Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Six with Dr. Seth Vannatta & Dr. Daniel Brunson

"Teaching Philosophy to First Generation College Students: Part I of II"

Transcribed by Drake Boling, 5/10/2017

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[Intro music]

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Dr. Eric Thomas Weber: You're listening to WRFL Lexington 88.1 FM, *all the way to the left*. This is Dr. Eric Thomas Weber here, and I've got for you episode six of Philosophy Bakes Bread: *food for thought about life and leadership*. The show is a production of the Society of Philosophers in America, a.k.a. SOPHIA. I and my co-host Dr. Anthony Cashio, he's going to join me, and we're going to be, today, issuing part one of two episodes that we're putting together on a panel that SOPHIA organized for the American Philosophical Association meeting this past January. Today's episode, and that next one eventually that will come, is about the value of and challenges for teaching philosophy to first-generation college students. We're going to jump in with the first segment of four pre-recorded interview segments that we've recorded for you on Philosophy Bakes Bread, *food for thought about life and leadership.* Here goes:

[Theme Music]

Dr. Weber: Hello and welcome to Philosophy Bakes Bread: food for thought about life and leadership, a production of the Society of Philosophers in America, a.k.a. SOPHIA. I'm Dr. Eric Thomas Weber.

Dr. Cashio: And I'm Dr. Anthony Cashio. A famous phrase says that Philosophy bakes no bread, that it's not practical. But we at SOPHIA and on this show, aim to correct that misperception.

Dr. Weber: Philosophy Bakes Bread airs on WRFL, Lexington, 88.1 FM and is recorded and distributed as a podcast next, so if you can't catch us live on the air, subscribe and be sure to reach out to us. You can find us online at philosophybakesbread.com. We hope that you'll reach out to us on any of the topics we raise, or on topics that you want us to bring up. Plus, we have a segment called "You tell me". Listen for it, and let us know what you think.

Dr. Cashio: You can reach us in a number of ways! We are on twitter as @Philosophybb, which stands for Philosophy Bakes Bread. We're also on Facebook at Philosophy Bakes Bread, and check out SOPHIA's Facebook page while you're there at Philosophers in America.

Dr. Weber: You can of course, also email us at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com, and you can call us and leave a short, recorded message with a question, or a comment, or bountiful praise, that we may be able to play on the show at 859-257-1849. That number is 859-257-1849. And if you're interested in learning more about SOPHIA, check us out online at philosophersinamerica.com.

Dr. Cashio: On today's show, we're very fortunate to be joined by two guests, Dr. Seth Vannatta and Dr. Daniel Brunson, who are both here to talk to us about the value of and eponymous to studying philosophy for first-generation college students. That's a lot of prepositions so I'm looking forward to unpacking that.

Dr. Weber: Dr. Seth Vannatta and Dr. Daniel Brunson both teach at Morgan State University at Baltimore, Maryland. Dr. Vannatta studies: American philosophy, philosophy of law, history of philosophy, political philosophy, logic, the philosophy of education, the philosophy of sport, and popular culture of philosophy. Seth recently published a book titled *Conservatism and Pragmatism in Law, Politics, and Ethics* with Palgrave Macmillan in 2014, and it's presently out in paperback, so go have a look.

Dr. Cashio: Dr. Brunson's research involves applying and updating classically informed Pragmatism, especially rooted in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce and Josiah Royce, to issues in contemporary epistemology. Particular topics of interest include cognitive neuroscience, disability, emotions, history, risk, and technology. His recent publications include *Fluency, Satisfaction, Truth: Re-assessing James in Light of Some Contemporary Psychology* in *the Journal of Contemporary Pragmatism*, and *Ensuring and Indefinite Future: Sustainability as a Consequence of Royce's Moral Vision* in a journal called *The Pluralist.*

Dr. Weber: In this opening segment, we ask you guys to tell us about how you got started in Philosophy, and how you would explain philosophy to someone. We'll just start with you Daniel, how about that? How did you get into philosophy? How would you explain it to someone who has never studied it before?

Dr. Brunson: Thank you, Anthony and Eric, I want to say again thank you for having us on the show. I'll go ahead and say it now since it's part of our topic for today, that I am a first-generation college student. My mom went to college when I was 13, and received an associate's degree of nursing, but didn't get her bachelor's degree until after I had finished my PH.D. 17 years later. And my father never went to college at all. I went to undergraduate at IUPUI, Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis, and did my graduate work at Penn State University, and I've been here at Morgan since 2010. I tend to think of philosophy as sharpening our intuitions and common sense beliefs and testing them for consistency. Which, for somebody who has never had philosophy before, I always like to emphasize that in a way it is a continuation and additional set of tools for things that we do in everyday life. In the debate and dialogue we do with each other in a variety of topics, and trying to make things more explicit about what we're doing when we are trying to convince somebody of something. That, and as we'll talk about today, questions of the history of philosophy and the traditions involved in various ways.

Dr. Weber: Daniel let me follow up with a question. When you began studying philosophy, something hooked you, right? You obviously continued in your studies. What about philosophy, what hooked you?

Dr. Brunson: Well I first started reading philosophy in high school, when I was working at a book store, and we had volumes, I read the *Critique of Pure Reason*

Dr. Cashio: In high school?

