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Building Philosophical Partnership: Using Havruta to Teach Philosophical Reading Skills

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential benefits of applying a technique of paired text study, Havruta, usually used for the study of Rabbinic texts to teaching philosophy in both undergraduate and divinity school settings. I also explore recent research on the significant gender gap in philosophy, which shows that much of the gender disparity occurs just after students' initial introduction to the discipline; some of this research suggests that this gap is linked to a "brilliance mindset," in which students think that success in philosophy is based almost entirely on raw talent, rather than a set of skills. I discuss how Havruta can be used to help students understand that it is possible to learn how to read and to think philosophically, thereby helping combat this misconception.

KEYWORDS

reading, philosophy, gender, Talmud

The Importance of Teaching Philosophical Reading Skills

Recent studies have documented a substantial gender gap in philosophy: only around 30 percent of philosophy BA recipients in the United States are women, with widening disparities persisting into graduate school, postdocs, and junior and senior faculty positions (Thompson et al. 2016, 1).[1] Significant racial disparities have been documented as well: data collected from the National Center for Education statistics found that in 2003, only 2.3 percent of faculty in degree-granting philosophy programs were African American and only 1 percent were Latinx (NCES 2011).

In the case of the gender gap, research has shown that much of this disparity develops very early in a student's engagement with philosophy. Several studies have shown that the gender ratios in introductory philosophy courses roughly match those of the undergraduate population as whole, but that many fewer women go on to take further courses in philosophy (see Paxton, Figdor, and Tiberius 2012; Thompson et al. 2016; Thompson 2017). This

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1   This is based on data collected by the U.S. Department of Education for the year 2012.

suggests that one important way to combat the ongoing gender (and, perhaps also racial, though there is less concrete data on this) disparities in the discipline would be to examine how these courses are taught. However, introductory philosophy courses are not the only places where students are introduced to philosophical material. Students' first encounters with philosophy can also occur in religious studies and seminary settings, where students may be even more anxious about how "difficult" philosophy seems to be, and where many students encounter philosophy out of necessity or degree requirements rather than by opting affirmatively to take a philosophy course.

Research on the gender gap in fields across the university suggests that beliefs about "field-specific ability," or a raw talent that cannot be taught, are especially strong predictors of gender balance in a given field (Leslie et al. 2015). A survey of faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows across all disciplines found that philosophy had some of the strongest field-specific-ability beliefs across any field in the university, including STEM fields, as well as one of the largest gender gaps (Leslie et al. 2015).

Another study, surveying undergraduates in an introductory philosophy course, found that students who hold a "brilliance mindset" about philosophy—the view that being good at philosophy is about being "brilliant" rather than a skill that can be learned over time—were less willing to continue in philosophy; the study also found this belief effected students' reported "willingness to continue" significantly more for women than it did for men (Thompson et al. 2016, 17). Another study found that students were more likely to hold brilliance-based beliefs about philosophy at the end of Introduction to Philosophy courses than they were at the beginning of the course. Researchers found no similar increase in the prevalence of brilliance-based beliefs about psychology after an introductory course in that discipline (Brock et al. forthcoming, cited in Thompson et al. 2016). In her recent paper, "Explanations of the Gender Gap in Philosophy," Morgan Thompson writes "If these results generalize, it suggests that philosophy may have the stereotype that it requires natural brilliance to succeed in philosophy; because such beliefs lead women to be even less interested than men in a discipline, it could partially explain the gender gap" (2017, 7). While less concrete data has been made available, similar patterns may explain racial and economic disparities in the field.

In this paper, I propose a pedagogical strategy that can be used to combat the brilliance mindset in philosophy, especially when encountered in religious studies and seminary settings, by breaking down a part of the philosophical process that is usually left to students to perform alone, with only limited guidance from instructors: philosophical reading. In most philosophy courses, students are sent to do the readings on their own, and then come to class to hear a lecture on the ideas in those texts; often, they are left to do the "matching" between the words on the page and the ideas presented in lecture with little or no guidance. If they are lucky, they also get a chance to explore the implications of those arguments, and to offer objections, in a smaller discussion-based setting. Even for students learning in smaller liberal arts settings, philosophical education often focuses more on identifying the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of a given argument than it does on discerning the argument in the text. While the strategies I discuss here will be aimed primarily at teaching philosophical material, they are also well-suited for use in religious studies and theology classrooms, where students often encounter philosophical material with even less explicit instruction about how to think and read philosophically.

