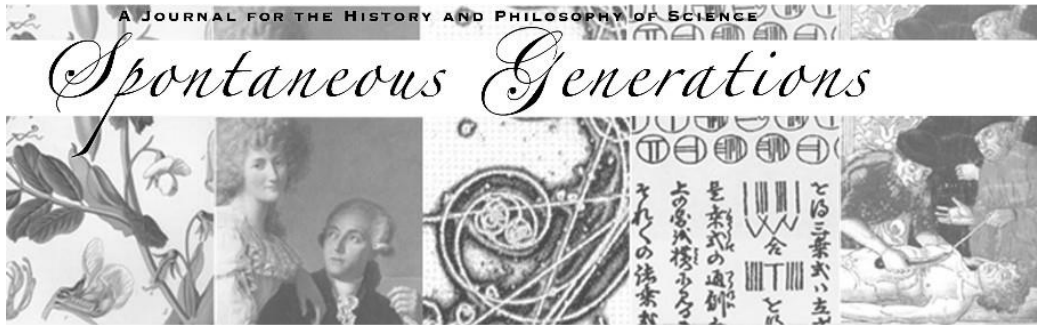




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Philosophizing Together: Josef Pieper on Philosophical Responsibility and Expertise

Rashad Rehman*

Abstract Philosophers have various responsibilities. Articulating these responsibilities, however, is contingent on what one means by “philosophy” and what philosophers have “expertise” in. Responsible philosophers must therefore interact with the following kinds of questions: What do philosophers have expertise in? What responsibilities do philosophers have as intellectual experts, and to whom are they responsible? What are philosophers supposed to know and be able to publicly convey? What is the role of a philosopher in contributing to local, institutional, and global responsibilities? This paper concerns itself with defending and articulating one such responsibility philosophers have: the invitation to others to engage in philosophizing. Using Josef Pieper’s (1904-97) life and writings as paradigmatically embodying this invitational-approach to philosophy, this paper articulates – by means of stories from his life – how this approach to philosophizing is pedagogically effective for instructors and students of philosophy i.e., in making philosophy worthwhile, accessible and relevant.

Philosophers are, among other things, conceptual analysts or “engineers.”¹ Philosopher Simon Blackburn put it as follows:

The word “philosophy” carries unfortunate connotations: impractical, unworldly, weird. I suspect that all philosophers and philosophy students share that moment of silent embarrassment when someone innocently asks us what we do. I would prefer to introduce myself as doing conceptual engineering. For just as the engineer studies the structure of material things, so the philosopher studies the structure of thought. Understanding the structure involves seeing how parts function and how they interconnect. It means knowing what would happen for better or worse if changes were made. This is what we aim at when we investigate the structures that shape our view of the world. Our concepts or ideas form the mental housing in which we live. We may end up proud of the structures we have built. Or we may believe that they need dismantling and starting afresh. But first, we have to know what they are.²

Philosophers interact with the “big” questions of human existence, interrogating, systematizing, enriching, and building concepts, theories, and arguments. As such, philosophers have responsibilities to individuals, communities, organizations, and global initiatives. This gives rise to many questions. For example: What do philosophers have expertise in? What are their responsibilities? What are philosophers supposed to know and be able to publicly convey? What is the role of a philosopher in contributing to local,

¹ Simon Blackburn, *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford, 1999), 1.

² Ibid: 1-2.

institutional, and global responsibilities? As Blackburn alludes to, if philosophers are to be relevant – and not “impractical, unworldly, weird” – they must answer these questions. This paper argues that Josef Pieper’s (1904-97) life and writings are paradigmatic in the task of clarifying one such philosophical responsibility: the invitation to others to philosophize. Through various stories from his life, this work shows how his invitational-approach to philosophy was not only responsible, but pedagogically effective i.e., in showing how philosophy is accessible, relevant, and worthwhile.

Josef Pieper: A Global Philosopher?