Dr. Brunson: Yeah, when I was 16. I read it again in college and it made much more sense.

Dr. Vannatta: You read it in translation, I'm told. (laughter)

Dr. Brunson: Yes it was translation. It was the Mecklenberg edition from Hackett. then I also like William James' Pragmatism, which of course is still very important for me. One thing about philosophy that appeals to me overall is the looseness of its boundaries. We can draw from the sciences, we can draw from history, we can draw from literature and still be philosophical in a way. And not that there's a set philosophical methodology, but, in going along with James, the idea that philosophy is a corridor that opens on to many different doorways. And so it's a way to move between disciplines.

Dr. Weber: So it leaves a lot of openness. So if you're an intellectually curious person, and you want to look around, that makes a lot of sense. That would be a virtue.

Dr. Cashio: All the doors open back up onto philosophy as well.

Dr. Weber: Some people say that philosophy is sort of the origin of all of the other fields, in a way. So it makes sense if you're interested in a lot of things, you end up connecting to philosophy, perhaps, or philosophical question in all kinds of places that may make you realize something interesting about it. How about you, Seth, tell us about yourself. "Know Thyself!". How did you get into philosophy? What is philosophy to you? What is you background?

Dr. Vannatta: I was introduced to philosophy early, I also was reading it in high school, in my European history class, we read Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx.

Dr. Cashio: Sounds like a fun class!

Dr. Vannatta : It was a great class. Our instructor wrote both our texts, and he was a Ph.D., and I wasn't told it was philosophy and he was a history teacher. I studied history as an undergraduate, but I learned later that I was always interested in intellectual history. I wrote a senior paper on Jeremy Bentham and Adam Smith, and started teaching at an independent Episcopal day school in Oklahoma City, where I'm from. And they offered to pay for a master's degree, and I took something like 57 hours on their dime. I stumbled into philosophy because it was a master’s in liberal arts and they had a philosophy track, and I took a course in

existentialism and thought the reading was really challenging and I thought this was where the riches are. I think I should probably pursue it to the Ph.D. level. I also saw it in terms of this corridor metaphor. My father was a raised on a farm by very traditional Methodist Christian family, and he went to college to study physics, eventually medicine, and sort of rejected organized religion. One of the ways that I define philosophy is that it's the discipline that works at the intersection of otherwise dichotomous modes of inquiry, including religion and science, nature and art. I think John Dewey referred to the philosopher as the liaison officer—some sort of translator between discipline. That, I think, continues Daniel's corridor metaphor.

Dr. Brunson: Well it's James's, but I'll take credit.

Dr. Vannatta: Well, Daniel's channeling of William James. But perhaps bridging the generation gap between my father and his father and their inability to talk science and religion drove me to try to synthesize the two early on, at least. The director of my liberal arts program ended up being the director of my dissertation at a different institution: Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where I got my Ph.D. After teaching high school and middle school for ten years, I liked to think also that the liaison officer is the productive side of philosophy. It's ability for generalization and conceptualization and abstraction. But I also think it has a sort of negative or critical function. The taking abstractions or concepts and giving them a critique so that sometimes concepts are taken as just so... But philosophers offer critique of abstractions which is also helpful sometimes, sometimes a historicizing of a concept, or just rigorously analyzing a concept semantically.

Dr. Weber: That's interesting, Seth. Actually, it's funny how both of your answers have tied together, and that's great. I wonder, you mentioned existentialism, you mentioned early exposure. What is it about philosophy, is it that corridor metaphor that excited you? Or what is it about your exposure to philosophy that really kept you going?

Dr. Vannatta: Early on, I think Immanuel Kant says that human reason is fated to ask questions that it must ask by its very nature. But they also transcend its powers to answer. That's a paraphrasing, but I think early on as a child, I laid in bed and wondered about the universe and nothingness and infinity and some of those boundary questions that got me into philosophy. I think I also just like a challenge, and I thought that philosophy was so challenging that trying to get a Ph.D. in it would make me satisfied with the intellectual endeavor.

Dr. Weber: That's interesting that you say that.

Dr. Cashio: Did it?

Dr. Vannatta: It has.

Dr. Weber: Good. Well I had an opportunity in Mississippi to teach a couple of class meetings at Parchment prison with inmates. Very serious prison facility. These folks were hungry for philosophical discourse. These weren't people who had gone to college. But they experienced just what you're talking about. They asked themselves questions and they had all kinds of ideas and it was an incredibly inspiring and motivating class meeting with people whom the general public might think are unlikely scholars or philosophers. But me going there as a philosopher, I guess what I'm saying is, what you're describing does not sound like something limited to white collar, upper-middle-class family. Everybody can have these big questions about the universe. Is that your experience, Daniel and Seth?

Dr. Brunson: Well I have had similar experiences teaching courses at Jessup Correctional Institute in the Prison Scholars program. Some of the courses were directly applicable to their lives: the course on the epistemology of testimony, but in general, I think you're exactly right about the wondering about the big questions is a pretty fundamentally human attribute.

