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LGBT PHILOSOPHY AND UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING

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My remarks fall into three parts: (1) some general comments about the profession and undergraduate teaching; (2) LGBT philosophy—its nature, questions about objectivity and balance, and whether it is best done in separate courses or integrated into the curriculum; and (3) what we can and should do now with regard to LGBT philosophy and undergraduate teaching.

1. The Profession and Undergraduate Teaching

When my department carries out a search I am repeatedly reminded how little attention seems to be paid by professional philosophers to undergraduate teaching, and how much it seems to be disvalued. My institution is primarily a teaching institution with a heavy teaching load. Reference letter after reference letter for job candidates by their graduate school teachers says something such as, “As far as teaching is concerned, I will leave comments on that to others,” and goes on to give yet another summary of the candidate’s dissertation. Though the Jobs for Philosophers advertisement for our position indicates we wish candidates to submit, along with their other materials, evidence of teaching excellence, we often find we have to remind people to give us such evidence. I have heard it claimed that some graduate advisors advise job candidates to not send materials related to teaching, because that will suggest one is a teacher rather than a researcher—in effect, a lower class professional philosopher.

American Philosophical Association meetings also make clear how low a priority is given to undergraduate teaching. There are relatively few sessions devoted to issues related to teaching, and they are often poorly attended.

I will not argue that research in philosophy is not important; it certainly is. It is necessary that graduate schools in part train us as researchers in philosophy. As far as American Philosophical Association meetings are concerned, they need to be a place where people can present their research and receive feedback on it. For those of us who teach at colleges and universities with no graduate programs in philosophy, the American Philosophical Association meetings sometimes serve as a refreshing opportunity to engage in a level of philosophical discussion we crave.

The writing done by most philosophers, papers presented at meetings and submitted to and published in journals, is aimed at others with similar...
training. Comparatively little is written with the intelligent undergraduate, or even the intelligent general member of the public, in mind. And much of it is inaccessible to non-philosophers. I often hear philosophers at American Philosophical Association meetings say that they find some papers too narrow and technical for them to understand.

So although research in philosophy is important, there is a remarkable lack of attention to issues related to undergraduate teaching.

First note an economic reality about professional philosophy. The economic basis for the field of professional philosophy is overwhelmingly based on undergraduate students taking philosophy courses, which provides jobs for people trained to teach. Graduate programs exist to teach those who will be teachers. Thus, jobs in philosophy rely significantly on undergraduates, most of whom will take perhaps only one or at most several courses in philosophy. Yet in professional philosophy they are often ignored and disvalued. (Is this generally true of academia in general, and not just philosophy? I wonder how many professions pay so little attention to and disvalue those people whose needs are responsible for the existence of their jobs.)

Let us shift to the question of influence and impact. Most of us have hopes and dreams of having some impact on “the field.” Given the reality of the profession, if we think about it, and if we widen the scope from “the field” to “society,” the largest impact we can have on society is through the impact we have on undergraduate students, by far the largest number of students taught by us. Organizations like the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy, the sponsor of this session, and the American Philosophical Association Committee on the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons in the Profession, should, in addition to focusing on how LGBT philosophers are being treated and whether they can work on scholarship related to LGBT issues, focus on how we can have an influence on students, and through them, on society. I argue for a view that sees LGBT philosophy as transformative: that we need to pay more attention to how we can work LGBT issues into our courses in a variety of ways, and that we need to facilitate the writing of more philosophical essays and papers that are accessible to undergraduate students.

2. LGBT Philosophy: Its Nature

I argue that part of the answer to the question, “What is LGBT Philosophy?” is that it is transformative. Nancy Holland, in a recent essay in the *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*, draws an analogy between philosophy in general and Women’s Studies in particular, noting that in both people engage not just in “informative teaching,” but also in “transformative teaching.” Philosophy’s teaching of critical thinking skills, and its examination of the texts and ideas upon which “our society’s current understanding of the world is based” in ethics courses and courses in the history of philosophy enable changes in the lives of our students. Women’s Studies is similarly transforma-