, as educators, foster self-reflection in ways that lend deeper meaning and life-long purpose to what students learn.



In January 2007, I began my work as Project Direct for this grant by sending out a call for participants that reiterated the questions above. From a pool of forty-five applicants, the search committee selected fifteen participants who made up the Working Group. By inviting a handful of professors who proposed new or significantly revised courses grounded in questions of belief and doubt, we sought to compose a Working Group that not only cut across academic disciplines and the tenured/untentured divide, but also to invite those who wanted to re-define their pedagogy, to discuss their teaching philosophies openly and critically, and to experiment with new teaching tools and different course objectives that sought self-reflection on the part of their students. Given the small number of participants in our Working Group Project, there seemed to be no way to draw definitive conclusions about a pedagogy of belief and doubt beyond what the Working Group's own set of experiences could summarize. But what became one of central aims of this project was to place these questions before an interested group of faculty and ask them to think about what such a pedagogy might entail given the disciplinary boundaries and academic demands of each of their proposed courses. Thus, the diversity of the Working Group helped shape the questions and the outcomes of this project as they contributed to the wide-ranging discussion at two faculty seminars: One five-day seminar was held in the summer prior to teaching the new or revised course, and a second three-day seminar was held in the summer after the courses were taught. Participants submitted detailed reports of their teaching experiences a month prior to the 2008 seminar. These reports became the focus of our final meetings and the basis for many of the contributions in this White Paper.

As planning for the faculty seminar began, I saw how belief and doubt played into such broad concerns as the secularization of universities, the ground of political and moral values in a pluralistic society, and the roles of identity and the will in assuming an unfamiliar subject-position. While I did not exclude these concerns from our discussion in the faculty seminar, I did see the pedagogical focus in this project as a way to ground our discussion and to avoid veering off into the existential abyss. I discovered in discussions with interested faculty that most professors are committed, first and foremost, to furthering students' understandings of any given subject while building their critical thinking skills. Questions of personal growth and development remained secondary (if at all important) to their students' learning. Many concurred that addressing students' beliefs should be done (if at all) in ways that would expand classroom discussions and further understanding about the specific topic being taught. For these reasons,

the intentions of the project were to encourage faculty to consider approaches to the “Big Questions” (philosophical, spiritual, moral and political) that are sometimes overlooked in content-driven courses. As Project Director, I wanted to urge faculty to consider what is gained and what is sacrificed when a teacher (who models classroom behavior) maintains skeptical distance from potentially polarizing topics such as religion, politics, sexuality or race. I also wanted to urge them to think in terms of teaching methods. One of the first questions I asked the Working Group to consider before our first faculty seminar was “what does a pedagogy of belief and doubt look like?” I suggested a number of teaching approaches including self-reflective journals or on-line posts, public debates, role-play or other forms of experiential learning, asking them which one they would use. While we came closer to defining this pedagogy collectively (discussed in the following section), each participant maintained their own distinct approach appropriate to his/her course demands and his/her own personal teaching style.

The initial meetings of the Working Group in June 2007 were planned with a number of goals in mind: 1) to engage with a number of guest speakers along with the seminal texts of other leading thinkers on subjects related to the pedagogy of belief and doubt in order to spark discussion and debate among the group, 2) to give each participant an opportunity to present his/her course with special attention to the controversial areas and widely held truths inherent in the course and the discipline more broadly, and 3) to broaden the group’s understanding of the legal, cultural, and institutional boundaries of religious, ethnic and racial identity, and to reflect on the professor’s role in the intellectual formation of the college student. While the faculty seminar clearly met these three goals during the first seminar, the degree to which the seminar influenced the ways each participant taught their classes was varied. Many of the reports that the participants submitted after having taught their courses described new components to the course readings and assignments that were aimed directly at these “big questions” of belief and doubt. I credit this result, in part, to the fact that from the beginning, I focused the Working Group’s attention on course design, classroom discussion, and assignments geared toward self-reflection.

As preparation for the seminar, I asked the participants to sketch out their intentions for their proposed courses as well as some of the biggest challenges in teaching them. Specifically, I asked them to think of one particular day in the course – either the first day when they introduce the course topic to students, or the day when they arrive at the “big questions,” or a day when they expect some kind of resistance to a topic or reading. Each participant was to consider a few

ways that he/she could teach that class to get different results. Then, as each participant came up with a list of methods, to think about the method in terms of desired outcome: Is it to encourage reflection? To challenge an assumption? To open up a space for dialogue? Participants had ample time to prepare these assignments and a number of shared reading assignments, many of which they offered as suggestions for the seminar.

The week-long seminar considered the following topics:

Day 1: Sketching Out the Problem of Belief

Day 2: Doubt: Its Importance and Limitation

Day 3: The Hidden Currents of Secular and Religious Belief

Day 4: In the Driver's Seat: Pedagogy and Power

Day 5: Asking "Big Questions" that Stretch our Students and Ourselves

To open the seminar, we invited Nicholas Wolterstorff, Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale University and visiting fellow at the University of Virginia, author of *Religion in the Public Square*, numerous essays on faith and rationality, as well as a scholarly exchange with the late philosopher, Richard Rorty. Their opposing perspectives on the place of religion in public discourse, published in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, provided the reading and basis for our discussion of the problem of belief. As a self-described Christian debating a Darwinian pragmatist, Wolterstorff raised the central question of the seminar: "How can persons who embrace such profoundly different comprehensive perspectives as do Rorty and I on reality, human life and the good, nonetheless live together as equals in a just, stable and peaceful society?" His answer (in part) pointed to the practice Wolterstorff outlined in his talk, "Dialogical Pluralism: A Model for the University in a Pluralist Society." The concept, dialogical pluralism, became central to the group in thinking about the role of the professor in the academy as it has moved away from its religious roots and its mission of character-formation toward a purely secular institution devoted to scientific inquiry (*Wissenschaft*) and knowledge for its own sake. According to Wolterstorff, the academy has progressed to a place where knowledge has become entirely interpretive, particular, and not at all generically human. The social practice of sustained intellectual inquiry is hardly orthodox or stable; it changes with new social values and technological developments. Out of this cultural perspective, Wolterstorff suggested a way to define a pedagogy of belief and doubt that is dialogical in its interaction between teacher and student, subject and object of study. It is pluralistic in that it holds to a

social practice with different goals that apply to each discipline. Through this process of sustained intellectual inquiry, teachers and students listen to one another and try to persuade the other as they honor the dignity of each perspective. The practice focuses on whether each person has given appropriate consideration to another person's beliefs and has shown responsible believing. Dialogical pluralism provided an important key term in the sessions that followed.

Questions about the role of the professor in the academy entered into many of our discussions, and they were the sole topic on day four of the seminar "Pedagogy and Power." One of our presenters that day, Ray Hilliard, laid out a careful argument for the importance of maintaining an unbiased opinion of everything we teach. Pointing to the power differential in the classroom, primarily the fact that professors assign grades according to the merit of students' work, Dr. Hilliard (a U.R. Professor with over thirty years' experience) warned against those who allow or even encourage full disclosure of viewpoint in the classroom as they enter into dangerous territory. Insofar as viewpoint lays claim to and reinforces identity, taking a position means aligning oneself with or against another. As leaders and authorities in the classroom, we should be aware of the risks involved in forcing students into these positions. Might their opinions influence the professor, intentionally or not? Could the student who reveals his/her beliefs feel the professor could look down on her or lead her to expect favorable treatment? The discussion that ensued reveals a variety of teaching philosophies with greater and lesser interest in knowing and taking on students' own beliefs. The next section explores many of these attitudes as they were reported by the participants after completing their Teagle courses.

Along with this critical reevaluation of our professional duties to the academy and to our students, our discussions veered toward practical suggestions for broaching difficult subjects or ideas. By the third day in the same seminar room, the Working Group had become a familiar circle of colleagues, anticipating each other's responses to what had become entrenched positions on belief, teaching and learning. Even so, what I began to see (and encourage) were greater degrees of tolerance and understanding among some very opinionated faculty. Both in and out of the sessions, I observed participants show great expressions of collegiality: sharing ideas about particular class readings, suggesting language and lending teaching tips that might be useful in dealing with particular issues, and, prodding each other in jest.

One session aimed to tie course content directly to a pedagogy of belief and doubt came on the third day of the seminar with a presentation by an historian of science, Margaret Osler,

from the University of Calgary. She was invited to talk about Newton's historical reputation and the historical relationship between science and religion. In addition to the presentation of her research on "The Other Side of Isaac Newton," Dr. Osler provided two readings from Newton's *Queries* and *Principia* which were used as the focus of a teaching exercise in interpretive and evaluative questions. The exercise offered the participants different ways to lead a discussion on Newton's own writings: one a text-based, close reading that began with questions such as, "What does the text say here and what does it mean? How does Newton frame his study in ways that avoid any reference to outside forces?" Another approach relied on a historically based, context-driven discussion that asked, "How we can explain Newton's contradictory views on God? Is there anything unorthodox in his portrait of God?" Both sets of questions are aimed at unlocking the intentions and meanings within Newton's own work, the former set by building a case with evidence in the text, the latter with historical context. The latter, however, goes further to engage students in larger ethical questions of belief and employs references to God and terms such as "unorthodox" that demand elaboration and evaluation. Afterwards, we discussed what learning could be gained by each approach, and how we might draw certain pedagogical tools that could be applied to any subject matter.

Many of the participants in the seminar came with a particular interest in questions of belief, evidence, believing and doubting that related directly to their own scholarship as well as the courses they teach. Not surprisingly, the project attracted a large number of analytic philosophers who were comfortable engaging in these hotly debated questions of epistemology. While I feel that the entire Working Group benefited from these discussions, I realized that other participants may have fallen silent because their interests and expertise lay elsewhere. Certain sessions that seemed to focus the attention of all Working Group members were those afternoon sessions devoted to our teaching, especially in reflecting on and refining our understanding of the practice of teaching belief and doubt, as well as several sessions that enlarged the discussion to understanding of the legal and cultural implications of a pedagogy of belief and doubt. Of particular interest was Dr. Rodney Smolla's presentation on the First Amendment and academic freedom. In his presentation and his own writings, we learned about the legal limits on free speech in the classroom (something only applicable at a State University), and the arguments and assumptions that are usually marshaled to defend the robust American conception of "freedom of speech." One of the important distinctions garnered from this session was that the university is

not just a marketplace of ideas; it is a civil community that promotes civil discourse in a communal environment. As leaders and moderators of civil discourse in our classroom, we need to regulate how speech gravitates to conduct.

In a session entitled, “Navigating the Hidden Currents of Belief among our Students” we heard from Reverend Robert Moore, former Associate Chaplain at UR who discussed the predominant attitude of students who passed through the Chaplain’s office who were reluctant to espouse their beliefs. In his experience, students – even those with strongly held beliefs – operate in a non-confessional culture. To illustrate this point, he presented the group with a scenario about a rather zealous student who stood up on a chair and began proselytizing her Christian beliefs in the school cafeteria to an uninterested audience. The student was politely asked to step down, and – now embarrassed and affronted – she sought a trusted faculty member to advise her on her rights. Dr. Moore turned the question to the Working Group. How would each of us respond to this hypothetical situation? Which of our own beliefs and/or philosophical commitments are most relevant in this situation? While most of the Group seemed reluctant to consider their own personal response to this, they were more willing to engage in questions about whether she was acting within her rights, what exactly were her intentions, and how the (private) institution defines civil disobedience.

In the following session, several religious leaders, whose work brought them into frequent contact with college students, were invited to the seminar to enlarge our discussion of the theological principles of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In their presentations they reiterated the importance of doubt to each of their faiths and how much they teach students to rely upon doubt as a foundation for faith. Rabbi Gary Creditor reminded us that what one believes is improvable, doubters like Elijah who flees and lives in a cave, or Moses who questions God directly are example of doubters who believe. He spoke of the rabbinical tradition of the *midrash* as a way to read scriptures critically. Dr. Thomas Graves of the Baptist Theological Seminary discussed the doctrine of necessary fallibility as a tenet of faith for any Protestant. As imperfect, “fallen” people, believers are doomed to error. Faith is a confiding trust in a perfect being. It involves risk as one surrenders to a higher power. Being faithful is not simply a matter of correct doctrine but a correct relationship to the divine. He reminded us of the personal encounters that build faith, an experience predicated upon a doubt-filled subjectivity. Humility and tentativeness are often lost between people of different faiths who “bark” their list

of religious doctrines at one another. Rather than our wearing our beliefs, we should act out our faith as an expression of what we hold to be true. Dr. Muhammad Sahli spoke of these visible differences that distinguish Islamic believers from non-believers and invited one of his students to speak of her experiences wearing the *hijab* to class. The central theme in this presentation focused on the importance of belief as part of a young person's identity formation. How do we assure the subjectivity of any religious attitude, where one seeks to define a belief in relation to God rather than hold to a list of doctrines?

While these are only some of the highlights from the faculty seminar, the reading matter, presentations and discussions served to put the central questions of the project in a wider context. How each of the participants used the seminar to revise their courses and inform their teaching is detailed in several of the chapters that follow. Working Group participants Stephen Hendley, Scott Davis, and Shane Pitts, devoted their courses to the problem of belief and its relationship to evidence, intellectual history, and cognition respectively. Participants Terry Givens and Terry Lindvall used selected works of literature and film to evoke different expressions of belief. Not every participant's course was devoted wholly to aspects of belief and doubt. Other participants such as Ori Belkind, John Kamiru and Andrea Simpson designed sections of their courses or targeted particular assignments in large surveys to give room for the inner thoughts and beliefs of their students. Finally, participants Miriam McCormick and Brian Doyle, who as professors of philosophy and theology respectively, have devoted much of their careers to the exploration of belief and doubt. Their contributions are based upon their own scholarship and experience in the classroom. While these experiments and reflections offer an initial reading of the pros and cons of a pedagogy of belief and doubt, they do not posit any clear conclusion about their effectiveness. To be sure, many faculty freely admitted that they felt a greater degree of engagement by their students, others commented on the absence thereof. Given the fact that many faculty were reluctant to survey their students, and others did so non-systematically, we could not provide a comprehensive assessment of the entire Working Group's experiences. Much to her credit, Mary Camac managed to cull a number of assessment tools that offers an initial measure of the learning outcomes. This comparative study is based upon a survey I designed as a pre- and post-test for students taking Teagle courses and suggests some encouraging initial findings among those surveyed. Many of the qualitative comparisons I found in reading the final reports of all Working Group participants can be found in the following section.

## Defining a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt

Sydney Watts

To give any coherence to a pedagogy as a system of training, a method based upon a theory, or even to the more broadly construed definition of pedagogy as an art, occupation or practice, requires a set of commonly held rules and practices. Yet, as anyone who has worked with college professors, especially those who operate within different disciplines and rely on different types of methodologies, finding a common set of teaching rules or even recommendations is an impossible task. A mentor of mine described teaching as an “impossible profession.” Many seasoned teachers will confess that good teaching isn’t something that you can instruct someone to do. It’s something you practice doing. Good teaching comes about when you think about your teaching every time you step into the classroom. A good teacher is not born but made through practice.

So can we actually define a pedagogy of belief and doubt when teaching is defined in such individualistic terms? I asked the Working Group at several different junctures in this two-year project to offer me a definition, or at least a description of such a practice. Many responses held to the subject of belief and doubt rather than the intellectual practice of it. The philosophers in our group devoted a great deal of time considering the nature of belief, its rationality and its volition. There are many courses that put belief and doubt within a Western intellectual tradition, or studies of belief through the lens of particular theorists, or in the experience of certain seminal characters of great literature. While that is not to say student do not learn by example, how many professors expect their students to be able to emulate some of the greatest minds in their fields? At best, we can hope that they understand the premises under which these minds operate and can follow their train of thought. But the question of a pedagogy of belief and doubt implies a more conscious attention to the goals of the course and the intellectual and moral development of students.

Early on, the Working Group defined a pedagogy of belief and doubt as one that focuses on building certain habits of mind characteristic of critical thinking. While the Working Group sought habits of mind exemplified in Socratic teaching, the degree to which specific habits were emphasized in designing particular assignments and in maintaining a certain classroom environment varied widely. Clearly, such habits would avoid doubting everything or believing



everything, but aim to build higher thinking skills so that the quality of belief is measured against the quality of doubt. How to do this exactly? How do we as professors assess this quality?

Most seemed to agree that there is no prescribed teaching method nor is there a perfect assessment tool, but I would like to suggest two areas where teaching tools and learning outcomes seemed to coincide in the Teagle courses designed and taught by the Working Group participants over the 2007-08 academic year. The first relates to a collective practice of critical engagement and civil discourse, the second to instruments that develop critical abilities to engage in belief and doubt.

At its foundation, this pedagogy seeks *to create conditions* in the classroom that gives rise to open and frank discussions about fundamental beliefs. Such conditions adhere to the practice of dialogical pluralism that Nicolas Wolterstorff outlined in his seminar presentation. This practice seeks to foster a high degree of tolerance for different views, especially those that hold to the value of a particular belief without clear evidence, and those whose faith represents a confiding trust in the supernatural as much as it is a belief conditioned by subjective experience. The conditions we create as practitioners of a pedagogy of belief and doubt should encourage grounds for belief that are built on doubt, while they give clear ethical limits to how those beliefs are evaluated and interpreted.

As educators, we are in many ways responsible for setting and maintaining academic standards as much as we set the tone for thoughtful, truthful discussions. We model behavior for our students as we try to show them how best to react to other people's beliefs which we may find offensive. Performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood offers a method for assessing the quality of belief we hold in regard to the other. His theory of evaluating and interpret cultural phenomenon is aimed to avoid ethical pitfalls (what he terms as "sins") of selfishness, superficiality, sensationalism and cynicism. As a way to assess our own beliefs in relation to another's, ethnographers respond to a moral map with four trajectories along the horizontal axis of detachment/commitment and the vertical axis of difference/identity. Conquergood maintained that morally responsible ethnography involves work in "genuine conversation" with the other, a location at the center of his grid that he called "dialogical performance."

One of the Working Group participants, whose report is not included in this paper, experimented with Conquergood's dialogical approach to ethnography. In his upper-level religion course he focused on the historical narratives of black slave rebellions and other

abolitionist writings that had, in previous courses, evoked negative (and highly emotional) responses. Rather than plotting their own positions toward a reading on the grid themselves, students were asked to fill out surveys at the halfway point of each seminar about the week's assigned reading. These surveys measured degrees of attachment and the extent to which they personally identified with and shared the views of the primary text. The results of these surveys were then plotted on Conquergood's chart. The findings were mixed and suggested that the students engaged with the readings on a relatively intense level throughout the semester, although their degree of identity with those texts varied dramatically. Their "curatorial" commitment (particularly to proslavery writings) showed a weak identification with the other and, perhaps, an unwillingness to engage in historical thinking, more specifically the thinking that demonstrates a greater facility to identify with beliefs founded in different eras and predicated upon different historical conditions. Conquergood would interpret this initial response to the texts as an "exotic," "primitive" and "culturally remote fascination." These results suggest (perhaps harshly) that those readers who distance themselves from these proslavery arguments are guilty of the sins of selfishness and superficiality. Alternatively, they may be read as evidence of the unwillingness for these students of history to identify with certain beliefs deemed by present day standards as morally abhorrent. While it may be difficult, if not impossible, to know the reasons why students distanced themselves from certain texts and not others, or to see which beliefs took them further from the dialogical center of Conquergood's grid, what this experiment did show was how moral and ethical responses that show a high degree of commitment on the part of the reader, can accompany an unwillingness to identify with highly controversial viewpoints, even if they are historically situated.

If, at the very least, we seek to create conditions that foster open dialogue with controversial topics, at the very best, in creating those conditions, we foster good habits of mind to overcome an aversion to ideas we dislike. Our goal should be greater (not necessarily total) identification and commitment to a topic (even an abhorrent one) to further engage a person's mind toward examining and debating ideas for the very reason that they carry significance. Even the skeptic must show a degree of attachment to an idea. To consider beliefs with indifference, or more, with extreme detachment may imply passive acceptance. "Why should I care?" asks the student. "Because these ideas matter!" exclaims the teacher. This pedagogy looks to build an environment in which students can take an active role in engaging in questions about beliefs that

matter, that are relevant to the object of study (whatever that may be). If the act of holding a belief to be true comes out of putting that belief to careful scrutiny, we must ensure a trusting environment so that the practice of questioning is done with confidence and respect to one another and to the subject at hand.

The second aspect that defines a pedagogy of belief and doubt focuses on particular teaching tools as instruments to engage and refine our intellectual skills. We give our students *opportunities to practice habits of mind* through a variety of assignments and exercises to engage in deep thinking and responsible believing. By “deep” I mean to go beyond the obvious and to consider the implications of a belief. By “responsible” I mean to take ownership of a belief through a process that weighs evidence on either side of an issue and considers the ethical and moral ramifications of a particular viewpoint. This White Paper includes a variety of assignments that give room for self-reflection, to ponder the hows and whys of certain beliefs. Whether it is an exercise similar to Miriam McCormick’s “Belief Journals” Ori Belkind’s “Response Entries” or Peter Elbow’s “Doubting and Believing Game”(adapted by Shane Pitts), the objective is to have students take time to reflect and interrogate beliefs that have engaged and continue to engage scholars. It is an opportunity to articulate clearly and carefully what a responsible thinker does to lay claim to a belief.

To what extent should personal beliefs enter into the discussion? Aren’t they a diversion from the matter at hand? Some of the Working Group members might agree. These participants prided themselves on bracketing their beliefs to such a degree as to leave the student convinced that the professor stands for something entirely opposite to what he or she actually does, is as if anonymity fosters better learning. While other participants, more invested in promoting their own viewpoints, looked to carefully selected course material to help them forward a position. One might question the extent to which this authoritative stance plays into the particular beliefs espoused in course content, course goals, and topics of discussion. Here, we seem to be crossing the line between the open and civil exchange of ideas in the classroom and what constitutes good scholarship. If professors are rarely scrutinized for whatever bias they impose on a course of study, shouldn’t they be willing to acknowledge (and lay bare) their own judgments about what is worthy and unworthy of study? I wonder how we as experts in our field can design a course with great authority, yet, at the same time, disregard the underlying assumptions of the material, assumptions which may run counter to the core beliefs of our students. The answer I keep

coming back to is for reasons of professionalism: that for many professors who are admittedly indifferent to the beliefs of our students, there is a great divide between the accomplished scholar and the debutant, especially when knowledge is so specialized and college coursework is entirely academic. For many of these learned professors, beliefs are mere opinion, irrelevant to a course of study. Ideas are posited as neutral objects of study, not cherished views. Critical thinking relies on dispassionate reasoning and personal distancing.

Aside from those who bracket beliefs from discussion and those who couch them in course material without any further scrutiny, there were those who looked to engage students' beliefs in an equally professional manner, but with an attention to self-formation and self-criticism. More importantly, they sought the critical examination of beliefs of a personal nature as well as those with wider social and political implications. To know and engage with a student's worldview provides a way to better understand their reaction to ideas and to bring them willingly into an open discussion about subjects with deeper meaning. They sought to educate their students to take risks and put their cherished views on the line. A few went further to reveal their desire to create bonds of trust with their students and to overcome prejudice toward a particular ethnicity, race, or gender as a commitment to social justice.

Devonya Havis, one of the participants who taught a philosophy course at a Baptist-based, historically black college, encountered many students who sought a re-affirmation of their beliefs. As she reported, "Texts that directly challenged students' core beliefs were less successful because the students appeared to view such challenges as an affront to their religious faith." The results of her class survey showed a majority of students who agreed that doubting what you hold to be true is a sign of intellectual weakness. Given this pool of students whose regard toward belief and doubt differed greatly from other participants' student bodies, her pedagogy of belief and doubt took a very different orientation. Much to the chagrin of her students, she did not tell them what to believe, but focused on the dangerous and slippery aspects of belief. In a course that studies many of the Continental philosophers; she refused to point her students toward certain truths, but asked what counts as truth? Aware of the epistemic preferences of her students, she avoided direct challenges to belief. Instead, she worked indirectly to question and challenge imbedded assumptions through parables such as *The Lemming Condition* by Alan Arkin. In this children's story, the main character questions the herd instinct that leads to certain death. The parable illustrated the problem of self-awareness and the

communal investment in acknowledging contrary views. The lesson solicited evaluative questions about how we are shaped by our culture toward certain truths. She drew on “thought experiments” from the more popular, *The Pig that Wants to be Eaten* by Julian Baginni, to the classic, Plato’s cave. She also drew on narratives such as Martin Luther King’s *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* to see a process of self-formation and self criticism. The final project, which required students to apply course theory with a lived experience, proved a successful tool in gaining intellectual ground while engaging inquiry concerning belief and doubt.

