I began this course, Foundations of Philosophical Thought, by conceding a certain degree of ignorance with respect to the field of Philosophy. In terms of my level of awareness pertaining to what it means to engage in philosophical thought, beyond popular "bamboo in the wind"-like metaphors, I will admit to an initial feeling of absolute ignorance. Not that I haven't been known to wax philosophically at times, particularly during late hours of the night. But those moments of, shall we say, "deep insight", always seemed to emerge by random coincidence, rather than through purposeful intention. I had no figurative philosophical thought "button" to push, or if I did, I had no idea how to find it.

The initial course reading, John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty", provided, out of frustration, cause to pose the questions, "How is this philosophy? Do I even know what the word 'philosophy' means?" Embarking upon a Google search in hope of uncovering a relevant definition of the word "philosophy", I found some clarification in the second of four listed contexts:

> *Philosophy (2) a : pursuit of wisdom*
>
> > *b : a search for a general understanding of values and reality*
> > *by chiefly speculative rather than observational means*
> > *c : an analysis of the grounds of and concepts expressing*
> > *fundamental beliefs*

This was indeed a helpful explanation. From here, I sought to analyze the manner in which Mill pursued his own inquiry regarding the values of liberty, and found Mill's train of thought to be contrary to my own way of thinking. I realized that Mill (1) pursued a line of thought *by chiefly speculative rather than observational means*, whereas I often relied chiefly upon the observational or empirical; (2) I also saw that Mill introduced opposing and contrasting views on his own accord, adding continual

nuance to his initial statements, thereby (3) presenting himself not as an authority, false or otherwise, but as a critical and creative thinker in search of *a general understanding of values and reality*, shared with the readers of his essay. A key component, I realized, was number 2 - the introduction of opposing and contrasting views, on one's own initiative.

This simple exercise in analysis led me to stumble upon an apparently commonly known concept called "confirmation bias". I was familiar with the term "bias", but hadn't heard of "confirmation bias", although I quickly recognized this as being something of which I was guilty:

> *Confirmation bias (according to Wikipedia) is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses, while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities.*

The discovery itself represented a significant turning point in my personal growth. I realized that I had spent much of my adult life seeking to confirm my own ideas through a habit of hastily brushing past anything that conflicted with my way of thinking, in search of circumstances where my thoughts and beliefs held water - rather than testing my ideas, not necessarily in comparison to the ideas of others, but by virtue of my own ability to reason, or, as per the definition of 'philosophy', by chiefly speculative means. Seldom do I recall asking myself, in relation to my own convictions, "what if the opposite is true?" Seldom do I recall asking the more simple, speculative, question, "What if?". "What if?" strikes me as being a question which is elementary to philosophical thought. Epiphany number one.

I am somewhat amazed that I've managed to live a rich life in spite of what can arguably be categorized as flawed thinking. Or maybe it's true: ignorance *is* bliss.

In my critical reflection after week 1 of the Foundations of Philosophical Thought course, I wrote:

> *"...it strikes me that I, as a budding philosophical thinker might, instead of observing the world in confirmation of my personal views, alter this practice and begin opening my eyes and mind to where my thinking might be wrong or flawed, in search of further contrast, nuance or opposition to my initial understanding."*

Bingo. Epiphany number two. Discovery of one's ignorance is humbling; discovery of a path toward gaining wisdom is encouraging. Philosophical, even. That only a few minutes should pass, from the one to the other, is a blessing. And yet, the more I learn, the more apparent it becomes how little I know. Of course, I've been aware of this classic phenomenon of life-long learning for quite some time. Einstein expressed the same idea, Aristotle expressed it way before Einstein, and for the past twenty years or so, I have been repeatedly reminded of its truth. There's something overwhelming about personal discovery: the initial 'aha' moment, as if one had discovered fire or the wheel, followed thereafter by a moment of almost crushing humility, upon realizing one's 'aha' moment is hardly unique at all, viewed in the scope of 2500 years or so of western civilization.