Dr. Weber: For our general listeners, the word epistemology refers to how we come to know things. And so when there's testimony, do you know that they're telling the truth? Do we know who is guilty even when you have testimony? So there was a whole course that Dr. Brunson taught on that, it sounds like. Was it a whole course or one class meeting?

Dr. Brunson: It was a short course.

Dr. Weber: Wow, that's cool though. And I bet they were taking notes, too.

Dr. Brunson: Oh yes, very much so.

Dr. Weber: That's fantastic, thank you so much gentlemen. We're going to come back after a short break to ask you about what we described as the topic for today, which has to do with first-generation college students and challenges as well as the value of studying philosophy among such groups and with them.

Dr. Weber: Hey everybody, this is Dr. Eric Thomas Weber, live here in the studio. I do want to mention, some of you may have noticed that we didn't have in the first segment a portion called "You Tell Me!" And it's not for lack of some feedback, so for the sake of it I want to thank Richard Moore and Mark Mallette for both sending us really substantive, meaningful feedback that we are planning on addressing in a significant way, it's just we couldn't get it done by today. But that said, please keep sending us, folks, your thoughts and comments. We had some other folks reach out to us with some really nice compliments and remarks or questions. But keep them coming, we're working on some of these. Without further ado, here is segment two of the show.

Dr. Cashio: Welcome back to Philosophy Bakes Bread! This is Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber and we are here talking with Dr. Seth Vannatta and Dr. Daniel Brunson. Our topic today is the value of and eponymous to studying philosophy for first-generation college students. So, we're eager to hear from our guests about that! Seth and Daniel, do you want to tell us what this is about, and how you got into studying it and just go from there?

Dr. Vannatta: Yes, thank you. Daniel and I both teach at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. Morgan State is a historically black institution designated as Maryland's public urban university. The school enrolls an average of 7,700 students in programs in the baccalaureate though the doctoral levels. 87% of the students apply for need-based financial aid, 59% are Pell Grant eligible, and 33% of undergraduates are first-generation college students. So much of my research for the topic was experiential and personal teaching at Morgan State University.

Dr. Weber: So this is very different compared to Princeton University, where probably the vast majority of people come from families with bachelor's degrees at least if not further education. Whereas Princeton is private, public universities often are here precisely to open opportunities for folks. And so it sounds like Morgan State is doing that quite nicely.

Dr. Vannatta: That's certainly part of their mission. It's also different from the Episcopal day school where I taught in Oklahoma, Cassidy School. If you were first-generation college students, around 99% or 100% of high school graduates go to college.

Dr. Weber: Daniel, how did you get into studying this topic for the panel?

Dr. Brunson: Well again, part of it is personal reflection upon my own experiences. Being a first-generation student going through undergrad and then grad school surprisingly enough, in Philosophy, of all things, and then coming here and teaching it at HBCU and thinking about the particular challenges faced by our students both as first-generation students but also coming from more or less underprivileged backgrounds in a lot of cases, since we are a historically black college or university. It also comes out in part with my research in the nature of risk and risk management. Reflecting upon what it means to teach 'at risk' populations, and such as our students who often work full time in addition to taking a full load of courses. Sort of the pedagogical difficulties with doing a liberal arts education at a public university.

Dr. Cashio: So, why are first-generation college students a special case? Why do they get any... why do you approach it differently than you would any other college student, when they get the same education? When you're teaching philosophy and thinking about philosophy, why is this a sort of special case?

Dr. Vannatta: From my perspective, it may not be a special case, it may be that first-generation college students is a population that overlaps significantly with other college students at an institution where their high-school educations weren't necessarily geared to college preparation. So the challenges for me, I would say, Richard Rorty said "Although philosophy is formally autonomous, it is not materially self-sufficient." In some sense, the material upon which philosophy supervenes is just culture. If you have philosophy of X, where X is some form of culture like politics or law or art or literature, or sports, sometimes they come with a background where they haven't studied that form of culture rigorously. So I teach philosophy of law and Constitutional thought, but one challenge is you need to both teach what might be a civics course, or a U.S. history course or a political science 101 while at the same time attempting a sort of second-order philosophical reflection on that form of culture. And that's, I think, a particular challenge that may not be unique to first-generations students, but those students may overlap significantly with students whose high school experience wasn’t geared towards college preparation of this sort.

Dr. Weber: Seth, can I ask you to repeat that line from Richard Rorty and maybe to explain it to somebody who isn't familiar?

Dr. Vannatta: Sure, the line is "Although philosophy is formally autonomous, it is not materially self-sufficient."

Dr. Weber: Oh my goodness. What does that mean?

Dr. Vannatta: To be autonomous means to direct its own project. Other disciplines don't direct its project from the outside. But to be formal is to not have any content of its own. Therefore, its material, its content, isn't self-sufficient. And I would say that philosophy is a second-order discipline upon the material that most broadly we can just call substance. When you say "I do research", or "I teach philosophy of X", that X is some form of culture, and that provides the material, the content, upon which philosophy is a theoretical reflection. For me, that tends to be law, politics, or ethics. But it could be education, religion, on and on.

Dr. Weber: Just like, for instance, you can't imagine having a philosophy let's say, of bioethics or medical ethics, without having any sense about what medicine is about, or what doctors do and what illnesses are. Philosophy can't be without some subject matter. Is that fair to say?

