The case study by Patrick Horn and Ryan Robinson raises some difficult issues in regards to freedom of speech in the academia, the establishment clause, and academic standards. Since the case is still open, however, and we do not know what course of action Lakeland Community College (LCC) will take in response to the lawsuit, I focus in this comment on two philosophical issues that the case raises. The first issue concerns the nature of teaching philosophy, especially the introductory class Philosophy 101. The second issue has to do with the intelligibility of arguing that a professor can promote religion from a philosophical perspective, or even adopt a particular religious perspective when teaching philosophy.

In what sense can philosophy be taught and how is teaching an entry-level class different from teaching a more advanced class? More pertinently, is there one way to teach an entry-level course in philosophy and what does it mean to say that it is a survey course?

I believe that teaching philosophy, including Philosophy 101, is a unique activity in the sense that it cannot successfully be achieved if the instructor treats it simply as a case of imparting philosophical information onto the student. Knowing what Socrates, Plato, Kant, and other philosophers and thinkers said, and explicating their views, is important but this in itself is not sufficient for successfully teaching philosophy, especially to students who are introduced to philosophy for the first time. What is mostly needed in this context, I believe, is to set an example of what it is like to do philosophy. This can be achieved only if the classroom is utilized as a platform for discussion. Ideally, the discussion should involve a variety of views and perspectives, and the instructor should be the orchestrator of the discursive events taking place. But if
we think of philosophy as simply a body of knowledge that the students need to appropriate for succeeding in the class, then philosophy is reduced to what philosophers have historically said about the enduring questions of philosophy. This impoverishes the students’ conception of the nature of philosophy, which is itself one of the most important topics that should be discussed in an introductory class to philosophy.

After reading Dean Brown’s letter to Dr. Tuttle, in response to a student’s complaint that the class is religiously weighted, the impression I get is that, for Brown, an introduction to philosophy class is a survey class that should exclude the instructor’s own philosophical view. “This class is not about your philosophy,” he writes to Tuttle. “It is a survey class and that only.” But what implications does the dean’s view have for understanding the nature of philosophy and the possibility of teaching it? Does a survey class have to include each and every school of thought, or all the major thinkers and questions of philosophy? Is it historical by necessity?

The very idea that a survey class should be comprehensive in regards to the history of philosophy, whether in terms of all periods of philosophy, all the major thinkers, or all the major schools of thought, is unrealistic, and I doubt that any instructor of philosophy thinks of it along those lines. A selectively historical introduction to philosophy is fine, but not all introductions have to be historical. At the moment I teach two introductory classes to philosophy, one topical-historical and another topical with focus on the question of skepticism. I use different texts for each class. I have chosen for the introductory class that focuses on skepticism a text that does not mention any names or schools of thoughts, at least not in the body of the text. Endnotes are provided for reference as to where students can find additional discussion of the topics and whom the philosophers associated with these topics are. I use the text in response to other perspectives on skepticism associated with philosophical questions in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, politics, and religion. My aim in both classes is to show the students what it is like to do philosophy by focusing on selective topics. I believe that, if I am successful in my endeavor, then the course served its purpose. This is not to deny the importance and necessity of the history of philosophy, but it is to show that it is possible to teach an introductory course in philosophy by being selective, even very selective, about the material included in the syllabus. I do not see the point of bombarding the students with myriads of names of philosophers and schools of thought.
The material presented to the students can be a conversation between the major players in the field, but it can also be one that involves the views of the instructor. Why is it that Dean Brown, and many other professors of philosophy, believe that it is inappropriate for professors to reveal their views on the topics discussed and even argue their case when they present their own views? Perhaps the main issue with Brown, as the lawsuit against LCC reveals, is that he objects to Tuttle’s disclosure of his own personal religious beliefs in the class. According to the lawsuit, he told Tuttle that he considers the instruction successful when the students never know what his personal beliefs are. But does it matter if the professor’s views are religious rather than philosophical?

