Some Risks of Neutrality[1]

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"That's bullshit," my student said. He had come to my office hours to discuss a reading from our feminist philosophy class. The "bullshit" he identified was not the class, the topic, or the reading (for which he had a thoughtful criticism). It was my answer to his question, or rather, my dissatisfying non-answer. He'd noticed that I tended to withhold my own perspective on the topics we discussed in class, preferring to let students contribute their views and analyze them together. When he asked why I didn't just offer my views directly, I explained that I try to maintain personal neutrality in the classroom so as not to unduly influence students and preclude them from coming to their own conclusions. (I also adopted this strategy to avoid the potent threat of being perceived as an indoctrinating feminist, lest it cause some students to shut down rather than being "forced" to adopt my views, though I kept this part of my motivation to myself.) It was this answer, this somewhat paradoxical position of neutrality, to which he called bullshit. I laughed, refreshed by his frankness, but also because I knew he had a point. And now, having taught many more classes, including more sections of feminist philosophy, I more fully realize how right he was.

My first tenure-track position introduced me to something of a culture change. My upbringing and education were on the East Coast, primarily New York, and I had moved to a public liberal arts school in the upper Midwest. As I eventually learned, these cultures are subtly

[1] To be published as: LaGuardia-LoBianco, A., 2025. "Some Risks of Neutrality," (Personal Reflection). *AAPT (American Association of Philosophy Teachers) Studies in Pedagogy: Teaching in Hostile Climates Special Issue.* 10: 211-218. https://doi.org/10.5840/aaptstudies2025102

but importantly different. Most relevantly, I was told (warned?) by my colleagues that most students would tend towards reticence under the guise of politeness. Some students were self-aware of this behavior, expressing in surveys or informal writing assignments that they were cognizant that some of their views might be unpopular, and they did not want to offend anyone. They judged that the best way to avoid offense was to withhold potentially controversial opinions entirely. Additionally, this pocket of the Midwest is rather homogenously religious, and I was told I could expect these values to be reflected in many students' opinions. I was hired as the feminist philosopher in the department. The message I took from this introduction was that I needn't worry about explicit pushback against more radical ideas. Quite the contrary, I shouldn't be surprised by an unwillingness to engage with them out loud.

Of course, cultural generalizations only go so far. I've had plenty of progressive, opinionated, expressive students (particularly in my feminist philosophy classes), and many more who are open-minded, curious, and eager to examine their assumptions. My aim here is not to criticize my students, whom I truly feel lucky to serve. Rather, my criticism is aimed at the approach I initially took to respond to the culture I imagined I was about to encounter. I thought: "Well, I'm clearly going to turn some students off with my progressive-to-radical views, even if I don't hear about it until my student evaluations roll in. I'm not going to change my syllabi or pedagogy because of this, but I'll try to minimize the chance of repelling students by letting the readings do the talking. I'll frame discussions in terms of analyzing what *these* philosophers have to say without attaching myself personally to any of these views. We'll keep the target on the arguments and keep personal commitments out of it. And anyway, this is a sound pedagogical practice. I want students to develop their own critical views, and this can be difficult to facilitate

if they perceive my role as a professor as telling them what they should think." And that was roughly the method I upheld for some time.

So, I tried to keep my own personal views professionally hidden for the sake of detached, neutral pedagogy. This was necessary, I thought, to avoid unduly influencing students or potentially alienating them. Part of the perception I was fighting against is, of course, a sexist one: the angry white woman feminist who forces her views on anyone within earshot, her interest in indoctrination rather than dialogue, who can be written off as an annoyance but not a threat. But I feared so much reinforcing that stereotype, and the impediments to students' learning it could cause, that I overcorrected. As a result of this experience, I think there are three reasons to be skeptical of practicing personal neutrality for the sake of supposed pedagogical rigor: it is an unrealistic and inauthentic goal; it is built on a false dichotomy between neutrality and indoctrination; and the semblance of objectivity it represents can further marginalize vulnerable voices, which is pedagogically irresponsible.

