

## Teaching Towards Love: The Manifesto of a Recovering Pedant

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I finally watched the first season of *The Good Place*. It was recommended by my students on the assumption that a show featuring a philosophy professor would surely captivate any and all real-life philosophy professors. And while the general claim is almost certainly false, they had my number.

The show centers on a woman, Eleanor, who dies and is mistakenly sent to heaven.<sup>1</sup> Once there, the error is quickly discovered, and Eleanor is threatened with deportation...unless, that is, she can attain something that evaded her during her time on earth: moral goodness. In order to achieve this, Eleanor solicits the help of one of her “good place” companions, a man named Chidi. Chidi is the aforementioned professor of philosophy, and he—true to character—decides the best thing for Eleanor is to take a crash course in ethical theory. He assumes that fluency in concepts like Kant’s “categorical imperative” and Mill’s “harm principle” and Aristotle’s “golden mean” will help her—steadily and surely—become a better person.

In my modest opinion, and with all due respect to a fellow philosophy professor, Chidi’s plan is stupendously idiotic.

It’s not just that there is serious disagreement between the various thinkers on his syllabus, nor is it the naive optimism that slots just a few weeks to gain mastery of notoriously difficult material. It’s the outlandish assumption that moral expertise, of the kind on offer in most philosophy classrooms, is in any way conducive to being a good person. If you turn to someone looking for moral help, and they tell you to read the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, they are either a scoundrel or an ethics professor or—quite possibly—both.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not suggesting that philosophers shouldn’t be in the business of moral education. I actually believe my task as a philosophy professor is to help students become better people, that is, genuine lovers of wisdom (people who would never think to utter the words, “the business of moral education”). The problem is that many philosophers, myself included, are incredibly dim-witted when it comes to designing classrooms that do this well. We’re rather poor psychologists.

As I continue to take stock of my own enormous idiocy, I've found invaluable help in an unlikely place: St. Augustine's discussion of how to read scripture. In what follows, I rehearse some of the considerations provoked by this encounter and their effect on my current approach to teaching. I predict you'll find many of my suggestions preposterous. My hope, though, is that you'll sit on that strong reaction for a couple years, maybe read (*actually* read) some Augustine, and then slowly make changes to your course, or—if you're not a teacher—the way you think about the role of books in your life. (If that describes you—*not a teacher*—whenever you encounter some form of the word “teach,” I invite you to replace it with some form of the word “read.” Also, since Augustine is the conversational touchpoint, there will be occasional references to God and the Bible. If you find this language alienating, take heart: my larger thesis isn't religious.)

In Book I of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine makes the remarkable claim that a person hasn't understood the Christian scriptures unless in reading them he also grows in love for God and neighbor. Augustine writes:

So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them. If on the other hand you have made judgments about them that are helpful for building up this love, but for all that have not said what the author you have been reading actually meant in that place, then your mistake is not pernicious.... [You] are mistaken in the same sort of way as people who go off the road, but still proceed by rough paths to the same place as the road was taking them to.<sup>2</sup>

As much as I like to tout the idea that a liberal arts education is intrinsically valuable, I think Augustine has it right. If our books, seminars, and discussions don't move us toward real wisdom, then our education is—as another religious writer puts it—a wretched subterfuge.<sup>3</sup> Just as Augustine says that understanding scripture always involves being built up in love, philosophy too must grow the heart.

Now, keep in mind, our friend Chidi seems to endorse something like this thesis. His lectures are explicitly designed to help Eleanor improve her character. Thus, his mistake is really one of imprudence. He doesn't know the proper means to his desired end. Let's take advantage of some of Augustine's assumptions in order to suggest a possible source of Chidi's confusion.

If we assume that Augustine correctly expresses what it means to understand the Christian scriptures, then it makes sense to assume that this

end, the growth of love, would have been very much on the mind of Jesus during his own time as a teacher. Furthermore, we can assume Jesus would have been especially adept at teaching toward love. Surely, his lessons—if any—were impeccably, even ideally, designed for spiritual transformation. Now, given this, it’s striking how little Jesus’s teaching resembles what we might call traditional “academic discourse.” He seemed to have zero interest in formal lectures, developing a “systematic theology,” or deploying a specialized, technical vocabulary. He was, to put it mildly, no Karl Barth. What do we find instead? It’s shocking: parables, metaphors, images, object lessons. All manner of loose and allusive speech typically barred from strait-laced philosophical discourse. What is the kingdom of heaven like? *A pearl*. How best to describe God? *A father overjoyed at the return of a prodigal son*. How ought we to live? *Consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field*.

Here’s where the philosophy professor grows suspicious. He assumes that Jesus is in desperate need of a clean-up thinker: someone who comes later and helps the reader *really* understand the ways of God by offering a less colorful, more precise explanation. Even if the theologian grants that there is some virtue to Jesus’s pedagogical approach, she or he refuses to entertain the thought that Jesus’s preferred manner of self-revelation is ideal: that knowledge of God (or Goodness, depending on your taste) might be best achieved via metaphor, myth, and parable; that, even stronger, a more analytic approach might actually move the reader away from God.