Dr. Vannatta: That's exactly correct. When I'm teaching a course on Constitutional thought, and we're reading a supreme court case, there's going to be some basics of U.S. government, U.S. history, that are necessary to start to theoretically reflect on the issue. Some of these are just divisions: separation of powers, the concept of federalism, that we have state powers and national powers, and there's an ongoing debate about which should be primary that is both historical and contemporary. In a course like that, we'll end up reading theories of constitutional interpretation by folks like Benjamin Cardozo, Antonin Scalia. There are these levels of analysis when you read a theory of how the *Constitution* should be interpreted, and then you read a judicial opinion. You need to understand the terminology in the opinion, that might be a civil case or criminal case. There are certain distinctions in legal terminology that one needs to know. Then you need to match the words of the argument in the judicial opinion to the theory that you are studying. These are multiple levels of analysis going on at once, and I think that provides a challenge to each at those multiple levels at once. I think that's been... the first challenge I would articulate with regard to teaching the population.

Dr. Weber: So this is interesting, you mention culture and its role in philosophy. Culture is the stuff that people generally get exposed to or share experiences and beliefs and the language we

use and so forth. And so differences in culture are one of the things people talk about across socio-economic status and education levels. I seem to remember a long time ago hearing about how many words a young person knows when starting kindergarten, and how many different kinds of words someone has been exposed to and those can be radically different depending on the households in which they were raised. I wonder, at the same time, obviously, you could have a first-generation college student be the smartest person in your class, who has read more than anyone else and so forth. It would seem to me that the scope of the kind of person who might be a first-generation college student can be incredibly varied, though. Daniel, would you find that to be the case? How would you describe conditions for a first-generation college student coming to college?

Dr. Brunson: I would first just caution that yes, we could have a first-generation college student who is brilliant, but those people are rare. When we have these conversations, we should really be thinking about how broad our approach applies.

Dr. Weber: So I didn't mean to imply about intelligence so much as exposure to how much...

Dr. Brunson: That was going to be my next point, that part of the issue I see is of exposure, but in terms of marketing, in a sense. The porousness of philosophy's boundaries, where it's, in cases where it's like I happen to come across philosophy books while working, and read them. Or that Seth had this class where he had some philosophy. Maybe students have classes where they do read Marx, but is he described as a philosopher? Is his inquiry talked about as being philosophical? Or is it Marx the economist? Looking at psychology textbooks, that's part of the issue too, there's the use of textbooks instead of primary text in some ways. You have a summary of James' thought or Marx's thought, or John Lock's thought, instead of putting into a political science textbook, when Locke is a philosopher too. So there's one way in which maybe they are not having the opportunities to deal with philosophers through primary texts. But also then, not always being aware of what they are reading is philosophy, and the questions they have are philosophical. So there's that level of exposure is an issue.

Dr. Weber: That's interesting, because there's also immanent scientists who have a great deal of education and then are very dismissive of philosophy, like Stephen Hawking.

Dr. Cashio: Exposure is everything.

Dr. Weber: I want to bring up one distinction that can help understand at least some of the differences that first-generation college students can experience. It's not that I am one, but rather my brilliant wife studied, got her doctorate in higher education, and by default I got an honorary master's degree in it. My exposure to talking about the subject matter when talking with her about it revealed that things you would never think about as privileges for people who have come from families with a college background can be. In particular, for instance, your average first-generation college student doesn't put in for instance, a request to live in the dorm nearly as early as someone else. Some people don't realize the kind of difference they are going to get in terms of where they'll live on campus, and have much less favorable circumstances, let's say. If you don't know to do X by this date, and you get reminded you have to have that in, you get what's left. Do you find experiences in any way related to philosophy or your classes or registration or any kind of lived experiences that connect with what you do in philosophy? Have you experienced differences that first-generation college students have had to deal with?

Dr. Brunson: Well yes, in the pedagogical literature, talking about teaching literature, they talk about the hidden curriculum and how a lot of issues students face are things like how to handle advising, knowing that there's a writing center on campus. There's a lot of resources available to students, but if you don't have experience with college before you get to college then it becomes a question of "Do you even think of looking for these things? Or do you think that you have to do it on your own?" There are popular representations of college where it is very much a singular pursuit, and it's not. It shouldn't be, but are they aware of the resources available to them?

Dr. Vannatta: I think that I need to be more aware of my own blind spots on what, as a first-year college student, the knowledge I had. My brother was a senior at my undergraduate institution, I had a mentor right there, I could ask for help. And I really had no question unanswered. I probably asked the right questions, being more prepared. I think that I have some blind spots as to, it strikes me odd why you would join a class three weeks late, or not have the book, or not attempt to get the book until later. I have to adjust to some of those challenges as a professor now.

Dr. Vannatta: When does financial aid come in? You need to be able to buy the books from the bookstore, you need to do with your financial aid money, but maybe that doesn't come through until October. So you don't have the $500 to buy your textbooks and pay yourself back after

financial aid comes through. So being able to negotiate those sorts of challenges without having an idea of how the system works.

Dr. Weber: Interesting, so you've got some professor who is berating a student for not having the material in class, without realizing that the person couldn't have possibly afforded it until a little bit later.