We need to keep in mind that expressing one’s own religious beliefs is different from expressing one’s own philosophical views. Furthermore, both forms of expression are different from making the case for one’s views, whether philosophical or religious. The latter activity is philosophical, and it is appropriate to promote it in a philosophy class. Philosophy discusses many topics and both ethics and religion are part of that discussion. I find the dean’s viewpoint outdated and foreign to the nature of doing philosophy. Perhaps professors cannot discuss personal views on religion in a biology class, but this cannot be a legitimate limitation for a philosophy class, whether advanced or entry level. I am not saying that professors have to discuss their views, but there should be no objection to doing that as long as the discussion is philosophical. Why should professors not state the case for their views? What else can they do? True, normally professors leave their own philosophies and/or the arguments for more advanced classes, but this does not constitute a refutation of the suitability of the practice in introductory classes. There should be no restrictions on how to teach a class, as long as one does it philosophically, allowing all perspectives to be presented.

Here, I would like to mention a recent ‘First Person’ column in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, written by David D. Perlmutter, who is an associate professor of mass communication at Louisiana State University and a senior fellow at the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs.1 Perlmutter writes about the nature and merit of teaching introductory 101 courses. He takes a different attitude than the dominant one in “elite” and state universities, an attitude that looks down on professors who teach this extremely important class. He makes the point that preparing to teach an entry-level course is an opportunity to clarify one’s thoughts about the field, as well as to explain and justify what people in the field do most clearly. As he puts it, “rather than an exercise in dumbing down
or oversimplifying, teaching the intro class forces me to explain and justify what I do more clearly.” By mapping out “the evolutions, revolutions, major players, controversies, and patterns of research and theory” in the field, he states, he fulfils the aims of the course. He evaluates the teaching of a 101 course as an exciting journey, an anti-aging tonic that leads to the desire to captivate the minds of over stimulated students by showing them the “fascinations and joys” of our fields. He ends the essay by writing: “That’s the real thing; that’s what real professors should do.”

Indeed, that is what professors should do. Perlmutter is not suggesting that an introductory class should include the major players and controversies in the field, or that various perspectives need to be discussed, but the focus of his comment, it seems to me, is on mapping the great conversations relevant to the particular 101 course being taught and, most importantly, on explaining and justifying what the specific field is about. For the latter to happen, instructors of 101 classes, especially in philosophy, should feel free to present their own perspectives.

This brings me to an extremely important issue, namely whether the argument that using philosophy to promote one’s own ethical or religious views makes any sense. First of all, I find no evidence in Tuttle’s syllabus that he was promoting a particular religious view, at least not in the sense in which he tries to convert people to Catholicism. No doubt, the reading assignments seem to be focused mainly on religious and ethical themes, and the main text used for the class is on human nature. But this in itself is no reason to accuse Tuttle of promoting a particular religious view. The point is the manner in which he discussed the reading assignments. Did he try to convince the students that all arguments are in favor of a Catholic worldview? It is hard to see how that can be the case considering that the reading assignments include Plato, Aristotle, the Presocratics, the Epicureans, the Stoics, Marx, Hegel, Mill, Freud, Nietzsche, Sartre, Descartes, Buddhism, and a whole additional text focusing on an exchange between a Moslem absolutist and a Black feminist relativist. Furthermore, the whole idea of teaching a class from a religious perspective is replete with problems.

I can imagine what it would be like to teach the mind-body problem from a religious perspective. In this case, the instructor will attempt to convince the students that God is the creator of all things, including minds and bodies, that God does not deceive us about the existence of the body, and that the interaction is genuine although the mind/soul can be independent of the body. But what would it be like to teach the ques-
tion of the nature of philosophy from a religious perspective? Can one seriously claim that philosophy is a divine or a devilish activity, for example? Perhaps the instructor would advocate the view that philosophy is the handmaid of theology. I am not saying no one will make the argument, but that does not seem to be Tuttle’s perspective at any rate.