Finally, in drawing together the outcomes of many of these teaching experiments, we were hard-pressed to see any measurable outcome of such courses overall. Pre-tests and post-tests (reported in the final section of the White Paper) were one tool that we found to be useful in seeing specific changes. Certain professors found many shifts in their students’ attitude toward believing and doubting and a greater desire to know the beliefs of their professor. While others saw significant progress in degrees of intellectual engagement and self-reflection through less commonly used teaching tools such as journals, on-line discussions, and writing assignments that asked students to apply their own beliefs and personal experience in light of what they had learned through readings and lectures to a particular set of questions. As a cultural historian interested in changes in attitudes and habits of mind, the (often slow and immeasurable) process of change is never linear nor accruable. While we hope to see our students realize the significance of what they have learned over the period of a few months, we know that it is often a few years (or more) before those realizations come to fruition.

## Evidentialism and a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt

Steven Hendley

It is almost natural, I believe, to think of a pedagogy of belief and doubt in Socratic terms as a way of enabling our students to become more reflective with their beliefs, to recognize the importance of critically examining the reasons for their beliefs in the light of objections from others who may not see things quite the way as they do. And this Socratic ideal of an examined or reflective life would seem to presuppose the evidentialist idea that we *ought* to have good reasons for thinking our beliefs true, since securing good reasons for our beliefs, and weeding out beliefs for which we lack good reason, is what we are trying to achieve through adopting that reflective attitude. Or, at least, this was a way of understanding what a pedagogy of belief and doubt might look like that was almost natural *for me* as I entered the initial Teagle seminar in June 2007. It was, in fact, the way I understood the course I had proposed which was centered in a close reading of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. I wanted to give my students, both religious and skeptic, the opportunity for a sustained reflective examination of their beliefs, pro and con, concerning the existence of God. The evidentialist presupposition behind my course proposal was simply that we ought to have good reasons for our beliefs, in particular where those beliefs concern the existence or non-existence of something like a Judeo-Christian conception of God, and we should, therefore, be vigilant about those reasons, inspecting their soundness in the light of arguments and viewpoints which call them into question.

In good Socratic fashion, I found my evidentialist presuppositions challenged by the 2007 Teagle seminar. Our very first formal presentation by Nicholas Wolterstorff dismissed the evidentialist challenge to religious belief as a product of a now widely recognized failed foundationalist epistemology. We do not need convincing reasons to accept our religious beliefs as true. All rationality demands in the sphere of religious belief is a willingness to respond to arguments which purport to give good reasons to doubt the truth of one's belief in God, not to have good reasons for one's belief. In much the same key, participants of the seminar were also asked to read for our first day's meeting William James' essay, "The Will to Believe," which famously argues that when the personal, pragmatic stakes are high enough, it can be rational to

will to believe in God without evidence which would be intellectually convincing to think it true that God exists. There appeared to be a message here for what a pedagogy of belief and doubt should look like or, more precisely, what it should *not* look like. It should not be based in evidentialist premises which would lead our religious students to believe they ought to have good reasons for their religious beliefs. After many spirited discussions in both the 2007 and 2008 seminars and my own experiences with teaching my course on Dawkins' book, however, I remain unconvinced. A sound pedagogy of belief and doubt should be based, I still think, in a commitment to the idea that we ought to have good reasons for our beliefs. Anything short of this leaves us with an impoverished picture of intellectual dialogue and inquiry which, in crucial respects, falls short of opening up a genuinely Socratic space in which our students can find their beliefs challenged and come to appreciate why Socrates famously declared the unreflective life not worth living.<sup>1</sup>

When Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, was published in 2006, I had several students I knew approach me wanting to talk about the book. Since the dialogues I was having with my students out of class were precisely the sort of dialogue I seek to foster in class, I thought this book – which appeared to have touched a nerve with some of my students in a positive way – would be an ideal basis for my college's month long, "special topics" courses we teach each January. But beyond that, these conversations convinced me that many of my students actively wanted to have this sort of critical discussion of religious faith and, apparently, were not finding enough of an opportunity in their time at college to do so. Seeking to satisfy that desire, I proposed a course designed around a close reading of Dawkins' book and, as a critical foil to Dawkins, Alister McGrath's, *The Dawkins Delusion?*. My basic objectives for the class were quite simple: to create a context where my students could engage with Dawkins' critique of religious belief and McGrath's response to that critique, develop a better understanding of the issues involved in the debate and, above all, have a respectful but frank discussion about these claims where those who were more sympathetic with Dawkins and those who were more sympathetic with McGrath could genuinely learn from each other.

After teaching the class, I could not have been more pleased with the results. It was, as I had hoped, a discussion-driven course in which most of my students, both religious and skeptic, made contributions on a regular, if not daily basis. And the discussions were of what I regard as

---

1. See Plato's *Apology*.

the highest caliber where you could see individuals changing how they thought about issues, if only in subtle ways, as a result of exposing their beliefs to the objections of others and taking those objections seriously in their responses. My positive impression of the course was borne out by the overwhelmingly positive responses I received from my students in their written evaluations of the course.<sup>2</sup> One person mentioned that her/his “faith had been strengthened” by the class but that s/he was “thankful” for the questions Dawkins had raised of her/his faith. Another described the course as “by far one of the greatest opportunities to sit down and critically analyze my beliefs.” Many commented on how helpful they thought the class discussions were, in particular. One noted how “everyone” involved in the discussions were “thoughtful and non-judgmental.” Yet another described the discussions as “a liberating experience.”

I find my student’s choice of the term “liberating” in describing what s/he found valuable about the course particularly interesting. Why is it liberating to have beliefs which are so close to the core of a person’s sense of self called into question rather than, as it undoubtedly is for many of us, simply annoying or even offensive? There are many ways in which we could think about the Socratic enterprise as liberating, but one sense which I believe is relevant here is the way in which it opens up a kind of autonomy for those who are actively engaged in it; not, of course, autonomy in the sense of being able to do or, let alone, believe whatever one wants to do or believe, but rather a Kantian sense of autonomy<sup>3</sup> where we come to tailor our beliefs according to what we ourselves come to see we have good reason to think true. The Socratic enterprise enables one to gain a form of ownership over one’s intellectual life. In reflecting on the grounds of a belief, it ceases to be *merely* a product of the psychological and sociological processes which have led one to adopt it, but a product of one’s own efforts to discern what one has good reason to believe. In enabling that critical distance from whatever has, as a matter of fact, led one to adopt a particular belief, one gains a sense of being, as a rational agent, in command of one’s intellectual life. Insofar as one sees the prospect of no longer merely believing whatever it is one has been influenced to believe one gains the autonomy to determine one’s beliefs for oneself

---

2. Fourteen of the sixteen students in the class evaluated it positively.

3. I am thinking here in rather general terms of the kind of rational autonomy Kant argues is at the heart of taking a moral point of view onto life where an agent acts only according to principles for which s/he has good reasons, reasons s/he can endorse in an impartial spirit as good for both her/himself and others, and so principles which can be universalized. For Kant’s ethical conception of rational autonomy, see *Fundamental Metaphysics of Morals*, “Second Section.”



through a process of rational inquiry.

This autonomy is not, however, individualistic in character. It is premised on what Emmanuel Levinas has called the heteronomy of a relation to the other person that is, at bottom, an ethical relation in which one finds oneself called into question by others, obliged to respond in ways which take their concerns seriously.<sup>4</sup> The Socratic enterprise is an inherently social enterprise which demands a sense of responsibility not only to the enterprise at hand, but to those who undertake it with you. It requires frank conversation in which one is willing to speak one's mind even if others might disagree and find one's point of view offensive.<sup>5</sup> But it also requires a sense of respect for the points of view of others, a sense that they deserve my consideration and should not be dismissed out of hand even if they might appear, at first glance, as offensive. It requires one to go out of one's way in saying, perhaps, more than one might otherwise feel comfortable saying and hearing, certainly, more than one might otherwise feel comfortable hearing. The class discussions my students had with myself and one another instantiated this frank but respectful character of Socratic reflection to a remarkable degree. I believe they learned not only the value of a kind of autonomy which is made possible by Socratic exchange, but also the value of an ethical sense of responsibility to others which lies at the heart of it.

But this Socratic enterprise is premised on the evidentialist idea that we ought to have good reasons for what we believe and that it is, consequently, worth the effort to submit our beliefs to critical examination in order to better assess the soundness of whatever reasons we may think we have for them. Those of us who accept the value of the Socratic enterprise accept this evidentialism in practice with respect to most of our beliefs. But does it hold with respect to religious beliefs? As I mentioned earlier, the thought that it does not was advanced at the beginning of our Teagle Seminar in 2007. To begin with the most widely known argument, James' defense of our right to 'will to believe,' his most basic point is that when the pragmatic stakes are high enough and we have no compelling evidence against a belief, we may reasonably allow our "passional nature" to move us to adopt that belief without having good reason for

---

4. See in particular, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 40 & 203.

5. As Socrates certainly did! For a wonderful example of Socrates's willingness to follow an argument where ever it leads, even to a point he knew his interlocutors would find scandalous, see Plato's *Gorgias*, 494-495.

thinking it true.<sup>6</sup> Though people of religious faith may lack good reason for thinking their faith true, if their lives are better by virtue of that faith, then it is reasonable for them.

It is unclear, however, how this pragmatic consideration is supposed to work in the first person, for the believer her/himself. I might think that it is reasonable for you to hold a belief without good reason for thinking it true because of all the good it does you. Indeed, this attitude can be motivated by a concern for the welfare of others and, as such, instantiate an apparently praiseworthy form of respect for them. But can *I* believe anything and, in full awareness, recognize that I have no good reason for thinking it true, but only believe it because of its pragmatic benefits? It is not clear, to say the very least, how I, in the first person, could pull that off. To believe anything is to believe it true and for that we need some reason for thinking it true, a reason that is relevant to its truth. And, at least with respect to beliefs concerning matters of fact in the world, such as beliefs concerning God's existence, the pragmatic benefits of a belief are simply irrelevant to its truth.<sup>7</sup> Viewed from a first person point of view, believing that God exists because of the pragmatic benefits of that belief must, therefore, involve some degree of distraction or self-deception which allows us to overlook this as the 'reason' for our belief, perhaps thinking falsely that we do, in fact, have good reasons for that belief. This is, undoubtedly, the case with many of us or, indeed, all of us with respect to some of our beliefs - holding them because we desperately want to believe them true, but without recognizing that we hold them for that reason. But this kind of distraction or self-deception, whether deliberate or not, is surely not something an intellectually responsible pedagogy of belief and doubt ought to affirm as reasonable for students. Though it may *appear* as a form of respect we show our religious students, it is in fact an attitude which, when taken seriously from a first person point of view, can only foster intellectually irresponsible attitudes and habits of thought.<sup>8</sup>

---

6. See William James, "The Will to Believe." This summation, of course, simplifies James' point to the extreme, a simplification demanded by the nature of and length constraints on this essay. Still, as a simplification, it is accurate enough, I believe, for my purposes here.

7. See Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe" in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge University Press, 1973) and Jonathan Adler, *Beliefs Own Ethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), in particular, the Introduction and Ch. 1.

8. It could be argued, however, that no real harm is done in fostering such attitudes with respect to a very limited range of our students' beliefs, especially when we take into account the benefits of those beliefs. But this response overlooks the way in which intellectual attitudes such as a willingness and desire to scrutinize the reasons for one's beliefs can only be acquired as a generalized habit of mind - a proclivity toward living reflectively with respect to one's beliefs generally. The reflective life is not, I believe, something we can cultivate in our students in a piecemeal way, with some beliefs but not others. Thanks to my colleague and Teagle seminar participant, Shane Pitts, for

Perhaps, though, religious beliefs are an exception to the evidentialist rule that we cannot believe something, in full awareness, to be true without having what we take as good reasons for thinking it true. This was the basic point pressed by Wolterstorff in his presentation to the Teagle seminar in which he argued that the evidentialist challenge to religious faith - the demand for reasons for thinking one's belief in God true - was a product of a bankrupt foundationalist epistemology. Following Alvin Plantinga in this regard,<sup>9</sup> the problem for the evidentialist is that demanding reasons for every belief gives rise to an infinite regress of beliefs which serve as reasons for other beliefs and so on. Typically evidentialists have avoided this regress by supposing that some beliefs are self-evident. Beliefs such as "1+1=2" or beliefs about one's own states of consciousness wear their truth on their sleeves, so to speak, needing no further justification.<sup>10</sup> They are "basic" beliefs in the sense that they are not inferentially derived from other beliefs which serve as our reasons for holding them. And these basic beliefs can serve as the foundations of other beliefs in the sense that these other beliefs are inferentially derived from them. But Plantinga and Wolterstorff both correctly note that the idea of self-evident foundations of knowledge is deeply problematic, rendering any evidentialism which presupposes it suspect. Plantinga, in particular, argues that foundationalism draws the range of properly basic beliefs too narrowly, excluding such beliefs as "there are enduring physical objects" or "the world has existed for more than five minutes" which, despite their lack of self-evidence, still appear to be beliefs we hold, and reasonably so, without inferentially deriving them from other beliefs which serve as reasons for them.<sup>11</sup> Lacking any clear criteria for what can count as a basic belief, Plantinga reasons that different communities will count different sorts of belief as properly basic and, as such, there is no reason why belief in God cannot be properly basic for the Christian community.<sup>12</sup>

Generalizing on this anti-foundationalist theme, Wolterstorff argues that rationality does not demand, as the evidentialist supposes, that we have good reasons for our beliefs, but merely

---

reminding me of this point. Also see Louis P. Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 190.

9. See, in particular, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief In God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?" and "Introduction" in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds., Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 135-186 and 1-15 and Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, 16-93.

10. See Wolterstorff, "Introduction," 3.

11. See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 59-61.

12. See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 74-78.

that we abandon our beliefs when we have good reason to suppose them false. Lacking good reason to suppose a belief false, we are justified in holding it even if we lack good reason for supposing it true.<sup>13</sup> As such, people of faith are rationally obligated to answer objections which purport to provide good reason for thinking their belief in God false, but are not rationally obligated to provide reasons for thinking their belief true; a way of characterizing the demands of rationality for religious believers which Plantinga accepts as well.<sup>14</sup> In this way, people of faith do not leave the argumentative sphere, what I have been characterizing as the Socratic endeavor to live reflectively. But those outside the religious community need to respect the religious beliefs of communities of faith as properly basic, beliefs which no more stand in need of justification for them than beliefs such as “the world has existed for more than five minutes” do for the rest of us. Different communities think about the world and their place within it from different epistemic or cognitive vantage points, characterized by different sorts of basic beliefs which guide them in their inquiry. Using the phrase Wolterstorff stressed in his presentation, we need to foster a “dialogical pluralism” between these different communities which aspires to facilitate dialogue across their different epistemic vantage points, but also respects that religious people must speak with their own distinctly religious voice and are rationally entitled to engage in modes of inquiry that involve basic beliefs which may lead them to conclusions about the world and their place within it which may not be shared by those outside the religious community.<sup>15</sup>

There are two points I believe we ought to bear in mind when evaluating the cogency of Wolterstorff’s and Plantinga’s position. First, its cogency depends almost entirely on the link they draw between evidentialism and foundationalism. And yet, it is far from apparent that evidentialism must presuppose foundationalism. One could, for instance, grant Plantinga’s point about basic beliefs and still argue that the range of what can properly count as a basic belief is more restricted than he would allow and certainly not relative to the epistemic vantage points of particular communities. One could follow certain aspects of Wittgenstein’s work and argue that properly basic beliefs are beliefs where it is difficult to make sense of *anyone* seriously doubting them; where, as with our belief that the world is more than a hundred years old, we would have

---

13. See Wolterstorff, “Can Belief Be Rational If It Has No Foundations,” 162-164. Wolterstorff goes on to qualify this simplest version of his position in important ways. For the purposes of this essay, however, I believe we can rely on this simplest version without doing his position an injustice.

14. See Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 82-87.

15. See Wolterstorff, “Can Belief In God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations,” 8-9.

to say, ““If I am wrong about *this*, I have no guarantee that anything I say is true.””<sup>16</sup> This would be a qualified evidentialism, to be sure, but one that would resist the potential for a proliferation of basic beliefs, depending on the varying epistemic vantage points of the communities in question. There would be, on this account, no question as to whether belief in the Great Pumpkin could count for some community of true believers as a properly basic belief, as it does arise as a question for Plantinga.<sup>17</sup> And there are still other options available for the evidentialist we need not go into here<sup>18</sup> as the only point I want to stress here is the availability of non-foundationalist options for the evidentialist. If these options exist, then Plantinga’s and Wolterstorff’s warranted critique of foundationalism carries no implications whatsoever for the cogency of evidentialism.

But the more pressing point I want to raise concerns the practical implications of their ideas for the Socratic endeavor itself and, for that reason, for a pedagogy of belief and doubt. For Wolterstorff and Plantinga, the people of faith do not entirely leave the Socratic sphere of critical self-reflection as they are obligated to answer objections which purport to offer reasons for thinking belief in God false. But they remain in that sphere in a way which makes them almost certainly immune to any critical challenge. As Plantinga himself points out, any argument which led to the denial of God’s existence could be met by the believer by merely asserting, quite plausibly, that s/he finds her/his belief in God “more worthy of belief” than any argument which would lead to its denial.<sup>19</sup> To better see Plantinga’s point all we need do is take an example of what is arguably a basic belief for all (rather than some) of us: our belief in a physical world independent of our minds. Surely we would, and arguably *should* find any arguments which seem to show that there is no physical world more suspicious than the belief those arguments aim to call into question. If belief in God is properly basic for the person of faith in this way, then in like manner they would and arguably *should* find any arguments against God’s existence more suspicious than their basic belief in God itself. Though freeing the believer of the need to find

---

16. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds., G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), #s 69, 231, 252, and 261. Also see Basil Smith, “Plantinga and Wittgenstein on Properly Basic Beliefs,” *Philo* Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring-Summer 2000, 32-40.

17. The basic question here is, as Plantinga phrases it: “If belief in God is properly basic, why cannot *just any* belief be properly basic? Could we not say the same for any bizarre aberration we can think of? . . . What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween?” For Plantinga’s statement of and response to this question, see “Reason and Belief in God,” 74-78. For a good summary assessment of the shortcomings of Plantinga’s response, see Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will*, 136-137.

18. See, for instance, Jonathan Adler’s intriguing proposal for tacit confirmation of beliefs which attempts to avoid the problem of an infinite regress while preserving the evidentialist idea that we need good reasons to believe, in full awareness, that *any* of our beliefs is true: *Beliefs Own Ethics*, Ch. 6.

19. Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 83.

good reasons for their religious beliefs does not completely close down the possibility of critical self-reflection, it does limit it considerably, giving the believer what amounts to a “Get Out of Jail Free!” card with respect to any serious critical challenges to their beliefs.

With these limitations, it is hard to see how dialogical pluralism could amount to anything more than a mutually respectful exchange of opinions, an expression of one’s own point of view and why one finds it, from one’s own distinctive point of view, convincing followed by similar forms of self-expression from others. With this in mind it is important to note that Wolterstorff argues explicitly that the Christian community may reasonably reject science in favor of their own Christian convictions, when they appear to conflict, pursuing their own distinctive form of ‘science,’ grounded in their Christian vision of the world, which ultimately could lead them to quite different conclusions regarding the nature of the world than a secular version of science, such as we know it today, would lead.<sup>20</sup> Plantinga has, more recently, amplified this natural implication of their position in arguing that people of faith should practice a Christian or, more broadly, theistic ‘science’ which would draw from “all that (they) know” of the world from both empirical observation and their faith, leading predictably to the rejection of evolutionary science in favor of intelligent design as more reasonable from the epistemic vantage point of the Christian community.<sup>21</sup> It is not hard to see how such proposals would lead to as many different and conflicting, but still purportedly scientific understandings of the world, as there are currently different varieties of religious and non-religious belief. Dialogue there could be, but the lion’s share would be within each particular community in terms of its own conception of proper science. For all practical purposes each community might as well have a “no non-believers allowed” sign on the doors which open to their own insular conversations. At bottom, it is a vision of dialogue which fractures dialogue into different communicative worlds where everyone is all but assured of never having to expose their most fundamental beliefs to critical reflection: a vision of dialogue at odds, for this reason, with the Socratic ideal of a reflective life.

The evidentialist demand to seek good reasons for one’s beliefs has the capacity to overcome such a fractured communicative scenario. Recognizing that demand allows the skeptic as well as the person of faith to call each others’ beliefs into question in a way that can bring

---

20. See Wolterstorff, “Can Belief In God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations,” 8-9.

21. See Plantinga, “When Faith and Reason Clash,” in *Intelligent Design Creationism and its Critics*, ed., Robert T. Pennock (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001), in particular, 139-142

both to ‘think again’ about fundamental matters they might otherwise merely take for granted and to reason together about the grounds (or lack of grounds) for their beliefs. It is integral to this properly Socratic form of dialogue that each person’s beliefs must be put at genuine risk, unlike the truncated form of dialogue that remains with Wolterstorff’s dialogical pluralism. Though we may fancy that we are showing a kind of concern and respect for our religious students by not placing their beliefs in such a vulnerable position, by excusing them, as far as their religious beliefs go, from the rigors of a no-holds-barred Socratic exchange, we are actually doing them a disservice. For, despite the risks, the rewards of the Socratic endeavor can be great, as the experiences of both my religious and non-religious students in my Dawkins class showed.

The reflective life is not, alas, for everyone. But it is too important not to make it available for those among our students who can appreciate its value. And, on the basis of my own experiences, the students who can appreciate it are also not likely to wilt at the first exposure of their beliefs to criticism. They recognize, or can be led to recognize,<sup>22</sup> that becoming aware of the possible shortcomings of the reasons for this or that belief, as made evident by this or that argument, does not and should not entail the immediate disavowal of any belief. The Socratic endeavor is a long term endeavor in which we engage in an ongoing reflection concerning the grounds (or lack of grounds) for our beliefs that may eventually culminate in abandoning them, but may, just as likely, result in the development of *better* reasons for our beliefs, developed in the light of criticisms of our earlier reasons. Hence, the response of some of my religious students that considering Dawkins’ criticisms of their faith, in the end, strengthened their faith. Of course, that is only one outcome of placing one’s religious beliefs into the Socratic sphere of critical self-reflection. Sometimes it can lead to increasing skepticism that may eventually culminate in a very difficult repudiation of deeply held beliefs. But those are the risks a responsible pedagogy of belief and doubt must not only accept, but actively embrace, I believe, as we seek to enable our students to autonomously fashion and re-fashion their intellectual lives for themselves through their own capacity to see what they do and do not have good reason to believe.

---

22. I stress this to my students in all of my classes which deal with “controversial” issues.

## Responsible Believing

Miriam McCormick

Despite specific disagreements that arose in our working group about the nature of a pedagogy of belief and doubt, we all hoped that our courses would encourage our students to become more responsible believers. This language of responsibility occurred repeatedly throughout our discussions. But what does it mean to believe responsibly? At minimum, it means that we want our students to think deeply and critically about fundamental questions in general, as well as about their own fundamental beliefs, attachments, and presuppositions. We would like them to reflect on their grounds for holding the beliefs they do as well as the grounds for doubting them. Even if such reflection does not lead them to completely abandon or alter their beliefs, the hope is that such engagement will lead to a change in the *way* they hold their beliefs, moving from automatic, unquestioning believers to reflective believers.