Dr. Vannatta: I learned that in my first semester here, and then started building in backup plans for the first two or three weeks such that a student wouldn't be penalized for not having a text until their money came in. That was a learn-as-you-go for me.

Dr. Weber: Well these are serious concrete issues of life, whatever coursework you're going to be taking as a first-generation college student. When we come back, we're going to ask our panelists Dr. Vannatta and Brunson, to tell us a little bit more about their own experiences in particular about philosophy and how you show the value of that to folks like first-generation college students, or what other challenges there are in studying that subject for such populations. We'll be right back with Philosophy Bakes Bread.

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Dr. Cashio: Welcome back! You're listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread. This is Dr. Anthony Cashio and I'm here with my co-host Dr. Eric Weber and today we have the privilege of talking speaking to Dr. Seth Vannatta and Dr. Daniel Brunson. We've been discussing the challenges of teaching philosophy and teaching in general, to first-generation college students. So let's talk about teaching philosophy and more particularly, if you guys don't mind, imagine I'm a first-generation college student, and I'm about to take a philosophy class. Why should I be interested? What does philosophy have to offer me? I'm just coming in, I don't even know what philosophy

is except for a bunch of old dead white guys telling me how to live my life. Why should I be interested in this course at all?

Dr. Vannatta: The 'old dead white guys' is of course a problem. It speaks to some of the things we said earlier about philosophy and its traditions and how vague its borders are. So in thinking about and teaching in HBCU, where there is a whole black intellectual tradition that's not necessarily called philosophy, but it is philosophy and extremely philosophical. There's a way in which, I hate to say, marketing, but pointing out to our students that their exposure to thinkers might have already, they've already been exposed to philosophy but because these thinkers are black, they haven 't been called philosophers in certain contexts.

Dr. Weber: Let me just point out for some listeners, HCBU stands for historically black college or university. Sorry, go ahead.

Dr. Vannatta: One of the ways that I try to introduce philosophy to students unfamiliar with the discipline is through an orientation class that I have taught a couple times. There are two things that have worked well. One is that I show them the list of, I think, 75-plus volumes of popular culture and philosophy, and they something in that series, published by Open Court, they like. They might like the Rolling Stones, they might like the game show *Jeopardy*, they might like the movie *The Matrix.* Or "Spongebob Squarepants."

Dr. Cashio: Everyone likes *The Simpsons.*

Dr. Vannatta: I try to let their interests direct their initial engagement such that will pick out one of these volumes, summarize a few chapters, do a presentation for the class, and share their experience reading philosophy through this pop culture artifact. We also read the *The Meno.*

The *Meno* is a dialogue written by Plato, discussing whether or not virtue can be taught. There's a point in the *Meno* where Socrates interrogates somebody supposedly ignorant asking this slave questions about how to double a square. By the end we realize that it has something to do with the Pythagorean theorem. The students all know it. They all know it abstractly, and they all don't know it concretely because of the way mathematics and geometry are taught at the high school level. So we end up showing that the square of the hypotenuse is a geometric figure, is an actual square. They say in that segment they learned more about math than they did in all of high school. Plato also has a theory of forms, where there are these mathematical objects that are

unseen. We start talking about "What is a circle?" We learn that there are circular things, but there's also a circle that is some mathematical relation to pi, and usually it interests most students and gets them thinking more deeply about some of the learning that they did in high school mathematics or elsewhere.

Dr. Weber: I think it's key, where you say they learn more *about math,* in that segment, than they did in high school. They didn't learn more math, but they learned about math in a way that they had not before. It goes to you point earlier about the higher level or second-order discourse and reflection.

Dr. Vannatta: I think philosophy, there's something I believe it's said about the study of religion, that religion makes the ordinary unusual and the unusual ordinary. I think philosophy somewhat does that too. Everyone knows what a circle is, but they haven't interrogated the concept rigorously enough to make that ordinary concept seem mysterious and unusual and have a relation to an irrational number, that they sort of knew about in high school math.

Dr. Weber: It's interesting you say that about math and about circles because what has seemed to work very often quite well for me is, in dealing with what people who think that what we talk about in philosophy is just ideals, and "I'm interested in the real world, man." and all that kind of stuff. I like to point out that the facts and definitions from the philosophy of geometry, and those in a sense are ideals, because if you think about for instance the nature of a perfect circle, there isn't a perfect circle in the world! If you zoom in enough on any circle, you'll see minor deviations from perfection because the definition is an infinite set of points equidistant to all the same distance from the center. A point is not something with any dimension, so it doesn't actually have any dimension, it's not in space, it's an idea. When you think about that, and you want to kind of consider, this is how I understand Kant and Pragmatism, some of what we've brought up briefly before earlier. My understanding is to think of an ideal as something which helps us do it better, in terms of: if I want to draw a better circle, when I'm drawing an oval I'm not getting equidistant from the center, I need to correct a little bit and be a little bit more perfectly even in terms of how far my dots are from the center. When people start to think about the ideal of a circle, it clearly can help guide your behavior to draw a better circle than you were drawing before. People get that. It's funny how math, which a lot of people don't like either, those metaphors really do seem to work in introducing people to ideals. Anyway, I have a

question to follow up about speaking of that, this series, you mentioned a series of popular culture and philosophy, I wonder what else you do to make philosophy accessible and approachable and relevant to those first-generation college students whom you teach. Do you have other mechanisms or things you do and say and teach and so forth that help make philosophy more accessible?