Josef Pieper (1904-97) was borne in rural Elte, Germany. He studied at the University of Munster, completing his habilitation “The Ontological Foundation of Morality in Thomas Aquinas” in 1929.³ He was also formally trained in law and sociology, studying under sociologist Johann Plenge (1874-1963) at The Research Institute for Organization Theory and Sociology between 1928-1932. For the rest of his career, he went on to teach philosophy at the *Gymnasium Paulinum*, the University of Munster and the Pedagogical Institute of Essen. As evidenced by his *Gesammelte Werke* (Complete Works),⁴ he is best described as a global philosopher whose approach was not confined by any one particular methodology or set of questions.⁵

Pieper argued for the following claims. First, philosophy is for everyone and not only those who were financially privileged and can afford university education.⁶ Second, philosophy cannot not be separated from tradition and theology, since it emerges from, and is enriched by them.⁷ Third, philosophers’ teaching, writings and speaking ought to be responsive to historical and socio-political circumstances.⁸ Fourth, philosophical questions

³ Josef Pieper, *Die Ontische Grundlage des Sittlichen nach Thomas von Aquin*. (Munster: Verlag, 1929). This work is not included in his complete works, possibly because he later revised and popularized it as *Living the Truth*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989). The thesis of both his initial scholarly dissertation and later popular, revised book was based on his teacher Romano Guardini’s “Von Goethe und Thomas von Aquin und vom klassischen Geist,” in *In Spiegel und Gleichnis* (Mainz: Verlag, 1932), 20-25.

⁴ Pieper, *Gesammelte Werke in Acht Banden*, ed. Berthold Wald (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2008).

⁵ In defense of this “global philosophical attitude”, see Josef Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy: Classical Wisdom Stands up to Modern Challenges*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

⁶ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (Toronto: A Mentor Book, 1956).

⁷ See Josef Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, trans. E. Christian Kopff (Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010), as well as Pieper’s *Tradition as Challenge: Essays and Speeches*, trans. Dan Farrelly (Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2015). Hereafter, references to “Tradition” refer to the latter text. In brief, his commitment to tradition and theology was not intended to be an opaque methodological commitment against secular intellectuals. Rather, addressing the claim that philosophy is marked by “rebellion against religious tradition”, he explained that “...the great originators of Western philosophy...Plato and Aristotle, not only found and recognized a ‘traditional’ interpretation of the world alive and vigorous—they accepted it as their starting point when they began to philosophize” (Pieper, *Leisure*, 148-149). He explains that for Plato and Aristotle what is ‘handed down by the ancients’ (*ex akoes*, ἐξ ἀκοῆς) was “a tradition which supplied the spark that set philosophy on fire.” Ibid: 149. He cites specifically Plato’s *Phaedrus* 274, *Laws*, 7, 15, *Philebus*, 10 and 16, *Symposium* 189, and Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 1074b.

⁸ Pieper, *Leisure*, 25-29.

can never omit differing methodologies, principles and theories.⁹ Fifth, philosophers should aim to find out the truth of things without privileging certain groups, individuals, methodologies, etc. His writings, though largely preoccupied with the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Augustine, display an unwavering commitment to each of these five theses. Consider also his references to Eastern philosophical traditions,¹⁰ complaints of the narrowness of Western philosophical practices¹¹ and desire to make philosophical practice accessible.¹² Further, stories from his life show how he approached his responsibility as a philosopher especially with respect to his commitment to inviting others into philosophical dialogue. These philosophical commitments are largely due to his conception of philosophy. By understanding his conception of philosophy, it becomes clear why inviting others to philosophize matters.

Pieper contextualizes philosophy as the paradigmatic “liberal art”, drawing on the conceptual and historical distinction between liberal arts (*artes liberales*) and servile arts (*artes serviles*). The distinction emerges in light of the ancient Greek term “leisure” (*skole*, σχολή) which was later translated into *scola* in the Latin Medieval tradition, the cognate of the English word “school.”¹³ He points out that Aristotle’s assertion in *Nicomachean Ethics* “we are busy that we may have leisure [*skole*, σχολή]” (1177b5-6) is literally, in Aristotle’s Greek, “we are unleisurely in order to have leisure.” As such, all “unleisure” or “work” is ordered towards having “leisure.”¹⁴ Thus, the liberal arts (*artes liberales*) are natural extensions of leisure since they are not aimed at any practical (ulterior, utilitarian) end beyond themselves. Liberal arts are the most free (*libertas*) since they are not aimed at praxis, that is, “the achieving of aims” or “the practical”, but are instead done “for [their] own sake.”¹⁵ Consequently, philosophy is valuable not only because it is done for its own sake, but because it is meaningful-in-itself. Pieper writes:

Whenever in reflective and receptive contemplation we touch, even remotely, the core of all things, the hidden, ultimate reason for the living universe, the divine foundation of all that is, the purest form of all archetypes (and the act of perception, immersed in contemplation, is the most intensive form of grasping and owning), whenever and wherever we thus behold the very essence of reality—there is an activity that is meaningful in itself taking place.¹⁶

⁹ Pieper, *What does “Academic” Mean?*, trans. Dan Farrelly (Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Pieper, *Living The Truth*, 44.

¹¹ Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray, S.J., and Daniel O’Connor (Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 1957), 75-90. Pieper differentiates the “West” from the “Christian West.” His criticism is not towards the Christian West’s claim to “theologically grounded existence in the world” (Pieper, *Tradition*, 27), but instead towards various Western philosophers and their philosophical practices. See the transcription of his radio talk “What is Meant by The “Christian West?”” in *Tradition*, 20-28.

¹² Josef Pieper, *Not Yet the Twilight: An Autobiography 1945-1964*. (Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2017), 10.

¹³ Pieper, *Leisure*, 21.

¹⁴ Ibid: 21.

¹⁵ Josef Pieper, *Traditional Truth, Poetry, Sacrament*, trans. Dan Farrelly (Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2019), 16.

¹⁶ Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 23. Against a possible misunderstanding, he distinguishes between “useful for” and “being good for something.” Specifically, he writes that “meaningful in itself” does not mean “meaningful *apart from the human person*”, but that “the point of reference is most clearly human existence” in which human beings are “meaningful in themselves” i.e., “a being existing for the purpose of its

Philosophy is fundamentally not an “academic discipline” in the institutional sense, but an orientation towards reality that human beings take in contemplating the “big” questions together. As such, philosophizing is intrinsically social, and aims at knowing the truth about human existence as a whole.¹⁷ Further, since philosophers are “critical”, which Pieper defined as “diligently taking care not to ignore anything,”¹⁸ philosophical dialogue demands openness to all possible philosophical interlocutors. Because of his concept of philosophy, his life was full of invitations to others to philosophize. This paper focuses on stories from his life which elucidate this invitational approach to philosophical dialogue in his *Not Yet The Twilight: An Autobiography 1945-64*.¹⁹

Story #1: Pieper’s “Philosophical Poetics” in Essen

When Pieper was teaching in Essen, Germany, he founded a philosophy group with his students entitled “Philosophical Poetics.”²⁰ In “Philosophical Poetics”, he would sometimes read a poem he had written or loved, and the evening was full of discussion between Pieper and his students. At other times, the group would read philosophy or literature together. They intentionally avoided all technical jargon. The aim of the club was active engagement with philosophizing, in an intellectually serious but lighthearted fashion. For example, they would walk by Baldeney Lake called “Lake Genesareth”, philosophizing past curfew and running back home at midnight together. Reflecting on his philosophical practice, his approach to his students was one of friendship. He never maintained the status of an elitist philosopher; instead, he maintained a reputation of being a simultaneously a student, teacher, and lover of philosophy. Likewise, he maintained a relationship with them based on a mutual love of philosophizing without divisive, politicized conversation in which sloganeering replaced philosophical argumentation. As such, respecting the dignity of philosophical argumentation, his students were interlocutors with whom he was conversing, not individuals to refute, belittle and defeat. He also maintained this attitude with his colleagues. For example, when he had Alick Dru translate his *Leisure* into English, Pieper was deeply unhappy with the first draft. He had realized there were nuances his German had that could not be put into English.²¹ He was so pedantic about being expressed clearly that after a series of countless revisions, Dru replied that from then on, he would only translate dead authors.²² Pieper would not fast-track publication at the cost of not being understood by his friends and colleagues. He saw his expertise as an opportunity to seek wisdom and insight together with his students and colleagues, and his work – no less his life – reflected this commitment.

own perfection” (Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy*, 57: modified translation). As he puts it, philosophy not only contributes to “man’s good”, but is “an indispensable constituent of the common good.” Ibid: 59.