First, true neutrality in the classroom—in which the instructor's views, opinions, and commitments are invisible to students—is impossible to achieve. The instructor's perspective is woven throughout the class, from the readings to the topics to the way class time is used. I think it is safe to say that we only choose topics that we think are worth our and students' careful consideration. Spending weeks discussing medical racism in a bioethics class, for instance, signals to students that this phenomenon is important and deserves our attention; a bioethics class that never discusses this issue is also sending a message. Outside of topics or readings we may be required to include for curricular reasons, a course's reading list is a limited and precious territory to populate with what we think matters. Even some course choices made without the explicit awareness that they bear our fingerprint can nonetheless transfer its pattern: an instructor

who always lectures to a small class and never tries to engage students is revealing a position about epistemic authority in the classroom, whether they realize it or not. My point is that we are already coming to the classroom with our own commitments (including our personal values, moral codes, political stances, pedagogical and philosophical standards, etc.), just like our students are, so it is disingenuous to pretend we are completely neutral with regard to the class material. Instead, pretending to maintain personal neutrality—as I tried to do—has the effect of asking students to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain who is directing every aspect of the class yet refusing to take accountability for it. In a win for the Midwest Nice ethos, I ended up reproducing the same approach some students told me they practiced—staying quiet so as not to offend anyone! But sheepishly avoiding the full force of my role while reading and discussing anti-oppression content may be confusing or disorienting to some students. More importantly, it is not fully honest or authentic (as my perspicacious bullshit-calling student realized), and this is an impediment to the trust I try to build with my students.

Second, the approach of personal neutrality assumes a false dichotomy between flexible-as-the-grass neutrality and dogmatic indoctrination. This is based on the worry that unless we frame an issue as anything but evenly considered on all sides and remain neutral between these positions, we will effectively force students to adopt our preferred position. There clearly must be a third option (at least), a way to express a firm evaluative position that allows for empathetic, open-minded dialogue and does not shoe-horn students into a particular view. Such a non-neutral approach can still respect students' intellectual autonomy—ultimately, they must make up their own minds—rather than indoctrinating them. And while the motivation to avoid even a hint of indoctrination is a good one, overcorrecting by pretending to have no commitments is not effective in that endeavor; withholding one's moral and political values does not work to oppose

dogmatism. Instead, it represents a cowardly creep towards centrism that creates exactly the conditions in which dogmatism can take hold.

A related risk of neutrality is that it may slip into bothsidesism. By refusing to take a position, instructors may feel they must countenance all sides of an issue, potentially even those that are misleading, false, or reinforcing of marginalization. To be clear, this is not a problem of neutrality as such nor an inevitable result of it. It is possible to explain why some piece of evidence is misleading without expressing one's personal views on the issue. But neutrality could potentially open the door to bothsidesism. And when it does, it is a missed opportunity to help students see why all sides of some issues are not always worth equal critical consideration and practice discerning the difference. Especially for certain topics, bothsidesism poses a risk of deeper harms. The harms I reference here are both pedagogical (e.g., supporting propaganda) and moral (e.g., reinforcing oppressive views about vulnerable groups). For instance, reading climate change deniers will not give students a more balanced understanding of the issue; anti-trans rhetoric will only reinforce harmful stereotypes rather than enlighten students with an alternative perspective. Pedagogical open-mindedness should not be completely unrestricted, something a position of neutrality could lead us to forget.

Of course, students come to us with their own backgrounds, their own ways of understanding the world that may be deeply entrenched. I can't really *make* students think anything, only lead them to see what is possible so they can decide for themselves. My influence is limited. But I do wonder whether my demeanor of personal neutrality led to a missed opportunity to help some students interrogate their views. I have received papers that broke my heart. One was from an active student in a feminist philosophy class who took a victim-blaming stance on sexual assault against women (a dramatic departure from the draft of the paper);

another argued that the commitments of feminism should entail an anti-abortion position that cited anti-abortion propaganda (in a moral philosophy class that was not focused on feminism or abortion, from a student who did not express any constellation of such opinions in class). I worried that by failing to take a strong enough position on these issues—if only a more forceful negative position about misinformation in these debates—I had missed an opportunity to help students interrogate these entrenched views (or at least, signal that they are worth interrogating).[1] If so, then even if my neutral approach did not cause the views in these students' papers, it did not necessarily challenge them.