Dr. Vannatta: One of the challenges in finding an example to use in teaching a text is that I keep getting older, and college students tend to be that same age. (laughter) So the pop culture artifacts that we're both interested in become fewer and fewer over time. In my theory of knowledge course I had to just bring them right into the classroom and we watched *The Matrix*, we watched a movie called *Being John Malkovich* when we read Freud. We read *The Matrix* alongside Plato. Then we read *Jeopardy and Philosophy*, which is one of those volumes that deals a lot with memory and education and concepts of intelligence that are important to a course on the theory of knowledge. Sometimes you have to bring those artifacts into the classroom so that everybody has a common reference and common example.

Dr. Cashio: I'm glad you brought up *The Matrix,* I used to do the same thing, that was my pop culture reference, like "Hey this is just like *The Matrix"*.

Dr. Brunson: Nobody watches *The Matrix* anymore.

Dr. Cashio: When I first started teaching...now they're like "We haven't seen it." I'm like "I'm going to go re-write my notes! You're ruining my lecture!"

Dr. Weber: I'm teaching in Kentucky, and there's a great show on TV, or that was not long ago called *Justified.*

Dr. Brunson: *Justified* is great.

Dr. Weber: Yeah, it's a great show all about Kentucky and crime in Kentucky, it's fairly recent and it was a great show, and nobody in my class watched it! I think I watched it last year, it was very popular and it was about Kentucky and all these Kentuckians haven't seen it! Maybe it's just because, maybe it was more than a year ago, I can't remember when I watched the darn thing. It's funny how we're trying to draw on this shared culture and it's so easy for us to fail to have overlap. One of the factors or features of a first-generation college student is that you may, if

you've been surrounded only by people who have gone to college, you'll have less of that overlap in terms of the things you know in common. Is that fair to say?

Dr. Brunson: I think so. Even reading Nietzsche, if you have not read any Greek culture, not just like historical facts about the Greeks and the pope and the Peloponnesian war, but if you didn't know anything about Aristophanes, there are a lot of references that are going to be difficult to get.

Dr. Vannatta: Another way that we make philosophy as a discipline appealing to an undergraduate is that many of our students want to go to law school. We show them statistics about which majors achieve highest scores on the LSAT the law school admissions test, which in large part is a logic test, and a reading test. We try to get them to do what they don't want to do, in order to achieve what they want to achieve, and sometimes that's taking a formal logic with Daniel or me, sometimes both of us pile in the room and teach some formal logic to get them to if they want to do well on this test.

Dr. Cassio: You will learn proofs!

Dr. Vannatta: Exactly.

Dr. Brunson: That's one of the more compelling arguments for an education in philosophy. The sorts of skills that we need as a discipline in terms of the reading, writing, communication, critical analysis, I think philosophy isn't the only place you can get that, but I think we do it pretty well. Looking at how the economy is changing and the nature of employment, I think it's compelling to tell people that philosophy, because it's a lot of skills, can prepare you for jobs that don't exist yet, in a lot of ways. So rather than being a particular kind of engineer, or what have you, or becoming an accountant, well, are there going to be accountants in 10 years when the computers take over everything? Philosophy can help prepare you for jobs that don't exist yet actually.

Dr. Weber: If you get trained to fix Windows 10, then you might make money for the next five years. But all of a sudden, you're going to need some more education once the next iteration comes out.

Dr. Brunson: Philosophy has an education in education. Philosophy is trading how to learn, I think that's a valuable selling point. Especially because a lot of the first-generation students find challenges in just convincing their families to let them study something as supposedly impractical as philosophy. Are you going to get a job with philosophy?

Dr. Cashio: That's not only a first-generation student problem, that would be all generation students.

Dr. Weber: When we come back, there's a couple questions that are offshoots of what we have just been talking about that I hope we come back and talk just a little bit more about right after a break. We'll be back in just a few moments. Thanks for listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread, production of the Society of Philosophers in America, airing on WRFL Lexington.

[Radio station music]

Announcer: Who listens to the radio anymore? We do. WRFL Lexington.

Dr. Cashio: Welcome back to Philosophy Bakes Bread! We've been chatting today with Dr. Seth Vannatta and Dr. Daniel Brunson. Finally, we have some final big-picture questions, some light-hearted thoughts, and we'll end with a pressing philosophical question for our listeners as well as info on how to get a hold of us with your comments, questions, and, I suppose, even criticisms. We'll take those too.

Dr. Weber: Yeah, so we're talking with Dr. Seth Vannatta and Dr. Daniel Brunson as we have just gone through a couple segments thinking about first-generation college students and the value of studying philosophy as well as the challenges for that. Right this minute, we've got a pressing moment where public figures are threatening to cut the National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as the National Endowment for the Arts. I wonder whether our speakers, our guests, would reflect on the question of whether or not their experiences with first-generation college students conveying the value of philosophy and thinking about challenges for that. Is there anything we can learn from that experience that might help us make the case for our public figures about why we should continue to support the humanities?