More empirical work would need to be done to show a direct link between philosophical reading and the brilliance mindset, but my experience suggests that it plays a role: students who are new to philosophy often struggle to understand the ideas conveyed in philosophical texts, but they also notice that others (their instructors and fellow students with more philosophical experience) are able to decode philosophical texts much more quickly and easily. If the reading skills that these more successful readers use are not broken down and explicitly discussed in class, then the perceived gap in "getting" philosophical texts may lay the groundwork for the brilliance mindset.

There is some scholarly literature on how to teach philosophical reading. Scholars have tended to suggest two solutions: either provide explicit information on how to read philosophy in the hopes that students will internalize it, or implement sets of classroom practices which incentivize and promote good philosophical reading practices. For example, David Concepción (2004) recognizes that many students in introductory philosophy courses lack the "background information" that is "idiosyncratic to philosophy" which is necessary for decoding philosophical texts. To address this, Concepción suggests giving students a "How to Read Philosophy" handout which provides them with the requisite knowledge thereby

dispelling the belief that "reading philosophy is just like reading anything else" (2004, 352). However, students may need more than a description of how to read philosophy in order to become effective philosophical readers; like other skills, demonstration, practice, and direct description of the methods used can all be helpful.

Other scholars have suggested that annotation practices and group work may help students develop their philosophical reading skills. For example, Clair Morrissey and Kelsey Palghat suggest an online annotation technique designed to facilitate a shared conversation about the assigned readings (2014). Morrissey and Palghat, however, did not directly engage questions of how to read or decode philosophical texts; instead, they developed what appears to be a helpful tool for documenting students' reactions to the readings. In contrast, the techniques I recommend here aim to shape the process by which those reactions are formed.

David Silvermintz (2006) suggests that working in small groups to read during class can help students learn to decode philosophical texts. Below, I suggest a similar method, but with alterations designed to make specific reading practices explicit in order to help students practice them. I argue that some combination of explicitly thematizing what it is that successful philosophical readers do, along with opportunities to practice these skills in a supported classroom setting, can help students become more successful philosophical readers.

In contrast to this relatively limited literature (see also Walker, Trafimow, and Bronstein 2017; Vázquez 2014), there is a significant body of research on how to teach undergraduates to read scientific papers.[2] This research assumes that scientific reading is a specific skill that is different from other kinds of reading, one that students can be taught to perform, and one that they can become more proficient at over time. Because scientific reading is similarly technical and relies on particular structural patterns specific to the discipline in question, it may be a more useful model for thinking about how we ought to both teach and research philosophical reading than models from other humanities disciplines.

There is also a substantial body of research documenting the low rates at which undergraduates in all disciplines complete assigned reading, with some studies finding that only around 30 percent of students in many undergraduate courses regularly complete the assigned reading (see Brost and Bradley 2006). One scholar sharply noted that, "Armed with a yellow highlighter but with no apparent strategy for using it and hampered by lack of knowledge of how skilled readers actually go about reading, our students are trying to catch marlin with the tools of a worm fisherman" (Bean 2011, 33). A key part of combatting both the brilliance mindset and the general sense of disengagement in undergraduate courses is to teach students "how skilled readers actually go about reading." To this end, the methods I suggest below may be adapted to many other fields, especially those which ask students to learn to read texts that are structurally or terminologically different from those they have encountered elsewhere in their education.

In my own teaching, I have found that the brilliance mindset is also pervasive among graduate students who have had little or no previous contact with philosophy, and that it is especially strong among second-career students who have spent long periods of time away from academic work. Many of my students hold the "great" philosophers (especially those who had significant influence on the theological tradition, with which this student population tends to be more familiar) in high esteem, and often assume that these texts are especially difficult to understand, and that, once understood, their arguments should be assumed to be correct. Some students expressed disappointment when they discovered that these canonical thinkers held beliefs that were obviously implausible in the light of contemporary scientific advances or cultural shifts.

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2 See for example, Kinchin (2005), Robertson (2012), Spiegelberg (2014), and Letchford, Corradi, and Day (2017).Notably, much of this research is geared specifically toward the biological sciences, which, in Leslie et al. (2015), was shown to have both a significantly smaller gender gap, and a significantly less pervasive brilliance mindset.

What is Havruta? Why Might Philosophy Teachers Want to Use It?

