Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode 22, with Dr. Mariana Alessandri

The Little Engine That Couldn't

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[Intro music]

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[Theme music]

Dr. Weber: I hope you enjoy today's episode as well as our breadcrumbs when we put these out as podcast episodes. This one will be out on its own as I think episode number 22, and then we will have each one of the breadcrumbs as a shorter episode. That will be 23 and 24. If you are interested in going to check out our back episodes, go ahead and do that at philoosphybakesbread.com. Without further ado, here is episode 22 of *Philosophy Bakes Bread.*

[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, AKA 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. We in SOPHIA and on this show aim to correct that misperception.

Dr. Weber: Philosophy Bakes Bread airs on WRFL Lexington 88.1 FM, and is distributed as a podcast next. Listeners can find us online at philosophybakesbread.com We hope you'll reach out to us on Twitter @PhilosophyBB, on Facebook at Philosophy Bakes Bread, or by email at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com

Dr. Cashio: Last but not least, you can call us and leave a short, recorded message with a question, or a comment, or bountiful praise, emphasis on the bountiful part, that we may be able to play on the show at 859-257-1849. 859-257-1849. On today's show we are very fortunate to be joined by Mariana Alessandri, assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Dr. Alessandri studied philosophy at Penn State University and her work currently focuses on existentialism.

Dr. Weber: She is also an accomplished public philosopher who has been published in the New York Times, and in the Times Higher Education, among other venues.

Dr. Cashio: On today's show, we're going to be talking with Mariana about "The little engine that couldn't." We'll be sure to figure out what that means. Just goes up the hill and quits? But first we want to hear about you, Mariana. We call our first segment, "Know Thyself!" We would like to know more about you. About how you got into philosophy, what philosophy means to you, about how you came to this whole endeavor.

Dr. Alessandri: When I went to college, I assumed that I would study psychology, because my sister studied psychology and it seemed interesting. Then, as happens with a lot of students, I just took a philosophy class because it was mandatory. I just loved it. I was hooked. I feel like that's what it is. Philosophy gets you if it gets you and it doesn't if it doesn't. Then I knew that I wanted to major in philosophy, but I thought that I was supposed to do something practical, so I double-majored in philosophy and computer science. Then I took a C++ class and I got a C! So I dropped it.

Dr. Weber: So, does that mean you did really well if you got a C...plus... (laughter)

Dr. Alessandri: You would think so, but no. I dropped computer science and I took up religious studies. I double majored in philosophy and religion in my undergrad.

Dr. Weber: Very practical, right?

Dr. Cashio: You just threw the practical thing out the window. Philosophy is quite practical. Isn't that the whole point?

Dr. Weber: Are you saying that philosophy is not one of the practical fields?

Dr. Alessandri: Oh no, that's just what college students think. I was a college student thinking that I was supposed to do something, but it wasn't so interesting or so useful or so good for me that I wanted to really major in computer science. I didn't have the passion for it that I had for the other things.

Dr. Weber: You took this philosophy class, and it was compulsory—you didn't have any choice. What was it in that class that was so exciting?

Dr. Alessandri: I don't even remember. The professor had an amazing reputation, and everyone just said to take Dr. Reese. I took him, and it was just a wonderful class. It was very relatable. It was very thoughtful. I'm sure we read Plato and Descartes, and talked about knowledge and the body and the soul and I just got really excited about it. I just kept taking, like our philosophy majors, I kept taking more and more and then it's basically a major.

Dr. Weber: A philosophy class is different in some ways than other classes that one might take. You could talk about how you took a psychology class or a whatever class and it there is more and more that is exciting in those things too. What about philosophy excited you, maybe not in that class but...Let's say you took one more class. You might just only minor in it. You kept studying this more and more. What were things that drew you and compelled you and kept your interest?

Dr. Alessandri: I think it was the same things that keep my interest now. The way that philosophers criticize society. I really love that. I love looking to the philosopher to tell you

something about society that society won't tell you. There is always the gadfly, there is the Socrates or the Kierkegaard, or the curmudgeon, the one who people don't like and people put to death. Even Martin Luther King Jr. and different thinkers like this that just criticize society and they are actually saying something quite meaningful and they are willing to put themselves on the line for it.

Dr. Cashio: The philosophers there on the fringe challenging, pushing. That's what you are drawn to?

Dr. Alessandri: That, and also just thinking. Our society doesn't think enough, still. When I was in college that was true. We don't read enough. We don't take time to analyze our positions. What are my thoughts on things? What are my beliefs? Should I challenge my beliefs? All of it. I tell my students that it's really funny that more people don't major in philosophy because it's such a narcissistic field. You get to take all of these classes and think about yourself and you get to analyze yourself. We spend a lot of time on our body, like in the way that Socrates would say. We spend lots of time pampering our body but we don't spend that much time on our soul or mind or whatever you want to call it. Philosophy is an amazing place to go to think about all of the things that are important. In that thinking we figure out how to act.

Dr. Weber: At the same time, the idea of being critical of your society, you mentioned that was one of the attractive things, thinking about the people who criticize our culture, for instance. When you talk about people who run for political office, when they are critical of our country they are thought of as unpatriotic. They are dismissed because they are critical. Is that a mistake or are people right to worry about folks who criticize our society too much?

Dr. Alessandri: I don't think being patriotic or not being patriotic is at the heart of the criticism of a society. I think you can be either, and I don't think that's the most important question. I don't think everyone who criticizes society is right. But I do think that people who criticize society are interesting, and they may be saying something worth listening to. I have always been taught to think a little bit deeper than the billboards. Think a little deeper than the ads you see. Anything that leads us there is a good thing to pursue and ultimately maybe abandon if you don't agree with it. I still think it's important to turn the world upside down. I love the way Socrates turns the world upside down. He's like, "No you're all doing it wrong. You Athenians are doing the whole thing wrong." They are not that different. The Athenians are very similar to our current society. That's why students love philosophy classes, in large part. They are just like, "Oh my, I've never heard anybody say anything like this before."