Away from God—how? In one of two ways. The strong claim (which I believe is right but won’t venture to defend here) is that approaches that move from the literary to the literal, the allusive to the analytic, obscure our ability to see God accurately. This is an epistemic thesis: stories and parables of the kind Jesus told are the best means by which to *know* God. The weak claim, one that even the philosophy professor is likely to grant, is that academic treatises are much less likely to move people toward character transformation. This is a motivational thesis: stories and parables of the kind Jesus told are much more likely to *catalyze character change*.

Let’s take all this back to the Augustine quote from earlier. While I find his main point compelling (that reading ought always to involve growth in love), I’m not fully convinced of all the particulars. Remember what he says about the person who gets it half right (someone who is built up in love by scripture but misses the author’s intended meaning): such a person is mistaken in the “same sort of way as people who go off the road, but still proceed by rough paths to the same place as the road was taking them to.” First, what’s this road that Augustine speaks of? Well, surely, it is the path to love of God and neighbor, the end—Augustine tells us—of all scripture. If

that's correct, then it doesn't seem entirely right to say that a person who is built up in love by scripture, while missing the author's intended meaning, is taking the longer, rougher road.

Consider a person—we'll call him Francis—who reads the story of the rich young ruler and misinterprets (we'll assume) that Jesus wants *all* his followers to sell their possessions and minister to the poor. Francis, a rather impressionable young man, does exactly this and becomes a devoted, life-long servant to the disenfranchised. Now, does it make any sense to say that Francis takes the long road to love? By no means! If scripture is a road that leads to love of God and neighbor, then it would be bizarre to claim that Francis's interpretation constitutes a detour. In contrast, imagine now a "correct" interpretation of the passage that, because it doesn't demand as much from the reader, doesn't lead her to the kind of intense and direct love we find in Francis. Wouldn't we say that this second reader, in her "correct" interpretation, is on the less direct path to love? If so, we arrive at a more radical version of Augustine's already radical hermeneutic: the "meaning" of any given passage of scripture just is the upbuilding of the reader in love. The best reader is the one who doesn't simply think that scripture is *for* upbuilding, but also *about* upbuilding. The *for* is the *about*. Jesus doesn't care whether you become a master exegete; he wants you to live as he lives.

I find this more radical hermeneutic utterly compelling, and it has dramatically transformed the way I think about the goal of my philosophy classroom. In what follows, I briefly discuss—in no particular order—a few effects of this shift:

- I'm rarely concerned to belabor the finer details of an argument or line of reasoning. Outlining each of the several steps in Descartes's cosmological argument; getting straight the precise way in which Kant's categorical imperative can be used to test the goodness of a proposed action; entreating students to memorize Aquinas' Five Ways—these more pedantic exercises have no place in my classroom. This, of course, doesn't mean that I don't teach philosophical texts, just that their primary function is to provoke an ethical epiphany. And, yes, this means that if—three days after class—they don't quite remember the finer details of Kant's transcendental deduction, but the lesson in fact seeded a real desire to love, then that session was a rousing success.
- I only teach texts that are conducive to inspiration. This list of readings is largely a function of my own pedagogical limitations. For instance, though I could imagine a gifted teacher leading a truly inspired seminar on Spinoza's *Ethics*, if I don't see a path forward, I won't teach it. (By the

way, selecting texts for inspiration shouldn't be confused with selecting for ease or relevance or whatever. The most inspiring texts are often difficult.)

- I only assign the sections of a text that are conducive to transformation. (This one is a struggle for me. I still have a tendency to fetishize big books.) That said, the more closely the work resembles a true work of art—say, *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Moby Dick* or *The Confessions*—the more likely I am to preserve the whole. This is not because I believe in the inviolable sanctity of Art, but because the full scope of a canvas speaks more powerfully than just a corner.
- I don't let the fact that an author is wrong about something (or offensive or a bad human being) prevent me or my students from being nourished by their words. "Heidegger was a member of the Nazi party—yes, despicable, but did he say anything beautiful! He did? Then let's start there." Or, "Kierkegaard claimed what, exactly? Well, that's a bit misguided, but the spirit of the claim seems generally right, so I'll use that too!" Or, "Augustine is almost certainly wrong if we interpret him to be saying this, but it's possible he is also saying this other thing which is deeply and movingly profound. Settled. We'll assume he is saying the other thing!"
- I try to create an environment that discourages undue casuistry. We are not gathered to play the game my wife calls "Socra-teasing," where the philosopher tests and refutes and counterclaims and quibbles all to the point of exhaustion. As entertaining as this game can be, we are looking to develop roots, not chop logic. (In a recent class, I pretended to have the mere vocabulary of a sixth grader in order to quell a spirit of empty jargonizing.)
- I try to answer questions, especially if they're asked in a casuistic spirit, in the manner Jesus so often adopts with "experts":
  - What exactly do you mean by "attention"?
  - "Well, imagine a young boy sitting down to dinner with his father, and the father turns and..."
  - Can you give us a brief definition of "soul"?
  - "The thing you harm when you betray a friend."