This notion of responsibility in the realm of believing is commonly invoked in ordinary practice. We express disapproval and approval for each other's beliefs; we ask in an incredulous tone, "How can you believe that?" or exclaim, "What a ridiculous thing to believe!" Such admonishments seem to reveal that we think the person in question has formed the belief irresponsibly, and it seems we hold him responsible for forming this belief. This notion of responsibility is not simply one that is pointing out the causal genesis of the belief. Holding someone responsible for his beliefs is not like holding the wind responsible for knocking over the tent. That we praise and blame each other for the beliefs we hold seems to indicate, rather, that we view the beliefs one forms to be the consequence of one's agency. But attributions of responsibility and other deontological judgments in the doxastic (belief) realm are puzzling. For much of what we believe is beyond our control; we cannot decide to believe the way we can decide to act. It seems that such lack of control should excuse us from responsibility and judgment.

In addressing these questions about responsibility and control, I have tried to develop a notion of doxastic control that does not require that we be able to believe at will. In developing



this view, I draw from John Fischer's discussions of "guidance control."<sup>23</sup> A central feature of this kind of control is the idea of "ownership." Those aspects of our lives for which we take responsibility are the ones we own. I think we can own our beliefs in this manner and that we expect each other to do so. Beliefs are products of our agency, something we have an active role in shaping and maintaining. Although we cannot believe at will, neither are we passive in the beliefs we form. We take responsibility for our beliefs and taking responsibility includes taking control of them. We are blamed when we lose this grasp, when we do not exercise our reflective competence which helps us believe the way we *ought* to believe.

Everything I have said thus far is in agreement with Stephen Hendley's views about the pedagogy of belief and doubt. He goes further, however, in saying that if in the investigation of grounds for believing, one discovers that one lacks evidence or epistemic reasons for one's belief, the responsible believer will give up that belief. Here Hendley concurs with the dominant view among contemporary philosophers about which norms govern beliefs. They say that evidential norms do; I should follow my evidence, and only believe when the evidence is sufficient. Closely tied to this view is that following evidence will tend to provide me with true beliefs, and that beliefs aim at truth. I think that this widely accepted evidentialist view of belief has led to a narrow and overly intellectual picture of the concept "belief." Arguments for evidentialism can show that evidential norms do a good job providing us with general rules for belief maintenance. But once we understand the reason for why they ought to be followed in general, I argue, we see that they do not always hold. If beliefs are thought of as having a purpose, then the purpose must be of a practical kind. Our beliefs serve the purpose of providing coherence, meaning making, prediction, navigation, both individually and collectively. It is thus possible for these practical norms to override evidential ones.

I think it is important to acknowledge that truth and knowledge are sub-goals; they are instrumental, not intrinsic goods, and so the possibility is left open that they can be trumped by other norms or goals. If the purpose of belief is to help us achieve our goals, flourish, and be excellent human beings, it is possible that some beliefs can do this independently of their truth-value, or of their being evidentially-based. When and how is this possible? If there is no evidence or it is evenly balanced, the evidentialist says we should suspend belief. Richard Feldman, a

---

<sup>23</sup> See John Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

defender of evidentialism, says that if one adopts any attitude towards a proposition “that person ought to believe it if his current evidence supports it, disbelieve it if his current evidence is against it, and suspend judgment about it if his evidence is neutral (or close to neutral).”<sup>24</sup> It is the last part of this claim I wish to question. There may be times when there is no evidence (and so neutral) but that it can still be permissible or even a good thing to believe something. There is some evidence from cognitive psychology which suggests that, not only have humans evolved to be able to decode and interpret meaning from our fellow creatures but that our brains have also adapted to see meaning in life events. To see both other people, and life events as meaningful is a distinctive human capacity and one that those with certain cognitive disorders (like autism) lack. In a sense, it is a developmental accomplishment to be superstitious. This meaning-making could translate into a theistic or religious perspective but it need not. And even those people whose illusions have been disrupted by science still have a lot of trouble letting go of this naturally adapted interpretive power. Jesse Bering calls this capacity to see significance in life events having an existential theory of mind (EtoM). He says:

[I]t is my impression that we would be hard pressed to discover an individual of normal cognitive functioning who has never exercised his or her EToM .  
Imagine the following:

You are on a crowded bus, lost in the newspaper before you, when suddenly you are caught in a dizzy fury of screams, blackness and crushing metal. Your bus has crashed and flipped over a steep embankment. You crawl out of the window, dust yourself off, and realize that you are the sole survivor out of dozens of other passengers. If a week from now, or a year or decade later, you find yourself asking, “Why me?” then quite simply you have an intact EToM. Even if you brush such questions aside because you see them as rather foolish, you still betray your EToM insofar as you can entertain this type of question in the current context.<sup>25</sup>

One could see this as evolutionary design of self-deception, but if we are adapted to believe in meaning, it seems this adaptation serves a purpose. Maybe it is an outdated purpose and one we should try to get rid of, like “natural” male aggression when faced with rivals. Feldman, and others, would clearly see these beliefs as irrational because they violate

---

<sup>24</sup> Richard Feldman, *The Ethics of Belief*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LX, NO.3 (2000): 667-695, p.685.

<sup>25</sup> Jesse Bering, “The Existential Theory of Mind,” *Review of General Psychology*, 2002, Vol. 6, no.1, 3-24, p.19.

evidentialist injunctions. But if we remember the reason for following evidentialist norms, that is because they will help us maximize epistemic value and if this value is instrumental – it is valuable because it helps us flourish and contributes to our overall good, then these kind of meaning-making beliefs may be another way of serving this greater good.

We want our beliefs to conform to our view of the world, to help us succeed in the world, to make us happier. But once the practical side is acknowledged it becomes clear that even though evidential norms generally govern belief formation, there are times when it may be permissible to believe despite a lack of evidence. The problem with this acknowledgement, is that we want a way of distinguishing the “warranted” non-evidentially based beliefs from those that are not warranted. This is one of the worries which Hendley considers. He worries that one can opt out of critical evaluation of one’s beliefs simply by declaring them “basic” and thus not open to question. As he puts it, if it is acceptable to hold on to beliefs even if they lack good evidential grounds this “gives the believer what amounts to a ‘Get Out of Jail Free!’ card with respect to any serious challenges to their beliefs.” I agree that it would be opposed to the spirit of a sound pedagogy of belief and doubt to allow students to opt out of such critical self-reflection. But I do not think that such self-reflection ceases when one discovers that one believes without evidence. Even if the belief remains, the recognition of its grounds (or lack of grounds) will affect the believer, will likely lead to a tolerance and humility. These attitudes may be more important for responsible believing than a relentless demand for reasons.

There is an important difference between believing against your evidence and believing when you have no evidence or the evidence is neutral. The difference can be illustrated by reflecting on the nineteenth century debate W.K. Clifford and William James. Here is Clifford’s flourishing defense of evidentialism:

“It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything on insufficient evidence.... Belief, that sacred faculty which prompts the decisions of our will, and knits into harmonious working all the compacted energies of our being, is ours not for ourselves, but for humanity... Every hard-worked wife of an artisan may transmit to her children beliefs which shall knit society together, or rend it in pieces. No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe.” (W.K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief, 1879 )

In the case of believing against evidence, I think Clifford is right; believing in this way is harmful and opposed to collective good. But James is right in the second context, the context in

which we have no evidence or it is equally balanced. In James's, "The Will to Believe," he responds directly to Clifford's strong evidentialist stance. He agrees that in many contexts, evidential considerations will settle the matter but on questions which cannot be decided by the evidence, he says the following:

"Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth." (William James, "The Will to Believe, 1897)

In helping to further flesh out this distinction between pernicious non-evidentially based beliefs and ones that are not, Stephen Grimm's recent discussion of how we should understand the value of true belief is useful.<sup>26</sup> He argues that we should understand true belief as a common good, comparing the value of true beliefs to the value of clean water. It may be the case that a particular body of water is of no value to me and so if I pollute it I will not suffer but we still think it is wrong because "the water harbors a value that should be respected, regardless of whether it answers to my personal goals or concerns... since clean water plays such an indispensable role in our well-being, we have an obligation—to others—not to pollute in this way, but rather to treat clean water with due respect." Similarly, not every true belief is of value to me; it may even be that one can be harmful. But it is because, in general, having true beliefs and knowledge is helpful for an individual and useful for society, that they are valuable. But it may also be a good and useful for society for people to see meaning in life. Non-evidentially based beliefs that detract from the common good are different from ones which contribute.

I will consider two objections to this distinction. It seems that some obviously false beliefs, or ones that go against all evidence, can be very useful. Imagine a plane crashes in the middle of winter high in the Himalayan Mountains. It seems that, even if all evidence points to the unlikelihood of survival, it would be good for the survivors to believe *against* their evidence. There are abundant examples of people ignoring the evidence of the doctors who tell them they only have a few months to live and such ignoring, perhaps, allows them to live longer. In these

---

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Grimm, "Epistemic Normativity," forthcoming in *Epistemic Value*, eds. A. Millar, A. Haddock, and D. Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

cases, even though one can gain personally by believing against the evidence, and we would excuse these believers, they are still cases of vicious or irresponsible believing. It is important that, *in general*, we do not believe in this way; the value of attending, of not ignoring evidence is of more importance overall than the individual value of believing against the evidence in particular cases. The situation is analogous to the value of truth-telling. Telling a lie in a particular case can be very valuable, and excusable, but this does not undermine the general moral rule that says lying is wrong. I think in the cases where there is no evidence, equal evidence, or barely any evidence, there is *nothing* pernicious about believing in a way that contributes to your well being (and perhaps overall well being).

Second, one may think in the Berring-type cases (cases where one sees life events as significant) or in questions of what happens after death the evidence is not silent. One may think that the principle of simplicity shows that the straightforward causal explanation of why you didn't get killed in the bus wreck is the one supported by the evidence, and so it would be pernicious to believe that there was anything significant in your survival. Berring imagines three cases of mothers: an autistic mother, a religious mother, and a non-religious mother with normal cognitive functioning. We are told that each of them just sadly lost her infant as a result of a disease. He says, "we might expect the following responses (or something similar) after asking them why the death occurred.... the autistic mother would speculate that cancerous lesions had gotten a stronghold on her baby's immunosuppressive system; the religious mother would tell us that it was the will of God; and the nonreligious mother would tell us that her baby died so that she can help other bereaved mothers."<sup>27</sup>

Someone defending the view that the evidence is not silent on these questions of why things happen would have to say that the autistic person's answer is the one that exhibits the "correct" belief. But there is something disturbing in this response, some kind of lack of humanity. James would say that this is a case where our passions have a role to play in what we believe. The problem with the autistic mother is that she has no access to those passions, or emotions, which help answer the question of why her baby died. For her the "why" question cannot be anything but "what was the cause?" It seems, rather than see the non-causal why question as meaningless, we could see it as a question which cannot be answered based on the evidence. One then could answer by saying, "I don't know why," but it does seem that one has a

---

<sup>27</sup> Berring, p.20.

certain degree of freedom of what one believes about it. Rather than try to force beliefs of this kind into an evidentialist framework, I think it is better to expose this framework as impoverished.

My experience in the classroom further reveals how what matters most is recognition of the grounds for one's beliefs, to see which ones are based on reasons and which ones are not. Responsible believing means one does not close off inquiry or suppress questions on any matter. But this does not mean one needs to abandon those beliefs which one is still investigating or allowing others to question.

The class I taught was "The Ethics of Belief," an upper level philosophy seminar. There were six students in it, five of whom were philosophy majors at the junior or senior level. The small size was one helpful factor for fostering the kind of engagement required for serious and critical thinking and it did not take us long to feel comfortable with each other, to feel like a true community of inquirers where we need not worry about judgment or fear disagreement. One of the lessons of the seminar in June 2007 was that a safe environment is needed for the kind of reflection we were hoping to foster. By making it clear that aiming to understand and illuminate the concept of belief and the norms that govern it is a collaborative effort, I helped to make the environment a safe one.

I had taught this class before, but what was a new and a radical departure from my usual assignments was their writing of belief journals. This idea was inspired by the Teagle seminar and discussions, and was an attempt to connect the theoretical to the personal. The core of what I asked them to do was to write about what beliefs they cannot imagine giving up no matter what, and to think about why this is so. I also said they could write about exchanges they had with others regarding belief or write about how the readings in class affected the way they thought about their beliefs and others. The week after thanksgiving, we had no readings; they presented their belief journals and we discussed them – three on Monday and three on Wednesday.

By that point in the semester, the students had adopted certain theoretical perspectives about beliefs, taken certain sides in the prevalent debates. There were some who were committed evidentialists, meaning that they thought beliefs were only legitimate if based on evidence. When it came to examining their most cherished beliefs, many of which were beliefs about the doctrines of particular religions, they tried to offer evidential justification. What came

out in discussion was that even if they could provide these reasons if probed, these were not *their* reasons for holding beliefs.

Even though there was no mention in the assignment that these central beliefs needed to be religious, much of our discussion ended up focusing on the status of faith, moral truths, life after death, transcendence. These six students had radically different views on these matters, and each had gone through some kind of evolution regarding them. The course and its readings had contributed to this evolution; the ideas and issues brought up in class were incorporated into their autobiographies. Thinking theoretically about norms for belief inevitably makes one think about his or her own beliefs differently. The difference, however, is not that one will only hold beliefs which are grounded in evidential reasons. Depending on one's starting point, the difference could be a recognition of the limits of reason, of our tendency to dogmatism, of entrenched prejudices. All such recognitions are valuable and are representations of responsible believing.

I will conclude with some of my students' remarks which indicate the kind of reflection I have been discussing. A religious student, but also a committed evidentialist, says the following:

The most persistent beliefs that I have are certainly my religious ones. I was raised in an extremely conservative house... this, combined with an early education in home school that exposed me to only certain viewpoints, left me with an interesting worldview when I entered high school. While there I was exposed to ideas and theories that had never been truly fleshed out for me before. I found myself discarding several of those ideas and beliefs with which I had been inculcated as a child. That being said, however, many of those beliefs have remained and in some cases actually been strengthened since then. I have heard pretty much every type of evidence against religion in general and Christianity specifically in the past few years. I honestly believe that Christianity stands up to the test. I find that the evidence against God or Christianity often depends on the person's viewpoint when evaluating that evidence from the start. I realize that the evidence that I take as supporting Christianity also largely depends on my preconceptions, but I try to minimize that influence whenever possible.... There is, of course, another possibility for why my religious beliefs persist as they do. I was brought up with them and will freely admit that I could not imagine myself without them. Because of this, it is entirely possible that I do what I accuse other people with what I see as irrational beliefs of doing and selectively gather evidence that will support my desired conclusions and ignore everything to the contrary. Perhaps what I have always looked at as evaluating arguments against my positions and weighing them against what I believe has truly been me shutting out anything that I disagree with so that my beliefs will remain intact, if not even more reinforced by my commitment

to retain them in the face of reason. If this is the case then I would freely admit that I am being irrational and should rid myself of these beliefs.

In recognizing the possibility (although he didn't quite believe it) that he may be guilty of irrationality and that one can tend to ignore evidence when in a certain mindset, he exhibits the kind of self-reflection we seek to foster. When another student pressed him on whether he believed *because* of the evidence or if he only sought out evidence once he was pressed by others, this student had to admit that it is unlikely he could ever give up some of his central beliefs, even if convinced that there was no evidence to support it. The questioning student said the following about his own religious belief, "I am convinced of the existence of God, and thought I feel I have personal evidence to support this (God acts in my life) it's not really why I believe, so the explanation for this eludes me." For one of the brightest students in the class to admit he cannot explain why he believes in progress on the road to responsible believing.

Finally, a student who was not as religious but still believed in the afterlife and some higher being, said this:

Gah. I think I have to admit that I have some unjustified beliefs...The first is that there is an afterlife. Talking about it in class today made me realize I mistook responsiveness to evidence for justification by evidence. The thing is there is such little evidence for or against the existence of an afterlife that I am at a point where I may either suspend belief or believe pragmatically but not empirically. I guess I choose to believe pragmatically.

In cases such as this, I think the student is able to make such a choice and it does not seem that he is abdicating his responsibility as believer for doing so.



## **Film and Literature in a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt**

Terryl Givens and Terry Lindvall

It was the only place where I ever heard anything really sensible said about any of the things that were really fundamental—life, death, time, love, sorrow, fear, wisdom, suffering, eternity...All that year we were, in fact, talking about the deepest springs of human desire and hope and fear; we were considering all the most important realities....

Thomas Merton thus describes the course in Shakespeare, which he accidentally tumbled into, as providing the catalyst to his spiritual journey that culminated in a change of major, then conversion to Catholicism, and eventually in his vocation as one of the most influential religious thinkers of modern Christianity. The power and freedom of the artist to give concrete articulation to an infinite range of human experience, to concretize the hypothetical, to imagine the hitherto unthinkable, to place on the dissecting tray of human analysis and opinion the most intimate and interior, makes of media-like literature and film not an escape from, but a journey to the heart of, reality at its most intense and vivid. "Making the stone more stoney," is how the Russian Formalist Schlovsky described the task of art. Some of us have found, in our explorations of a pedagogy of belief and doubt, that the resources of literature and film, in particular, are potent means for confronting the student with questions of ultimate meaning and value, in a way that addresses the intellect, the emotions, and the moral faculties. Along the way, we have found the totality of such an engagement with the whole person is an apt method for foregrounding fundamental questions about the relation of faith to intellect and will, the nature of evidence, the possibility of competing epistemologies at work in our personal lives and in the academy. Following are some reflections based on our personal experiences relying upon literary and filmic avenues for exploring and developing a pedagogy of belief and doubt.

### **I. Literature**

A pedagogy of belief and doubt at its best is one that negotiates the difficult terrain of respecting religious commitments and beliefs, while getting students to be genuinely reflective and self-critical about those beliefs, especially insofar as they impinge on ethical, scientific, or

humanistic areas of study. Because my own field is the history and literature of religion, belief and doubt are central rather than peripheral concerns, and constitute the subject matter as well as a pedagogical issue in much of my teaching. The path I chose by which to pursue a more effective and self-conscious pedagogy of belief and doubt was to make those poles the nexus of a course (the nineteenth-century crisis of faith), and select texts that invited students to experience, and re-live, as it were, the challenges to religious orthodoxy that filled the intellectual landscape of that era. So rather than treat belief and doubt as historical phenomena that we studied at one remove, we worked our way systematically through those primary sources that constituted the battle ground on which orthodoxy and secularism struggled against one another. My goal was to 1) put students in a position where they had subjective experience of, rather than dispassionate readings about, a historical crisis of faith and 2) challenge them to become, in the process, more self-reflective about their own presuppositions and paradigms and 3) learn to differentiate highly personal and subjective responses from the textual bases and rational arguments that conditioned them and finally 4) make those texts and arguments the focus of intellectual investigation and classroom discussion.

The syllabus texts were effective in disconcerting and disorienting at least some of the students in ways that were ultimately productive. As scholars like Stephen Prothero have pointed out, American students tend to be uncommonly illiterate when it comes to religious traditions and perspectives outside their own. The first part of our course was a historical overview of the beginnings of modern secularism and atheism, and the cultural wars that decimated religious belief before and after Darwin. This phase successfully set the stage, since it made clear that at this time in history, belief and doubt were contested in very public ways with enormous social repercussions. The experience of bringing together students from several different religious orientations, in a context where the religious subject matter frequently invited personal reflections, meant students were frequently exposed to competing religious traditions and assumptions, and commented often and favorably on the value of seeing the same problem through multiple lenses. That aspect of the class alone was an effective vehicle for helping to bring into the light a distinction between "knowledge" and belief.

Perhaps ironically, the readings we discussed could at times be persuasive evidence of the limitations of a pedagogy of belief and doubt. Science may rely entirely upon the impersonal

logic of evidence and rational discourse. Literature, of course, relies for its power and influence upon other dimensions of the human personality. The best case in point for this fact may be a text like *Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky's argument against the goodness of God is not one that is predicated upon logic. It relies for its wrenching effect upon a sense of shared humanity that will be outraged by its graphic depictions of horrific violence inflicted upon innocent children. (It is, in this regard, especially timely given the geopolitical world of the present). It may be dissected as an argument that is compelling or fallacious, water-tight or defective. But it is not at all clear that that is the most appropriate way to read Dostoevsky, and the students sensed that. What this insight portends for a pedagogy of belief and doubt is the reminder that in an academy split between scientific and humanistic disciplines, there are different ways of knowing, and some forms of human intuition may be as valid as others, even if they do not yield as readily to analysis or argument. What this means, to me at least, is that a pedagogy of belief and doubt requires respect for difference not as a simple concession to the stubborn or the entrenched or the "true believers," but as a recognition that there are different ways of knowing, even if they are not equally valued in the academy.

A second text that was powerfully successful was *Barabbas*, by Lagerkvist. The theme of that work was the tension between belief as a condition of mind that we inherit or will-lessly occupy, and belief as a deliberate construction of faith, a choice we make. The novel follows the anguished struggle of the felon freed in Christ's place (according to the gospel narratives) to qualify himself to belong to a community of believers in Christ and his resurrection. The novel brilliantly enacts the multiple scenarios of ambiguous meaning, the intrusions of the unexpected or the remarkable into a neutral universe, which are constructed by Barabbas, into, alternately, his vision of a supernatural universe, or into a cosmos devoid of the sublime or the divine. None of the facts he observes, the phenomena he experiences, or the narratives he hears, will resolve themselves into clear and definitive systems of meaning. The world he inhabits is infinitely malleable, frustratingly pliable and ever-yielding to his own acts of interpretation. He has to choose how he will construct the universe he will inhabit. Seeing the possibility, if not the certainty, of belief as a choice, makes it more difficult for students to relegate belief and doubt to the realm of the purely subjective, the intractably personal. It therefore opens a way to put on the table positions and perspectives that had hitherto been considered sacred cows that are beyond negotiation.

A principal obstacle to effective education is the tendency of students to resist new perspectives or challenging ideas, especially if they threaten deeply entrenched beliefs and values. At the same time, an agenda that explicitly or tacitly aspires to de-convert, or dismantle one's personal or religious beliefs is no less nefarious than a pedagogy that aspires to convert or proselytize. It is for these reasons that literature of the type I have described may be a particularly effective resource in a pedagogy of belief and doubt. Great literature avoids the twin perils of dogmatism and abstraction. It can invite students to vicariously experience the emotional and intellectual upheavals that are the prelude to an introspection that is truly transformational.

## II. Film

The issues of belief and doubt in teaching through visual means have significant historical precedence. The question of sight and its relation to religious belief and to doubt may have percolated around the character of Thomas, the doubting disciple, who elicited the response from Jesus that those who believe but do not see are to be blessed. The promise was for a community of faith that did not witness the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but believed a preaching from other apostles. Thus, for Christian education, the notion of belief had been extended beyond the evidence of the eyes.

In the pedagogical tradition of iconography, films found a place in the teaching of belief. They also, as many early advocates of the religious possibilities would rue, found a place in triggering doubt in spectators. Films could and would teach a variety of messages. A pedagogy of faith and doubt in the visual communication of film is grounded in several unique characteristics of the medium. Each shapes the reception and processes of perception and interpretation that leads to a better understanding of teaching through visual media.

First, film is marked by a sense of immediacy. It confronts the spectator on a raw, visceral level. Unlike the reading of philosophical or religious texts, little opportunity is allowed for reflection or evaluation while one is watching a film. One attends to the amalgam of images, *mise-en-scene*, montage, music, dialogue, and numerous special effects and cinematic touches. Films are emotive in their initial experience rather than cognitive. If one can distinguish between two epistemological approaches, the enjoyment of an idea versus the contemplation of the idea (*connaitre* vs. *savoir*), the taste and experience of knowledge of a phenomenon versus the

analysis and critique of that same phenomenon, the primary experience of film belongs to the former category. One first tastes and enjoys a personal knowing of the film; then one seeks to understand it through a more critical investigation. Both kinds of knowledge are important, but the raw encounter is central to film. A second aspect of encountering issues of belief and doubt through film is conditioned by the film's central characteristic of iconicity. Film is iconic, in that while it allows one to directly look at it, it also invites perception through it. One first enjoys it as it is, as a spectacle of movement and a narrative of action (usually, except in certain art house films like *My Dinner with Andre*).