The technique that I propose is borrowed from a different time, place, and culture: Havruta is a traditional form of paired text-study used in yeshivas (singular yeshivah), Jewish institutions of higher learning dedicated to the study of rabbinic and Jewish legal texts.[3] The word "Havruta" is simply the Aramaic word for friendship; in rabbinic literature it is often used to refer specifically to the relationship between study partners. This method takes diverse forms in many different contexts, but as I describe it here, it consists of three main parts: (1) reading the original text aloud, one or two lines or sentences at a time; (2) translating each line into a mutually familiar vernacular in order to reconstruct the flow of the argument in the text; and (3) discussing the newly translated content, either by asking questions (such as "What does so-and-so mean by x?" "Do you agree with A's view?") or by offering alternative ways of interpreting what the text is saying. This process always takes place aloud, working in a pair. In traditional settings, the pairs sit in rows with the teacher, learning with her own study partner, sitting at the front of the room. In many yeshivas, a "*shoel u-meshiv,*" literally "ask and answer," will circulate through the room to help students understand texts that they find difficult. Pairs also consult one another for help.

This makes the basic structure and physical environment of the yeshivah quite different than that of the university or seminary classroom or library. University libraries are characteristically quiet, leading students to think that learning is an individual process, best carried out silently; the yeshivah structures learning as a dialogical process.[4] Often, even students who are studying a text alone will read aloud, mimicking their half of a standard Havruta conversation.

There has been some academic work on Havruta as an educational tool for studying Jewish texts outside of the traditional yeshivah setting, including in university teaching. However, there is no comparable literature for using Havruta to study other kinds of texts. In their book *The Philosophy of Havruta*, education scholars Elie Holzer and Orit Kent (2014) describe their use of Havruta in a post-college program designed to prepare teachers for work in Jewish elementary schools. Holzer and Kent analyze the structure of Havruta interactions within the context of education studies, and they also describe the advantages and challenges of using Havruta in the classroom. My analysis draws on their work while recognizing several important differences between their setting and the philosophy classroom, including differences in the student population, texts studied, and overall educational goals. Most significantly, the structure of Havruta as I describe it here differs from the one offered in Holzer and Kent (2014). While their framing is quite helpful, it focuses almost entirely on reading narrative, rather than legal, rabbinic texts. In the yeshivah, Havruta is used for both genres, but I adapt the presentation of Havruta slightly here to make it closer to the strategies used with legal texts, because these tend to have a structure more similar to philosophical texts. The Havruta exercises I used in my classroom ask students to move sequentially through the three stages of Havruta learning: reading the original text aloud slowly, line by line; "translating" the text into more familiar language; and discussing and raising questions about the text's content or argument. For the most part, I use this method to help students close-read texts that had already been assigned, using around fifteen to twenty minutes of a fifty-minute discussion section; the remaining time was reserved for group discussion of what students had found during Havruta time.

Havruta is modeled in the rabbinic texts which it is used to study. Rabbinic literature is a diverse, genre-bending corpus of legal, narrative, and exegetical material. Much of the material circulated orally before being written down and most scholars argue that rabbinic texts were written down between 200-800 CE. While it is likely not a record of a literal conversation between Havruta partners, much of Rabbinic literature was woven together by an editor into a dialogic structure, modeling the kinds of conversations that it wants its readers to have when they encounter this literature.

The Rabbinic corpus also includes direct descriptions of particular teacher-student and Havruta relationships. In perhaps the most famous example, Rabbi Yoḥanan mourns the loss of his most talented student Reish Lakish:

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3   There is some irony in using this technique to combat problems that are helping to produce a gender gap in philosophy, because the yeshivah itself, and the Havruta techniques used there, have only recently become accessible to women; most yeshivas remain all-male institutions. As in the literature about the gender gap in philosophy, some have argued that the very structure of Havruta, especially its often argumentative tone, can be alienating to women. Research in philosophy has shown that women do not find philosophy classrooms to be "too combative," and I suspect that the concern about similar problems in traditional Havruta contexts are likely products of other ways in which women's full participation in the life of the yeshivah remains limited rather than the argumentative nature of some Havruta-based learning environments. See Thompson et al. (2016, 24).

4   Some recently renovated university libraries are changing this, with increased space for discussions and group work.

> The Rabbis said: Who will go to calm Rabbi Yoḥanan's mind and comfort him over his loss? They said: Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, as his statements are sharp, i.e., he is clever and will be able to serve as a substitute for Reish Lakish. Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yoḥanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yoḥanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him: There is a ruling that supports your opinion. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Are you comparable to Reish Lakish? In my discussions with the Reish Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the law would be broadened and clarified. And yet you say to me: There is a ruling which is taught that supports your opinion. Do I not know that what I say is good? Rabbi Yoḥanan went around, rending his clothing, weeping and saying: Where are you, Reish Lakish? Where are you, Reish Lakish? Rabbi Yoḥanan screamed until his mind was taken from him, i.e., he went insane. The Rabbis requested for God to have mercy on him and take his soul, and he died. (B. Bava Metzia 84a) [5]

In this story, the Havruta relationship is modeled as a both adversarial and friendly: Reish Lakish offers a relentless stream of objections to his Havruta's legal arguments, but he does so in the spirit of a shared intellectual and religious endeavor. For Rabbi Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish, legal and logical objections form the basis of a deep friendship. As we will see below, this kind of relationship shares certain structural features with the Socratic dialogue that is the precursor to many contemporary philosophical discussions.

