Statement of Teaching Philosophy – Julia Netter

I have taught courses in political philosophy and in interdisciplinary settings with economics and computer science. In my teaching, I want to give serious normative foundations and technical depth to the necessary debate on technology ethics. I believe that teaching these foundations well requires encouraging students to think creatively and precisely, and to help them learn to provide, and engage with, critical feedback.

Creativity and precision are key to identifying philosophical questions and to evaluating philosophical positions that students confront. This is true in "classic" philosophy courses, but also in computer science classes that discuss technology ethics. In my experience, CS students especially are often enthusiastic about ethical problems, but struggle to precisely tie their broad questions to specific evaluative principles and frameworks to reason about them. I employ several techniques to develop students' creativity and precision.

In my **philosophy classes**, such as POLS 0920E (Moral Pluralism), I turn regular homework essays into an activity promoting creativity and precision by requiring students to choose their own questions to answer. In the beginning, they usually struggle to find questions that lend themselves to substantive philosophical argument, and instead choose broad, descriptive questions. I provide feedback on the questions, but also occasionally allow students to experience first-hand how difficult it is to make a rigorous argument in response to an ill-specified question. This experience teaches students how to identify interesting, precise philosophical puzzles. In addition, I implement a culture of mutual feedback (see below).

In an **interdisciplinary setting**, students' varying backgrounds and the signature pedagogies of different fields pose challenges and opportunities for effective learning. For example, my section of POLS 1150 (The Ethics and Economics of Wealth Creation) combined students with backgrounds in economics, philosophy, political science, and other fields. I observed that when given a question that asked them to take a position—e.g., on distributive vs. emergent conceptions of justice—the students without a philosophy background tended to balance concerns, making vague arguments for a middle ground. I challenged students to take clearly delineated positions by inspiring *metacognition*: I asked them to reflect on, and justify normatively, why they thought the middle-ground to be right, rather than choosing it out of an intuitive reluctance to commit to a position. This technique encourages precision as it helps students focus on assessing the strength of an argument, e.g., by systematically looking for principled reasons that support, undermine, or defeat it.

In another example, CS students who I taught for a guest session in CSCI 2390 (Privacy-Conscious Computer Systems) evidently worried about concrete instances of privacy loss, and had an intuitive, urgent sense of this loss being harmful, but lacked a nuanced understanding of why the privacy loss occurs, and how an individual is harmed by it. I helped them develop this ability by inducing a *perspective switch*: I asked them to give an example of a situation in which they perceive a privacy loss, and to then argue *against* this situation constituting an infringement of privacy. For example, a student suggested that theft of a private diary might infringe on the author's privacy, but on my prompt granted that the act of theft alone may not infringe privacy, but that only the thief reading the diary would. This technique develops both creativity and precision in thinking, helping students identify and discern underlying ideas that affect our understanding of privacy—e.g., the thief gaining control of the diary versus actually accessing the contents. It also provides them with concepts to reason about privacy in the digital setting. Cloud storage services, for example, may have control over data, but not necessarily access to it. Students reacted well to this technique, and several emphasized the value of my guest session in their course feedback:

> *"I really enjoyed [...] our conversation about what privacy means philosophically, and I hope that we can integrate these conversations about privacy philosophy as we discuss papers, and not just a one-off thing like it was."*
>
> *"[The course should definitely keep discussing] normative perspectives too!"*

Beyond in-class discussion, and independent of the setting, my teaching focuses on developing students' **writing skills**. When I teach in class and provide feedback on students' writing, I use the mantra of *"answer the question"* to help students acquire habits of precision. First, I prompt them to *answer* the question instead of simply summarizing rival approaches, conflicting arguments, or potential objections that are relevant. Instead, students should use these to aid their own judgments on the question at hand. Second, I emphasize that students must answer the *question*, rather than mistake it for a cue to talk about the topic at large. Finally, I encourage students answer *the* question, that is, the question at hand, rather than a related one. This easy-to-remember mantra guides students in developing arguments that are precise and to the point, and can also serve to educate teaching assistants to effectively grade student work and moderate discussions.

In the future, I plan to develop a more formalized **pedagogy for teaching philosophical thinking and creativity** both within and outside of core philosophy courses. I will provide students with prepared (but expandable) "mindmaps" of questions they may ask to analyze and respond to an ethical challenge, as well as terms that prompt them to approach the challenge from different angles. For a CS class on machine learning, for example, such a "mindmap" might contain terms for different ideals (e.g., autonomy, control, anonymity, and privacy) and perspectives (e.g., consequences, duties, rights, and virtues), and other words that might trigger an association leading to an idea. These mindmaps conceptually externalize our mental state, prompting new ideas and connections. For example, students may notice that a large training set for a language model promotes user anonymity, but might be biased against minority sociolects (i.e., language varieties of socioeconomic groups). The mindmaps do not constrain discussion, but rather help students identify angles that the discussion may not yet cover.

Finally, a cycle of writing, reading, offering and receiving criticism is essential to students' growth as philosophers and ethically-informed citizens, as it helps engender creative thinking, habits of precision, and a **culture of mutual feedback**. In my D.Phil., I saw this cycle play out in Oxford's small-group teaching (where a tutor meets 2–3 students), but replicating it in a larger class setting can be challenging. I plan to experiment with technology to create a similar experience for larger groups (such as a CS class). I will ask students to upload their writing assignments to an online review system, and assign each (anonymized) student submission to another student to comment on, with the course staff providing additional feedback. This gives students the opportunity to read and respond to their peers' writing, but also supplies them with individualized feedback. Platforms for this purpose (e.g., conference review systems like HotCRP, or tools like Quizi.us) are widely available, free, and straightforward to use, and make it easy for me to ensure that the peer feedback remains civil and constructive. I will draw on the collected material to select examples of good writing and critique for in-class discussion, and use them to jump-start further debate on the topic material, relying on the creativity-promoting techniques outlined before. This setup prepares students for the research seminars and review cycles of academic philosophy, but also teaches a culture of constructive criticism that helps them develop as writers and learn from each other.

In summary, I enjoy helping students become independent, creative thinkers who can develop precise and structured arguments when engaging with philosophy and ethical challenges. I have experience teaching in interdisciplinary settings, and am excited to teach courses at the intersection of the humanities and computer science. My teaching philosophy centers around systematic aids that train creativity and precision, as well as feedback cycles based on the students' own work.