Visual spectacle was a central concern for the theological and ironic journalist Soren Kierkegaard, the Protestant Woody Allen of 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark, who italicized tensions within a hierarchy of aesthetic, ethical, and religious modes of discourse. For Kierkegaard, ambivalence toward the aesthetic experience was rooted in its tendency to promote a disinterested appreciation toward an object, even if that object/subject were divine. Kierkegaard illustrated this thought in a discussion about showing a child a sequence of pictures: first one of noble men on horses, then of William Tell shooting an apple, and then climactically, an illustration of the crucifixion. The child could not enjoy the execution of the good and loving Man, because the facts of the picture demand a religious choice rather than aesthetic distance. In contrast, those who beheld the picture from an aesthetic perspective ("whether it is a success, whether it is a masterpiece, whether the play of colors is right, and the shadows, whether blood looks like that, whether the suffering expression is artistically true") would act as a gaggle of distant admirers rather than as passionate disciples.

The interpretation of the images can be expanded by considering the contribution of the medieval Quadraga, the fourfold method of interpretation. The issues of belief and doubt in a film text can be examined via literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic lenses. Each provides a fresh hermeneutic to the understanding of a film by opening up various perspectives from which to study it. Third, similar to novels and poetry, films are generally distinguished by their indirection, by their parabolic form in introducing ideas that could challenge, reinforce, subvert, or purify one's beliefs. The filmed stories provided models of identification for students to assess their own foundations of belief and doubt.

Finally, films invite a communal response. One usually does not watch films alone, but in the company of family, friends, or strangers. People laugh, cry, cringe, or respond to the

cinematic narratives ensemble. As such, films open up dialogue among various (and often diverse) groups to interpret a film's meanings with a minimum of defensiveness or antagonism. In this sense, film offers a safe haven for a discussion of personally salient and cherished beliefs, and also allows students to attend to the oppositional readings of doubt within the narrative.

As contemporary students have become more visually oriented, it is incumbent upon educators to attend to this alternative means of addressing important issues, not the least of which is a pedagogy of belief and doubt.

## **Professor as believer... and doubter?**

Brian Doyle

At the heart of a discussion of pedagogy is the issue of the relationship of the professor to her students and his colleagues. What is the role we are to play in the classroom and in the academy? It was the assumption of our group, a fair one in my estimation, that to be a legitimate scholar we must be consistent in our positions inside and outside the classroom. Our discussions concerning our own roles in the classroom were varied and nuanced. All sides referred to the history of education and its role in the life of the student.

### **Intellectual Tradition and the Educator**

Our group named at least three distinct yet related responsibilities of the college professor. First, we must transmit the knowledge of our discipline. The reader may think this is a responsibility that requires little argument but upon careful consideration it becomes obvious that different subject areas envision knowledge differently. Psychology, history, political science and others have specific data and theories that must be communicated for the student to meet most of the objectives of a course. Philosophy, literature and others do not have the same amount of content nor the same types. Yet, there are theories, terms, and ideas that are pertinent to all disciplines and must be the responsibility of the professor to make available to the students.

Secondly, college courses should assist the students in their development of their learning styles and abilities. Almost all college courses teach students to read, write, and present more efficiently and effectively. Inherent to this is the improvement of the students' intellectual skills. Most of the faculty in our seminar stressed critical thinking as an essential aspect of their classes. We debated what was meant by critical thinking but, to generalize in a way to avoid these debates, allow me to define critical thinking as the ability to examine material from differing perspectives. Inherent to critical thinking is the asking of critical questions. Thus our courses are driven by interrogation of the subject matter, different interpretations of it, our assumptions about the subject as well as our own subjectivity. It is the responsibility of the professor to both instruct students on how to think critically and to model this behavior. It is the modeling that is perhaps most important but certainly most difficult.

Finally, education does not only serve the student or the professor. We, as college professors, serve our society, nation and world. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explicate the importance of quality education for the different communities to which we belong but it is essential for the professors to keep this role in mind. We want our students to be engaged responsibly and intelligently in this world. Some of our institutions also serve a religious community wherein these values are still essential.

### **Professor as Model**

As the faculty member engages in critical inquiry, it became clear to us that the means by which each of us engaged the material was determined, at least in part, to our disciplinary method. Certainly, most areas of study have some overlap at the level of methodology. But it was clear to us that our disciplines determine the degree to which we could share our methods of critical inquiry. Moreover, the role and importance of critical thinking varied according to the subjects we taught more than who was teaching them.

One consistent factor of our disciplines was the clarion call for intellectual integrity. Faculty must teach their students to present their own work and their own thoughts in light of texts and concepts presented or researched. But instruction on this account is not as effective as good modeling. Faculty, in the classroom and in their scholarship, must demonstrate integrity if the lesson is to be grasped and embraced by their students. The pedagogy of doubt and belief, we agree, is an aspect of critical inquiry. It is essential that this be done in light of our disciplinary approaches.

In light of this discussion, we must admit that faculty members are not the final authority in education. The classroom is a dynamic location with moods, attitudes, and a history. Yet the faculty member is always in dialogue with different forms of authority. First, of course, is administrative. But more than in a management style, the administration is to be the protectors of the larger programs and education from the university. It is the responsibility of the administrative bodies to ensure that our individual courses form some sort of cohesive whole for the student.

We also have disciplinary and academic authorities. There may be figures, theorems, texts, or films that are a necessary aspect of a class within our disciplines. If a student passes a course in 13<sup>th</sup> century literature he is expected to have read some Dante. If she takes a class on



ancient philosophy, she should have read *The Apology*. As professionals, we need to recognize that our issues of belief and doubt do not occur in a vacuum but are tied to the historical discussions of which we are a part.

Many of us in this cohort recognized an obligation to search for truth. There, of course, was division among us as to whether the finding of truth was possible, but all agreed that we were on an intellectual journey in search of a clearer and perhaps more true vision of reality. Perhaps it is a self-selecting aspect of this seminar but we agreed that critical questioning in the least, if not full out doubt, assisted the faculty member and the student in the search for truth. Yes, several millennia later, we agreed that Socrates has it correct. But a stance against positivism is not without meaning in the contemporary educational system.

An interesting issue was raised in these conversations. We were willing to acknowledge certain authorities in our pedagogy? At least one of us taught at a religiously affiliated institution. Other institutions had historical roots in a religious tradition. One of our institutions was an historically black institution. Does this not raise another issue of authority? I think it fair to say that we did not address the issue of historical or religious authority enough. How do we raise issues of doubting the authority of the very core of our institutions? It is not an easy question. It is one that requires more time and energy than we were able to give to it in this context.

As authorities in a given academic field, we lead our students responsibly and intelligently through a course of study. But, in doing so, we do not lose our individuality nor our opinions, beliefs and, of course, our doubts. Since the role of the professor includes professing something to be the case, it is customary for us to have confidence in these beliefs. We are well educated and experienced in the field and thus have a right to recognize the authority and strength of our beliefs. That is to simply state the obvious, in most cases, we have confidence that our beliefs are correct or true, or most appropriate for the context. However, a specific need of any good pedagogy of belief and doubt necessitated humility in these beliefs. Like Socrates, we must admit that there is that which we do not know. It is possible that we are wrong or that our beliefs are misplaced? Is it appropriate to communicate these self doubts to the classroom? Perhaps it is not only appropriate but necessary. Yet, how do we successfully model confidence in our beliefs with an appropriate humility and acknowledgement of doubt? The answer to these questions differed among the members of the group, but not according to discipline, but how our classrooms were structures and run.

Perhaps an example from my experience can shed some light on this discussion. As a Catholic theologian at a Catholic university, my students at Marymount University regularly assume my faith and the strength of it. The idea of sharing any of my current religious doubts does not seem appropriate or attractive to me. Nevertheless, I often find myself sharing a story from my past which I can share with you here.

In my doctoral studies I took a seminar titled: *The Resurrection of Jesus in Contemporary Theology*. As the title suggests, we read many of the contemporary theologians as they wrestled with the biblical, historical, physical, and theological issues related to the claim that Christ rose from the dead. It was a three hour class so we took a break and would all chat in the hallway. For weeks, the initial question was the same: “So do you think it really happened?” Catholic and Lutheran priests and lay theologians would honestly admit that, upon reading the biblical narratives of the appearance of the Risen Christ and this or that theologian’s interpretation, no, we are not sure we believe it happened. The one class I turned to a priest who, after much pause, admitted that he wasn’t sure if it happened, and I asked him if he was to say mass that weekend. His response was wonderful: Sure, I’m on the schedule. His doubt did not discount his commitment. Our doubts are an aspect of a dynamic and life long relationship.

This story is effective in the classroom. It demonstrates that the most learned and the most devoted still doubt. It also allows me to speak of my doubt but to do so within a community of believers and doubters. My doubt does not remove me from the community. It is the responsibility of the community to respond to my doubt and, perhaps, share in this doubt.

One further issue concerns the privacy of the professor. We all have our own will and mind. There may be times when we doubt some of our beliefs to which we hold fast. Some of these doubts may be passing, some may be consistent. Sharing some of these doubts can serve as a positive model for students. It can demonstrate to them that all knowledge consists of data that must be put to critical investigation. Doubts are an integral part of critical inquiry. However, some of these doubts will be personal. They may be significant doubts. Is it always an effective model to share these doubts? Is it possible that we undercut what we have taught our students as true? Can we undo our intended objectives of learning through inquiry by pressing questions of personal significance?

Our group did not find consensus as to the role of the personal beliefs of the professor. Most agreed that when the topic became too personal, we turned back to the texts at hand. But

this was a pedagogical technique. It does not resolve the issue. It seems that the only way a professor can appropriately share significant and personal doubts is to create a classroom environment that is safe for all yet structured enough to foster a learning experience for the students.

### **Teaching Believers to Doubt**

In my own experience at Marymount, I have found the most successful learning outcomes when beliefs are challenged in ways that strengthen a person's faith rather than undermine it. A substantial percentage of my students are Catholic and most are Christian. In my course on theology, I wanted to model my willingness to doubt my beliefs in productive ways, ways which would produce more thoughtful, reflective believers. In my class, we read Freud, Marx, Durkheim, and, through video, Richard Dawkins who have raised and continue to raise significant challenges to the Christian faith. None of them can or should be summarily dismissed. As we worked to engage these figures and texts, I tried my best to take a critical stance in relation to my own beliefs. My faith has helped me through difficult times. Telling my students this did not seem inappropriate and most nodded as it was assumed and an important role of faith. Then we talked about Marx' argument that religion is what explains away the significance of this suffering and allows us to remain complacent and passive through the experience. Allowing my faith to be challenged by this figure opened some in the class to be challenged as well. They had little fear that I would leave class and leave my faith or be struck by lightning. Perhaps this permitted them to take a critical stance toward their own beliefs.

It seems that any discussion of belief and doubt is served best by an environment that is, above all, safe for inquiry. Asking "big questions" that center on what we believe could rattle the very foundation of our students' world views. Professors must ensure that students are safe to question themselves and each other respectfully. Much of this safety will be engendered by an honest faculty member who is willing to take risks and reward critical thinking in its varied forms. I have been known to take risks in the classroom though I still struggle as to whether this is a good idea. Given my role as a Catholic theologian, I have to be careful but there are times that the risks and the big questions coincide. One of the 'big questions' I want my students to consider is why suffering and evil exist in the world. In theology, we call this issue theodicy. It

has three tenets: God is all powerful, God is all good (and therefore does not wish us to suffer), and suffering exists. Students usually explain suffering away with stock answers such as: we are supposed to learn something from the suffering, or it is our fault, or it is a mystery we are not to understand. I argue with them that, upon critical examination, none of these answers really addresses the issues involved. This discussion will take much of a class period. Near the end, I am asked my opinion. This is a great risk for me but I tell them that I question the omnipotence of God. I tell them that I would much prefer a loving God who lacks power than a powerful God that allows such profound suffering in the world. The church does not have a specific response to the issue of suffering but it certainly claims that God is all powerful. My questioning of this teaching within the classroom can be seen as a risk but it is my hope that students recognize that theology participates in the same profound questioning of the mysteries of life as literature, philosophy, history, and art. We must be willing to investigate all of the possible responses to these perennial questions. If we bracket certain answers because we are Christian or American or what have you then we are not authentic thinkers. It is our responsibility to be sincere as we approach these universal questions. It is what makes theology and the intellectual endeavor useful and necessary.

In my theology course, exercising these big questions of belief and doubt in light of personal faith was, in many ways, unique to other courses developed by members of the Teagle Working Group. Theology does not only serve the academy. It serves the church. A Catholic university does not only promise a degree from an accredited institution but it strives to instruct its students, regardless of their faith, in the tradition of Catholic higher education. It is certainly not my job to convert or protect the declared faiths of my students. I make it a point to never ask them their personal faiths or denominations. Nonetheless, it would be foolish of me to fail to recognize the possible consequences of the readings, lectures and discussions. By my discipline, I am required to teach what the Catholic Church teaches as that which it teaches. I may not teach something as a teaching of the church when it is not. However, I am also responsible to raise critical questions of the teachings of the church. This must be done carefully and respectfully. It is my firm conviction, even more so after my experiences with the Teagle Working Group, that to do theology well I must encourage respectful questioning of all aspects of the subjects. Theology presumes faith but it does not expect the learner to abandon rationality and

intelligence. Doubt and belief are not polar opposites but companions in the rational search for the eternal truth.

Thomas Aquinas argued that theology is a science since it employs a methodology and addresses an objective reality – God. Most of my scientist friends roll their eyes at this argument. Some reject theology as a science because it does not begin with a *tabula rasa*. Of course, many now argue that science does not start from that position either. In the same way that hard science must look critically at all of its interpretation of collected data so must theology. What is crucial to understand, in my opinion, is that belief and faith are not the same as certitude. Theology does not claim nor strive to establish certitude but to further the understanding of the faith claim. My classes were most successful when I convince students that religious faith is not about affirming the existence of something for which there is no proof. Faith is a relationship between a limited rational being with an eternal and transcended being. And doubts are not only normal in love relationships but they are integral to them. It is what it means for us to be human. We live in a world without certitude. Bringing those doubts and questions to the life of faith is not to destroy one's faith but to strengthen the relationships of the people with God and their communities. If the unexamined life is not worth living, neither is the unexamined faith.

My teaching of this course and others has changed considerably since the Teagle group met. Part of this may simply because I was given considerable time to think about the issues involved. Many of us are pulled in so many directions that a week of thoughtful consideration of a topic is now rare. Certainly our work as a group was assisted by the readings, guest lectures, and presentations. But we became a learning community with a specific issue to discuss. We did not all agree. We do not now all agree. But we respectfully argued about the nature of education, reality, God, and the human person. In many ways, we lived out the pedagogy we hope to instill in our classrooms. We allowed ourselves to be challenged and made vulnerable to each other. Many of us are better educators as a result of the Teagle experience.

## Designing “Religion and Its Critics”

Scott Davis

The mission of the Teagle Grant was, as I understood it, to investigate the issues involved in presenting the big questions about belief and doubt to a student body that, at least potentially, contained some members who might feel threatened by the academic study of religion. This is not a problem I have encountered much in the quarter century I’ve been teaching in ethics and religion. Although I have, fairly enough, been described as a “secular Aristotelian,”(Stout 2004, 331, n. 16), I typically adopt the traditional philosopher’s strategy of attempting to get students to imagine why an author would hold a particular set of beliefs and how he might draw the conclusions he does from those beliefs. Therefore, I needed a strategy that would relate to the particulars of our grant. In the syllabus to our meeting of June 2007, the seminar identified four major questions:

1. To what extent do tenets of belief (or unbelief) preclude a breadth of learning and critical thinking?
2. How can an instructor engage students in intellectual work when met with deeply ingrained ideological resistance?
3. How can an instructor take on any discussion of belief without being dismissed as advancing a liberal or conservative bias?
4. As faculty, what responsibility (if any) do we have to try?

On an initial reading, the answers to questions 1, 3, and 4 seem obvious: 1) There's no reason they should; 3) by not advancing a liberal or conservative bias; and 4) a fiduciary responsibility to the student, the institution, and the discipline. Thus the real issues surround question 2.

Part of the problem lies in the term "ideological." Faculty meet with deeply ingrained resistance in the classroom for all sorts of reasons: Boredom, ignorance, response to bad course design etc. "Ideological resistance," would seem to come from an "ideology," but that's not too helpful; nobody has a clear sense of what that means either. "Ideology" can't simply mean "belief" or "set of beliefs," since beliefs and sets of beliefs underlie all of our actions, judgments, expectations, and the like. So if it is to incorporate beliefs, an ideology must also incorporate

some stance toward the demands that others can make on the justification of those beliefs. But that, by itself, is not going to be enough, since it fails to distinguish "ideology" from "faith" (or, alternatively, it identifies them). The concept of faith has its problems, but they are not the same as those surrounding ideology. Aquinas, for example, notes that "faith is mid-way between science and opinion," (*ST IIaIIae.1.2. sed contra*) by which he means that faith is neither the sort of personal opinion that a casual viewer might offer on some *American Idol* competitor, nor the systematic organization of a body of knowledge that facilitates deriving future truths from well justified propositions that have been incorporated into the system. So the person of faith, for Aquinas, is justified in saying that he holds some proposition - "God is triune" - true, while acknowledging that, if were held to the justificatory standards of contemporary metallurgy, the justification would be defective.

Ideologies, at least as they are encountered in popular culture, are typically less self-aware than expressions of faith. Marxism in the age of Lenin and Stalin comes to mind. So do contemporary post-Cold War expressions of market capitalism as the cure for all that ails us. That these examples come so quickly points to a distinguishing characteristic of ideologies: they assume a status for their claims that puts the demand for justification out of bounds. Both cases here come with the implied prefix, "The most rigorous scientific investigation has shown that ..." In this sense, sadly, most assaults on creationism and the argument from design generated by the scientific establishment turn out to be ideologically motivated. Scientifically informed examples, such as the writings of Richard Dawkins, have struck me as no less ideological in their presentation of both the natural sciences and the arguments of believers. To take a recently published example, Victor Stenger presents basic cosmological positions as though they were uncontestable and, when necessary, introduces various versions of Hume's critique of belief. But he does not address the contemporary responses to Hume and similar critics by first tier philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. In particular, there is no awareness of the complex critique of foundationalism and the burden of proof argument. This may be because the primary source for contemporary theistic philosophers is Keith Parsons's 1989 attack on Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Richard Swinburne.

Returning to the original question 2, it seemed to me that the sorts of "ideological resistance" some people report encountering in the contemporary liberal arts classroom stem from either an approach to the natural sciences that extends the scope of their authority beyond

justification or a stance toward the content of faith that goes well beyond that of mainstream Catholics, Protestants, and other traditions in contemporary America. The latter is frequently associated with fundamentalism, a radical movement in American evangelical Protestantism that traces its origins to the early 20th century. While I have never had a student impede the progress of class by insisting on a fundamentalist interpretation of some text, and only rarely suffered from the scientific equivalent, this conflict between the ideologically-oriented scientist and the ideologically-oriented believer seems to be at the heart of our project. So it seemed to me that I could combine questions 2 and 3 by formulating a semester course that focused on the historical origins of, and the philosophical questions that went with, the emergence of this potential conflict.

Earlier versions of "Religion and Its Critics" focused on major philosophers and religious thinkers of the early modern period - Descartes, Pascal, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Schleiermacher - and their legacy. For the Teagle version, I focussed on aspects of emerging Western science, taking my start from Alexandre Koyré's 1957 classic, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*. Koyré, best known among historians of science for his technical essays collected in *Etudes galiléennes* (1939) and *Newtonian Studies* (1965), argues in this volume that a major feature of the emergence of modern Western science is the shift from the qualitative properties of the cosmos as divine creation to the quantitative measurement of natural phenomena.

The brilliance of Koyré's analysis is that it subverts any simple division between the sciences, philosophy, and theology; it focuses on the ways late medieval and early modern Christian thinkers were attempting to develop accounts of the natural world that were consistent with both their traditionally held views about God and God's creation and with the findings of new instruments, both technological and mathematical, for interpreting the phenomena of the created world. Any account of "science" which excluded Kepler, Galileo, and Newton would, *ipso facto*, be a bad account of science. But once Koyré brings their contemporary activities and conversation partners into the discussion, the "warfare between science and religion" thesis associated with A. D. White and other 19th century polemicists is exposed as too simple minded to maintain credibility.

What Koyré does show is that, by the beginning of the 19th century, many leading students of nature are willing to compartmentalize their academic and their religious commitments. The competing theological commitments that drove, for example, the Leibniz-



Clarke Correspondence, are no longer of interest to leading practitioners. Koyré illustrates this anecdotally in his penultimate paragraph, recounting how Laplace:

who, a hundred years after Newton, brought the New Cosmology to its final perfection, told Napoleon, who asked him about the role of God in his *System of the World*: "Sire, je n'ai pas eu besoin de cette hypothèse." (p. 276)

My next move in the design of the new course was to transfer the basic steps of this story to the emergence of Darwinian thought, by way of Philip Appleman's exceptional Norton edition of Darwin. Not only does Appleman reproduce key texts of Darwin himself, but selections from Darwin's scientific and theological predecessors, contemporary critics and champions, and later 20th century developments. Beginning with Paley's version of the argument from design, the class works through the interpretation of the fossil record, the emergence of uniformitarian vs. catastrophe theorists, and the impact of Darwin himself. This allowed the class to consider the 19<sup>th</sup> century critique of Darwin's theory by such notable scientists as Owen, the defense of that theory by such equally important figures as Lyell. I close this section with A. R. Wallace's 1883 tribute to Darwin, which incorporates Wallace's view that the theory of natural selection contributes to the argument from design. The selection concludes with the remark that Darwin's genius "was enabled to grasp fundamental principles, and so apply them as to bring order out of chaos, and illuminate the world of life as Newton illuminated the material universe." (Appleman 2001, 288)

At this point the course made its biggest departure from previous installments. Instead of continuing with the philosophical and religious traditions, I shifted to Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, an account of what Balmer calls the "evangelical subculture." A very personal book, reflecting Balmer's own spiritual evolution, the first edition became an Emmy nominated PBS series and the book is now in its fourth printing. My thought was that the best way to introduce fundamentalism would be to have it introduced historically through a sympathetic participant-observer. Not only that, but Balmer's volume allowed me to situate that particular strand of American Protestantism in the larger spectrum of American religious history. Through a number of contemporary case studies, tied together through a history of American evangelical thought and practice, Balmer illustrates the complexity of evangelical history and experience, from its place at the forefront of political progressivism in 19th century America, to

its marginalization after the Scopes trial, to its return after the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976. In particular, we looked at the emergence of predispensational millennialism in the mid-19th century, followed by its coupling to Fundamentalism in the early 20th. The pamphlets that gave the movement its name were intended, “to turn back the theological challenges of Protestant liberals or ‘modernists.’” These pamphlets, financed by California tycoons Lyman and Milton Stewart of Union Oil, set forth a series of doctrines their authors regarded as essential to evangelical Christians. Those who subscribed to these doctrines, which included belief in the virgin birth of Jesus, the infallibility of the Bible, and Christ’s imminent return to earth, became known as *fundamentalists*.” (Balmer 2006, xv) This generated the framework for the American confrontation with Darwin.

Having followed Balmer up to the present in his review of the “evangelical subculture,” we returned to Appleman to look at contemporary creationism, scientific creationism, and intelligent design and their scientific and philosophical critics. The goal was to see the spectrum and development of fundamentalism as it subsequently influenced Catholics, Jews, and others, including the Catholic biochemist Michael Behe and his critics (Appleman 2001, 525-623). At this point I move to a recent exchange between a conservative Christian philosopher and an atheist philosopher to compare the current state of the argument. My goal is to show that, within the technical language of contemporary analytic philosophy, each argument for and against has a sound and (at least partially) compelling counter-argument. The idea is to eliminate simple minded accusations of ideology and bias against either side.