"How do you even get there?" I asked mid-way through the course. By "there", I was referring to the quality of thought where one begins digging deeply enough into the complexities of human existence, to produce something as elementary as Descartes' "I think, therefore I am". How does this happen?, I wondered. Or how does the opposite occur, for example, where does one find the urge or inspiration to choose a basic, fundamental human concept such as 'justice', and begin to examine its various nuances and complexities, until arriving at an observation such as, 'just

practices can sometimes yield unjust consequences'? I believe the answer lies in cultivating a speculative mindset that perpetually asks, "What if?" – eventually followed up by the questions, "What if I'm wrong?" "Then what if?".

Quite often after completing the weekly readings, I've simply wanted to (metaphorically speaking) pull a blanket over myself, curl up into the fetal position and seek comfort with my thumb in my mouth. What could I possibly have to write about of value on a weekly basis, after butting heads with some of the greatest minds in human history?

Thank heavens for "me, myself, and I". Whenever I'd read something and felt completely stunned afterward by the enormity of it all, and by stunned, I mean mind-numb, as in literally unable to think – I found myself asking, "how does what I just read make me *feel*?" And then I simply began to write, hoping *something* would emerge, eventually. And eventually, something, in the form of thought and ideas, did emerge, merely by allowing my mind to speculate. Here's a handful of favorite "thought bites" excerpted from the past few weeks of writing (quoting myself):

> *"… perhaps a society can only be wholly just, in proportion to the degree of its citizens' will for a wholly just society."*

> *"…having experienced that the possibility exists to achieve this [noble] purpose, should one not always try to do so, to the best of one's intentions and artistic abilities? Is this not the "right" thing to do?"*

> *"Essentially, I'm asking the question, "How much money (or supportive resources) should a person in need, relative to the surrounding community who support him, receive in alms before he can no longer rightfully claim to be in need?""*

> *"Is 'power' perceived, or is 'power' real? Or, is there [more] 'power' in truth*
> *itself?"*

> *"Perhaps the questions we have about death, are really about life itself."*

Given my point of departure at the start of the course, I'm pleased with the caliber of these questions and statements. They invite further examination and inquiry. It then occurs to me, that if an effective inroad to philosophical thought is via the perspective of how ideas interest or affect me directly, or via how they make me feel, perhaps the best way to practice and engage in philosophical thought moving forward is to expand the range, variety, or diversity of what I allow to interest and affect me.

And there we have it, epiphany number three: "expand the range, variety or diversity of what I allow to interest and affect me". Now there's a thought: Free your mind, open your heart, let the world in.

I've become fond of the word "perhaps". The word allows us to express a thought, without excluding the idea that um, perhaps, we may be wrong. I find it to be *oh so* liberating, allowing oneself to think without the limitation, or fear, of judgment (especially from oneself) regarding right or wrong. The inquiry container of "if I am wrong, how or where am I wrong?" is, I believe, far richer than the container of "how am I right?" Kindly recall, I used to be a practitioner of "confirmation bias" – my thinking (in the past) being, if I discover something and believe it to be true, it's important to have this "truth" confirmed by ignoring anything which suggests the contrary, correct? Wrong. I can barely bend my mind in this fashion anymore.

I believe the greatest gift I've received from the Foundations of Philosophical Thought course is a realization of how much more meaningful, while engaged in thoughtful, speculative pursuit, an exploration of "how or where I may be wrong"

feels to be, rather than endeavoring to confirm how right I am. Although I haven't yet read enough Plato to know when he graduates from documenting Socrates' ideas to introducing his own, there seems to be a parallel contained in the above, drawn from a Socratic or Platonic concept (if I'm not mistaken) - somewhere along the lines of 'instead of seeking always to do good, we should rather seek to do no harm' – or was that Mill, or Hume, or Kant, or ??? – I'll admit at this juncture, some confusion still exists in my mind as to exactly who said exactly what. However, 'who said what' is something I can research and verify on my own time, in the pursuit of life-long learning; the more beneficial value at this moment stems from a concentrated exposure to thought of this nature, the kind of thought that encourages one to reflect and draw connections, for example, from 'instead of seeking always to do good, we should rather seek to do no harm', to 'instead of seeking to confirm where I'm right, I should rather be figuring out where I'm wrong'. Inversions of this type (good/harm, right/wrong), which seem basic to philosophical thought, are worth gold to a novice philosophical practitioner such as myself.