Presumably, if someone is to argue a case from a religious perspective, one needs to contrast that perspective with other perspectives to show why the other perspectives are wrong. In Tuttle’s syllabus, there is evidence that he attempted to do precisely that. Sartre’s atheism, for example, is contrasted with Paul Vitz’ “The Psychology of Atheism.” But, in this particular example, the argument as to why one or another view is wrong is philosophical, not religious, and students, notwithstanding the fact that they are new to the field, can decide for themselves whether the view concerned is convincing or not. Tuttle may set up the discussion in such a way that his views are the focal point, or he may have showed why Vitz’ view is more convincing than Sartre’s, but as long as he allows equal opportunity for responses from the students, no harm is done. This is not to say that the equality of opportunity to present a view or a criticism of a view is the same thing as having equal views, or views that can be argued on equal grounds. But if this means that the students had to have training in philosophy prior to engaging the professor in a debate, then I think this is confused. It certainly would help to have the right training, but it is not necessary. The professor may know more about the subject than the students, but, in philosophy, once the viewpoints have been presented, there is no say who will get the best insight. As long as the professor allows equality of presenting opinions, he serves his job as a teacher.

Of course some students are impressionable, and it may be a fact a certain instructor might take the infatuation with his views favorably, but this in itself does not mean the practice of arguing for one’s own views, even if it is the instructor’s, must be stopped. It would be a fallacy of missing the point if this conclusion is drawn from the circumstances. The fact that a student complains about the focus of the instructor is perhaps an indication that the student disagrees with something the instructor said. If that is the case, then the course served its purpose of showing what philosophical activity is about.

Let me remind the reader here that I am not defending Tuttle. I do believe that his syllabus reveals a bias for teaching religious and ethical themes in a class that has room for other topics. I am simply saying that giving him the benefit of the doubt is appropriate because he could have
fulfilled one of the main purposes of teaching philosophy, which is to exemplify what philosophical activity is like. I think we have to keep in mind that, if too much weight is placed on what the instructor argues for in the class, then we need to address the question of how students are introduced to arguments for the existence of God in introductory classes to philosophy. Almost all introductory textbooks in the field contain a substantial section on philosophy of religion that include the problem of evil, atheism, religious experience, and the arguments for God’s existence. Should we expect atheists to complain that the text, or the instructor who teaches that text, are attempting to convert them into theism? If an instructor shows why the ontological argument for God’s existence makes sense, for example, does this mean that he or she has a personal agenda? Certainly not. Philosophical arguments for the existence of God are not meant as faith promoters or as actual proofs that God’s existence is a favorable fact. They simply reflect how philosophers attempt to make sense of the reality of God.

I am not sure what to make of the notion of a Christian philosopher because, as I see it, the philosopher has both an ethical and a philosophical obligation to wait on the meaning of all discourse, including religious discourse. In a sense, it is a contradiction in terms to characterize oneself as a Christian philosopher. As a theologian, however, Tuttle perhaps attempts to make sense of the Catholic faith. After all, one of theology’s definitions is a faith seeking understanding. Philosophy, on the other hand, is the activity that provides the understanding, or at least one type of understanding. Philosophical understanding is different from theological understanding in that the latter relies on textual and historical analysis of religious doctrines whereas the former relies on conceptual analysis. From this perspective, philosophy cannot promote religion in any coherent sense, and neither can a philosopher. It is not that the philosopher, especially a Christian philosopher who may argue from a particularly religious perspective, may not try to justify his or her faith — but the attempt itself is bound to fail for the simple reason that religion appeals to the heart, not the mind, or this is at least how I see it. Religion in my view is not a theoretical activity that gives us options on what is right and wrong. Religion commands us to do the right thing and tells us what that thing is. But philosophy does not operate in that manner. If Tuttle allowed discussion in the classroom, showing the merits and the confusions of each position discussed, including his, then he would not have been promoting religion even if he advocates a form of Catholicism. To assume that it is possible to promote religion philosophically is to assume
that religion can be promoted as a theory of some sort. But if religion is not a theory, then philosophical discussion of its content cannot be a form of promoting religion. If Tuttle argued for his religious belief by attempting to give it philosophical justification, then his justification must be metaphysical-theological. If the latter, then one wonders whether he was doing philosophy after all.

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