From here the course moves to the contemporary moral theologian Stanley Hauerwas and his recent critic Jeffrey Stout. Hauerwas, the most influential Protestant theologian in the academy, argues for the rejection of what he takes to be the liberal agenda in favor of a return to a theology which puts the primary emphasis on the Church. From this perspective the primary goal of the individual Christian is faithfulness to the demands of the Gospel. The social teachings of the mainstream churches and secular thinkers are then criticized to see whether or not they help or hinder the contemporary Christian in the pursuit of faithfulness. Stout, in turn, mounts a critique of both the traditionalism he attributes to Hauerwas and the secular political theory, derived from Rawls, that seems to deny the Christian a voice in the public square. Stout deploys a variety of philosophical techniques against both sides, in particular the “inferentialist”

account of language associated with Robert Brandom, to argue in favor of a democratic pluralism in which neither the traditionalist nor the restrictive Rawlsian is given pride of place.

### **Teaching "Religion and Its Critics"**

The in-class dynamics of the course were mixed. 300-level courses in Religion are capped at 15. This one started off with 15, but rapidly dropped to 11. Much of this I attribute to the difficulty of Koyré, though one of the students, a freshman, lasted until it came to formulating a mid-term thesis. Discussion in class was typically lively and informed by the reading, but after the mid-term the numbers of people present any given day dropped markedly. One student eventually withdrew from the University for reasons unconnected to the course. Three more pretty much vanished, for a variety of personal reasons, and thus on any given day there were, at most, typically six students.

My typical procedure in 300-level courses is to assign a short (3000 word) midterm paper and a longer (5000 word) term paper. The short paper was designed to force the students to reconstruct the argument of Koyré, locate Paley in terms of it, and generate a response by Darwin. Given the difficulty of the Koyré, the results here weren't all that bad. The term paper asked the student to identify a recent story from the *The New York Times* that was relevant to the issues of the course and then to generate an analysis and response to that story using the tools provided by Balmer, Hauerwas and/or Stout. While the results were mixed, at best, the topics were interesting. There was a relativist critique of the philosophers, both the Christian and the atheist, based on a piece, "The Moral Instinct" by Steve Pinker that appeared on January 13, 2008 in *The New York Times Magazine*. One looked at a controversy over a Hebrew Charter School in Florida. One dealt with the controversy over Tibet and the constitutional proposals of the Dalai Lama. Another considered Senator Clinton's use of the controversy over Senator Obama's pastor as a subversion of democratic discourse. Two approached the denial of tenure to a young astrophysicist at Iowa who associated himself with intelligent design. The others were similar in topic.

In last summer's seminar there was much discussion about assessment. I was as puzzled about how this would be undertaken as I am by assessment at the departmental and university level (I say this as someone who has written assessment plans for two programs and served on

the Provost's ad hoc committee on the assessment of field of study courses). I was particularly concerned that, if the expectations of "ideological resistance" were as widespread as the project expected, the instruments being suggested would introduce an adversarial component between students and faculty at the very beginning of the course, if only because they seemed to import at the beginning a set of standards and expectations that struck me as carrying a "liberal bias." This ran contrary to my goal of distinguishing a liberal arts education from an education into political liberalism. I have no interest, as a professional educator, in doing the latter.

In addition, there were also issues of research using human subjects that added a further complication. Therefore I informed the students on the syllabus of the goals of the Teagle grant and that I would be adding some question unique to this course to the end of semester student surveys known as SEIs. Since the current SEI system allows for this, I reasoned, there would be no need to approach the IRB with my questions. In the end, with such a small data base, I decided to forego the questions altogether. By that time it was evident that the demographics of this course were no different from usual: A mix of social and religious moderates to liberals, open to argument, tolerant of non-standard views.

### **Teaching Outcomes**

The most important things I learned had to do with course design. The next time I offer the course I will once again begin with Koyré, but I will move through the material more quickly, and turn from it to the first chapter of Butler, Wacker & Balmer's Religion in American Life. That will allow me to develop the status of religion in the early modern period up to the American revolution. At that point I will go back to classics and introduce Hume's Dialogues on Natural Religion to capture the formulation and criticism of the argument from design. After Hume I plan to move to Thomas Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions. This provides a major part of the story that was missing from the Teagle version. Koyré's work is central to Kuhn, but he also discusses cases from the rise of chemistry and physics that contribute to the developing idea of science as a separate intellectual profession. Then I will return to Religion in American Life for religion in 19th century America, including the progressives, the premillennialists, and the early Fundamentalists. That will set the stage for the Darwin, to be followed by Balmer's account of 20th century American religion. Once again, I'll conclude with Hauerwas and Stout unless something better comes along.

A second aspect of course design may prove almost equally important. Early in my teaching career I designed some courses, particularly upper division courses, with no class meetings in the final two weeks. The idea was to facilitate research and individual assistance with writing. In the 14 years I have been at the University of Richmond, I haven't done that. I think I'm going to go back to it. In this course I distributed the final assignment at the end of the ninth week, with a schedule for developing the topic and outline. The result was the melting away of class. If I had two very short papers (4-6 pages) and distributed the term paper assignment at the end of the 10th week, with the assignment keyed to the materials of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11th weeks, then suspended course meetings for weeks 12 and 13, it might be possible to keep the course focused on text and discussion while still giving them enough space to formulate a topic, research, and generate a rough draft. I plan to use the 14<sup>th</sup> week to have the students present summaries of the rough drafts that may provoke questions to be considered in the final draft.

## References

- Appleman, Philip ed., Darwin, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Norton Critical Editions, 2001)
- Aquinas, Thomas. Summa Theologiae (cited by part, question, & article)
- Balmer, Randall. Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Butler, Jon, Grant Wacker, & Randall Balmer. Religion in American Life (Oxford University Press, 2003)
- Craig, William & Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist (Oxford University Press, 2004)
- Hauerwas, Stanley. After Christendom? (Abingdon Press, 1991)
- Hume, David. Dialogues and Natural History of Religion (Oxford University Press, 1999)
- Koyré, Alexandre. From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957)
- Kuhn, Thomas. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1966)
- Parsons, Keith. God and the Burden of Proof (Prometheus Books, 1990)
- Plantinga, Alvin & Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. Faith and Rationality (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983)
- Stenger, Victor. God: The Failed Hypothesis (Prometheus Books, 2008)
- Stout, Jeffrey. Democracy and Tradition (Princeton University Press, 2004)

## Course Design and Assignments for Psychology 206: Why People Believe Weird Things

Shane Pitts

### Introduction

The primary goal of the Teagle seminar on pedagogy of belief and doubt was to explore avenues to address issues of beliefs and doubts, broadly construed, as they arise in the college classroom. With this overarching objective in mind, I was most interested in fostering the development and refinement of habits of mind, traits, and intellectual skills in my course that addresses questions of how we arrive at and maintain a variety of beliefs – especially those about human behavior.

The global approach I took toward realizing the course promises or goals resulted in a multidimensional approach toward thinking about beliefs about human behavior. An underlying assumption of this approach is that beliefs and doubts are more than a product of purely cognitive, rational deliberation; therefore, to subject our beliefs or doubts to analysis using only the rational or cognitive skills dimension of critical inquiry would not be sufficient. Thus, rather than thinking only about how we believe and doubt from a purely cognitive or rational skills dimension (e.g., reasoning, analyzing, evaluating, interpreting, applying, comparing, synthesizing, etc.), I also attempted to bring two additional dimensions to bear on our approach to studying beliefs: a worldviews dimension and a values dimension. According to Gabennesch (2006) and several papers by Bertrand Russell, the worldviews dimension might best be construed as an approach or an attitude toward the world, specifically a skeptical view. This worldview values the idea that the world is not always entirely what it seems and that it is rather commonplace to misperceive reality. We cannot form our beliefs about the world of human behavior based on naïve realism. Therefore, those who utilize this worldview are disinclined to believe claims about human behavior, or most other matters, at face value. Using this as a starting point, the course emphasized that (a) beliefs and doubts should not be entered into lightly; beliefs and doubts are not easy; (b) positions on most matters are best taken provisionally, subject to revision; and (c) when it comes to belief, there are no orthodoxies. Because such an approach may challenge one's current beliefs, it is essential to include a values dimension in our conception of critical inquiry.

The values dimension is one of an ethical commitment to intellectual due process. Certain intellectual traits or habits of mind such as intellectual humility, intellectual empathy, intellectual perseverance, and fair-mindedness are central to the values dimension of critical inquiry. Just as a principled juror strives to evaluate the evidence before her in as impartial and full manner as possible, so does the principled critical thinker display dispassionate judgment when it comes to evaluating others' and her own beliefs. Adhering to the values dimension demands cultivation of traits or dispositions such as integrity, tolerance for uncertainty, being willing to admit one's mistakes, to change one's mind, refusing to dismiss meritorious ideas that may nevertheless be repugnant, and many others. I used this multidimensional approach throughout my course, in readings, modeling of my own behavior and attitude, and as an integral objective and part of most of my assignments. This comprehensive application may be one of the reasons why I saw significant statistical change along many of the outcome measures I used.

### **Course objectives and content**

The focus of the course revolved around the nature of our beliefs, especially as they relate to an understanding of human behavior and thought processes. We addressed questions such as, How do we arrive at our beliefs? How do we maintain them? How do we come to believe things that are not so (or that are so, or that we do not know)? How do we know? In essence, the focus was on the cultivation of a degree of healthy skepticism regarding various truth claims made about aspects of human behavior. In many respects, the course emphasized questions of epistemology, or, how can we know what we claim to know about why people behave and think as they do? We focused heavily, at times, on explorations of the many ways in which thinking goes awry. The course was predicated on the idea that many of the beliefs we hold, especially about human behavior, are more akin to haphazardly constructed, common sense hypotheses, than to well-reasoned, coherent, justifiable positions. To that end, I wanted students to discover several ways in which superstitions, erroneous decisions, and weird beliefs are a result of common cognitive processes invoked by attempts to cope with the complexity and uncertainties of life.

Many of the early readings in the course set the stage for our thinking about beliefs about human behavior. In keeping with the worldview and values dimensions of critical inquiry, many of the course readings were selected to encourage conversations about what are beliefs, what is

skepticism, and how our thinking about others and our own behavior is subject to distortion and error. Over half of the readings, discussions, and activities focused on various ways in which everyone's thinking, motivations, and emotions tend to muddle our formulation and/or maintenance of beliefs of any kind, but especially those about others' actions and beliefs as well as our own behaviors and thought processes. For instance, many of these readings highlighted various biases and mental heuristics, which while often adaptive, many times lead to the creation and maintenance of questionable beliefs, or at least beliefs based on tenuous grounds. Several readings argued that our brains are in essence, belief-generating machines, evolved not to assure truth, logic, and reason, but to enhance our ability to survive. Therefore, beliefs are strongly resistant to change. Introducing students to the nature of beliefs and doubts in this way, I believed, would lessen tendencies to be overly reactive, dismissive, or otherwise apprehensive about the challenges all of our beliefs may undergo during the term. Furthermore, I believed this focus on common biases, as arising from the normal workings of the human mind, vividly illustrated the worldview dimension of critical thinking by highlighting the idea that things are not always what they appear. Likewise, because of these many biases in our thinking, the importance of having an ethical commitment to grant all ideas intellectual due process (i.e., the values dimension) also was at the forefront of our readings and discussions.

After some preliminary readings on skepticism, science, and the nature of beliefs, many of the initial readings focused primarily on areas of pseudoscience (e.g., psychic phenomena, astrology, near-death experiences, etc...). However, as argued by Gabennesh, focusing our attention too narrowly on the sphere of pseudoscience overlooks the primary challenge to any critical thinker, which is posed not by "weird things" but by insidiously mundane ones. Thus, the course also included a variety of "ordinary topics" such as: Is spanking an effective means of teaching proper behavior to your children? Are people right-brained or left-brained and what does that mean? Are there different "learning styles?"; Are polygraphs effective at detecting lies?"; Are projective personality tests (e.g., Rorschach) effective? Are criminal "profilers" accurate? Does excessive sugar intake induce hyperactivity? Can people formulate entirely false memories of tragic events? We also discussed a variety of other claims about human behavior, about psychological practices, and about religious belief and doubt. The focus of our thinking was always on how to weigh evidence for the claims and how people, including ourselves, arrive at and maintain these beliefs. I also wanted students to come to value and gain



an appreciation of a scientific approach to considerations of human behavior. While I did not presume that critical thinking is coterminous with good scientific thinking, I did begin with the assumption that principles of scientific thought, expanded and generalized into the far reaches of everyday life may be a good starting point for thinking about “why people believe weird (and mundane) things.”

To best situate the course assignments in context, I have listed the objectives of the course as stated in the syllabus below. Overall, I designed the course to offer participants opportunities to develop and apply some of the aforementioned skills, worldviews, dispositions, and values. Specifically, I wanted students to be able to:

- critically evaluate a variety of claims made about human behavior
- understand some of the major characteristics of science and how they can be used as a tool for assessing many everyday, ordinary and extraordinary claims
- understand, recognize, and evaluate major characteristics of pseudoscience and pseudoscientific thinking
- understand and practice identifying in their own and others’ thinking several cognitive, social, and motivational heuristics and biases that are the result of normal cognitive processes, but which also contribute to the formulation and maintenance of “weird” and “ordinary” beliefs
- avoid a simplistic deference to “privileged” viewpoints (scientific, religious, etc...) without ample, reasonable attempts at justification
- appreciate how to critically evaluate our own beliefs, as well as other thinkers’ arguments and claims about human behavior
- engage in intellectual “due process” of any ideas or beliefs
- understand the values and important habits of mind associated with critical thinking and a liberal education (e.g., intellectual perseverance, intellectual humility, fair-mindedness, intellectual autonomy, willingness to alter one’s views in the face of evidence, the desire, as difficult as it may be, to overcome the tendency to rely on what we initially believe without subjecting our ideas to scrutiny, etc...)
- value and appreciate ambiguity and uncertainty
- understand and value the importance of approaching beliefs and doubts with a healthy degree of skepticism

### **An Overview of a Selection of Course Assignments**

I taught two sections of a course: “PY206: “Why people Believe Weird Things.” One section was a sophomore and up section and the other was for first-year students. Both sections were 200-level courses. Below I describe several of the assignments and a few of the class activities.

### **On-line “discussion posts” or QQTPs (Quotations, Questions, and Talking Points)**

For class meetings, students submitted on the course Blackboard discussion area a set of discussion springboards or starters (i.e., ideas, reflections, questions, comparisons/contrasts, applications, etc...). Using a method developed by Conner-Green (2005), I asked that students attempt to include a quotation from the reading(s), especially ones they found compelling or controversial; at least two questions prompted by the day’s readings; and at least three ideas based on the readings that could be used as “talking points” during class discussions. The QQTPs (quotations, questions, and talking points) were graded and I expected them to be far more than mere summaries of the readings or questions that could be readily answered based on the reading alone. Students were encouraged within their discussion posts to: (a) address critical features of the authors’ ideas; (b) address the relationships between different readings (within or between class meetings); (c) explain the implications of the readings for real world issues or other issues in psychology; (d) apply concepts from the readings to new examples found in the media, literature, or to personal experiences; (e) propose novel ideas or insights; (f) engage in frank, thoughtful articulation and justification in writing about their and others’ beliefs about any given topic. The objective of this assignment was to encourage students to think about, organize, and focus their ideas about the readings prior to class discussions. I also thought it could be a relatively non-threatening vehicle for students to express their beliefs and ideas. I strongly encouraged students to read their classmates’ posts prior to the next class meeting and to utilize the discussion board to engage in on-line dialogue with each other. Finally, I also thought that the writing of the QQTPs would provide an opportunity for informal writing, which may serve as practice for their writing for larger class assignments.

After the first week or two of class, I provided every student with detailed feedback and constructive criticism on their discussion springboard contributions (QQTPs), as well as their in-class contributions. This feedback seemed to be appreciated by my students and seemed to raise the level of discourse in the QQTPs and in class discussions.

In end of the term evaluations, students provided constructive feedback on each assignment, including the QQTP assignment. (Summary assessment data is available upon request). The QQTP assignment appeared to be well received in both numerical and narrative evaluations. Common themes in the narrative evaluations regarding the assignment fell within the categories of: “Really helped me prepare for class”/“Helped me think more carefully about

the readings”/”Helped me think more clearly about my own thinking on topic X” / “Was valuable for helping me articulate my positions or beliefs.”

Although I think the QQTPs (on-line entries) were effective at helping students grapple with the readings and more importantly, inculcating in them the habit of subjecting their beliefs to scrutiny (and the quantitative assessment appears to support my thinking), in hindsight, I think having students make the posts anonymously may have offered them more freedom of expression. This in turn may have moved us even closer to meeting the goals of the course.

### **Class Discussions**

Class discussions were an especially important aspect of the day-to-day operation of the class. In many ways, I designed most other class assignments and activities as a means of enriching classroom interactions. During the first few weeks of the course, discussions were good, but sometimes grew stagnant. I did a number of things to encourage frank, open discussion. At least implicitly, I think one of the most effective strategies I used was simply modeling this behavior for students. They saw how I responded to readings and to others with whom I disagreed, and seemed quickly to become skilled at how to disagree with others in an agreeable manner. After this modeling, students got to know one another better and realized that I was there to guide them not to judge their beliefs. Soon discussions began to blossom. I was often amazed at the quality of comments and thoughtful, open dialogue among students. Another tact I often took was to assume the role of “Devil’s Advocate.” For example, I would discuss an idea from multiple angles and attempted to do so with equal passion. Both during class and in the end of the term narrative evaluations, students often commented on how they appreciated and valued this approach. Indeed, many students began using this approach during class discussions.

I employed several “standard” techniques to facilitate discussions. For example, in “think-pair-share” a student or I posed a thought-provoking question (not a question with a straightforward “answer”) to which students expressed their thoughts about the question by writing for several minutes. They next shared their ideas with another student, and finally discussed their thoughts about the question with the class. One twist I added to this activity was that I sometimes posted a “Question of the Day” to which students would “think-pair-share” and discuss only briefly. Later in the term, I would pose the same question and students would again

note their thoughts. During the last week of the term I brought these initial responses back to students and they all seemed to enjoy and learn from seeing the changes in their own perspective (and the changes in their writing ability).

To facilitate discussion and to offer a glimpse into the day's class, I often utilized "3-minute writes" near the end of class. For this informal writing assignment, students were to jot down briefly their reflections on (a) the main point of the day's discussions/activities; (b) the "muddiest" point for them regarding the day's discussion or reading material; (c) any additional insights or thoughts about the class meeting that day. The writes were not intended as "free writes" wherein students generate quick initial thoughts. They were intended to be thoughtful, focused writing by students, reflecting their current understandings, thoughts, and ideas. I reviewed the cards before each subsequent class meeting, which provided me with a snapshot of how well students grasped the main idea of the readings and what they took away from the discussion. This allowed me to begin subsequent class meetings by helping to clear up confusing points or to help students articulate what a class discussion might mean for the bigger picture.

Another approach I took to encourage discussion and the application of the skills we were learning was to show students that they should critically evaluate everything they read, including college textbooks. I collected a number of passages from textbooks that many of the students had used or were currently using in other courses (e.g., Intro to Psychology or Intro to Sociology texts) or from our own course readings and asked students to apply the skills they were learning to the author's arguments. This activity coincided well with the worldviews or "skeptical" dimension of critical thinking. By simply reflecting on their own knowledge of a given topic, students were soon able to discern when an author had a particular agenda in her or his writing. The point of the activity was for students to discover that all writings, which convey author's ideas, beliefs, worldview, etc..., are subject to scrutiny, just as is their own.

Below I describe some of the other activities and strategies I used in the course to facilitate the goal of getting us closer to critically but respectfully scrutinizing our own beliefs as well as those of others.

## **Believing & Doubting Assignments**

"Everyone agrees in theory that we can't judge a new idea or point of view unless we enter into it and try it out, but the practice itself is rare." -*Peter Elbow*

I used a derivative of Peter Elbow's (1973, 2008) "doubting and believing game" to create a framework for thinking about beliefs. The procedure begins by asking students to read an article and to believe everything the author says, even if they initially disagree. They are to accept the author's reasoning and work to understand the main points. Students are asked to do everything they can to find the logic, strengths, and "truth" within the writer's argument(s). They are to explain these main points and arguments in a brief written response (a few paragraphs, unless the article demands more space). Next, students are instructed to doubt everything. Question every obvious assumption and dig for hidden ones. Persist in looking for pitfalls, biases, and irrationalities in the author's argument(s). Explain this aspect of the reading in a few paragraphs. Finally, they were to write their personal take (beliefs, ideas) on the reading after believing, doubting, and thinking about the arguments and issues. Many comments in narrative evaluations extolled the assignment for "helping me think through my position on a topic and "helping me to better grasp and articulate a point of view with which I initially disagreed" and "few assignments had more impact on helping me change my thinking on a topic than the believing & doubting papers and discussions." Overall, this assignment seemed to be one of the more successful in meeting course objectives.

## **Classroom Demonstrations – "intuitive physics"**

It was especially important to me that we not only read about a variety of cognitive and social biases, but that students experience them first-hand in their own thinking. Therefore, I engaged students in activities and demonstrations that vividly illustrated these biases and heuristics in their own thinking. These many demonstrations turned out to be an important, valuable contribution toward getting students to leave behind a dismissive, "that happens to other people, but not to me" style of thinking. I did many of these early in the term in an effort to dampen the urge for students to dismiss any particular belief as "stupid" or as being held only by people quite different from themselves. Some of the illustrations I used included the Barnum effect, confirmation bias, illusory correlation, psychic demonstrations, demonstrations of the nature of coincidence and probability (and our propensity for imbuing coincidence with

meaning), representative heuristic, intuitive physics, and many more. I took great care to assure students that falling prey to these biases is “normal” and has nothing to do with their intelligence, academic ability, personality, etc.... These heuristics are natural by-products of the processes of an otherwise effective mind.

Most often I attempted to have students discern the point of a demonstration, rather than explaining it to them directly. Fortunately, they often were able to articulate the underlying point of the demonstrations. For example, early in the course I did a demonstration of “intuitive physics” wherein I placed a ball in a spiraled, descending maze-like apparatus and asked students to draw an arrow to predict the trajectory of the ball once it had launched out of the maze. (I also used several other similar demos). Virtually no one correctly predicted the direction of movement of any of the objects I used in any of the “intuitive physics” demonstrations. I said nothing about why I was doing this demonstration and on the surface; it outwardly had nothing to do with the readings. After asking students why they could not predict the motion of the objects, and with some further probing, eventually a student commented to the effect, “We’ve all had tons of experience with falling and flying objects throughout our lives and yet we still were wrong about the behavior of the objects.” Another student excitedly chimed in, “Yes – just like we’ve discussed, we’ve also all had a lot of experience with human behavior – you know seeing others and ourselves behave and think... and this experience has led us to formulate almost intuitively many erroneous ideas about human behavior, similar to our intuitive ideas about the objects!” Based on other comments, the students had gotten the point that we all have “intuitive theories” about human behavior, in part, because we feel that we have ample experience with human behavior and we believe our personal experience in such matters is a good guide to reality. Based on other similar demonstrations and readings, I think students discovered how poor or unreliable one’s personal experience is as a guide to reality about forming beliefs about human behavior. Comments in narrative evaluations lauded the use of these demonstrations. Students thought they were quite effective at illustrating the power of these illusions in thinking.

I attempted a number of different pedagogical approaches in order to engage students with the material. Interestingly, a common theme in end of the term narrative evaluations was how much students appreciated, valued and learned from the variety of classroom approaches. Many commented that they were motivated, at least in part, to come to every class because they never knew what might happen.

## **Final Project**

For a final project, students in two person teams researched a belief (among a large set of options), presented on their topic, and wrote individual papers on their topic. The primary criteria for the project was that it had to include both proponents and skeptics arguments and that the students use what Schick & Vaughn (2005) term the “Criteria of Adequacy” to evaluate the claims. In general, students reported enjoying the process of researching one topic in more depth and thought the paper offered them an opportunity to utilize many of the skills and habits offered by the course.

I utilized a peer review process on one of the reading response papers and on the final project paper. For example, using a double-blind procedure, students reviewed two of their peers final project polished drafts. Comments in narrative evaluations revealed that students found this an excellent learning experience, as it was instructive both to read peers comments on their papers and to practice constructive criticism of others’ work.