Having studied rabbinic texts in a yeshivah setting myself, I found Havruta to be an attractive model for teaching philosophical reading because of the similarity between the Havruta relationship as described in rabbinic texts, and that of philosophical dialogue partners. In both cases, the corpus of texts often models the dialogical relationship that interlocutors are supposed to imitate when studying it. The relationship between Havruta partners bears some similarities with the relationship between philosophical dialogue partners I have had in my own education too. At the same time, though, my Havruta discussions often were more productive than many philosophical discussions I experienced in purely academic settings, in part because my Havruta partners held me responsible for their learning as well as for my own. In their study, Holzer and Kent note that "Havruta text study challenges the habits and norms of the traditional classroom," by confronting them with "the need to be actively involved in the dynamic of peer learning" and expecting the student "to take into account her partner's success as well [as her own]" (2014, 60). My own experiences learning in Havruta suggest that it might be an attractive vehicle for building a more collaborative intellectual culture in the philosophy classroom without sacrificing the critical edge that often characterizes successful philosophical discussion.

The Havruta relationship, as described in rabbinic literature, is often characterized by a mixture of adversarial and cooperative features. On the one hand, it is the Havruta's responsibility to challenge the arguments and interpretations offered by her partner; in more traditional settings these objections are often offered in a forceful and loud tone. On the other hand, Havruta relationships are also designed to be collegial; the argumentativeness is in the service of a shared goal: developing an understanding of the texts at hand.

Philosophical discussion often shares these two, sometimes opposed features. Participants in a philosophical discussion, or class, should be focused on furthering a shared philosophical agenda: developing a deeper understanding of an idea, argument, or question.[6] But, in practice, many philosophical conversations tend more in the first direction than in the second; this dynamic is only heightened when student-teacher power dynamics are added into the mix. In introductory courses, students often first encounter philosophical conversation through Plato's Socratic dialogues. Even scholars who are generally partial to Socrates's pedagogical style note that Socrates's dialogues often rely on an apparently hierarchical relationship between Socrates and his interlocutor. Socrates (or the teacher asking Socratic questions) is supposed to lead the less knowledgeable or less skilled interlocutor to understand the true structure (and, more often than not, logical flaws) of their way of thinking. In his book *Socrates as an Educator*, Gary Allen Scott notes that "In Plato's Socratic dialogues, the larger-than-life philosopher seems superior to every interlocutor with whom he converses, and although he always appears eager and willing to learn from those he examines in conversation, he never seems to learn much of substance, if anything, from his interlocutor about the topic under discussion" (2000, 27). Whether or not this initial impression is

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5   Trans. modified from Sefaria.
6   Scholars of rabbinic literature have noticed these structural similarities. See Labendz (2013) and Boyarin (2009).

correct as an evaluation of the Socratic dialogues themselves, it may lead students to think that philosophical dialogue relationships rely on a hierarchy of knower over and against a non-knower or learner; it may also reinforce existing beliefs and tendencies that lead students to be reluctant to participate in classroom discussions if they do not feel that their ideas are fully formed. The ways in which Socratic questioners reveal truths or ideas that otherwise seemed invisible to the learner may also help contribute to the brilliance mindset.

In contrast, Havruta, when executed well, relies on an even playing field between two learners who share a desire to gain information from a text. While one partner may have a better understanding of a given text or idea, this is not decided from the start by the structure of the relationship; both partners are trying to make sense of something together. As Holzer and Kent describe, this requires students to make both "challenging" and "supporting" moves. They note, however, that "Students paired with one another will not naturally engage in supporting and challenging each other's ideas in substantive and constructive ways" (2014, 145). Instead, they argue, "It is the responsibility of educators to help students cultivate such practices through the design of the learning environment and the teaching we do in it" (145). This is rarely done explicitly in philosophy classrooms; students often do not learn how to perform supporting moves in discussion because so much emphasis, in both classroom discussion and writing, is put on developing objections to others' philosophical positions.[7] Thus, using Havruta in the philosophy classroom provides an opportunity to make both the process of philosophical reading, and the process of philosophical discussion more explicit to our students, allowing them to become more confident in performing both challenging and supporting moves (Holzer and Kent 2014, 123). Havruta also gives students the opportunity to practice these skills in a more intimate setting than the full-size seminar, often out of full earshot of the instructor. This allows students to gradually develop the confidence they need to participate more fully in standard classroom discussion formats.