Third, I've come to realize that personal neutrality in the classroom is as socially irresponsible as the posture of pedagogical neutrality taken in certain philosophical debates. I've argued against traditional methods of teaching the ethics of abortion as a politically neutral, impartial, rational debate about rights on the grounds that such approaches not only miss central moral considerations (like lived experiences of pregnancy) but can themselves be tools of oppression.[2] Philosophical debates about issues that uniquely face marginalized groups (like abortion) implicitly posit such experiences as appropriately *up for debate* by anyone and proceed as if the best way to debate them is to divorce the discussion from any personal, lived experiences that may "bias" the discussion. Such an approach thrives under the semblance of objective rational discourse that is built upon a host of discriminatory assumptions and serves to silence the very people who stand to be impacted by the debate. One of the central problems here (which is applicable to other areas of philosophy) is the assumption that neutrality is the best way to arrive at truth while personal experiences inevitably veer away from truth. Such a position is a philosophical privilege for those whose experiences are not routinely called into question or threatened (and not only by philosophical debates themselves). When used the wrong way in

certain debates, “the view from nowhere” can reinforce oppression under the veneer of objective rational discourse.

I stand by that argument, and I’ve realized that just as we shouldn’t pretend certain topics are politically neutral or objectively free from personal experience for the sake of rational debate, I shouldn’t present myself as a detached peddler of philosophical ideas without any personal moral or political investment in them. If the former is a potentially harmful tool of oppression, then the latter is too, since it is based on the same basic stance that personal experiences or commitments interfere with sound philosophy (where “personal experiences or commitments” are understood to be distinct from fallacious biases towards a position). It is not enough to “let the papers do the talking.” Their messages can get muddied or misinterpreted, and it will not be as powerful as an instructor stating their commitments explicitly.

Even if these considerations are plausible, the unfortunate reality is that there can be professional and practical limitations on adopting a non-neutral stance. The political temperature of the locale, university, and student body may favor, or even necessitate, personal neutrality, since revealing certain political opinions might be a professional risk in hostile climates, especially for contingent or otherwise vulnerable instructors. And it is worth emphasizing that social identities shape how the disclosures of political commitments are received (or not); recall the “annoying feminist” perception discussed above, or the “angry black woman” trope, or the dismissal of a “difficult” disabled person calling out ableism. By no accident, it is harder for those with marginalized identities to get uptake of their political voice, and that much more so when they are calling out structural oppressions. This may lead instructors so situated to withhold their views out of self-protection. And of course, it would be inappropriate if a class

became about an instructor's own personal views, or if these were revealed in too forceful a manner. Care in the professional presentation of one's personal self is not misguided.

So, it is not always a simple matter to avoid neutrality, and it may not always be desirable to do so. But in my own case, given the moral and political subjects I regularly teach, I believe adopting a posture of personal neutrality is too risky. Instead, I plan to forgo false personal neutrality by ceasing equivocations and fence-sitting and committing to a clearer articulation of the positions I am putting forth with the material. It is silly to deny that I want my students to leave the class with particular views. I do want my students to learn certain things—a responsibility for promoting justice among them—not by a Borg-like assimilation but by communicating the reality of certain concepts so they come to realize their importance. So of course I want to change my students' minds! And though the method by which this happens should be ethical, it is part of the point of a transformative education, a responsibility of mine and not a violation of my professional role.

I'm convinced of the need to revise my approach, but I am still drafting a new one. I think this is an opportunity to creatively develop and test out strategies in the classroom that authentically embrace my position as a moral and political agent without sacrificing the professionalism of my role. In this pursuit, I'm embracing what Stephen D. Brookfield calls the "muddling through" process of teaching: the recognition that what worked in one teaching context may fail in another, that our best plans may fall flat, and ultimately, a commitment to renewed effort amid the failures.[3] This approach of drawing on experience yet remaining adaptable in new situations may be essential for the delicate task ahead of me, as every class and set of students will be different. So far, I think there are a few ways to use non-neutrality productively.