Dr. Cashio: They don't get asked these big questions. No one has come to them and asked them to think about their soul or their relationship to society. Not in a deep sense. They get the billboards and bumper stickers, but when you get to a philosophy class and someone says, "Have you ever thought about this thing?" That might seem very simple to us, but you are right. It draws them back over and over again because it challenges them.

Dr. Weber: One of the things people say in defense of the critic is to say, "No, it's not un-patriotic. In fact, our country is founded on criticism. This is why we have the freedom of speech. We need to learn to disagree peacefully..." and so on. Maybe the critic should be thought of as profoundly patriotic, actually, for contributing to leadership because we don't want to be on the wrong course. Is that one of the ways you think about the critic as contributing to leadership?

Dr. Alessandri: I'm not sure about contributing to leadership. Maybe or maybe not. Some people are just critics and they don't contribute to anything. What you said was interesting, that we should be talking more, and I think that's true. Even disagreeing more. Not more, but being OK with disagreeing. I'm really trying to work on that, both in personal life and in public life and in philosophical life—that it's OK to actually disagree with other people, but you can also have a conversation. I'm interested, in my university, for instance, in bringing together people who I think disagree with each other. Let's talk about it. If we can't get in the same room and talk about it, then we're just going to keep making up what the other person thinks and not actually hearing it from their own mouth. I do believe disagreement is perfectly fine and I think that it's good to get used to it, and not try to make the other person agree with you.

Dr. Weber: One of the question we like to ask in this first segment, in light of who you are and how you came to philosophy and so forth, is about what it is that philosophy means to you, as a result. In your eyes, what is philosophy?

Dr. Alessandri: I like this question a lot and I've thought about it in different contexts. The idea or the definition that feels most close to me, is when I think of philosophy as a kind of storytelling. My favorite philosophers, when I'm drawn to them, is because they tell the most beautiful stories, and I find those most beautiful stories the truest stories. Those stories are the ones that inspire me and they make me want to live a better life than the one I'm living.

Dr. Cashio: Any kind of story, or is there a specific type of story that is decidedly philosophical.

Dr. Alessandri: They tell many different kind of stories. They tell stories that are religious, about the beginning of the world. They tell stories about why we are here. They tell stories about what happens when I die. They tell stories about what are the right things to do in the world, like ethics. I think there is a lot, and, for me anyway, if I approach them like stories, I say, "This philosopher has a point of view. Let me get inside his or her head and really try to understand what story they are telling. How do they see the world?" Then, later, after I understand it and can feel where they are coming from, then I can either abandon it or agree with part of it or jump onboard.

Dr. Weber: Are there some particular examples of stories that you find compelling, especially for someone who hasn't say studied philosophy before? "Man you should read this story, or watch this movie." Is there a story that is compelling and demonstrative of philosophy?

Dr. Alessandri: I don't really mean stories like a short story or a story about something? I know that you guys talk about the stoics a lot and have a respect for the stoics. When I think about Seneca, and the way that he thinks about the world, I find it quite compelling. The world is a storm and we have to brace ourselves, and philosophy can help us brace ourselves for it. I don't agree with everything in stoicism. But I really enjoy that he has a whole worldview. It is quite pessimistic, in my opinion. That's what I like about it. I try to impress upon my students that the world is coming for you. If it hasn't already come for you, watch out. It's a storm. It's coming. Be prepared. If you are not prepared you have to deal with that later. So try to deal with it now and it can enhance your life now. That literally makes you live differently, if you buy into it. If you agree, you're like, "Oh my God, I really do have to appreciate what is going on today. I have to recognize that this person may not come home at the end of the day." That is an example of a story that I really find compelling, just the way that they see the world.

Dr. Cashio; That's really great, and I really like this approach to philosophy. Eric, just a moment ago was just mentioning someone who hasn't studied philosophy in a philosophy class. This is a good way for them to get into philosophy on their own and thinking about it. You read Seneca, or read any philosopher, but you need to look for the entire worldview or vision that they are presenting to their world. What they are doing in their writing is presenting a story, a vision, a worldview, a unified whole. That is one way of entering into their thought and understanding their philosophy.

Dr. Alessandri: Then you see them as a person. You see them as a person, rather than the book. "The book says..." I'm always encouraging my students to say, "Who is the book? Who is the author? That is just a person." They have thought long and hard about it, but it's just a person. You can, in the end, disagree with him. This is the way that they have conceived the world. I like thinking of philosophers as people. I get this a little bit from Miguel de Unamuno, who is a philosopher that I love. The way he talks about it, he says, "I have been this man before," when he talks about Kierkegaard. He says, "I have been this man. I was him, walking around in Copenhagen. I was Pascal." He thinks of himself as a metaphorical reincarnation of some of the philosophers that he really loves. It makes them very more human. They had personalities. They get grumpy, they get angry, and they are funny sometimes. I like to get into the books from that point of view, like they are a whole person.

Dr. Cashio: Kierkegaard himself is another great example of a thinker. It's hard to understand what Kierkegaard is talking about until you get into his head, into the vision he's presenting.

Dr. Alessandri: Yeah, and he's got multiple personalities. He writes under pseudonyms, and so each one has its own worldview. Even within him, you have to say, "No this isn't Kierkegaard, this is Climacus. This is Johannes de Silencio." That's even more fun. That's why I'm drawn to him. A lot of people are not drawn to him for that reason. He's crazy. He has too many different... I don't even know what he believes. That's what I like about him. He has a book called *Judge for Yourself*. He makes you judge for yourself. He doesn't want you to be a follower of Kierkegaard. He want you to figure out what you believe, based on all of the presentations that he has given you, the worldviews he gives you.

Dr. Weber: This is a really cool way of thinking about the notion of a story. It's a different sense of the world than we might mean everyday, when people are talking to each other on the street, and they think about a story, you have a big-picture vision of what a story means. We are going to come back to that after a short break. Thank you, everybody for listening to *Philosophy Bakes Bread*. I'm Dr. Eric Weber, here with my co-host Dr. Anthony Cashio. We are speaking with Dr. Mariana Alessandri. Thank you all so much for listening. We will be right back.