¹⁷ Pieper, *Tradition*, 209-10.

¹⁸ Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy*, 88.

¹⁹ Ibid: 10.

²⁰ Ibid: 13-14.

²¹ Ibid: 54-55.

²² Ibid: 55.

Story #2: Pieper on Philosophical Understandability

Pieper needed more than a full day to write a forty-five-minute lecture and, on occasion, half a night more.²³ He was also notorious for delivering lectures to his classes by only telling stories. However, these lectures were successful not only because of his pedagogy, but because of his desire to be understandable to his interlocutors. For example, he would share his philosophical work with an “everyman” and see if they understood it.²⁴ He reported that some older individuals wished they were younger and could be his students.²⁵ His relationship to his academic work was one of sheer concern with philosophical accessibility or understandability, and his interlocutors were thereby not prevented from being enriched by his philosophical thought. His contemporaries, from Heidegger to the analytic philosophers in the English-speaking world, were and are concerned with philosophical progress on technical philosophical problems — often to the detriment of understandability.²⁶ While he was equally invested in Heidegger’s and the analytic tradition’s philosophical questions, his diligence and care for his understandability reveals his commitment to rejecting philosophy as a discipline only for the specialized, university-educated. Philosophy is for all human beings, and hence should be accessible for non-specialists.²⁷ There are two further reasons he desired philosophical understandability. First, philosophical understandability is a precondition for philosophizing with others, since language (both written and oral) is the medium of human interaction.²⁸ Second, plain language is a mark of truth because it enriches what one says and respects the dignity of the person with whom one is speaking.²⁹ This is reminiscent of his admiration of the Medieval

²³ Ibid: 27.

²⁴ Ibid: 177.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid: 10.

²⁷ Pieper’s claim that philosophy is for everyone is not a euphemism: it is rooted in his philosophical anthropology. In virtue of being a human being, we possess faculties – cognitive and spiritual – which allow us to come into contact with the totality of reality, a philosophical account of human nature embodied by the Latin ‘*capax universi*’, translated as “capable of coming into contact with the totality of reality.” He writes that a human being’s world is a “many-storied structure” (Pieper, *Leisure*, 108) in which we, rooted in and responsible for our environment, nonetheless transcend it: “...it is only because a human being, being a spirit, is capable of attaining the essences of things, that they can embrace the totality of things...” (Ibid: 119, translation modified). In its philosophical context, his language of “essences of things” refers to “essences” as St. Thomas Aquinas understood them. For an approachable introduction to Thomistic metaphysics, see Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014). Relatedly, Pieper emphasizes that since philosophy is for everyone, there are no special environments in which philosophy takes place: philosophy takes place whenever we put before us the totality of reality, including (and especially) in mundane contexts. Since “a human being’s world [i.e., and not *merely* their environment] is the whole of reality”, “...when a human being shuts themselves up in their environment, in the sphere defined and limited by their immediate needs, the degeneration that follows is only possible because spiritual degeneration is possible. The really human thing is to see the stars above the roof, to preserve our apprehension of the universality of things in the midst of the habits of daily life, and to see ‘the world’ above and beyond our immediate environment.” (Ibid: 119, 122, translation modified).

²⁸ Pieper, *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

²⁹ Pieper defends this in *Tradition*, 211-218.

disputation (*disputatio*).

The Medieval *disputatio* was an event in which scholars from different backgrounds, departments and faculties would enter into debate with one another to interact with “disputed questions” (*quaestiones disputate*). Distinctive to the *disputatio*, Pieper argued, were its rules and what they meant. Most exemplary was that in the *disputatio*, once one put forward their position, their interlocutor would, before entering into refutation, confirm their own understanding of their interlocutor. It was only after one’s interlocutor approved of how their view was characterized that the counterargument could be offered. This means that before one was able to talk and share their argument, they were required first to show that they understood the person with whom they were speaking. Pieper says that the guiding principle here was “not so much to overcome the opponent or to reach any “conclusion””, as it was “to mutually explore a question as far as possible, to carve out a path to knowledge opening out to infinity.”³⁰ He said that in the course of debate, one’s reasoning reflected “the strength to “listen to” everything one encounters.”³¹ He was concerned with the possibility and realization of genuine communication in service to philosophy, paradigmatically embodied in the *disputatio*.