My first approach will be disclosure at the beginning of the semester for the sake of transparency: "These are my commitments that inform the structure and design of the course. I'm here to help you evaluate your own reasons for your views, not get you to agree with me or punish you for disagreeing. But I can't pretend that I *don't* have a perspective on these issues, and since I am asking you to interrogate your views, I will also present mine in the same spirit." This approach is more authentic than neutral—no more hiding behind the curtain. It also presents a natural segue to get students thinking about their own opinions, perhaps by asking them to examine the pre-theoretical reasons for their views before revisiting them at the end of the semester. Instructors may even disclose how their own views have changed or issues on which they are still uncertain. This approach can have an equalizing effect between instructors and students, signaling that we are all in an evolving process of trying to figure out what we stand for and sorting through informed reasons to do so.

Second, we can use our personal commitments to model the process of philosophical inquiry itself. By showing how we have arrived at our own commitments, we can demonstrate how to use sound reasoning, consider alternative views, and engage in productive disagreement. This could look like a disclosure at the beginning of a new topic that the instructor holds X view for Y reasons but recognizes the importance of charitably considering opposing arguments. What a powerful way to show students why we read authors we disagree with![4] We can then show students that we recognize that the opposing view has some good points while still defending our view (or perhaps changing one's mind for those good reasons). When we let ourselves reveal our commitments, we open up a chance to model the process of how we arrived at them, exactly the method of sound inquiry we are teaching our students. Additionally, this approach may ground the stakes of philosophical dialogue. I sometimes see introductory philosophy students slip into

idle, non-committal debate, mistakenly believing that it doesn't really matter what you argue since philosophers can argue for anything. Using our own commitments to show that considering opposing views is not about proving everyone wrong but about shoring up our own arguments in an intellectually responsible way may help counter this tendency.

Finally, backing away from neutrality involves, for me at least, not letting a fear of upsetting the few get in the way of educating the many. Again, practical and professional considerations matter here, and this approach will not be available to everyone (though it is dystopian to think of a classroom ruled by fear rather than inquiry). At the risk of relying too much on my own psychological profile as an explanation, I realize I bring my deeply conflict-averse and private disposition into the classroom. This does not include philosophical conflict, but a fear of a more fundamental hostility towards my pedagogy that could potentially disrupt the classroom space. Further, I am a private person; I tend to limit my classroom disclosures to stories about my cats. So, part of my muddling through process will entail some comfort with my personal discomforts for the sake of (hopefully) a better class. While I still plan to lead with compassion and kindness, I also recognize that it is inevitable that some students will end up unhappy, pissed-off, or otherwise displeased with me or the class. And I must learn to accept this, because the cost of fence-sitting, of watering down my position, of doing everything possible to avoid upsetting someone (itself impossible!) is too high given the topics I teach.

This last suggestion is less a concrete approach and more a mindset shift away from catering to the imagined group of silent dissenters, as I had been. Some students who come in with sexist views about feminism (or related topics) may be convinced that I am trying to push my views on them regardless of what I do. Unfortunately, some portion of these students may not be in the classroom to critically consider their views. My efforts may be better spent

investing in productive discussions with those who have not written off the topics before learning about them. I'm not suggesting that teaching even these students is impossible, only that there may be strategic choices to make given my limited time and energy. Frankly, if it comes down to tiptoeing to avoid upsetting or alienating those who have already made up their minds or nourishing the thoughts of those who haven't, or who want to learn more, the choice is now clear.

The practice of personal neutrality has long been the pedagogical standard for understandable reasons. But I've come to believe that it is too risky to continue without serious consideration, especially when it concerns anti-oppression teaching material. Further, the thought of perfectly objective, neutral instructors is a disheartening vision.[5] We must bring our passions, our values and commitments, and our moral and political agency to the classroom; we must show students why we are connected to what we teach, for it can help them (and us) answer the question of why we pursue truth at all.

References

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Notes

[1] One could reasonably point out that if these students' views were that deeply entrenched, they could not be uninterred by one professor—that there was little I could do in these cases. This is a

fair point, but I think there is still a responsibility to correct misinformation within a classroom, even if it does not always result in changed minds.

[2] LaGuardia-LoBianco, "Reframing Abortion Lessons."

[3] Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher,* 1.

[4] And this can be done without slipping into harmful bothsidesism, so long as the "sides" are grounded in good faith, sound reasoning.

[5] Note that large language models like ChatGPT are designed to present all sides of an issue without taking any stance on them.