Dr. Brunson: Certainly in the past half-decade there have been a great number of economic anxieties. As we were saying in the previous segment, this causes difficulty for recruitment and bringing any college student, but perhaps especially first-generation college students into philosophy, and then it's like "How am I going to get a job in this major?" You have to go to college to be able to get a good job, but how do you get a good job after college? I think there's something we need to remind ourselves and remind people of in that there's more to life than work. You think of Hannah Arendt's distinction of work, labor, and action as another type of human activity. Or again, thinking about the tradition of the local arts are the arts of freedom. They're supposed to take you out of the bare minimum of working to keep yourself alive, and maybe have some time to watch TV. There's something about the humanities and the arts that has a higher purpose than just giving people to be employed. There's value there, and the economic arguments about the value of philosophy or the humanities are useful and necessary but we need to have more than that as well.

Dr. Vannatta: Michael Che on *Saturday Night Live* made a joke recently, said that scientists have discovered that vegetarians lived an average of six years longer than meat-eaters. Then he shrugged his shoulders and said "Yeah, but for what?" (laughter. I think that distinction between the means for living, getting a job as a means for living, and the end, the purposes, we should always keep those in mind. Keep that distinction in mind. I think in a similar sense, Aristotle said that profit was a means for sustaining the service, which is the purpose of the business, rather than treating the profit as it's the end itself. Keeping in mind jobs are means to sustain living, that there are purposes higher than just sustaining oneself.

Dr. Weber: That's interesting. I have done some advocacy for the National Humanities Alliance, and one of the things they point out is that there are things out there that aren't necessarily about jobs that we care about. For instance, think about how people care about the America flag. But when it comes to the humanities, there are things that folks can think about of history. If there's some important documents that might be destroyed by hurricane Katrina, who is going to fund the safeguard of them, the preservation of them when there's a flood. Think about how much we spend to encapsulate and protect the U.S. constitution. It's just a piece of paper right? Why do we need to spend a lot on money on that? The answer is that things in our culture have value and we

know that we have to value those things in our history and our culture matter. So do ethics and so forth. I think that argument does reach some people on both sides of the aisle.

Dr. Cashio: It gives us something to live for, and to fight for as a culture. I like that vegetarian/ meat-eating analogy. Getting rid of the arts altogether is sort of an abolition of the culture itself. What is there to be proud of or to fight for if we have undermined the thing that makes it rich, gives it experience and value of expression?

Dr. Weber: There are some calls today for teaching philosophy, some people are calling anyway, for teaching philosophy in K-12 education, kindergarten to 12th grade, at some points anyway. They might not get far in a world that's threatening to totally cut the NEH, National Endowment for the Humanities support. Here's the question. Do you think such programs, bringing philosophy into primary and secondary education, do you think that that would help advance the cause to teaching philosophy to first-generation college students?

Dr. Vannatta: I do, I think philosophy should be incorporated in the curriculum all the way down. I think that having more schoolers discuss the concept of friendship or honesty in the same way that Socrates and his interlocutors interrogate the concept of virtue or courage, is of value. When I was teaching 9th grade history, we were studying the Pre-Socratics, and we had students try to defend some primary substance, whether it be fire or water or mind or air and I see value in that. I think opening students up to that way of thinking gets them interested in pursuing something for itself, rather than...memorization and testing.

Dr. Cashio: I would like to add a clarification, both of us value philosophy and encourage the idea of putting philosophy earlier in the curriculum and I agree with that all the way down, not just because it would make it easier to recruit philosophy majors. I mean we work in a philosophy department, so there's a selfish aspect here as well, but in addition to that and more importantly, thinking about the kinds of people who are trying to create. Thinking about education has a process of making people more critical and reflective about themselves and their culture and philosophical education is... So the question is isn't an education in philosophy, which raises issues of: What is philosophy? What are the books that they should be reading, the problem they should be studying? But a philosophical education is in some ways more important.

Dr. Brunson: I think we want to avoid churning out victims for the status-quo economy, and we want to educate students to reconstruct imaginatively that economy. That could be an idea improving the public good, or improving their own lives and their relationship to that status quo economy.

Dr. Cashio: Alright guys, one final question we want to ask you guys. Would you, Seth and Daniel, say that "Philosophy bakes no bread", as the saying goes, or that it does? Why? How? Can you explain? Talk to us about bread baking.

Dr. Vannatta: I would go with the idea that philosophy does not bake bread.

Dr. Weber: A-ha!

Dr. Vannatta: I will go with the negative side to emphasize, as we talked about today, that there is more to life than bread.

Dr. Brunson: I'm going to follow up on my quotation from Richard Rorty and suggest that philosophy is the oven but it needs the dough of culture to bake its bread.

Dr. Weber: A-ha, but then it does some baking right? We're going to have to have these guys duke it out.

Dr. Cashio: I like it, I'm also hungry now. You caught me off guard with the no. Like "What the hell are we doing?"

Dr. Weber: Maybe we should follow up. You're making a good point, Anthony. So Dr. Brunson, you say philosophy doesn't bake bread? This is shaking my world, tell me about that.