I imagine my "aha" moments hardly seem monumental, from an outside perspective. I can live with that. The monumental or significant for me lies in an exposure to thought models and inquiry methods which I haven't previously explored. For example, in my Critical Thinking course this semester (Fall 2016), in reference to the (far too) popular "10,000-Hour Rule" for so-called "mastery" of a skill (yes, I'm skeptical), I wrote:

> *"... thinking critically within this context, we'd need to define 'mastery', specify the particular skill, and then discuss whether 10,000 hours is an appropriate benchmark for mastery of that particular skill."*

- and yes, I was thinking critically, but I borrowed the method of dissection from Socrates (via Plato), in order to illustrate how one might establish a basis for common understanding within the context of a casual conversation. Thinking critically, you and I cannot *assume* to have a common understanding of a particular entity, and therefore, we may have to examine things from a *philosophical* perspective, if not to seek truth in regard to the entity itself, then at least to agree that we are in fact discussing the same entity, with a shared understanding of what that particular entity may or may not be.

Again, there may be some who would categorize these examples as 'Philosophy for Dummies". And again, I'm ok with that, as (at the very least) I seem to have found my philosophical thought "button". Twelve short weeks ago, I could barely express what philosophy is, or how one "does" philosophy. Today I'm completely fascinated, especially by the element of reasoning, e.g., if we're examining 'A' and discover that 'A' also contains or implies 'B' and 'C', well then, we can't be sure to fully comprehend 'A' without having examined "B' and 'C', now can we? The A-B-C of it may seem elementary, but in practice, the mere examination of 'A' can sometimes be a rabbit hole whose path some would rather not trace (take the issue of abortion, for example), let alone discover that inside, there exists a 'B' (the concept of "personhood", for example) and 'C' (the principle of freedom, for example), and who knows where else the inquiry might lead? What if …?

Although uncertain as to where my personal journey of philosophical inquiry will lead after this rewarding course ably guided by Professor Arthur Millman, I am left with the impression of being handed an extremely valuable thinking tool, along with a well-rounded manual concerning how this tool might be put to use.

* N.B.: 24 hours later, after some reflection, I'm beginning to think that "the greatest gift" from the course is actually to be found in the following observation:

> *"It then occurs to me that, if an effective inroad to philosophical thought is via a point of view of how ideas interest or affect me directly, or via how they make me feel,* **perhaps the best way to practice and engage in philosophical thought moving forward is to expand the range, variety, or diversity of what I allow to interest and affect me.***"*

In other words, there seems to be great value in movement toward an embracement of the world around us. Or, if not an embracement, then an ability to observe as if one is seeing things for the very first time. Quite possibly, such an ability might lead to seeing something for the very first time, truly "seeing" it, no matter how familiar "it" may have seemed before. In a comparison of child art with child philosophy, Gareth B. Matthews writes, "The adult must cultivate the naiveté that is required for doing philosophy well, to the child such naiveté is natural." I find there's exists a tension here, inside myself. My natural, immediate 'philosophical' inclination would call for a 'more sophisticated way of thought' – and perhaps there is some merit in this particular inclination, yet Matthews advocates for the openness, curiosity and naiveté of childhood in order to "do philosophy" well. The "openness to experience" we speak of as a core element, disposition, or mindset in critical and creative thinking, might very well also be a key element of philosophical thinking. Perhaps a balance between the two would be appropriate, for what value is there in "seeing", without the capability for reasoning?