

Shane Ewegen
Summary Report for 'The Concrete Universal'

The academy has become the cultural symbol for the Ivory Tower: that insular place wherein intellectuals, severed from the world of pressing socio-political concerns, are free to debate abstruse but ultimately meaningless questions. This description, if at all true for the academy as a whole, is doubly true for academic philosophy: for philosophy, by its very speculative nature, risks floating off into the clouds of theoretical reflections and losing sight of the concrete world below. (This jest has been ushered against philosophy since nearly its inception.) As a professor of philosophy, I sometimes worry that my classroom has become too 'heady' and recondite, and that it has lost its essential connection to the world beyond its four walls if, indeed, it ever had it.

To address this worry, I set out this past Fall to make my classrooms more practically engaged—to make them more 'down to earth,' so to speak. For two of my courses, I formulated and included a practical component whose fulfillment took place beyond the walls of the classroom. My hope was that, by requiring students to engage their communities on a concrete and practical level, I could alleviate or at least temper the loftiness otherwise endemic to the philosophical classroom.

For my Ancient Greek Philosophy course, I struggled initially to come up with a meaningful and interesting assignment that would accomplish these ends. How does one make such an antiquated and speculative topic more politically concrete? The answer to this question came to me while reading Plato's *Apology*. In this text, Socrates is tried by the city of Athens for (among other things) buzzing around the city, like an annoying gadfly, and engaging its citizenry in focused, laborious philosophical inquiry. So difficult and irritating is Socrates's practice that the aristocracy of Athens would rather see him killed than continue to endure it. In this figure of Socrates the 'gadfly' I saw the answer to my question: I would require that my students interrogate their *parents* in the style of the great Socrates.

The assignment, titled 'Socratic Refutations,' required that the student engage a family member in a sustained and focused philosophical debate on a political topic of the student's choosing. In order to make this encounter fruitful, I asked the students to prepare themselves beforehand by researching a topic and by practicing arguing about it with a friend. I also urged the students to conduct themselves maturely and kindly through the course of their 'refutations.' Above all, I instructed the students that the point of the exercise was not to 'win' the argument by proving a thesis or viewpoint, but rather simply to reveal to their interlocutors that their position was not as secure or clear as they perhaps thought it was. In other words, and in a thoroughly Socratic fashion, the goal was to make their interlocutors aware of their own *ignorance*.

Although this is what I told the students, the actual goal of the exercise was left unsaid. My true hope was that, through attempting this exercise, the *students themselves* would come to be made aware of their own ignorance. When one reads the Platonic dialogues, one finds Socrates effortlessly and eloquently reducing his interlocutors to speechlessness. When one attempts to do this in real life, however, one discovers just how difficult this is to pull off. I wanted my students to experience something of the devastation of realizing that one does not know as much as one thought about the political goings-on of one's community. (This type of humility is, I think, essential to meaningful and genuine political involvement.) Above all, I wanted my students to come to appreciate how *difficult* it is to make philosophical thinking concrete, and thus how hard it is to overcome the speculative distance that philosophy itself seems inclined to create.

Students picked a variety of topics, such as gun control, abortion laws, the legal status of

Shane Ewegen
Summary Report for 'The Concrete Universal'

recreational drugs, the viability of a Donald Trump presidency, and—my personal favorite—the nature of bread. I gave the students some leeway with how to present their results to me. Some students recorded their conversations and then transcribed the tapes; others simply summarized their conversations; still others conducted their conversations over social media (Facebook, Twitter, text-message) and sent me the transcripts. I was truly blown away by the creativity the students exhibited in this regard. I could not have foreseen, let alone have required, the rich array of presentations that I received, some of which I displayed at the CTL Presentations in April.

At the end of the semester I informally interviewed the students about their experiences. They unilaterally agreed that the exercise was uncomfortable but rewarding. Very few students 'had a good time' with the exercise, though every single one of them claimed to have learned a great deal from it. As I had hoped, they all seemed to have felt the existential discomfort that accompanies encountering one's own ignorance. Given this result, as well as the beautiful and entertaining collection of 'Socratic Refutations' I received, I am compelled to admit that the assignment was a resounding success.

For my Guided Studies course, and as a graded component of the class, I required the students to become engaged in socio-political organizations on campus. The hope was that, while simultaneously studying speculative philosophical issues *and* engaging in dirt-under-the-nails activism and service, the students would begin to see the natural intimacies between the two. I allowed the students to pick an organization that appealed to them (subject to my approval), and required that they participate with the group on a regular and active basis. Students chose organizations such as the Trinity chapter of Amnesty International, Habitat for Humanity, Best Buddies, Green Campus, The Fred, WGRAC, EROS, and others.

At the end of the semester I interviewed the students about their experiences. The response was univocally positive. The great majority of students ardently enjoyed engaging in civic action, and all of them came to see the value of it. Above all, the students appreciated the existential balance afforded them through the coincidence of philosophical thinking and practical engagement, as well as the greater sense of community that this assignment has brought about for them. (Many if not all of the students have remained active in the organization they chose for the assignment.)

My very successful attempt this past year to make my classes more political would not have been possible without the support of the CTL Fellowship group and the rich insights of the wonderful people who comprised it. Our workshops were always engaging and useful, and nearly every good or fruitful idea I put into practice was suggested to me by one of the other fellows or the directors. Through participating in this program I learned the value and joy of collaborative pedagogy and the impossibility of excelling through solitary work alone. I hope very much to be able to participate again in the future.