Dr. Brunson: Again, bread has something that sustains life. But the sustaining of life is different from the enjoyment of life, and certainly bread can be delicious in various forms. But I think again, keeping yourself alive with bread is not the same as living a life that is fulfilling, for example. Philosophy operates at a different level than bread, perhaps.

Dr. Cassio: Is that to the detriment to philosophy?

Dr. Brunson: No, I think that we need to have a variety of things.

Dr. Vannatta: Are you suggesting that philosophy is merely the butter and the olives and the cheese, and the garlic and the delicacies? In which case, it's traditionally reserved for those with leisure, who don't have to work, as Aristotle would have said.

Dr. Brunson: I don't want to go that far. I also think that only eating bread would be a poor existence.

Dr. Cassio: I was talking to a student earlier today. She had just recently graduated, and I was asking her, telling her about this upcoming interview. So I said "You took some philosophy classes as a first-generation college student. What would you say? How does it fit to you?" and she said that these theoretical subjects, she was an English major, so she kind of knows about it, they're harder for first generation college students because they have to deal with harsher realities. And so maybe you're right, Daniel.

Dr. Brunson: Well I did think about, as a very young person, lying in bed thinking about the universe, infinity, nothingness. I wasn't thinking about where I was going to sleep the next night. There is a certain privilege to not worry about that question so that I can worry about those Kantian questions that human reason is fated to ask.

Dr. Weber: It's certainly true that when you're crossing the street, it's a good idea to make sure that you don't get hit by a car while you're thinking. You should probably make sure you attend to what's coming both ways, and engage in philosophy when you get to the other side!

Dr. Vannatta: Or stepping in a hole looking at the heavens, like Thales, right?

Dr. Cashio: I always use Thales as my example. Philosophers have been absent-minded from the get-go. So it kind of comes with the territory.

Dr. Weber: I think any thinker that gets absorbed in something can run into a post or something.

Dr. Vannatta: Or not listen to what's going on around you because you are participating in a very intense dialogue in your own head. That's a problem from time to time.

Dr. Cashio: Well thank you for all those great insights. I think you're mostly right on the point, oh, right on the point if I'm telling the truth. We have one last little section or two to discuss. We like to tell jokes here. We have a little section called "Philosophunnies", end a little light-hearted. Sometimes our topics get a little serious. So do you guys have a joke for us?

Dr. Weber: Or a funny story.

Dr. Cassio: Or a funny story, something about philosophy.

Dr. Weber: And remember we want to try and explain any concepts before the joke so we don't have to explain backwards.

Dr. Brunson: Well I have one that needs no explanation and is on topic. A dean was at a faculty meeting and complaining to the physics department about how expensive it is to spend all this money on lab equipment and new computers and says "This is just incredibly expensive. Why can't you be like the mathematics department where all they need is pen and paper and a wastebasket? Or even better, the philosophy department, all they need is pen and paper.

(laughter)

Dr. Weber: No idea is wasted, good or bad. That's funny. That's kind of sad, but funny.

Dr. Brunson: My specialty.

Descartes said "I think not!" and POOF! He disappeared. (laughter, rimshot, applause) I can't take credit for that.

We want to invite our listeners to send us their thoughts about big questions that we raise on the show.

Dr. Weber: Given that, we'd love to hear your thoughts, Seth and Daniel, about what question we should ask everyone for our segment called "You Tell Me!". Have you got a question or a few that you propose that we ask our listeners?

Dr. Brunson: Just to turn it into a question, the point before about the liberal arts education or philosophical education, where instead of thinking about education as a certification process to be employable in a reasonable fashion. The question is: What are we doing to people in our educational system?

Dr. Vannatta: A follow-up to that is: What damage has ever been done to you in a classroom by an instructor?

Dr. Weber: Interesting. What damage has been done to you? This is hopefully informative so we don't do this damage in the future.

Dr. Vannatta: Exactly. As we all have blind spots, and we don't want to do that sort of damage, so we might need to hear that from the audience.

Dr. Weber: Right, well thank you so much, Seth and Daniel. These are great questions, and folks, you heard it, we're about to remind you of our contact information so you can send us your thoughts on these big questions.

Dr. Cashio: Thanks everyone, for listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread, food for thought about life and leadership. We're your hosts, Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber, and we have been grateful to be joined by Dr. Seth Vannatta and Dr. Daniel Brunson. We hope you listeners will join us again. Consider sending us your thoughts about anything you've heard today that you would like to hear about in the future, or the question we just asked you: What damage has been done to you in the classroom? I don't know if I want to hear that answer.

Dr. Brunson: We need to hear it, though.

Dr. Weber: Once again, you can reach us in a number of ways. We're on Twitter @Philosophybb, which stands for Philosophy Bakes Bread. We're also on Facebook at Philosophy Bakes Bread, and check out SOPHIA's Facebook page while you're there, Philosophers in America.

Dr. Cashio: You can email us at philospohybakesbread@gmail.com, and you can call us and leave a short, recorded message with a question or comment that we may be able to play on the show. We want to hear from you guys, your beautiful voices. You can call us at 859-257-1849, that's 859-257-1849. Join us again next time on Philosophy Bakes Bread, food for thought about life and leadership.

[outro music]