Dr. Cashio: Welcome everyone to *Philosophy Bakes Bread.* This is Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber and today we are talking with Dr. Mariana Alessandri of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Our topic for the day is 'the little engine that couldn't'. We haven't really talked about that yet.

Dr. Weber: Let me be clear: the little engine that could not. In case anyone didn't understand that.

Dr. Cashio: Could not. Are you making fun of my accent, Eric?

Dr. Weber: I couldn't hear the "n't" part.

Dr. Cashio: In this segment, we're going to talk about goal-setting, optimism, pessimism. In the last segment we were talking about philosophy as story telling, which I found super awesome. I think Eric had a question that followed up on that.

Dr. Weber: That's right. I really enjoyed your outlook on thinking about philosophy as a kind of storytelling. Especially this notion, you were telling students that they need to worry about the world being out to get them. It's really interesting, in contrast with Dr. Alessandri, I'm going to admit that I'm considerably more of an optimist in some ways. Yet I find myself saying some of the similar things to my students. In particular, when they really struggle with a test or an exam, I say to them, "Look, when you are in college, the exam is at least meant to be for your benefit. The world is going to test you over and over again every day and it's not for your benefit. Which is not quite the same as saying, "The world is out to get you," but in a sense it kind of is.

Dr. Cashio: You're much nicer than me, Eric. I just remind them they are going to die, and not to worry about it too much. "You're going to die, so it's alright."

Dr. Weber: In the United States people tend to be much more inclined towards optimism. Our first big-picture question is: Is that a mistake?

Dr. Alessandri: I think so, for sure. I think that it leads to a lot of disappointment, and disappointment that people are not prepared for. I think the stoics are really good in terms of preparing people for, not even the worst all of the time, but for disappointment. To make you a resilient person. If we go out thinking more about failure and the things we can't do, I think we will be more whole people. We won't be blind.

Dr. Weber: Before you go on, just for listeners who have not had a chance to hear all of our prior episodes, can you remind our listeners who haven't heard prior episodes, what that word means in context of philosophy?

Dr. Alessandri: When I think of stoicism, it helps me to think about whichever stoic thinker I'm thinking about, which in this case is Seneca, he basically says that life is a storm. He uses the metaphor that life is a storm and the storm hits everybody indiscriminately. If you believe that, then it's kind of by chance, or you could believe it's sent by the gods, which he also kind of believes. No matter how you believe it, the point is that everybody suffers in life. He wants to minimize suffering by preparing us for it and by seeing suffering as a part of life. That is very natural.

Dr. Weber: So, it leads to a kind of acceptance of the fact that we're going to suffer? Is that what you're saying?

Dr. Alessandri: Yes. I'm also thinking about Epictetus. He is another Stoic philosopher who says that there are no good things or bad things, there are just things that happen to you. Losing my job is not a bad thing. It's just that I lost my job. That accounts for the fact that you can have someone who lost their job and say, "Yeah, I lost my job and it's fine", and someone else who says, "I lost my job and this is the worst thing in the world." Or someone who gets into a car crash and says, "Oh, I'm OK." Epictetus reminds us that we are OK, that we can be OK. It has to do with how much you prepare. Stoicism is really big on preparing, spending enough time thinking about it and then being ready for it, so that when it happens, you say, "This is just not something that I wanted to happen, but something that happened. You can still be OK.

Dr. Weber: This is perhaps why optimism is a mistake, you think? Because it's failing to prepare ourselves for the storm?

Dr. Alessandri: Not quite. I do also think that. First I want to just talk about optimism and pessimism the way that the public talks about it, which is right in many ways. Optimists are generally seen as people who see the glass as half full, and pessimists are people who see the glass as half empty. Optimists think they can very often. "I think I can." We represent that by the little engine that could. "I think I can. I think I can." It's very important and we say to kids that you have to believe that you can or you're not going to be able to do it. Pessimists tend to believe, "No, I can't do that. There's no way I'll be able to do that." There we have this division between what people believe about the world and in the research the studies show that optimists think they can more often than pessimists do. What that means then is that optimists try to do more things than pessimists do. It's also the case that pessimists are usually right. They are more often correct than optimists are that they can't do something. We have this division.

Dr. Weber: I have a three-year old son. When he needs to do something, he says, "Will you help me?" I say to him, "You can do it, Sam." I'm talking to him about something I'm fairly sure he can do. In short order, he does it himself. It's terrific and I see him learn, "Oh, actually I was able to do that. Next time I don't need to ask for help so much" kind of thing. Is that a mistake?

Dr. Alessandri: No, because you just said that you thought he could do it. You had a reasonable assumption that he could do it. Optimists tend to overestimate their own power, their own ability. That's the way that optimists and pessimists are seen as opposites. What I find the most interesting is that they agree on something, and this is the answer to your original question of why it's not that good. I think optimists and pessimists agree that if you don't think you can do something then you shouldn't do it. If you don't think that you can succeed, then you shouldn't even try. I think that's common sense for people: "If I don't think I can, then I'm not going to try." That's where I think they agree, and that's where they are both wrong, in a way.

Dr. Cashio: How are they both wrong?

Dr. Alessandri: Because they both believe that. Pessimists don't think they can do it, so they don't do it. They do not even try. Optimists think they can so they only go for things that they think they can do. If they think they can't do something, they won't either. Most people believe, I think everybody but me and a few other people out there, believe that the only things worth pursuing are the things you have a chance of succeeding at.

Dr. Cashio: You think we should be more like the little engine that couldn't? Try things that we can't succeed at?

Dr. Alessandri: That's where I'm headed. We say things like, "Failure is not an option". I think that's a recipe for disaster, to say things like, "Believe in yourself and think you can succeed." I just feel like we are telling people that if you then fail, it's because you didn't believe in yourself enough, or something like this. It's probably an assessment. What we should be telling people, our kids and such, is, make a realistic assessment of if you can and if you can't, but don't base your action on whether you think you can or you cannot. I think there are other, more important reasons to decide what we're going to go for and what we're not going to go for, than just, "Can I do it or can't I do it?"