- I encourage discussion, but never open-ended discussion. A good discussion leader is like the conductor of a symphony: slowly leading the class toward a climactic insight. Here a bit more Sarah with her inclination for charity; there a little less Richard with his booming self-certainty; here some Peter to balance out Sarah; there Amelia who—yes, I see it!—has just caught the thread. (Somehow the educational world has come to associate “Socratic” discussion with conversations that go nowhere in particular. Not only is this a terrible representation of Socrates’ own method, but it also strikes me as bad teaching. Why think that something good will come from placing a bunch of sophomores in a room and getting them to express their opinions? If we assume further that it’s precisely their opinions that are likely to be off, the method seems all the madder.)

I know what you’re thinking: what I’ve just described isn’t a philosophy classroom. Philosophy is all about lingering over the minutest details of an argument and learning specialized vocabulary and providing definitions when asked for further clarity. My class, in sad contrast, sounds more like a self-help seminar or a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous or one of those inane book clubs full of people who only ever see themselves in the characters. In response, all I can say (and without the slightest bit of ill will or irony) is: very well, then it’s not a philosophy course. If that’s what you mean by philosophy, then you’re quite right; I am not at all interested in it! I want my students to become lovers of wisdom, not primarily critical thinkers (in the narrow sense employed by my critic) or experts or, God forbid, assistant professors.

But, you say, this is all a little anti-intellectual. Shouldn’t students be able to know and rehearse the content of Descartes’s third meditation? On the view I’m expounding, the idea of what it means to be intellectual has been rehabilitated. Because the intellect is meant to serve life, good thinking is marked by a preference for questions and dispositions of mind that grow the soul. Consider an example:

You read a novel in which love is portrayed as a commitment to another person’s good irrespective of whether they reciprocate. This picture strikes you as beautiful and noble, and in the immediate hours after reading the book you’re overcome with the sense that you must change your life. Now consider two different intellectual paths. On the first, you research everything that’s been written on the philosophy of love. You’re desperate to know what it *really* is, and, to this end, you need a proper, studied account. So, you head over to the

library and spend months researching the nature of love. (Incidentally, the research goes so well that you go on to write a dissertation about it and spend the first ten years of your career as a professional philosopher [sic] writing groundbreaking articles.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, you get tenure and a really sweet moniker-of-the-guild: *The Love Expert*.) In contrast, on the second path, you decide to imitate the examples from the novel, and immediately move to forgive someone who harmed you years before.

Which of the two paths models *clear thinking*? The answer is obvious.

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[*Note to self: Insert an expanded philosophical give-and-take that establishes my ability, if not inclination, to participate in a careful consideration of objections. The kind of thing that shows the reader that this writer, for all his winsomeness, can really get down to business and hold his own.*]

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But I've said too much! This game of asking for and giving reasons, whatever else it's good for, does not lead to intellectual satisfaction. If doubt were a ferocious beast, reasons, justifications, and cavils would be its sustenance, every return volley stoking its hunger.<sup>5</sup> Maybe, just maybe, Socrates knew this too. He spent so much of his time asking for and weighing definitions ("What *really* is 'love?')", but perhaps all he ever wanted was someone to reject the premise. I like to imagine this final scene from a lost dialogue:

Theophilus: Socrates, I can see you really are ignorant. This is not the path to wisdom, but a child's game. I'm on my way to reconcile with a friend. Come and see what love is.

Socrates: [*To himself and with a look of joy...warm as the joy that children feel when they see their father's life dawn again, one who's lain on a sickbed racked with torment, wasting away, slowly, under some angry power's onslaught—*]<sup>6</sup> "Ah, yes. Finally."<sup>†</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, I progressed far enough into the show to know that this isn't an entirely accurate description.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Teaching Christianity/De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), p. 124.

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<sup>3</sup> This shouldn't be confused with teaching toward social-political-bureaucratic praxis. I'm classical enough in my intuitions to believe that soul work is fundamental, and that it's often hidden and maybe even largely unquantifiable. This is one of the more boldly offensive views a person can hold in today's educational landscape. Most administrators seem to believe that, if an educational objective isn't manifestly assessable, then it's tantamount to magic, and the practitioner in question should be burned or drowned or buried in jot forms or whatever it is we do to remediate witches these days.

<sup>4</sup> See, this issue, Joe D. Bookman, "The Plight of the Dissertator," *Zeal* 1/2 (2023).

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to my friend Søren for this image.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to my friend Homer for permission to quote from his epic poem *The Odyssey*.

† Thanks to my friend Mark for the countless conversations that form the background of this essay. What is an intellectual friendship? A relationship in which one person's ideas are irrevocably marked by another's. Also, thanks to an anonymous reviewer for their many kind-spirited questions and suggestions. I try to address some of their more pressing concerns in the argumentative interlude. But, really, I think we'll just have to grab a meal together.