## **Conclusions and Course Assessment**

Overall, it appears that the Teagle course, PY206 - *Why people Believe Weird Things*, may have been influential in meeting various course objectives as denoted by increases in participants tolerance of ambiguity, desire for complex cognitive activities (NFC scale), and increases in the tendency to appreciate responsible doubting and the ability to change one’s beliefs, and decreases in beliefs (or increases in doubt) about various paranormal and pseudoscientific phenomena (PBS scale) and common myths about human behavior and thought processes. (Summary analyses are available upon request). Narrative comments from students also corroborate this general assertion. Although virtually all courses, including the comparison courses, apparently resulted in similar changes in participants’ responses on most of the scales, it is noteworthy that the largest changes typically occurred for those in the “Weird Things” courses. This was especially the case for reductions in paranormal beliefs and beliefs about common myths of human behavior. This may have been the case, in part, because “Weird Things” focused more explicitly on those areas, relative to the comparison courses. Nevertheless, changes in measures of tolerance of ambiguity, need for cognition, and other questions posed by Teagle participants regarding doubt, disagreement, change of beliefs as a

virtue, etc... were also statistically greater, for the most part, for those in “Weird Things” relative to controls.

I am encouraged that these changes may be due, at least in part, to the multidimensional approach to critical thinking promoted within the course. Additional, more sophisticated analyses are still underway, but initial analyses reveal that a host of potential explanatory variables (e.g., GPA; SAT/ACT scores; High school rank; proposed major; year in college, number of psychology and other science courses taken, etc...) do not account for the variance in the difference scores. Likewise, the plausible hypothesis that changes may have been the result of year in college or number of psychology courses taken effectively is ruled out by comparisons between the PY206 classes and the upper-level classes in research methods(304) and cognitive psychology (407). If time in college or number or level of psychology courses taken explained the difference scores, students in PY407 and PY304 should have had larger differences scores relative to those in PY206, and that was not the case. On perhaps the other side of this coin, one potential explanation for the differences in pre-and-post test scores among PY206 students and others is that because they had less exposure to psychology courses than those in PY304 and PY407, there was more room for change and those changes were the result of nothing more than having an additional psychology course in their experience. However, a number of analyses showed that either the differences at pre-test between those in PY206 and those in upper level course were not significantly different and more advanced analyses clearly revealed that even after “partialing-out” (taking into consideration, numerically) the number of psychology and science courses, the number of college courses, and the year in college, the differences for many of the measures for those in PY206 still emerge as statistically significant. Based on responses to the Teagle post-test questions, it appears that the course was successful in raising questions of belief and doubt. Students took advantage of the opportunities to scrutinize their beliefs about the topics under consideration. Finally, perhaps another indication of the success of the course came in the form of a conversation that began early during a class meeting. Several students in conversation with one another spontaneously commented how they thought the class should be mandatory for general education. Likewise, over 55% percent of the narrative evaluations suggested, with no prompting, that the course was so valuable to them that they felt it should be required for psychology majors or for general education.



In closing, it appears that many of the pedagogical strategies utilized within my “Weird Things” course were successful in facilitating an open, fruitful dialogue in the college classroom about belief and doubt; about critical self-reflection and intellectual honesty. What I most desired for the course was to nurture in students the lifelong intellectual habits and skills for thinking about their own thinking when it comes to what they believe or do not believe. Ultimately, it seems that responsible believing and doubting demands an ability and unwavering willingness to think carefully and reflectively about our own thinking. The realization that belief construction and reconstruction is best an unending, ongoing *process*, rather than a final destination, is the beginning of the reflective, Socratic dialogue of the examined life.

### References

- Connor-Greene, P. A. (2005). Fostering meaningful classroom discussion: Student-generated questions, quotations, and talking points. *Teaching of Psychology, 32*(3), 173-175.
- Elbow, P. (1973). *Writing without teachers*. Oxford University Press.
- Elbow, P. (2008). In *The selected works of Peter Elbow: The believing game: Methodological believing*. Available at: [http://works.bepress.com/peter\\_elbow/20](http://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/20)
- Gabennesch, H. (March/April, 2006). Critical thinking: What is it good for? (In fact, what is it?). *Skeptical Inquirer, 30*(2), 36-41.

# **The Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt in Principles of Microeconomics**

John Kamiru

## **Introduction**

This course attempted to address issues of belief and doubt as they relate to economics and business through a utilitarianism approach. This approach looks at individual actions, business policies, and government policies in terms of benefits and costs. Since nothing is freely given or received, it is important to weigh the consequences of each action. There is also an underlying criterion that should be employed with each action that is moral conduct (Richard Brandt, 1959 and Dan Brack, 1982). Utilitarianism helps explain why cheating and lying, for example, is morally wrong and why the moral benefits of telling the truth and honoring contractual obligations is important.

Taylor (1975) states that there are two types of utilitarianism, one called “act” or “unrestricted” utilitarianism and the other “rule” or “restricted” utilitarianism. Accordingly, “act” or “unrestricted” utilitarianism seeks to find the consequences of a particular act in order to know whether it is right or wrong. On the other hand, “rule” or “restricted” utilitarianism takes the position that an act is right if it conforms to valid rule of conduct and wrong if it violates the stated rule. Hence, Taylor argues, the principle of utility is the ultimate test of the rightness or wrongness of human conduct. It is these views and their influence in economics and business that help explain the role of belief and doubt. Hence, it is from this background that the course approached the topic of belief and doubt.

## **Course Description**

Microeconomics is a branch of economics that provides a broad understanding of how the behaviors of individual economic units (consumers, producers, etc.) are influenced by events such as

changes in prices, incomes, interest rates, new government regulations, political events, natural factors, etc. Included is the awareness that value and belief system provides a different platform of economic and business ethics that tend to influence economic choices and utility maximization. Whether it is utilitarianism, rights and society expectations, or justice and fairness there is a need to evaluate economic human behavior broadly to ascertain that belief systems are not marginalized. A well-rounded student is one who is offered a platform where his or her moral or religious convictions are allowed to be expressed and encouraged. Hence, in order for the students to understand the changing economic environment, especially in the global environment, a better knowledge of different religious and cultural norms and how those norms shape individual, business and society choices is important.

Further, in an attempt to strengthen a student's learning process, an accurate and objective thinking and analysis of different issues was encouraged. Specifically, students were encouraged to avoid what McConnell and Brue (2008) calls "pitfalls to sound reasoning" as applied to an economic perspective. For example, biases may tend to cloud one's thinking and result in a distorted analysis. Another area that tends to cloud students' reasoning and objectivity is correlation versus causation fallacy. In addressing these issues, the goal was to help students develop critical thinking skills and analysis.

## **Methodology**

The primary method of course delivery was lecture and interactive discussion through active student participation, case analysis and group projects. The lectures were devoted to the coverage of the textbook chapters and supplemental readings, with primary emphasis on basic economic principles and their relevance to individual as well as organizational behavior including business ethics.

To enhance their learning, the students were expected to comply with their reading assignments in order to participate in class discussions, case studies, and group project analysis. Also, to ensure that

the students understood the concepts and illustration as the course unfolded chapter after chapter, they were assigned questions whose answers were discussed in class. I required homework assignments that relied on textbook reading and web research for answers to specific concept questions and illustrations. These assignments helped students develop the ability to think logically, as well as use quantitative analysis in order to explain the behaviors of individual units engaged in production, exchange, and consumption of goods and services in an environment of shifting moral values and questionable business ethics.

The role of individual behaviors and ethics as it relates to business organization cannot be taken lightly. Taylor (1975) defines ethics as philosophical inquiry into the nature and grounds of morality. He refers to morality as moral judgments, standards, and rules of conduct. He points out that moral judgments include both actual and ideal judgments. Further, Velasquez (2006) defines business ethics as a specialized study of moral right and wrong. Here, according to Velasquez, the focus is on moral standards as they apply to business institutions and organizations. However, it is important to note that unethical behavior by major business organizations have raised questions on the viability of business ethics as practiced in the business world. Some have argued that business and ethics are mutually exclusive. In other words, business ethics is really an oxymoron (Ghillyer 2008). However, others argue that unethical behavior by organizations such as Enron, Tyco, and Worldcom etc. do not invalidate the importance of the code of ethics in business.

### **Pre-Test**

In an attempt to gauge student's perception on belief and doubt a pre-test questionnaire was administered with eight questions for each of the two fall semester classes. However, for the spring semester, the pre-test had thirteen questions. The response affirmed that agreement with everyone in a classroom setting was not a necessary condition for effective learning. Further, any disagreement about

a fundamental belief or doubt should not be a conversation stopper. There was also a strong inclination that a professor's personal beliefs should be part of classroom discussion.

Also students' beliefs should be part of the classroom discussion and should be taken seriously but not necessarily accepted. Further, the view that they should doubt their beliefs is an act of intellectual courage and not necessarily a reflection of one's weakness. The stated views were expressed by a majority of students with a mean of around 20 and a standard deviation of around 8.

The spring semester classes reflected very similar views with a mean of around 15 and a standard deviation of around 7. For the additional questions in the spring semester, the questionnaire sought to establish the most significant source of students' beliefs and doubt. There was a strong indication that family roots and their religious faith had a strong influence. Of less importance in shaping their beliefs were their peers and friends. There was a strong agreement on this view with a mean of around 15 and standard deviation of about 4.

After administering the questionnaire the class focused on discussing several cases one of which is presented below:

**Case 1 Analysis: A Legal Market for Human Organs** (McConnell and Brue, 2008)

In this section the course attempts to address belief and doubt as it relates to human organ transplant. The basic question is whether the market system offers a lasting solution on shortages of human organs for transplant. Further, the course sought to address the challenges of belief and doubt when an individual is confronted by specific issues of organ transplant.

Presently, there is no legal market for human organs. However, underground (black) market for human organs is prevalent domestically and internationally (McConnell and Brue 2008). Usually the poor in the third world are enticed to sell their organs such as kidneys for a price. In other instances, a forced extraction of such organs is carried out to unsuspecting or unwilling donors.

In the current state of health care industry, it is a common practice in modern medicine to transplant kidneys, lungs, heart, livers, eye corneas, pancreases etc (New York Organ Donor Network). However, organ transplants have moral and ethical ramifications to many who confront this choice of life and death. Some people's religious beliefs tend to influence their views on organ transplants and are unwilling to participate as donors. Others are uncomfortable with the whole notion of organ transplant and discussion of death of their loved ones in terms of donating their body parts before their demise.

The difficult nature of this issue tends to limit the available organs for transplants. Some of the difficulties are rooted in people's beliefs and doubt about the whole idea of organ transplant. Hence there are more people in need of transplant than the number of voluntary donors. These shortages of donated organs find many people on a waiting list. Unfortunately, many die before organs are available for transplant. Interestingly, although there is a great effort to encourage organ donations especially on one's drivers license, not many take advantage of this opportunity. McConnell and Brue (2008) notes there are "an estimated 4000 deaths in the United States each year awaiting organ transplant." The dilemma then is how to deal with ideals of organ transplant as well as the unethical practices that prevail in the organ donor industry. Specifically, without a legal market for human organs, an underground organ market prevails where the well off pay for organs from third world countries.

The proponent for a legal market argues that such a market might reduce the present shortage and undercut the underground market. In the process, lives would be saved by shortening the waiting period of organ transplant as a significant number of patients die waiting for transplant. And, since the price for donated organs currently is in effect zero, the quantity demanded for transplant exceeds the quantity supplied. Hence, the introduction of such a market would in effect offer an incentive to donors

whereby they would receive a monetary compensation for their organs. Here then is the dilemma, should we engage in selling human organs? Do a person's religious beliefs or culture influence their perspective in this type of economic phenomenon? The students were expected to address this issue from economic theory as well as from ethical and religious belief.

A market for human organs is envisioned working in this format: First, an individual specify his /her willingness to sell one or more usable human organ either being a live, upon death or near death. This is implemented by entering into a legal contract. Having a legal contract ensures that the parties wishes will be honored. Second, the donor specifies where the money for the sale of the organs would be paid. This may include ones family, a church, educational institutions, charity etc. It could also be used to pay off a portion of medical expenses incurred by the individual.

Third, like any other market where there is a demand for a product, firms would emerge to participate in this market. They will purchase organs and resell them at the prevailing market prices for profit. The market would function like any other market. The higher the price the more people (suppliers) will be inclined to participate and in the process individuals needing the transplant will benefit. In theoretical sense, the effect is to reduce the number of individuals on the waiting list as well as the length of time on the waiting list (McConnell and Brue 2008).

In assessing such a market, the students were encouraged to offer their views on the nature of such a market in light of their beliefs and economic theory discussed in class. The issue again is whether a market solution is a sufficient condition for the prevailing problems on organ donation and therefore, should override ones belief about such personal issue. Also, the students were to look at the challenges presented by organ donation on their religious belief and if they are content by the status quo where shortages and underground market prevail.

On the other hand, opponents of the market-based solutions contend that the idea of instituting a

market for human organs is debasing, and flies in the face of human decency. Their position is that a shortage for human organs cannot be addressed through the market system. Several issues are raised in regards to marketing organs in light of religious beliefs. One, selling human organs as commodities commercializes human beings and diminishes the sacred nature of human life. Further, as a society, selling and buying human organs as products in a regular market should not be entertained as it is unethical. Two, the market as portrayed will only make organs available to those persons that have the means to pay or have health insurance. Hence the poor and uninsured will be left out. Being unable to pay is as worse in this case as the prevailing shortages. Lastly, a market for body organs would significantly increase the cost of health-care (McConnell and Brue 2008). In other words, by offering organs to the highest bidder, the patients would be forced to pay market determined prices. This will translate into higher medical care cost that will be out of reach to many in need of transplant.

**Illustrated Examples: Virginian Pilot Newspaper, April 7, 08. In this discussion, three articles are cited. The examples here only applied to the spring semester class.**

### **1. Out Of Tragedy a Gift for Others**

This article discusses the choice Ms. Jacqueline Jackson made after her husband was shot and killed May 2007. "I have to do what I can do to go on with my life and honor his memory". She said.

### **2. New life From a Stranger- A Recipient Story**

This article discusses how Mr. Joe Leake, received a liver transplant. "It was a miracle- to be honest with you. I had been on the donors list all of two days. The doctor gave me 12 hours to live".

### **3. Legacy of Life from Organ Donors. April 8, 2008**

This article is an editorial in reference to the above two articles.

The students were divided into two groups (categories). The first group was to review and discuss the proponent's moral argument and beliefs in light of the struggles that people face with such issues. Why do they see a market for organ transplant as the best alternative? The second group took the



opposing view that a legal market for human organs was unacceptable prescription for an issue that does not call for a market solution. In other words, it is a moral and ethical issue that transcends the market and as such it is unthinkable to trade human organs.

They discussed their own beliefs and doubts that are confronted in such situation. Also, faced with similar situation, they addressed choices they were bound to make. They also dealt with the issue of a market solution and whether it offers the best alternative as far as human organs are concerned given the ethical and moral issues raised. The discussion centered on the merit and demerit of legal market for human organs.

During this section of the course, the students were asked to address their moral convictions including their religious beliefs and doubts. Many voiced the extent to which these religious beliefs have shaped their position on this issue. Even if they were organ donors or not organ donors, I tried to gauge the extent to which this examination may have influenced their views or beliefs one way or the other. Lastly, the students were asked to assess what major issues have challenged their belief or created doubt in their belief.

### **Underground (Black) Market for Human Organs**

The other issue discussed centered on the ethical and morality of accepting organs from underground (black) market. For example, if they knew an individual sold his/her organ in a part of third world country such as Pakistan or Philippines as a means of making money, would that change their belief or create more doubt on the viability of organ donation? Goyal et al. (2002), notes that a kidney in India which has the largest black market in the world sells on an average of a little over \$1,000. In this case, the discussion seemed to challenge students' beliefs and also raise some doubt on their strongly held views in support or opposition to organ donation. A significant number of students believed that accepting organs from such a source was unethical and went contrary to their belief

system. In other words, they would be hard pressed to accept such organs. Their position was also reinforced by the knowledge that some of these so-called donors were postoperatively denied their meager compensation. However, some felt that since it was not their fault, they would accept such organs although it was a violation of their beliefs, and created some doubt. In other words, they were willing to change their beliefs in such a special situation of life and death although they knew they were accepting stolen organs. Hence, in such a case, there is a serious crisis of belief and doubt on which ever choice is made.

Of interest, there was a small group of students who had reservations about organ donation and were also suspicious of donor organizations. They tend to hold the view that in case of medical emergency, doctors might not exercise all the necessary measures to save them. Instead they may prefer to let them die so as to harvest organs from them. The sentiment seems to be that if it is very expensive to try to save an individual, why not let him die and use his or her organs to save several individuals. There was, however, no supportive evidence for that argument although an isolated case was cited in New York Times of a surgeon accused of speeding a death to get organs (Jesse Mckinley 02-27-2008).

In summary, there was strong sentiment that one's religious belief on market for human organ should not be compromised. Also, the choice to change one's belief or doubt does not in anyway constitute any weakness but an opportunity to be open to divergent views.

### **Post-Test**

A post-test was administered at the end of the course. The average size of the two classes for the fall semester was 35 while the other two for the spring semester was 30. There was a strong agreement that the course did raise big questions about belief and doubt. Specifically, the influence that religious beliefs has on business ethics as presently practiced in the business world is significant. For the fall

semester classes, the mean was around 15 with a standard deviation of about 8. For the spring classes the mean was 14 with a standard deviation of around 6. Further, for both semesters there was a strong appreciation of ethics in business and a person's religious belief and doubt. The students felt that more discussion on belief and doubt is necessary to reinforce their learning process.

There was also an indication that the decline in ethics has a generational twist to it. In that students perceive their parents' generation to be more moral than their generation. The decline in morals as they argued is due to changing values in modern society. In other words, what was not acceptable in their parents' generation is readily acceptable today.

### **Conclusion**

A legal market for human organs or the lack thereof gave students an opportunity to reflect on their belief and doubt as it relates to human organ transplant and the business ethics of such a market. There was an understanding that belief and doubt has an integral role to play in the learning process. The sense of physical and financial exploitation of the poor in the third world challenged the students' belief and raised doubt on the merits of participating in such a market. On the other hand, the role of business ethics as an integral part of individual actions and business policy decisions was indispensable. In essence, the pedagogy of belief and doubt in the Principles of Microeconomics enabled students to integrate their beliefs and doubt in the learning process.

### **References**

- Brandt, Richard. Ethical Theory, Englewood Cliffs, NJ. : Prentice- Hall, 1959, p.386.
- Brock, Dan W. "Utilitarianism", in Tom Regan and Donald Van DeVeer, eds., And Justice for All, Totowa, N.J. Rowan and Littlefield, 1982, pp. 217- 240.
- Ghillyer, Andrew. Business Ethics: A real World Approach, New York, McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2008.
- Goyal et al., Economic and Health Consequences of Selling a Kidney in India, JAMA- Abstract: October 2, 2002, 288 (13): 1589.  
(<http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/288/13/1589>)
- Inside 'Kidneyville': Rani's Story

[http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/news/2007/05/india\\_transplants\\_rani](http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/news/2007/05/india_transplants_rani))

Jesse Mckinley (2008-02-27). Surgeon Accused of Speeding a Death to Get Organs – New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/27/us/27transplant.html>). The New York Times Company.

McConnell, Campbell R. & Stanley L Brue. Economics, Principles, Problems, and Policies. 17<sup>th</sup> Edition, New York, N.Y.: McGraw Hill/Irwin, 2008.

New York Organ Donor Network, Which Organs Can Be Donated for Transplantation? ([http://www.nyodn.org/transplant/organ\\_which.html](http://www.nyodn.org/transplant/organ_which.html)).

Taylor, Paul W. Principles of Ethics: An introduction, Encino California and Belmont California, Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1975.

Velasquez, Manuel G. Business Ethics: Concepts and Cases, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006.

## **Uncovering Barriers of Belief through Personal Responses to Big Questions**

Ori Belkind

### Objectives

As I understand it, one of the objectives of the project is to search for effective pedagogical tools that would increase students' learning in a pluralistic class environment. An instructor may face important challenges when he or she encounters what I call "barriers of belief." These are pedagogical barriers one faces when teaching in a classroom where students have a diverse, and often clashing, worldviews. One barrier of belief exists between the instructor and the student. The student and the instructor may come from different backgrounds, take for granted different sets of values, and appreciate knowledge for different reasons. One of the challenges is, therefore, to be able to teach across barriers of beliefs without disabusing the authority of the instructor, but also without pandering to the student or diminishing the significance of one's fundamental beliefs. Another barrier of belief exists between students, as certain worldviews may be considered to be more dominant or acceptable than others, and certain identities may be felt as marginalized. In this particular class, wherein I taught Modern Western Philosophy, it was obvious that barriers of beliefs are likely to be significant. Most of the philosophers we discussed had a well-developed religious philosophy, a particular conception of God, and a distinct approach to science. Thus the first objective was to find more information about the students' worldviews, how they approach the material, what they take to be significant, etc. But, another part of the objective was to be able to convey my own beliefs without intimidating them into thinking that I don't tolerate or that I'm dismissive of their fundamental beliefs. Then, it was hoped, I would be able to take these barriers of belief into account and find new ways of presenting and analyzing the material that are sensitive to these barriers.

Another objective was to go beyond simply tapping into students' minds and discovering what they actually think. The hope was to be able to inculcate in the students the practice of articulating one's beliefs and then subjecting them to scrutiny. Presumably, the more important goal we have as educators is to produce graduates who are able to express their fundamental beliefs, and then provide relevant justification. A truly educated individual is able to subject his or her fundamental beliefs to close scrutiny. However, it has become the practice of college education to leave personal views outside the classroom and to merely teach skills in "critical

thinking.” According to this approach, beliefs are not personal. Given a particular view, it does not matter which, we teach our students that there are good reasons one can give for it or against it. But if topics are presented as free-floating “neutral” ideas, and their examination as an objective exercise in providing reasons and finding weaknesses, will students learn to apply such critical scrutiny to their own views? A true education teaches students to take risks and put their cherished views on the line. Such an education encourages students to subject their beliefs to doubt and examination. The crucial thing is that we need to cease treating beliefs as if they stand apart from the person, an abstract target to be shot at with a pellet gun. Rather, we should think of those beliefs that one is emotionally invested in - a belief that matters, that is, such a belief that if were false its holder would lose his or her bearings to some extent. Thus, another objective was to find a mechanism in which students learn to articulate their *personal* views, and to give the students safe opportunities to truly examine and scrutinize them. This objective is more important than the first objective, but also more elusive.

Teaching Modern Western Philosophy seems like a good context to test pedagogical tools that are sensitive to barriers of belief and encourage the examination of fundamental beliefs. Descartes’ and Hume’s skepticism introduces a serious challenge to students’ trust in the knowledge they received from their teachers. Spinoza’s metaphysics challenges their metaphysical intuitions about the nature of God and the world, and Leibniz’s theology puts their faith to the test, in the case that they do believe in a perfect God. But for the philosophical arguments to have purchase on students’ minds, they have to be taken off the page and brought into students’ lives. Thus, I wanted to introduce direct questions related to the arguments studied; nevertheless, I did not want to evade the momentous significance of posing these questions to oneself. So, for example, after studying Descartes’ arguments for dualism between mind and body, I posed the question “Do I have a soul?” to the students. The questions were expressed in the first-person so that students will pick up the cue that this is essentially a question they are asking themselves. Their answer might be interesting to other students and to me as the instructor, but it also has the potential to send them on the intellectual journey one takes in answering that question. To make the exercise one in which the dialog is not just between the student and the instructor, I constructed a public form (a discussion board on Blackboard) where students posed their “Response Entries” to the questions. Once a student posted an entry online, all other students could read it and comment on it. (They were actually required to post at least

one comment.) The hope was that the attempt to articulate answers to these questions would encourage students to engage in the sort of dialog that contemplates “the big questions”. Also, the hope was that viewing other students’ responses that seriously engage the question would pull students out of their passive stance, giving them a social sanction for engaging in what is potentially a very interesting and worthwhile exercise. Is there anyone not interested in whether they have a soul?