Dr. Weber: As you were explaining this concept to me, I made a connection that I have never made before about the danger of saying, "Failure is not an option." This past semester and the

semester before I taught business ethics class a couple times. One of the key stories that we tell is about the Ford motor company which put out the Pinto, even though it was not ready to be put out. It was very dangerous. It would explode if you hit at 25 miles an hour. The notion of 'failure is not an option' might have been one of the motivating factors to say, "No this car is coming out, come hell or high water."

Dr. Alessandri: There's books like that. There's books written on the economic crash of 2008 that said that people were over-optimistic. They thought they could. "Failure is not an option. We're going to do it. We think we're all powerful so we're going to force it to happen." They were not reading the signs.

Dr. Weber: That's very interesting. I've never thought about that.

Dr. Cashio: Even if the signs were to say, "You can't do this", you should still try?

Dr. Alessandri: Yeah, so that is my next idea is to say that once we throw out whether we think we're optimists or pessimists, and let's let failure be an option. Now failure is back in. Let's consider being the engine that couldn't Then, I feel like we have a better metric by which to judge which endeavors are worth pursuing.

Dr. Cashio: In philosophy, I'll bring in the spectrum of morality for just a minute. We identify the moral value of an action in different ways. We can take the fancy termed, deontological approach to decide the value of an action is in the intentions of an act itself, like why we are going about it. Then another one says the value is in the consequence of the action. It seems like you are taking that first approach. Is that correct?

Dr. Alessandri: Sort of. I'm just trying to loosen our society's grip on the notion of feasibility. This is a great word that my student gave me yesterday. I'm so grateful. Feasibility is the way we normally go through, "Well, can I do it? If I can, then I guess I should." We kind of mix up what I can do with what I should do. That's a problem. If we take that out and say, "Let me look at the act. Let me not ask whether I think I can do it or not, let me look at the act itself and see whether it is a worthy act." The process of getting to which acts are worthy is very difficult. That's what it calls for. We have to then think about them very hard.

Dr. Weber: I think we need two things. One, I think we need a little more explanation about what is the Little Engine that Couldn't, and then we also need an example to help ground this. Isn't The Little Engine that Couldn't an engine that is not even going to try? If that's not the case, explain that to us. What is an example of someone with some sort of problem or inability that nevertheless falls into this case that you want to recommend? Let's make this concrete for people.

Dr. Alessandri: Your first question was what is the Little Engine that Couldn't, does it mean I'm not going to try? Because we are so trapped in that framework of "things are not worth doing unless I think that I can do them" means that it would make no sense to say "I'm going to try at something that I know I will fail at." It makes no sense. IF we start saying, "OK. Let me look at the act. Let me not even ask whether I can or can't. Let me look at the act and say, is this an act worth pursuing? IS this a noble goal to have?" You want it more concrete. I thought of three examples. One example is like, if you choose not to eat factory-farmed meat. You have done a lot of reading about how this meat was produces and you don't agree with it, you don't think it's ethical, then you might say, "I'm going to decide not to eat it." Then you have people on both sides saying "Oh good. Don't eat it. If we all don't eat it, then we can change the meat industry.

Then you have the opposite people saying, “You’re wasting your breath. It’s never going to change. You might as well eat the factory-farmed meat.” I think those reactions both represent the wrong reaction to why someone would decide to not eat factory-farmed meat.

Dr. Cashio: Pessimism and optimism would get you to the same position.

Dr. Alessandri: Yes but if it’s not going to make a dent then I shouldn’t do it.

Dr. Weber: That’s a really nice example. WE have time probably for one more before our little break. What’s one more example? You said you had one more example. What is number 2?

Dr. Alessandri: I was thinking about clothing produced in sweatshops, which is similar to the first example. But if I just decide that I am not going to buy that clothing produced in sweatshops, someone might say, “Well, that’s the only kind of clothing you can get. There’s no way to buy sustainable clothing, et cetera, so you might as well just give in. That’s one bad reaction in my opinion. The other bad reaction is, “oh good, let’s all join together and do it together. Together we’re going to make a difference. Together we’re going to change the industry,” which I don’t think is very realistic. It has a hidden danger, which is that I’m judging you. If you’re wearing a piece of clothing from a sweatshop-produced retailer, then I’m going to judge you. It makes people go against each other. It makes people judge each other. That’s the wrong reason to act too: “Oh you don’t recycle? I noticed that so and so wasn’t recycling.” All of a sudden we have a case of eco-vigilantism, which messes up one’s desire. I don’t want to be against anyone. I just want to do what I think is right because I think it’s right. IF you want to do it too, good. The truth is, if you push me hard, the truth is that maybe we will make a difference. I’m not saying it definitely won’t. But I’m saying that if you go into it saying, “Let’s all go in together,” then you’re putting pressure on a lot of other people, and I think it’s not really fair to them.

Dr. Cashio: This is interesting. You are rejecting the normal platitude that a bunch of little drops will make an ocean. It is not necessary that we believe that if we do it together we can make a difference, so we just reject that altogether?

Dr. Alessandri: I at least want to point out the danger of that mentality, which is that then we start monitoring each other.

Dr. Weber: Well the other side of it is that people will give up when they feel as thought heir efforts are not succeeding.

Dr. Alessandri: Exactly. As long as you think you’re doing it and making a difference, you’ll do it. As soon as you think you’re not making a difference, you’ll stop. That’s why I think the setup is wrong. That’s why I think we should say, “Huh, even if I fail, what’s worth doing?”

Dr. Weber: Anthony mentioned that you might be focusing on the value of this in the intention of the act, but there is also this further example, which is that the act itself might be virtuous. That’s the third category of thinking about the morality of how you assess an action. Maybe it is about the intention, or maybe it’s just about the fact that it’s what you think is best to do in terms of the action itself.