Story #3: Pieper’s *Leisure* in Context

While Pieper’s *Leisure* is widely known, the context in which he wrote it is not. He wrote *Leisure* in a tiny room in a Sauerland holiday home on the Böhre in Germany,³² in an upper-floor of a wooden shed which possessed only a bed, a chair and a table. He said of this simple room that it was utterly silent. This context in which *Leisure* was written was no coincidence and was much more than mere context. Instead, the story of how *Leisure* was written reinforced his commitment to “listening silence” which was “much deeper than the mere refraining from words and speech in human intercourse,” but represented the act of opening oneself up to “the language of existing things.”³³ This “listening silence” had been characteristic of him from the earliest points of his career as a philosopher. For him, “listening silence” was a precondition for philosophical “contemplation.”³⁴ In his early autobiography, he reports that he preferred to write in solitude and quiet, and with utter concentration.³⁵ His commitment to a “listening silence” reflects his philosophical orientation as that of a student, and not only a teacher. He regarded himself as a student of the great philosophers. By way of illustration, Pieper writes that his relationship to Plato is characterized as a student sitting at Plato’s feet, and not a modern scholar looking over his shoulders.³⁶ His listening silence before the great philosophers is no statement of philosophical elitism: his conception of philosophy was one which demanded openness to

³⁰ Josef Pieper, *Scholasticism*, trans. Dan Farrelly (Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 159.

Translation modified.

³¹ Ibid: 160.

³² Pieper, *Not Yet The Twilight*, 34-35.

³³ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Goethe*, trans. Dan Farrelly (Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2009), 26.

³⁴ In his later work, he appears to designate “listening silence” as the precondition for “contemplation” e.g., Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 23. He made this point earlier as well: “To contemplate...to ‘look’ in this sense, means to open one’s eyes receptively to whatever offers itself to one’s vision, and the things seen enter into us, so to speak, without falling for any effort or strain on our part to possess them.” *Leisure*, 31 (my italics).

³⁵ Pieper, *No One Could Have Known*, 68-84.

³⁶ Pieper, *Tradition*, 186. Possibly an allusion to Luke 6:40: “... a student is not above the teacher.”

all interlocutors, and to all forms of philosophizing.³⁷

Story #4: Pieper on Teaching Philosophy

Pieper turned down invitations from the University of Gottingen, University of Munster and Goethe University Frankfurt, opting instead to teach at a pedagogical institute which offered professional training to teachers.³⁸ He wrote that because the training was conducted using the students' first language, and not the "foreign terminological jargon"³⁹ of the university, a unique space for philosophy was opened:

[one's first language] has been developed down through history and is influenced above all by dialect and poetic language, normally open[ing] up to us the depths of reality in which we can come to sense the world as a whole and have direct access to insights which determine the course of our lives.⁴⁰

This shows two ways in which he understood himself as a philosopher. First, his expertise was receptive to the non-academic facets of doing philosophy. He recognized that a central difficulty to philosophizing was not only the inability to *read* others' work e.g., English-speaking philosophers largely not being able to read foreign languages, but in *appreciating* the language of others as well. He engaged with this challenging project throughout his career. There is evidence throughout his *Werke*⁴¹ that Pieper knew Latin and Greek in addition to various German dialects, French, English, Danish, and Italian. He had not thought himself a polyglot nor a linguist; instead, he thought of himself as a philosopher attentive to both his language and the language of his interlocutor. Second, he used this appreciation for one's first language as an opportunity for intercultural, interreligious, and interdepartmental dialogue. For example, when he was writing on the philosophical nature of "festivity,"⁴² he travelled to India to learn the Hindu notion of "festivity." Hardly Eurocentric, even if rooted in and celebrating Europe, he expressed a "long cherished wish to get to know a culture which was *not* Western."⁴³ This reflected his orientation as philosopher who desired to philosophize with others, especially in a

³⁷ Pieper contended that his appreciation for all forms of philosophizing was not synonymous with, nor consistent with, any form of relativism. His contention was not that philosophy *just is* a series of concepts, arguments, and theories whose truth-value was person/culture-relative; instead, he argued that *in order to do philosophy*, one must be open to the totality of reality, omitting no idea, consideration, thought, etc. It was this radical openness towards objective reality, and simultaneous denial of relativism, that characterized his conception of philosophy.