## Method

The entries were posted on Blackboard in response to four questions. The entries were described in the syllabus as follows:

There are 4 response entries (RE). Throughout the course each student will post 4 response entries to the course website and at least 4 comments to different RE’s posted by other students. The response entries and comments aim to provide opportunities for students to examine their own beliefs and respond to the beliefs of others. For each RE the student will get a grade for their RE and a grade for the comments they posted to other students’ entries. These grades will have one of the following three values:

- no credit (0 pts)
- credit (2 pts)
- extra credit (3 pts)

If the RE or comment is either not done or is done very poorly, the student will get no credit for it. If the RE or comment is satisfactory, the student will get full credit for it. If the entry is exceptionally thoughtful and illuminating, the student will get extra credit. The RE and comments will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Quality and consistency of style
- Grammar
- Structure
- The extent to which the RE or comment engages with the philosophical positions and arguments presented in class or the positions expressed by other students.
- The extent to which the RE or comment expresses clearly and precisely the student’s views.
- The extent to which the student subjected his or her own beliefs to scrutiny.

The RE’s and comments will not be marked down for the content of the views expressed; they are evaluated for their clarity, sophistication and the extent to which the student examines his, hers or another student’s beliefs. If you don’t have a clear view on the topic, invent one!! A student will get no credit for his or her comment if it is disrespectful or dismissive of another student’s beliefs or character. A student is allowed to argue against a fellow student’s beliefs, but not against the value of the other’s person.

A student received full credit for doing the response entries as long as they simply did the assignment with a minimal focus and attention. This helped me alleviate their fear that they might be evaluated on the content of their beliefs rather than on the quality of their work. On the other hand, since a particularly good response entry would have earned them extra credit, they did have external incentive to invest thinking and effort into doing these assignments well. An

excelling student could have earned 8 extra credit points. While it was not easy for them to earn extra credit, some were able to garner enough to boost their grade.

The response entries included the following questions:

- Response Entry 1 – Do I have a soul?

Descartes believes that the soul and body are different substances. The soul is a thinking substance while the body is extended. Do you think you possess a soul distinct from your body? What makes you think so or what makes you think not? Do you find Descartes' argument for the distinction between soul and body convincing? Why, or why not?

- Response Entry 2 – Am I Free?

Spinoza argues that finite beings are determined to act by the laws of nature (which stem from God's immutable essence) and by other finite beings. This implies that it is an illusion to think that human beings have free will. Do you agree with Spinoza that you have no free will? If laws of nature are deterministic, how is it that we seem capable of choosing one course of action over another?

- Response Entry 3- Is the Existence of God Consistent with that of Evil?

Leibniz argues that ours is the best possible world. He claims that perhaps some “evil” acts are permitted by God, but the overall turn of events will yield more goodness than any other possible world. Do you agree with Leibniz's argument? Do you think that a better world than this can be imagined, and if so, shouldn't God create that world? Does your answer permit God to be omnibenevolent, omniscient and all powerful?

- Response Entry 4 – Do I Know Anything?

Descartes used the Dream Argument to argue that we can't trust our senses, and the Evil Genius argument to claim that we can't trust reason. Later Descartes thought that one needs to prove the existence of God in order to show that clear and distinct ideas must be true. Hume argued that we have no rational justification for believing matters of fact based on relations of cause and effect. Are you troubled by Hume's skeptical worries? Is there anything that you know? What do you know and how does it survive Hume's attack on inductive reasoning?

The response entries were ordinarily posted right after studying an important argument by a philosopher. The discussion instigated by these responses paralleled the one taking place in class. Class time was scarce and we had to devote all of it to investigating the various philosophical texts and arguments. Online conversation continued on parallel tracks, focusing on the intersection between students' beliefs and the arguments presented in class. I believe the students felt comfortable to express their opinions in class, sometimes using the entries as a means of venting their own beliefs or reminiscing about their background.

### Results

Overall, I found the Reponse Entries to be surprisingly effective. While students seem to be treating this as yet another academic assignment, the opportunity to see how their personal views interact with the material studied was taken seriously by many.



Here are a few articulate responses:

- I believe that I possess a soul which is distinct from my body, most significantly because I am a Christian and wholeheartedly subscribe to the Gospel. My beliefs are not substantiated by logic or reason and are mostly faith based. However, I will attempt to explain them in more existential terms. For example, just as a driver of any vehicle sits in the vehicle, but is separate from it, so also the soul who is the driver of the human body is separate from it, although residing within it. At the same time, the soul cannot do anything without body nor is the body of any use without the soul.
- Hume's skepticism was mind-blowing to say the least. As a biology major, an argument that dealt such a blow to inductive reasoning, the very heart and soul of science, was very sobering. Hume not only astounded me by asserting that the subject of my studies could not be rationally justified, but also directly attacked the legitimacy of the great beckon of "Truth" of the modern world. For the majority of people living in the world today, science is the most objective guide to truth we have. How often do people try to justify their arguments by beginning with, "Studies have shown...?" When people want to know the "Truth," they turn to science. My initial reaction to Hume was amazement. Who is this man who dares to attack science itself? He did not just attack a particular theory. He sought to knock out the foundation from underneath the entire institution. It would appear that scientists who have claimed to be the most rationally justified individuals have met their match with Hume.
- I find it quite difficult to believe that every aspect of every life, every decision made and every decision yet to be made, has been predetermined. Spinoza's does not make a compelling argument that we are not free beings; he simply works off of his own philosophy that everything is determined to act or to exist through God's nature and assumes everyone is on that wagon with him. To say we have no choice as human beings completely undermines the value we place on life in the first place. I believe in thinking about consequences before taking an action, and I believe most people think about possible repercussions, positive or negative, before doing most things. If our choices are already decided for us, then why should we care about consequences?

The tone of the last entry was more typical than, say, the second. Many entries were very defensive and often presented a very skewed or distorted view of the philosopher. This was especially true if the student thought the philosopher's argument undermined their cherished beliefs or if they thought they can recruit the argument to bolster their view. In the first response entry I included my own response, without announcing it ahead of time or making it look as if this entry was more or less important than the other ones. A student even dared provide a comment on it.

The comments students posted in response to the entries were often much shorter, and only on few occasions generated discussion that went beyond the requirements. Here are a couple of examples of comments students posted in response to other students' entries:

- Your proposal that the question of "Do I have a soul?" is an oppressive one has really gotten me to think. While the idea that one has a soul is often seen as liberating in that it allows one to transcend time and earthly life or continue to exist after bodily decay, your post made me rethink this notion. Indeed, while this aspect of a soul can be construed as liberating, it is also true that inherent in this conception is oppression, for this view seems to require belief in its validity, a type of intellectual tyranny. If I understand correctly, it seems that you characterize not just current opinions and beliefs as malleable and decentered but also the very aspects of identity that produce these opinions and beliefs as malleable and decentered—which while a description of identity is a far cry from the precise,

condensed answers we are often expected to produce when we are asked to “describe ourselves.” I like this idea a lot, but find that I still grapple with the desire to condense an answer; however, perhaps the answer that one’s identity is impossible to condense is an answer condensed enough.

- I found your critique of Hume's argument very interesting. I definitely agree that the argument would be stronger if it provided some evidence of its own, and that the destructive nature of the argument does not actually prove anything, except that the standard beliefs on which we function may not be accurate. However, I did find Hume's argument more convincing than you seem to. I thought that he did manage to deconstruct some beliefs, though I too, found several areas in which I thought his argument was incomplete. But, while I was reading your response, I did have one other thought. I wondered if it is possible that we do not want to agree with Hume's logic because the idea that we do not know anything makes us feel worthless. I don't know where exactly the way that we, as humans, understand ourselves fits into Hume's argument, but our perception of ourselves as the wisest of the living creatures might make us unlikely to appreciate Hume's point of view.

The comments were often either a statement of agreement or disagreement, without much development. They were required to give at least one comment. Since they were not required to give more, in most cases the conversation did not continue or petered out very quickly. Sometimes an exceptional student would give a well-crafted, thoughtful and illuminating response. For example, one very good student gave this first, striking response:

I must commence my response to this question with the caveat that I answer this for purely compulsory reasons. That is, given the option I would choose not to respond to this particular question. I say this not as an insolent and petulant student, but rather as someone lately coming to terms with the evolution of his philosophical viewpoints. Had Prof. Belkind posed this question to me in high school or even as recently as two years ago, I would have paused to ponder and then launched into a lengthy and highly opinionated response either for or against Descartes' split (even the 20/20 vision of hindsight prevents me from knowing on which side of the argument I would have fallen). However, I now approach this assignment with a more critical and nuanced eye. The primary reason for my reluctance to answer this question of ‘body and soul’ or ‘mind and body’—however we choose to phrase this Cartesian dualism—is an opinion of Richard Rorty’s that I have wholeheartedly taken up and embraced as my own. This opinion amounts to the grand question: “so what?” What has contemplation of this question gained for humankind? What use can come from my continuing to ponder the mind/body conundrum that has mired Western philosophical thought for hundreds of years? (Rorty actually posits Platonic essentialism as the initial point with which he takes philosophical beef—so thousands of years.) Perhaps, I am too new at the discipline to have highly developed and sophisticated opinions of my own with which to tweak Rorty, but his argument for sloughing off these philosophical questions in our post-structuralist world where ‘truth’ is merely a property of sentences seems entirely convincing to me. Therefore, instead of directly answering the question posed by Prof. Belkind, I will briefly trace the evolution of my thought to its point of congruency with Richard Rorty’s.

Raised a Roman Catholic, the notion of ‘souls’ and ‘eternal life’ were nothing foreign to me. If someone had questioned me in middle school, I would have said that there were such things as saints (and I probably would have waved ambiguously toward the rafters of the church to indicate where they resided), and of course I knew I would live forever in one form or another. Each night, I would whisper goodnight to my dead grandmother, knowing she was watching over me as I slept and that one-day we would meet again. These were comfortable beliefs for me, and they had no practical consequence on my daily living. But in college, I began to ‘suffer’ from relativist tendencies. These became particularly apparent after I discovered my ‘gay identity’ and began to do sensitivity and diversity training. (Note: This is neither the time nor the place to discuss my antagonism for essentialism. Therefore, the scare quotes around ‘gay identity’ will have to suffice to alert the reader that I do not believe in the reified conventional meanings that burden both the term ‘gay’ and ‘identity’ with a fixed and essential nature.)

During the spring of 2006, I took off from school and traveled across the country with an l/g/b/t (lesbian/ gay/ bisexual/ transgendered) religious group to conservative Christian schools to present the alternate theology that it is not a sin to be gay. Before I embarked on this Soulforce Equality Ride, I grappled with myself—how could I tell these Christians that it was not a sin to be gay? Was that not just my opinion? How could I claim a privileged position to know God’s will and still keep my integrity intact? These were questions to which I never found convincing answers. Instead, I did as Rorty would later advise me (although I hadn’t read any philosophy at this point)—I sloughed off the question and instead related my personal experiences. I settled on this middle ground: since I couldn’t resolve the issue, I would just put it out of my head. Instead of claiming, “I’m right and you’re wrong,” I just told my stories about being gay in the hopes that the Christian students would feel compassion and see me as someone they could relate to—a fellow human being. That, I reasoned, was the best I could do.

Now, here in Modern Philosophy class, Prof Belkind has asked me to decide once and for all whether or not I possess a soul distinct from my body and to provide my rationale for that belief. Furthermore, I must determine whether Descartes’ argument is ‘convincing.’ However, I must decline. Although it may sound absurd, I choose not to think of myself in those terms at all (or at least, I work very, very hard to shake any tendency to think of myself in such a way). If I must have some picture of myself in my head in order to function, I again turn to Rorty and imagine a “centerless network of beliefs and desires” with the stress on “centerless.” For me, there is no ‘core,’ no ‘soul’ that I imagine myself having, but that is not to say that I therefore believe all I am is mind or body or some combination of the two. I prefer to think of myself as a farraginous concatenation of ideas, beliefs, and sentiments—all very particular to my historical time and circumstance. Therefore, instead of agreeing or arguing with Descartes about my possession of a body and soul, I prefer discussing methods of fighting poverty, sharing my favorite piece of poetry, or describing how I envision a liberal utopia. We have already devoted enough time to the mind/body split, and it is now past time to start asking new questions and telling new stories.

This particular response has engendered many comments and I think students had learned a great deal from it, taking discussion a lot further than any one can hope for in a class such as this.

### Assessment

As part of the assessment, I distributed a survey during the exam. The survey included a list of statements with which the students had to express their attitude. The 32 students who completed the survey had to select a number from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 5 indicates “strongly agree.” The list of statements and averaged numbers were as follows:

The Response Entries helped me

1. Examine my fundamental beliefs.	3.81
2. Become more thoughtful.	3.74
3. Realize that opinion needs to be backed with reasons.	3.77
4. Change my outlook on the world.	2.65
5. Understand beliefs I disagree with.	3.61
6. Become more skeptical of everything.	3.65
7. Become aware of flaws in my thinking.	3.68
8. Get strengthened in my beliefs.	3.26

9. Waste time.	2.32
10. Exchange ideas with other students.	3.61
11. Express my personal views more easily.	3.58
12. Become more open to my instructor's personal views.	3.23

### Evaluation

Perhaps surprisingly, I think the most encouraging sign for me was that students mostly disagreed with the statement on the survey claiming that the response entries were a waste of time (the average was 2.3). There were 2-3 very disgruntled students who put a 5 next to that statement, but most of the class seemed to think of the exercise as valuable. This is an encouraging sign since the response entries, while they also help with understanding the material, derive their utility mostly by contributing to the examination of the student's beliefs. Thus the survey suggests that students were genuinely interested in engaging with such questions and in reading how other students responded to the same questions. Another interesting number is the average of 2.65 placed next to the statement claiming that "the response entry changed my outlook on the world." This suggests, since most students disagreed with this claim, that the examination that took place did not cut very deep, and that while students were interested in sharing their beliefs and hearing of others' beliefs, were not really putting their beliefs on the line. A thorough and thoughtful examination of fundamental beliefs, one can assume, will lead to changes in one's outlook. This last number therefore seems to me to contradict the 3.81 average calculated on responses put next to the statement "the response entries helped me examine my fundamental beliefs." Perhaps what the students meant was that the exercise helped them *express* and *articulate* their fundamental beliefs, which is a valuable exercise in itself. But a thorough examination, I think, was not present.

Nevertheless, the numbers suggest that the students learned a lot from simply doing the exercise, or at least they *feel* as if they learned from it. The numbers indicate that overall, students believe that the response entries helped them examine their fundamental beliefs, become more thoughtful, realize that opinion needs to be backed with reasons, understand beliefs they disagreed with, become aware of flaws in their thinking, and express their personal views more easily. Even if only a fraction of these claims is actually true, the response entries were a highly successful pedagogical tool.

My overall assessment of the response entries is that this tool has added a whole new dimension to my teaching. This exercise has been extremely effective in reaching the first objective, which was to find a tool for coping with “barriers of belief.” The implicit message in the response entry was that the course does not promote any single viewpoint or ideology, but that it places value on the very act of articulating and examining one’s fundamental beliefs. The online discussion forum is also a “safer” place than classroom discussions. The student can think and find the best way to articulate his or her fundamental beliefs in privacy, but the forum is still public, enabling everyone to see what the responses were. This probably encouraged students to express their personal beliefs, taking strength from the willingness of other students to do the same. The forum also enabled students to exchange and debate these views among themselves, without the instructor being the sole audience or target. I think that students were also more receptive to my personal view, since it was posted as just another entry alongside all the students’. The implicit message was that my personal beliefs are not more valuable than theirs, even if I have more tools and I am better skilled at defending them.

The response entries really helped me understand where the students are coming from and how they are thinking about the material. They really helped me recognize and understand the barriers of belief existing between myself and some of the students. For example, while for me the philosophical discussion about the existence of God is primarily an intellectual exercise, without much at stake personally, I could see that many students were really concerned with what the philosophers had to say about God and our relationship to God. With some of them, their faith was on the line, and the assertions about God had a great resonance (even if they were not always taking these philosophical assertions in a nuanced or even correct way). Just being aware of these barriers enabled me to appreciate the context in which I am teaching, and to realize that there is a genuine discrepancy between my fundamental beliefs and those of my students. While I haven’t *done* much with the awareness of these barriers, it is a first step in learning how to deal with them. I also feel that posting my own response entry as if it was just another view, really helped lay any fears that I am looking to simply erase their worldview and plant my own outlook in its place.

The second objective, which is to teach students to examine their beliefs and subject them to doubt, has been obtained only on few occasions and with non-uniform effectiveness. I think the reason why the second objective has not been reached fully has to do with the fact that

students did not get much feedback from me on their response entries or comments. They often simply posted their entries, receiving no comments back or unhelpful comments from their peers. Initially I had the idea that I would provide a comment on each response entry, but very soon the demands of the course and of life unraveled that hope. With three other papers and a final exam to grade, the desire to evaluate each response seemed daunting. But it seems to me that the response entries have a great *potential* for creating a means of teaching the students how to evaluate and examine their own beliefs.

### Conclusion

The following may be concluded about the response entries.

- This tool added a new dimension to my pedagogy that both the students and I found valuable.
- It provided the students and the instructor a lot of information on the barriers of belief that exist between the instructor and the students and between students. It is apparently a good tool for alleviating possible anxieties about the instructor's belief being more important than the students'.
- It provided a new and valuable avenue for assessing whether the students understand the material.
- It is evident that this tool has potential for encouraging a thoughtful examination of beliefs but this potential wasn't fully realized. The instructor needs to provide a lot more feedback for it to have its full impact.
- Students feel more comfortable expressing their personal views and hearing the instructor's personal view when they are posted online as part of a discussion that occurs parallel to the class.
- It seems as if students feel that they have learned to become more thoughtful and open to beliefs they disagree with.

## Teaching Tough Courses: Mediating Belief and Doubt through “Moodling” Online

Andrea Y. Simpson

The course I submitted for revision using the pedagogy of belief and doubt was *The Politics of Race in the United States*. Belief and doubt surround this subject. The title alone assumes a racial component to politics. Since the study of politics is mainly about the study of power in political life, embedded in that assumption is another assumption—that race is a factor in the distribution of political power. Students have many beliefs about why racial inequality exists or if it exists at all, and many doubt the validity of the study of racial problems in any form, since some believe such enterprises result in the persistence of racial animosity. How might instructors deal with the beliefs about the sources and outcomes of racial inequality in the United States? Over the many years of teaching this subject, I have experimented with many approaches. Participating in a working group on the pedagogy of belief and doubt seemed the best way to create new ways to approach this subject.

My interest in the Teagle fellowship was to test some ideas for expanding the scope of the class through the introduction of literature on liberation theology. I thought this subject area would expand students’ understanding of the moral aspects of oppression, racial or otherwise. The course objectives were as follows:

- To employ the writings of liberation theologians, as they sought to rationalize support for the end of oppression of indigenous people in Latin America, to help students ask and ponder the “big” questions about democratic ideals and how human beings can best foster social norms that serve all of the people
- To use this subject to strengthen student’s ability to think critically about a wide range of issues that takes them beyond the one story of slavery, emancipation, and the fight for rights in the United States

### Assessment Measures

#### Pre-Course Survey

I started with the pre-course survey, and found that most students responded intuitively the way I expected them to.

- Students universally agreed with the statement that “the best learning environment is one in which not everyone agreed.”

- They did not think that class discussions should exclude their personal beliefs, or the beliefs or the professor or classmates.
- They thought that it was not a sign of weakness to question your beliefs, nor was doubt cowardly.

With these positive results in hand, I proceeded with the course as outlined in the syllabus.

## Course Highlights

### Journaling

In the past, I have used journaling in response to the readings to advance thoughtful responses to the intellectual dilemmas posed in the course. In listening to others at the seminar, I now think that journals should be a regular part of the racial politics course. The difference would be that I would have very specific guidelines for material I expect to see in the journal, and how students should relate experiences to the material.

### Moodle

In the beginning of this project, I thought that introducing liberation theology as a macro theory that might connect global struggles for racial equality would relieve the guilt White students almost always feel in this course. In order to explore liberation theology, among other topics, Kenneth Warren, a Teaching and Learning Center liaison, registered the students for *Moodle*, an interactive online program available here at the University of Richmond. This is an excellent teaching tool for discussions, especially once we create an atmosphere of trust and openness in the classroom. I assigned two students in the class to respond to the readings, and the rest of the class to respond to these entries. This was part of their overall participation grade.

## **Problematizing the Authority of Texts and Professors**

### The Trouble with Texts

There are two important aspects of teaching race that need to be understood. First, texts are the source of much misinformation about the condition of African Americans. They cannot be relied upon as “authorities” on the subject. Race, much the same as crime, is considered a



subject that everyone understands. Students, and the general public, confuse understanding and knowledge with opinion.

We must even question sources of knowledge when you consider the history of research on race in the social sciences. In a groundbreaking book on the subject, Daryl Scott argues that social scientists are complicit in maintaining racial inequality by producing scholarship that supports the goals of the state (Scott 1992). In other words, when the goal of the state was integration, scholars of all races produced work that provided evidence that segregation was harmful to Blacks. An example of this is Kenneth Clark's famous "Doll Study." When the state wanted to retreat on integration, work was produced that provided evidence that integration was harmful. In fact, integration could create the "marginal man"—a creature uncomfortable in his own skin and in the White world.

Political Science is a data-driven discipline. We rely on what we can discern from mathematical equations that reveal what variables have the most explanatory power for a particular phenomenon. One drawback for those who study race politics is that data is scarce regarding the condition of Black communities. In fact, data on Blacks is scarce in the areas of political behavior and electoral politics. When scholars generate data, they often choose respondents that guarantee certain outcomes that favor their theoretical argument. In other words, learning the truth about race and politics requires a critical, discerning intellect. You can never accept texts on face value.

#### Overcoming Perceived Biases and Misgivings: Establishing Trust and Confidence

The extra burdens on faculty of color have been well-documented (Alfred, 2001; Thompson and Dey, 1998). When a member of a marginalized group seeks to educate young people about marginalization using data, facts, and theory, those data, facts, and theories are all suspect. Students often ask me, "Professor Simpson, do you think your experiences and your age make you biased against the idea that racism is not a factor in political life?" There is no doubt that we all have a lens through which we filter information about any subject, but I stress to students that the course is an attempt to give them material from scholars who have different lenses—White race scholars, Latino race scholars, cutting-edge race scholars, and scholars who produced seminal works. This appeases students some, but it does not erase the doubts they have about my qualifications as a scholar.

There is work on Black female faculty that may help us to understand what happens to them in the classroom, especially with majority white students. They are less likely to be tenured at majority white institutions than Black men or White women (Alfred, 2001; Turner, 2002). The term “chilly climate” is used to describe the subtle ways women are excluded from the life of their departments and the university. Several scholars, (Benjamin, 1997; Smith 1999), argue that the academic environment is often hostile or indifferent to Black female professors. Some of the reasons given are that Black women who exude confidence, are intelligent, and are agentic can be misunderstood. These qualities may be perceived as arrogance, aggressiveness, and anger.

The crucial question here is how can Black women who teach race and gender respond to what might be called “preexisting conditions.” My pedagogy up until the Teagle experience included giving students as many different explanations for the unequal distribution of political power as possible, and creating a safe environment for the expression of student responses. Students needed to trust me with their most controversial notions, and I need ways to engender that trust. I have succeeded more times than I have failed with this pedagogy, but I am always seeking more and better ways of overcoming inherent obstacles to learning in the classroom.

### **Introducing Texts and Tools for Optimal Learning**

The Teagle program emphasized applying the “pedagogy of belief and doubt” and infusing courses with meaning. For this course I would now define “meaning” as the encouragement of questions and introducing doubt about pre-existing beliefs. While I teach a great deal of Black history and the history of race politics, what I desire is for students to look around the world they live in now, and figure out what might be contributing to continued inequality.

There were two new teaching tools introduced in this redesigned course. One was Moodle, and the other was a small text on liberation theology, *Introducing Liberation Theology* by Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff (Orbis Books, 1987). I also showed the film “Romero,” which was the story of the awakening of the activist inside of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who inspired the people of El Salvador to engage in the struggle for individual rights. The Contras, the so-called resistance movement in El Salvador, assassinated Romero in his church on March

24, 1980. I hoped that combining the two would give students a better idea of the purpose of liberation theology.