Dr. Alessandri: The act in its context. It may not always be true, but right now it’s true.

Dr. Weber: We are going to come back after a short break to learn a little more about the little engine that couldn’t, as well as quixotic pessimism. Don’t worry if you don’t know what that is

yet. We'll be right back, everybody with my co-host Dr. Anthony Cashio and our guest Dr. Mariana Alessandri. I'm Dr. Eric Weber with *Philosophy Bakes Bread.*

Dr. Cashio: Welcome back everyone. It is your privilege today to be listening to *Philosophy Bakes Bread*. This is Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber and it is our privilege today to be speaking with Mariana Alessandri. Last segment, we were talking about the power of pessimism, really overcoming pessimism and optimism—the danger is implicit in the actions in this way of approaching the world. In this segment, we're going to tilt at some windmills. Alright, Mariana. You've named this approach to looking at problems, 'quixotic pessimism', after the famous Don Quixote, the hero of lost causes, to describe taking on difficult social issues. Maybe you could tell us more about quixotic pessimism, besides the fact that it is quite fun to say. Quixotic. I could say it all day.

Dr. Alessandri: I am very much influenced by a political philosopher named Josh Dienstag, who is at UCLA. He wrote a book called *Pessimism*, really fantastic book. He analyzes there, that the U.S. is being very optimistic, and the dangers therein, and things like that. I get a lot of my thoughts from him. He reads Unamuno and he reads Quixote. He puts together this really nice argument that I really believe in and want to keep building on. Don Quixote is a man who is very old. Cervantes is the author of Don Quixote. Cervantes tells us that Don Quixote went crazy from reading too many books. Miguel de Unamuno is a philosopher who loves Don Quixote and takes him very seriously and says, "Wow, if he went crazy from reading too many books, then that's precisely what we should do."

Dr. Cashio: Been there done that. Read too many books, go crazy.

Dr. Alessandri: There is this idea that connects to what I said earlier, that our society is the one that has a problem. If society deems us as successful, maybe we should re-think ourselves. If society deems us crazy, then maybe there is something to what we are doing or how we are living. I think our society is already crazy. It's success crazy. It's obsessed with money, it's obsessed with having a lot of things, materialism, practicality, the things we were talking about in the last segment. I also think that reading and educating oneself and being immersed and really trying to understand the world are all good pursuits. If that means that people are going to think we're crazy, then so be it. That's where Quixote is crazy, but I take his crazy to be a good kind of crazy.

Dr. Weber: What does Quixote want to do and what makes one a Quixotic pessimist about some issue?

Dr. Alessandri: Quixote, on one of his first adventures, he goes, famously, this is probably the most famous part of Don Quixote, and he decides that he is going to attack a windmill. He sees windmills and he thinks that they are giants, and so he is going to go attack one. Sancho Panza, his squire, the funny one, tells him, "No those are just windmills." He says, "No, I'm going to go attack it." Of course he goes to attack the windmill that he calls a giant, and it knocks him apart and breaks his lance. Everybody reads that as that you shouldn't be stupid and you should know that windmills are windmills and they are not giants, and you should see the world correctly. But what I really love about Unamuno's interpretation of that, is that he says that Quixote was right, because Quixote saw past the windmill into what the windmill represents. It represents the bread factory that is coming to the town, that everyone thinks is a good thing. Today we might

call it industrialism. Things that we don't recognize as creeping in that are actually harmful for a town, but they look nice because maybe they bring a few jobs or bring something. In the end, they are going to undermine the town or the society. Unamuno's interpretation is that Quixote saw something more important, that is worth fighting. Dienstag interprets that that he knew he was going to fail. He knew he was going to fail. It doesn't matter if you are going fail or not. The windmill is worth fighting. The giant is worth fighting. In my opinion, we have to find giants that are worth fighting, even if we know we are going to fail at them, because not doing so is worse. Saying, "I can't beat the system so I'm not even going to fight it." I think if there is an unjust system, we owe it to ourselves to fight it. We learn that from Quixote.

Dr. Cashio: Is this how you would distinguish between Quixotic pessimism and regular old-fashioned pessimism?

Dr. Alessandri: That's a good distinction, because regular old fashioned pessimism, what I said before, where it says, "If I think I'm not going to get anywhere I might as well not try," which is the same as optimism. Quixotic pessimism says, "I don't really think I'm going to get anywhere. I don't really think that if I, as a professor, choose not to teach online classes, I don't think I'm going to beat the system. I don't think I'm going to overturn online education like I would like to. But it means that I will not be a part of it. It means that I refuse to be part of something that I don't agree with. It marks me, it gives me a kind of character, even if I am going to fail at it.

Dr. Cashio: The little engine that couldn't isn't trying to get over the mountain. He is very suspicious that he even can, but he still has to try the darndest.

Dr. Alessandri: Trying, like I said though, the words get all messed up. The words 'even trying' sounds like I tried and failed, or "I tried and I should just keep trying." I am kind of allergic to the word 'trying'. It's just doing it. I'm doing it. I'm acting. I'm moving my train up the hill. It's the present. It's not necessarily the goal. I'm acting because I think this is the right way to act.

Dr. Weber: In the case of the little engine that could, there were some things that needed to get over the mountain. The person who doesn't know, or isn't concerned about success or failure, would that person try? You don't like the language of try. Would that person do?

Dr. Alessandri: I think so. If it's your job. The mountain metaphor, you would have to stick in whatever you think is your cause, but if you think it's worthy to take your train over the mountain, I would have to use the word try. You try. But it's not a trying in order to succeed, and if I don't make it I say, "Oh I never should have tried that." Or try, try again. It's just to say, "No, I'm doing it regardless. I don't care if I succeed or fail."

Dr. Weber: In the case of windmills, what was there before a windmill? I take it that there was a mill, and you would have cattle or something go in a circle to pull the top stone over the other stone so you grind your grain into flour. A windmill, I take it, uses wind to do that more easily, and maybe you can do more more easily. I don't know. What I'm saying is, there is intelligence in moving to a windmill. What is there to oppose about a windmill?