³⁸ Pieper, *Not Yet The Twilight*, 27-31.

³⁹ Ibid: 176.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Beyond his own translations throughout his work, Pieper's autobiographies are full of stories in which he speaks to local persons in their native language. See Josef Pieper *No One Could Have Known: An Autobiography: The Early Years 1904-45*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987).

⁴² The text which emerged from this trip was Pieper's *In Tune with The World: A Theory of Festivity*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1965).

⁴³ Pieper, *Not Yet The Twilight*, 188. Elsewhere, he writes similarly against Eurocentrism: "It seems that the traditional wisdom of the Far East has preserved this awareness [total and serene unfolding of the most intimate responsive powers of the soul] much more vividly than our Western rationality" (Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy*, 50).

way which was respectful of language and attentive to the global aspect of philosophizing.

Three Lessons from Pieper on Being a Philosopher

As expressed earlier, a constituent element of a responsible philosopher is to invite others to philosophical dialogue. As Pieper's life shows, this open, invitational-approach to philosophical dialogue is effective in making philosophy relevant, accessible and worthwhile. Here are three things we can infer from these stories. First, Pieper never isolated his work as a professional philosopher from his commitment to being a student. His formal philosophical skills were never weapons towards his interlocutors; instead, they functioned as aids to philosophical conversation amongst friends. Second, his paradigmatic example of human conversation, the *disputatio*, was more than an ancient artefact of the medieval university. As he himself says explicitly, it will be what saves the university from hyper-specialization, lack of interdepartmental dialogue and philosophical elitism.⁴⁴ As such, a philosopher should be attentive to another's viewpoint and do their best to understand it, even strengthening their interlocutor's position before criticizing it. Third and finally, his approach to philosophizing with others is arguably best captured in '*contemplata aliis tradere*' ("to give over the fruits of one's contemplation to another"), the Dominican Order's Latin motto derived from St. Thomas Aquinas. Pieper's scholarship was not disassociated from his teaching experience and efforts to de-institutionalize philosophy. This is part of the reason why the publication of *Leisure* was so successful. His *Leisure* began with the objection that philosophy was the last priority in post-war circumstances, an objection interrogating the nature of philosophy itself. He used this objection to invite his readers to do philosophy, interrogating whether it really was a last priority in a truly human life. As a responsible philosopher, it was this invitational approach to philosophy which made it accessible, worthwhile and relevant.

Conclusion: Pieper in the Classroom

There are three ways in which my classrooms have benefited from Pieper's life and writings. First, at the beginning of the year I teach the Medieval *disputatio* in all my courses. My students are aware that in a highly politicized world where platforms for human communication are often saturated with yelling matches, sloganeering, and a lack of listening, the space for genuine conversation is comprised. The *disputatio* gives them a model for what human conversation, oriented towards truth and nothing else, looks like. Furthermore, it reminds them about the importance of language, both in the sense of being understandable, as well as doing one's best to understand others. Second, I remind my students continually of my own philosophical questions, severing the misperception that teachers and instructors are responsible for simply testing material and giving grades. I share my questions, thoughts and reflections on the questions, what others think about the questions I am currently working on, and so forth. It is then that I invite them into dialogue and ask them what *they* think about the

⁴⁴ Pieper says this in an interview with Thomas D. A'Andrea in Josef Pieper, "St. Thomas: Now More Than Ever – An Interview with Josef Pieper," interview by Thomas D. A'Andrea, *Crisis*, March 1 1990, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/1990/st-thomas-now-more-than-ever-an-interview-with-josef-pieper>.

questions. Finally, like Pieper's classes, my classes are saturated with humour, lightheartedness and stories. The classroom environment for him was the space within which friends philosophized, not merely debated or battled out philosophical ideas. My classroom, students and pedagogy of philosophy are indebted to Pieper's life and writings.

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