When students read the text, they responded thoughtfully, but not without a critical eye. The first entry below is from one of the two students assigned to respond to the liberation theory text. New entries are in bold type. Responses are italicized and in a smaller font. The next completes the thread of discussion on this topic:

***On a personal level, I owe my entire existence as I know it to Catholic Charities. However, I must say that for all the good that has been done, it is equaled and perhaps even surpassed with evil . . . to get back to liberation theology, if this can honestly be considered an applicable solution to world poverty and to bring peace, the scholars desperately need a reevaluation.***

***-Ethan***

*Ethan, while I agree with you that people should be hesitant in automatically accepting that the role of the church in different societies has been and is a positive one, I do not agree with your taking a one-sided view on the argument. The role of religion definitely has had major negative aspects in different communities. However, it is important to keep in mind that those faithful to different religions are just men who may hold their same beliefs or commit similar actions even if that religion was not present. . . . I am arguing that people and nations often act for selfish interests and in many cases used religion as an excuse for their actions. In many incidents these actions would still have been pursued without the use of religion as an excuse.*

*-Jenny*

*. . . The ideals that people hold, can help to connect them and make them part of something bigger than themselves. It is when people truly believe their ideals, that they can make change happen. Romero may have done what he did because he believed God told him as such, but we can tell without a doubt that he believed what he was doing was more important than himself. It is only when individuals can hold these beliefs above themselves that people can truly illustrate change.*

*-Peter*

*As illustrated in the film "Romero" hope can be a very powerful element in a person's life. [It] helps them get through their everyday hardships. This, religions have played a big role in helping poor nations by giving them food, jobs, money, and hope . . . so if one doesn't want to believe in the Christian religion, don't. But the sense of community that liberation theology portrays should be adopted by the people.*

*-Odalina*

*. . . I am not saying that there are no religions out there that may inform their followers to inflict harm upon others that refuse to accept their religion. However, in regards to many of the world conflicts, in particular colonization or genocide, it involved Christianity, Judaism or Islam and these three have the same foundation. According to the doctrine of Christianity, one is to "love their enemies as they themselves" and to "forgive others". As to why there is so much hatred and*

*fighting, I think that to state that religion is the sole cause excludes all the others factors. I dare to say that if people hate and fight one another, than they are not true Christians.*

*-Kendra*

After a few more entries on the usefulness of religiously-based political movements, I posted the following for students to consider and respond to either online or in class.

*These are outstanding postings on this work. I have just a few comments for your consideration:*

- *We may want to separate the dogma of religion from the directives of the sacred text. We know that Jesus Christ, as quoted in the New Testament, said that "The poor will always be with us." We also know that he said, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven." What does it all mean?*
- *We can probably agree that Jesus, divine or not, had a good idea for living together when he admonishes us to "love one another." How do we do that? MLK thought it meant "agape" love and the formation of the "beloved community." This is an ideal. We are a very long way from the ideal, but perhaps religious leaders can help us get there.*
- *Does religion do more harm than good? I don't know. Does "liberation theology" work? I don't know--Haiti and El Salvador are still in shambles.*
- *Do we need transformative political leaders to create transformative laws, or priests and pastors to transform the leaders, and the law? Maybe the former is more workable than the latter.*

*-Andrea Simpson, Instructor*

*In response to Dr. Simpson's question, I think that in the United States political leaders would be more effective in creating transformative laws because it is easier for people of a variety of different faiths to unite under a political leader in support of a cause than to have everyone divided between the different religions. . . . I tend to think that religious leaders transforming the leaders and the law is unlikely to happen any time soon because religion can be such as divisive factor among the religions and politicians seeming to believe too much in one religion could alienate some of their constituency. Therefore, politicians being changed by religion could create a lot of conflict and raise the issue of separation of church and state, even though our Presidents have all been Christian (local politicians represent more of a variety of religions).*

*-Molly*

In the classroom, my strategy was to ask the designated responders to the text to summarize their entries. Sometimes I questioned the responders for clarification, and other times I asked students if they would like to talk about their responses to the original posting(s). In the classroom, we often returned to the text for clarification on the definition, source, and application of liberation theology. I used this time to correct misperceptions and errors in the reading of the text. I also confronted erroneous assumptions about the workings of the United States capitalist

democratic system. Occasionally students altered their original responses in light of new information. For some, these discussions allowed them to clarify their position.

For this class, the idea of a religious theory as a guiding force for political or social policy was unacceptable. In retrospect, I believe that the bombing of the New York City Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent media coverage of “Islamic extremists,” affected this generation of students in terms of their ability to consider liberation theology. In other words, they have been socialized to reject any connection between religion and politics, and to appreciate the separation of church and state, which they assume is strictly adhered to in all situations.

### **“Moodling” Toward Meaning**

We made more progress when we read a text that took students to the intellectual and theoretical grounding of American political and social ideology. Students read *The Racial Contract*, by Charles Mills (1997). Mills makes the argument that some of the roots of racism are embedded in Western ideology and theory. This text challenged students, who came in with some assumptions about the inherent value of western ideology. Here is part of a long discussion thread:

*In our discussion of the racial contract, we talked of how racism has become more covert. We also discussed how in this Racial Contract that whites were unwilling to give up anything that might carve away what they had. In today's world racism seems to have become on a more individual level, as things such as voting rights were more broad sweeping goals of the civil rights movement, today's goals seem much harder to achieve. As our country has put down affirmative action and set-asides, how can we achieve these goals? Is this a case like utopian socialism, where people's personal ambition will create a situation where equality can almost seemingly never happen? . . . History has proven particularly at the race level, but in other areas as well, that people who have power or are high up on the socioeconomic ladder are extremely reluctant to give up their status, so how can we break this trend? I might be reaching here a bit, but I'm interested on how all of you think this problem can be addressed.*

*-Peter*

*I agree that a society in which everyone is equal and no one has any more than another person is a very unlikely achievement. I also think that if by some chance it was achieved it would not be sustainable for very long. However, I think we can work towards more equality, especially more equality of opportunity. I remember learning in high school that there is a difference between believing in equality of wealth and equality of opportunity and in the United States there is more of a belief in equality of opportunity than in equality of wealth; that if everyone is given equal opportunities it is up to them to work hard and gain wealth. Despite this,*

*as Charles Mills mentioned in the Racial Contract the cumulative wealth that blacks did not earn because of discrimination in labor from 1929 to 1969 was more than \$1.6 trillion in 1983 dollars. This is wealth that they could not pass down to future generations as whites have been able to leave money to their family.*

*-Molly*

*Democracy is based on the notion of human nature, and that people are naturally self-concerned and will naturally strive to better their own situations. While they can be concerned about others, they will never be quite as concerned about others (excluding family) as they are about themselves. Peter's question is a difficult one and it is difficult not to have a hopeless or pessimistic view of the current situation and possible solutions. Though the Racial Contract dismisses enlightenment ideas as exclusive of minorities, I still contend that Enlightenment thinkers' discussions of democracy and protecting minorities (though they are[not] talking about poor or rich minorities) are still helpful in discussing how to improve current situations. Edmund Burke is very concerned about the oppression of minorities, argues for true moral equality of mankind, and is extremely adamant about maintaining religious influences on men to make them more virtuous.*

*-Jenny*

*I think the focus on the self-centered nature of human beings is dangerous. If in fact we are so self-centered, then the most logic remedy for problems of inequality is for the poor, (who are quite numerous), to rise up against the oppressors and forcefully take power. To me, the problem seems to be as much about wealth as it is power, and wealth is power. Many of those in power believe that they are superior to the poor, and these same people also believe the poor are indeed, inferior, to themselves. I would like for these people to ask themselves this question: "What is the difference between me and a working class African American receiving government aid?" I would also like to ask them how they would characterize such a person. Someone made the comment that it is unfair for someone who has "worked hard to earn" their wealth to give their money to someone who has never worked a day in their life. Of course lazy people like this do exist, but I assure you they are far and few between. I know many poor people who have worked their entire lives living paycheck to paycheck and have nothing to show for it. I know many poor people who struggle to find work, despite their best efforts, and are continuously laid off through no fault of their own. Yet these people still have to put up with a society that calls them lazy, unmotivated, and inferior. Where is the fairness in this.*

*The ratio of the top executives of a company pay compared to the lowest worker's pay has increased 300 times since 1980. This is the richest country in the world, yet there is amazing poverty within it. Perhaps great wealth is not possible without great exploitation of the poor. In order for all people to truly have been created equal, there needs to be equal representation of all diverse types of people in all aspects of life. And in order for this to happen those in power would need to somehow admit to their abuse of power and work (or be forced) to relinquish their privilege.*

*-Craig*

In class, the discussion on this text and the responses was lively and satisfying. As the instructor, I guided them back to an earlier discussion about American ideology and how we attempt to balance self-interests, or liberty, with concern for the oppression of others, or justice. I helped them connect these ideas to specific thinkers addressed by Mill. While they were not completely won over by Mills's argument, it made them explore how inequality could be sustained and supported by western ideals.

We returned to the discussion about liberation theology. Could this theory balance emphases on individualism in our society? Students disagreed about how far liberation theology would take us. Some thought that liberation theology was about socialism. Others thought it was simply a tool to combat oppression. One student was a staunch advocate of the redistribution of wealth and state intervention in the creation of opportunities for the poor. He believed that wealth in the United States was acquired at the expense of others, particularly minority groups. Other students, as is common in their generation, were nervous and unsure about assuming that those who acquired wealth did so at the expense of the poor. Therefore, they were not sure about the fairness of a redistribution of wealth.

This discussion inspired me to give a short lecture on the contours of redistributive policies in the United States, such as Veteran's benefits and Social Security. Incorporating these facts about which redistributive policies Americans favor and which ones they do not clarified for some students the utility of ideas of the enlightenment in creating and sustaining socioeconomic classes in the United States.

### **Mediating Belief and Doubt**

As I discuss earlier, one of the major hurdles in teaching tough courses, courses on race, gender, economic inequality among others, is establishing confidence and trust in the classroom. One of the ways I was able to generate trust was through honest and safe communication of ideas in Moodle. No one had access to this discussion board but the instructor and the students.

How do we develop teaching methods flexible enough to confront the controversial subject areas of various disciplines in a meaningful way? One of the ways is to uncover what our work means to us, and how best to convey why we have dedicated our lives to pursuit of knowledge in this area. The Teagle program encouraged me to think harder about how to infuse

the courses I teach with a quality that allows students to think about how we live our lives and question accepted norms. While the liberation theology section was not as successful as I hoped for, the experience with Moodle and the journals enhanced class discussions. The Moodle entries allowed me to access gaps in knowledge about United States government and law, while honoring students' beliefs and concerns about racial inequality. Students connecting literature across disciplines and questioning their beliefs occurred because I was consciously aware of ways in which to inspire this behavior. One thing I learned last summer was to ask students why we should care about the material and the phenomena we study. In holding that constant throughout the course, I received the greatest of gifts from students: They actually thought about the material and its relationship to the university community, the city, and the world.

### Works Cited

- Alfred, Mary V. 2003. "Reconceptualizing Marginality from the Margins: Perspectives of African American Tenured Female Faculty at a White Research University." *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 25.
- Benjamin, L. 1997. *Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Boff, Clodovis and Leonardo Boff. 1987. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Loury, Glenn C. 2002. *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mills, Charles. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Fr. Ellwood (Bud) Kieser, (Producer), & Duigan, John, (Director). (1989). *Romero*. [Motion picture]. United States: Paulist Pictures.
- Smith, Pamela J. 1999. "Teaching the Retrenchment Generation: When Sapphire Meets Socrates at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Authority." *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 53, 10141.
- Thompson, Carolyn J. and Eric L. Dey. 1998. "Pushed to the Margins: Sources of Stress for African American College and University Faculty." *Journal of Higher Education* 69:3, pp. 324-346.
- Turner, S.V. 2002. "Women of Color in Academe: Living with Multiple Marginality." *Journal of Higher Education* 73, 74-94.



## Comparative Assessment of the Teagle Courses

Mary Camac

### *Common Goals*

Although the fifteen courses taught as part of the Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt project came from a diverse set of disciplines and were taught at a variety of levels, they shared the same set of goals regarding students' attitudes toward belief. These goals included getting students to recognize their beliefs, to explore the reasons for these beliefs, and to consider beliefs that differ from their own. Since beliefs may be justified in a number of ways, a common goal was to teach students to distinguish among different ways of knowing (e.g., science, logic, faith, etc.), and examine the circumstances under which we can responsibly use them to support or challenge belief. Finally, all of the courses sought to create an atmosphere in which students and faculty could openly discuss beliefs in a way that managed to both respect individuals and challenge them to go beyond their comfort zone and examine dearly held positions.

### *Types of Classes*

All of the classes were either in the humanities or the social sciences. Although some crossed disciplinary lines, they can be roughly categorized as four in philosophy, three in religion, three in English, two in political science, two in psychology and one in economics. Classes were relatively small, ranging from 3 to 32, with the majority ranging from 10-20 students. Nearly all of the courses were electives. The gender distribution favored females, with an average of nearly twice as many females as males across classes. Few classes had freshmen; students tended to be sophomores, juniors or seniors.

### *Types of Assignments*

Assignments fell into four major categories: journals, electronic communication, papers, and class discussion. Virtually all classes employed class discussion and papers. Three classes required journals, and five incorporated online discussions using software such as Blackboard™ or Moodle™. Two of the classes requiring journals also used online discussion. Ori Belkind's course provided an assessment of his on line response entries (see Section IV.A.). His survey showed a fairly high indication (3.81 on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 indicates "strongly disagree"

and 5 “strongly agree”) that the assignment helped “examine my fundamental beliefs,” and a good indication (3.68) for students who responded that the assignment had helped “become aware of flaws in my thinking.” Similarly, Shane Pitts’ evaluation of his online QQTP assignment (quotations, questions, and talking points; see pages 66-67 ) showed that students strongly agreed that the assignment “encouraged me to evaluate my beliefs and/or doubts” (4.5 on a 5-point scale) and “encouraged me to scrutinize my own thinking” (4.59).

*Students’ Attitudes toward Belief and Doubt*

Does taking a course that focuses on belief and doubt affect students’ attitudes? To evaluate global effects of our courses on student attitudes, nine of the fifteen instructors administered some or all of a set of items developed by Dr. Watts. The items are listed in Appendix X. Students rated their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

The majority of instructors reported results from only one or two of these items, and only three instructors provided data in a quantitative form that could be combined across sections. The following means are based on the two psychology courses (Pitts’ Why People Believe Weird Things and Camac’s Psychology of Belief) and a philosophy course (Hendley’s Imagine No Religion). Four items from the scale were used by all three classes. Results are in Table 1.

---

Table 1

Pre- and Post-course Measures of Attitudes Toward Belief and Doubt

<u>Item</u>	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Post-test</u>
1. Learning is best accomplished when everyone is in agreement.	2.0	1.7
2. Doubting what you hold to be true shows intellectual weakness.	2.3	2.0
3. It is important to respect other people’s beliefs even if you think they are wrong.	4.3	4.4
4.* A professor’s personal beliefs should not enter a classroom discussion.	2.5	2.4
9. My personal beliefs are generally kept to myself; they should not enter into a classroom discussion.	2.8	2.7

\*Based on the two Psychology classes only

---

These means do not show much change from the beginning to end of class. However, the averages mask that fact that one class did have some significant changes from pre- to post-test: Pitts' *Why People Believe Weird Things*. His students changed their average scores to show greater disagreement with the first two statements: 1) agreement is good for learning, and 2) doubt shows weakness. They also agreed more with the ideas that professors' and students' personal views should enter classroom discussion. The other two classes showed smaller and sometimes opposite changes. On the question of students' keeping personal beliefs to themselves, for example, Hendley's class actually agreed more with the statement, going from 2.4 to 2.7, and Camac's class remained the same at 2.3. Also commenting on the change from pre-test to post-test was Zivi, who noted that the number of students in her *Sex, Power and Politics* class who agreed that students' beliefs should be kept to themselves dropped from 21% to 5%, and the number who thought professors' personal beliefs should be kept out of the classroom dropped from 58% to 32%. In general, students' responses tended to reflect a positive attitude toward discussing disparate beliefs. Findings reported by Kamiru in *Economics* and Simpson in the *Politics of Race in the U.S.* concur with those in Table 1, where students agreed at the outset that personal beliefs could enter class discussion, that agreement was not necessary for learning, and that doubting one's beliefs was not a sign of intellectual weakness.

Not all classes agreed that doubt was a sign of strength, however. Both Doyle (theology) and Havis (philosophy) found that their students saw doubt as a threat to their beliefs and that doubt was a sign of intellectual weakness. They attribute this to the fact that they were teaching populations who held firm religious beliefs.

#### *Other Assessment Tools (NFC, CLEV)*

Another measure employed by several instructors was the Need for Cognition Scale (Caccioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984). This 18-item scale measures one's attitude toward thinking. People who score highly on this scale tend to be more open minded. Items are rated on a 6-point scale, where 6 = strongly agree. Sample items are, *The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me*, and *Thinking is not my idea of fun*. While this is a measure of a stable personality characteristic, knowing students' initial interest in thinking might help to explain why some classes are more successful than others. It is also possible that students need for cognition could be affected by a class. Data on need for cognition were reported by Pitts,

Hendley and Camac. Students in Pitts and Hendley's classes averaged approximately 81 points (meaning that for the 18 items, the average rating was 4.5), while Camac's students averaged a much lower 68 points (average rating was 3.8). Camac's students are more typical of college students in general. Despite the high initial score, Pitts' students actually improved their scores significantly over the course of the semester, averaging an 85 on the post-test. The other two classes suffered slight drops in score. When averaging across all three classes, need for cognition remained constant at 77 points from pre-test to post-test.

Camac wondered whether Need for Cognition (NFC) related to students' attitudes toward belief and doubt. Looking at the 66 students surveyed in her Psychology of Belief class as well as comparison classes in Social and Abnormal psychology, she looked at whether NFC scores correlated with any of the belief items. There were no significant correlations. However, another measure, the Checklist of Educational Values (Perry, 1968),<sup>28</sup> or CLEV, did have systematic relationships with several of the items. CLEV measures epistemological beliefs with items such as, "*If teachers would stick more to the facts and do less theorizing, one could get more out of college,*" and "*There is nothing more annoying than a question that may have two answers.*" Items are rated on a 7-point scale, where 7 = strongly agree. Scores reflect a student's position on a dualism-relativism dimension. Dualism is the idea that knowledge is a set of facts; that things are either true or false. Relativism is the view that truth depends on the context; that there are different points of view that affect one's interpretation. The higher the score on the CLEV, the more dualistic one is. It makes sense that dualistic people might like thinking less than relativists; this is supported by a negative correlation between CLEV and NFC ( $r = -.37, p < .01$ ). It also predicts students' ratings on several of the belief items. More dualistic students agreed more with the idea that doubt was a weakness ( $r = .351, p < .01$ ). They were also more likely to agree that learning was best accomplished when everyone was in agreement ( $r = .263, p < .05$ ) and that a professor's personal beliefs should not enter the classroom ( $r = .259, p < .05$ ). However, there was no relation between dualism and students' attitudes toward expressing their own beliefs, or in their attitudes toward respecting others' beliefs. These data

---

<sup>28</sup> Perry, William (1968). *Patterns of development in thought and values of students in a liberal arts college: A validation of a scheme*. U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, Bureau of Research, Final Report, Project No. 5-0825, Contract No. SAE8973.

suggest that students' attitudes toward knowledge and a teacher's role may affect how willing they are to engage in questioning their beliefs.

### *Conclusions*

The instructors report generally positive outcomes in their courses. Most were impressed by their students' willingness to engage in the process of questioning their beliefs. Of course, not all classes went equally well. There are many factors that could have affected classes' success. One factor relates to the composition of the class itself. Many of the classes were electives, but a few were requirements that draw a large number of non-majors who may have a lesser degree of willingness to apply themselves to the questions of the course. Many of the courses were typical of small seminars: upper-division electives, discussion-based, and writing intensive, which tends to draw a greater degree of commitment from upper-classmen, many of whom may be exceptionally interested and hard-working students if not more mature and open-minded. In terms of gaining intellectual ground with students, Pitts' course shows high gains in learning outcomes. This change may be explained by the frequency of assignments and feedback from the professor. Among the few courses which saw few changes in learning outcomes, attitudes toward belief and doubt remained stable; no course saw any reversal of attitude or "backlash." To be sure, the degree to which a professor is comfortable with controversial topics has a direct influence on the classroom environment. Most participants in the faculty seminar were familiar with the course material they were planning to teach. They chose to participate in the Working Group where they could find a place to test their ideas and look for support from colleagues as they sought ways to apply new teaching methods.

## Appendix X

### Items for Evaluation of Attitudes toward Belief and Doubt

1. Learning is best accomplished when everyone is in agreement.
2. Doubting what you hold to be true shows intellectual weakness.
3. It is important to respect other people's beliefs even if you think they are wrong.
4. A professor's personal beliefs should not enter a classroom discussion.
5. The point of life is to search for the truth, with as open a mind as you can, NOT to memorize the "eternal truths" that have been handed down from generation to generation as matters of faith.
6. Learning is best accomplished when everyone is not in agreement.
7. Changing one's beliefs is a virtue or desirable quality.
8. Disagreement about a fundamental belief is a conversation-stopper.
9. My personal beliefs are generally kept to myself; they should not enter into a classroom discussion.
10. Doubting what you hold to be true shows intellectual courage.

## Appendix Selected Sources

### Problems of Belief

“Discussion: Religion and Public Discourse,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* (March 2003)  
vol. 31, no. 1.

1. Rorty, Richard. “Religion and the Public Square: A Reconsideration” *JRE* 31:1 (March 2003): 141-149.
2. Wolterstorff, Nicholas. “An Engagement with Rorty” *JRE* 31:1 (March 2003): 129-139.

Clifford, W.K. “The Ethics of Belief” in *Lectures and Essays* vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1879),  
1-4.

James, William. “The Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe*. edited by Frederick Burkhardt  
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 13-33.

Pojman, Louis. *Religious Belief and the Will*. (London: Routledge, 1986), 170-79.

Prothero, Steven. “Belief Unbracketed: A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of  
Where He or She Is Coming From,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* Available on-line at  
(<http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/bulletin/articles/prothero.html>)

Smolla, Rodney. “Academic Freedom, Hate Speech, and the Idea of a University,” 53:3 *Law and  
Contemporary Problems* (Summer 1990): 195-225.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Rethinking First Amendment Assumptions About Racist and Sexist Speech,”  
*Washington and Lee Law Review* 47 (Summer, 1990): 171-211.

### Historicizing Science and Religion

Dobbs, B.J.T. “Newton as Final Cause and First Mover,” in *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution*,  
edited by Margaret J. Osler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25-39.

Osler, Margaret J. “The New Newtonian Scholarship and the Fate of the Scientific Revolution,”  
in *Newton and Newtonianism: New Studies*, edited by James E. Force and Sarah Hutton  
(Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004), 1-14.

Westfall, Richard S. “The Scientific Revolution Reasserted,” in *Rethinking the Scientific  
Revolution*, edited by Margaret J. Osler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000),  
41-55.

### Evolution, Cognition, and Believing Weird Things

Bering, Jesse M. “The Cognitive Psychology of Belief in the Supernatural.” *American Scientist*,  
vol. 94 (March-April 2006): 142-149.

\_\_\_\_\_. “The folk psychology of souls.” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29:0505 (2006): 453-  
462.

Shermer, Michael. "Why Smart People believe Weird Things" in *Why People Believe Weird Things*. (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 273-302.

Pedagogies and Surveys

Bell, Derrick. "Evolving Faith" *Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 75-92.

Carpenter, Joel, "The Evangelical Student Today," Panelist presentation. Teagle Foundation Listening Conference on Religion in Liberal Education, September 8-10, 2005.

Conquergood, Dwight. "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance" in *Literature and Performance* 5 (1985): 1-13.

Hooks, Bell. "Heart to Heart" in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 127-137.

Palmer, Parker J. "Knowing in Community: Joined by the Grace of Great Things," in *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 89-113.

"The Spiritual Life of College Students" A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose. Higher Education Research Institute, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. University of California, Los Angeles.  
<http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu>.