Dr. Alessandri: Maybe doing things easily isn't really a point of life. Maybe it shouldn't be our goal. We have that a lot today in technology. Things that are promising to make our life easier, when in fact we shouldn't be doing them. We operate on the mentality of "If I can do something, I should do it." We don't stop to ask, "Should I do it or shouldn't I do it regardless of whether I

can do it?" Because I can do it easier doesn't mean I should bring the windmill in. Maybe I should and maybe I shouldn't. We are less and less asking the question. We are just saying, "This is doable, this is viable, this is feasible." Then we do it. I think that's the mistake. I think we have to focus more on what's worth doing and in order to focus more on what's worth doing, I firmly believe we have to say it's worth doing regardless of whether it succeeds or fails. If it's worth doing, If it's going to succeed, then it's also worth doing if it's going to fail.

Dr. Cashio: All of this talking about trying and doing, we haven't even talked about Yoda yet. I'm proud of us. No one has mentioned it. For our listeners, how can we go about being more like Quixote? Are there steps to intentional Quixotic pessimism? How can we go about it, bringing this into our lives and acting on this idea?

Dr. Alessandri: I think the first thing we have to do is accept that failure is an option. We think we have to ditch the whole optimism/ pessimism distinction and say that failure is an option. This opens up the world to all kinds of worthy causes. This allows me to pick from a bunch of worthy causes which thing that I might be able to do. The second step would be to choose. Choose your lost cause. Choose something that you may not win at. Choose something that is worth doing on its own. You have a responsibility to choose carefully. You have to be able to reflect. You have to be educated. You have to think about it a lot. It's not something that you do out of nowhere because you feel like it. You have to really think about it. Choose a cause that may be a lost cause. In many times, the most important causes are the lost causes. The most important things are the things we're not going to be.

The third step is then fight for it with the idea that you'll fail. If you are fighting for it with the idea that you will fail, you don't care if people think you're crazy. Just like they thought Quixote was crazy. You don't care if people will ridicule you. You won't care if people raise their eyebrows at you or frown upon you or anything like that. I'm doing it regardless. I'm not going to teach online classes. I'm not going to eat factory-farmed meat, and I'm not going to wear clothes made in sweatshops. I don't care what anybody thinks. I don't care if it makes a dent or I would like it to make a dent. I would still do it if it doesn't make a dent because I don't want to be the kind of person who gives into these machines. It's the machine. I don't want to give in to the machine that I can't stop. I want to sort of die fighting. I want to keep opposing it. I don't want to contribute to a corrupt world. I want to be the kind of person who resists and who goes against the grain. I don't care if I succeed or fail because that's not how we should judge whether my cause was worthy.

Dr. Weber: That's really fascinating, especially this point about teaching online classes, because the insufferable optimist in me likes to think about the fact that there are people who are unable to go to school. There are people who are disabled literally, and they can't possibly attend certain kinds of classes, except because of online teaching. When I think about those people, online teaching opens a world of education to all kinds of people who wouldn't have gotten traditional education, and yet ultimately the truth is that the growth of online teaching has way more affected everyday teaching and students than people with disabilities. Gobs of people go through online classes and fail and really high proportion, or it's not as good of an education for them as they might be able to get otherwise. That's a really interesting point, because I like to emphasize the positive, in terms of opening up opportunities for people who don't have them. But you are noting the costs of that, which is that we then get this system where all kinds of people who aren't disabled at all are steered into things like for-profit online universities, and aren't helped to succeed get an education, and get it with the Pell grants...

Dr. Alessandri: Ask any student why they are taking an online class and they will say it's because they think it's going to be easy. There are so many cons to online teaching. You have named one pro. There are so many cons to online teaching. We tend not to ask of technology, "What's the cost?" We only say that it can do this. We don't say, "What else are you going to do that is really bad for our environment? What else are you going to do that's going to take away our jobs in the future? What else are you going to do that's bad for us? We only say, "Is there anything good about you?" If there is, we take it. That's the problem. We're not being thoughtful enough with pros and cons.

Dr. Weber: I am noticing things that you are teaching me. I do want to ask you the tough question though, about the fact that I lived in nine years in Mississippi, in a place where there are a lot of people highly devoted to a lost cause, and I think it is one of the great problems of the state of Mississippi.

Dr. Cashio: The lost cause of the lost cause.

Dr. Weber: The south, in the Civil War, the "War of Northern Aggression", where people down south fooled themselves, even though the state legislature of the Mississippi said that their prime reason for joining the Confederacy was slavery, people could fool themselves in unbelievable ways into thinking it didn't have to do with that. Isn't it possible entirely for people trying to devote themselves to lost causes to do terrible wrong? To do terrible harm?

Dr. Alessandri: I don't think every lost cause is worthy. We have to be careful what lost causes we are going to endorse. I think that's a real question. I think that is what ethics is, is figuring out what's the right thing to do. I don't think Quixotism allows you to get away with just going with your gut or deciding something on your own. I think it takes reading. We come back to Quixote read. He read and he read and he read and he read. He wasn't acting arbitrarily. There is another scene where he goes and he fights against slavery, basically. There was a man mistreating his servant and he interfered. What ended up happening was that he ended up making it worse. He ended up making the boy get a lot more lashes than he already had.

People read the book and say, "See, that's why we shouldn't interfere." Unamuno reads it and says, "That's why we should interfere." There may be mistakes. Maybe if you are a Quixotic person, you might make a mistake, but that's important to do something. It's important to think about it. It's important to choose your cause. It's important to get involved. It's important to talk. It's important to educate yourself. It's even important to talk about this group that you're talking about. To talk with them, to understand what are their motives. What do they want? What do they feel? How have they felt wronged? I feel like it's not an easy solution, and I do think that the way I'm talking can't guarantee against mistakes. I don't think that mistakes are any reason not to act. I think not acting is worse than acting and making a mistake.

Dr. Weber: Thank you, everybody for listening to *Philosophy Bakes Bread*. We have got one more segment with Dr. Mariana Alessandri, with me, Eric Weber and my co-host Dr. Anthony Cashio. We will be right back with *Philosophy Bakes Bread*.

Dr. Cashio: Welcome back, everyone, to *Philosophy Bakes Bread*. We have been talking with Dr. Mariana Alessandri, and now we have some final big-picture questions, some light-hearted thoughts, and we are going to end with a pressing philosophical question for you, our listeners.

We were having a really exciting conversation there at the end of the last segment? Would you say, Mariana, that craziness, some level of craziness, is the cure for too much common sense?

Dr. Alessandri: If you look at the history of philosophy, that's true. Socrates was crazy and he was put to death for it. He went a little overboard, but I think that being seen as crazy, you may be onto something, if you're crazy. It means that you are rejecting the world that is as it is. You are kind of saying, "This isn't right, or that isn't right, or I want to act differently." Like I said, you might just be crazy. It's not necessarily a good thing, but it could be a good thing. Too often we dismiss it as not productive or not helpful at all.

Dr. Weber: One thing that we do, is that we sometimes let someone who seems kind of crazy to us be on their own, as long as they are not hurting anybody, but when they are, it seems perfectly reasonable for us to step in and try to do something to stop the ways in which they are hurting people. Is that your view as well, or is that contrary to your view?

Dr. Alessandri: That is very much in line with what I think, I take my very general sense of ethics from Martin Luther King Jr. He said that just laws are ones that uplift the human personality, and unjust laws are the ones that don't. We have to judge the action, we have to say, "Is this helpful for people, or is this not helpful for people?" If it's someone who is hurting people, obviously we would intervene. That's going to happen anyway. That's going to happen in any ethics system, there's going to be an outlier. I think we have to, again, find a cause that is worthy because it's worthy, and we have to do our homework and think about it really hard and talk to other people and that kind of thing. I don't think it's a recipe for just doing whatever you want. I think it's mostly about resisting. If the world is corrupt, find the things in your world that are corrupt, and resist them. Even if no one else joins you, even if you can't get a whole group of people together. In fact, if you do get a whole group of people together, be careful. Don't judge them if they are not doing their part.

It's about resistance and I really like Wendell Berry. He is a poet and philosopher from Kentucky, and in this one quote he is talking about protest poetry. You would think, "Why am I writing this poem of protest to any given war? What is poetry going to do? Poetry is not going to end wars." You have a lot of poets who maybe feel disheartened and have that optimistic mindset: If I'm not making a difference, then I shouldn't do it at all. Wendell Berry really gets at the heart at what I think of as Quixotic pessimism. He says that writing poems may not end the wars, but you have to write protest poetry if you are a poet and you feel inclined to. You do it not because it's going to end the war, but you do it because doing so preserves the qualities in one's heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiesce. I love that line because it's really about, don't acquiesce to the world as it is. Don't say, "If you can't beat them, join them." All of that stuff is very cowardly in my opinion. We have to come up with a different reason for action other than just, "Is it going to make a difference?"

Dr. Weber: There is a scholar I know who is on the left, and he is not very happy with how the last presidential election went. At one time I remember him bemoaning the fact that he thought op-ed writing, which is one of the ways that philosophers can get themselves out there and get arguments and try to make a difference, some might think, he was saying, "Op-eds don't make a damn bit of difference." He was totally frustrated and flustered. This sounds really analogous to his situation. An op-ed may not make much difference, but mustn't we speak?

Dr. Alessandri: We must do something. It's not about "Do all of our collective efforts make a difference?" If I would only act if all of my collective efforts made a difference, I would never act.

If you look at Kierkegaard, if you look at Unamuno, they are arguing against a world that doesn't act, that doesn't do enough. It sits and contemplates. Kierkegaard rails against philosophers for this reason. He hates us and he calls assistant professors 'paragraph gobblers' Just people who read and read and they love to read and they love to rethink, but they are not actually doing anything. Even though I'm talking about Quixote reading, he didn't just read and read and read. He read and read and then went and did something. It's both contemplation and action. We get that from Aristotle, we get that from Kierkegaard, we get that from Unamuno, that it requires both but it is not just because it's going to work. It's because you have decided that it is the right thing from all of your reading, all of your time thinking about it and talking to other people.

Dr. Cashio: Read so deeply that we go a little crazy.

Dr. Alessandri: You have to be crazy in this world to read at all. I'm starting to read *Fahrenheit 451*, and it's a whole book about the burning of books, when books don't matter anymore. That's the problem. We are not reading very much as a society. Very literally, we have to go back to books, back to reading. Trying to understand other people's point of view, and have dialogues, discussions with people, especially people you don't agree with. I think it's all very important.

Dr. Weber: Mariana, do you have any final big-picture thoughts you want to leave for our audience?

Dr. Alessandri: Only acting when you think it's going to succeed will lead to much less action than we are capable of. I think we have to have a better motive for action than just feasibility or viability. If we could all turn our minds to that, and frame the picture a little bit differently, we could say, "I'm going to do this, and maybe nobody will join me, but I'm going to do it." This is important. 'I can do something' may not have any difference in the world, but it has a difference on me.

Dr. Cashio: Very good. Be boldly pessimistic. We have to ask you the question we ask everyone who comes on the show, because the name of the show. I think you just touched on it a second ago, so I'm curious to see how you tag onto this. Would you say that philosophy bakes no bread, as the saying goes? That all philosophers are just paragraph gobblers? Or maybe it does. Maybe there is something practical, where the rubber meets the road, so to speak, for philosophy. What would you say? If you do think it bakes bread, what do you say to someone who says it doesn't? How would you respond to this?

Dr. Alessandri: I think it can. But I don't think it always does. It can. You can have flour and yeast and salt and sugar, but that doesn't make it bread. You need the baker. You need to want to bake bread. I think philosophers who want to bake bread have to do something. They have to get a feel for it. They have to practice. In practicing, you make mistakes. This is what I love. I stand for all things negative. You're going to make mistakes. You are going to fail. But every time, it's part of it. You're not just following directions. You have to get a feel for it, and you have to add some water, but not too much water, and you'll learn that by doing it and by failing. Trial and error, through mistakes. Et cetera. I don't think it always bakes bread. I think there are many philosophers or people who study philosophy who are paragraph gobblers and I think there are other people who are just trying their hand at resisting a corrupt world and trying to say something and trying to do something and trying to act. I think those are all very noble and it can bake bread.

Dr. Weber: That really makes me feel better because Anthony and I have been trying and failing over and over again.

Dr. Alessandri: Then you can feel like it's alright. It's not the end of it.

Dr. Weber: I do feel a little better about that.

Dr. Cashio: You take up philosophy with this Quixotic pessimism, and you just do it because it's worth doing.

Dr. Alessandri: You do it because it's worth doing. You do it because you want to be the sort of person who does that. You want to be the sort of person who does that. It's almost back to Seneca. You want to be the kind of person you can be proud of.

Dr. Weber: That resonates with some past episodes we have had in a number of ways. As you know, Mariana, we want to make sure people know both the serious side of philosophy, as well as the lighter side. Maybe you don't think there should be one. I don't know. You can tell us.

Dr. Alessandri: I think it's all light. That's what I love about it. I think it's all funny.

Dr. Weber: In our next short segment here, we call 'philosophunnies'.

Dr. Weber: Say 'philosophunnies'

Sam: Philosophunnies!

(laughter)

Dr. Weber: Say 'philosophunnies'

Sam: Philosophunnies!

(child's laughter)

Dr. Weber: We would love to hear your favorite joke or funniest fact or story about philosophy. Have you got anything funny, either about pessimism or Quixotic pessimism, or about philosophy in general that you can tell us? A story or a joke or something? Have you got something for us?

Dr. Alessandri: Yeah. This is related to the philosophy bakes bread, and the question if philosophy is useless. It's a story that actually happened to a friend of mine from grad school. I'm stealing it, but it illustrates the point really well. After he graduated, his mom was going around introducing him to people, her friends, and she would say, "This is my son Michael. He's a doctor. Oh, but not the kind that helps people." (laughter) Of course we get that reputation, of course that's the way we think about it, but Seneca talks about philosophy as medicinal and things like this. Of course, a lot of philosophers do feel like we are the kind of people who can help people, or at least point people to folks that can help them.

Dr. Weber: That hurts a little bit. For each episode, Anthony and I gather a couple of jokes that we want to share also, or quotes or something. Anthony, do you want to tell one of these lines that we found? A couple of these are just sayings, and then we found a few jokes.

Dr. Cashio: This one is from one of my favorite philosopher, George Carlin. "No one ever says, 'it's only a game' when their team is winning."

Dr. Weber: We have got one from Oscar Wilde. “Pessimist. One who, when he has the choice of two evils, chooses both.” (crickets chirping)

Dr. Cashio: Two windmills are standing in a field. One asks the other, “What kind of music do you like?” The other says, “I’m a big metal fan.” (laughter) Everyone knows windmills are jerks. Don Quixote was right. That windmill was just looking at him wrong.

Dr. Weber: On the twins’ birthday, while the boys were at school, the father loaded the pessimist’s room with every imaginable toy and game. The optimist’s room he loaded with horse manure. That night father passed by the pessimist’s room and found him sitting amid his new gifts crying bitterly. “Why are you crying?” the father asked. “Because my friends will be jealous, and I’ll have to read the instructions, and I have a constant need for batteries, and my toys are going to get broken anyway,” answered the pessimist. Passing the optimist’s room, the father found him dancing for joy in the pile of manure. “What are you so happy about?” asked the father, to which the optimist replied, “There has got to be a pony in here somewhere!” (laughter) We have got two more and they are quick, at least.

Dr. Cashio: A dog walks into a bar and is promptly escorted out, as animals are not allowed inside. (laughter). Ones of those no-joke jokes.

Dr. Weber: Exactly. These are pessimist jokes, according to the internet. Here is one more. What did Batman say to Robin before they got in the car? “Get in the car.” (laughter)

Dr. Alessandri: That’s what you get from the internet.

Dr. Cashio: I’m blaming the internet on that. That section, talk about doing quixotic pessimism.

Dr. Weber: We intend to fail when we tell jokes.

(rimshot, laughter, applause)

Dr. Cashio: Last but not least, we want to take advantage of the fact that we have powerful social media, for better or worse, as we discussed in this episode, that does allow two-way communications with programs like radio shows. We want to invite our listeners to send us their thoughts about big questions that we raise on the show.

Dr. Weber: Given that, Mariana, we would love to hear your thoughts about whether you have a question that you propose we raise for our listeners for a segment that we call, “You Tell Me”. Have you got a question for folks?

Dr. Alessandri: I have a question and it’s very personal, because this whole thing is a very personal journey. If you could somehow know that you were going to fail at something, what is still worth doing? It’s going to be different for every person.

Dr. Cashio: Fantastic. What is still worth doing? Thank you, everyone, for listening to this episode of *Philosophy Bakes Bread*. I wish we had more time. I have tons of more questions and conversations, so maybe we will have you back on again soon. That was really fantastic. I’m Dr. Anthony Cashio and this is Dr. Eric Weber, and we have been talking with Dr. Mariana Alessandri, it’s been a pleasure and I hope our listeners have enjoyed it too. Consider sending us your thoughts on anything that you’ve heard today that you would like to hear about in the future, or about the specific questions we raised for you.

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, at Philosophers in America.

Dr. Cashio: You can of course, email us at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com, and you can also call us and leave a short recorded message with a question or a comment that we may be able to play on the show, or maybe on one of our breadcrumb episodes. EW have been doing some of those, listening to your messages and replying. Check those out. You can reach us at 859-257-1849. Join us again next time on *Philosophy Bakes Bread*: food for thought about life and leadership.

[Outro music]