The empirical research on the gender gap in philosophy suggests that, while women do not disproportionately feel that the philosophy classroom is "too combative," they do have a more significant gap between their grades in introductory philosophy courses and their overall grade point averages (Thompson et al. 2016). Research in other fields has shown that women respond more negatively to what they take to be poor grades than their male peers do (Thompson 2017, 3). This concern about grading and evaluation may also contribute to an unwillingness to offer risky ideas in discussion, or even to participate at all, especially in courses where participation in discussion is weighted heavily in grading. Because Havruta allows students to try out ideas without direct supervision from an instructor, who is likely grading them on class participation, it may help students who would otherwise be reluctant to participate more fully, and it may also give students space to try out newer or unorthodox philosophical approaches.

I discovered that Havruta has other benefits in the classroom. Because philosophical texts are almost always presented to students in English in anglophone classrooms, students often do not expect to have to translate between philosophical language and more familiar ways of speaking and writing. They may be demoralized when they initially find texts very difficult to understand. In her article on using study guides to teach Talmud in university settings, Beth Berkowitz notes that, "When sense-making is working properly, it becomes invisible, and we do not realize the almost miraculous powers that each of us possess to create coherence" (2016, 26). Berkowitz then uses her study guides to "halt" students' efforts at "meaning-making" to allow them to understand the full structure of the texts they are reading (2016). I used Havruta in my philosophy classroom in a similar way—to help students see that making meaning out of philosophical texts is not miraculous, but rather is something that can be broken down into manageable units.

Berkowitz (2016) also stresses that "halting" this meaning-making process can make students more aware of the limits of their understanding of a text; I found that students in introductory philosophy courses were often well-aware of these limits, but felt uncomfortable or ashamed about them. The translation step in Havruta normalized explicit discussion of what students did *not* understand. While many students expect to immediately understand what they read, the translation

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7   I noticed that this emphasis had significant effects on the way that students approached both philosophical discussion and essay prompts. Often confronted with the "reconstruct and evaluate" philosophical assignment—which asks students to describe a philosophical position, offer what they take to be the strongest objection to that position, and then either defend or refute the objection—students felt that they had to come down on the side of the position that they reconstructed, because that was the next step in the philosophical dialogue. Students were very reluctant to embrace the idea that defending or supporting an objection could make for good philosophical writing. This suggests that these assignments may promote an overly rigid, "back and forth" model of philosophical debate, which does not allow both supporting and challenging moves to grow organically out of one another.

step in Havruta makes it clear that making sense of the text is in itself a substantial task; this helps keep students from becoming demoralized if they do not understand a text or argument on first reading. This also forces students to read more slowly. While many students are taught to "read for general comprehension" and not get hung up on particular passages, this approach can be counterproductive when reading technical philosophical texts, where understanding an initial set of definitions is often required to make sense of the argument going forward.

Havruta allowed me to borrow from a flipped classroom style of teaching, giving me the opportunity to directly supervise and help students perform work that they would usually do alone at home. At its inception the flipped classroom was, in part, an effort to transplant pedagogy from the humanities to the sciences; an early article on flipped classrooms noted that "Professors have flipped courses for decades. Humanities professors expect their students to read a novel on their own and do not dedicate class time to going over the plot. Class time is devoted to exploring symbolism or drawing out themes. And law professors have long used the Socratic method[8] in large lectures, which compels students to study the material before class or risk buckling under a barrage of their professor's questions" (Berrett 2012). However, Havruta gives us the tools to flip the classroom in a different way, allowing instructors to help students do what is usually assumed to be homework—their reading assignments—with the help of both peers and the instructor. To this end, I also borrowed a technique that is common in more contemporary *batei midrash*, giving students a printed sheet that contained both excerpts of the texts themselves and specific questions and instructions for their reading practice, allowing me to structure not just what students read, but *how* they did so.[9] These handouts gave me a space to explicitly discuss and explain particular reading practices. Many instructors give students reading questions to think about as they read, or to answer once they have done the reading, but these questions are often used primarily to help students focus on the most important material. The questions I used were deployed as tools for the reading process itself. On my handouts, questions were intermixed with the texts themselves and asked students to not only think about or focus on the reading, but to do something active with their partners; I also sometimes asked students to underline, circle, or mark certain passages or features in the provided text.

As with other flipped classroom approaches, Havruta allows for highly differentiated instruction. In the traditional Yeshivah setting, students of a variety of levels learn together in a single room; this model is particularly appealing for classrooms with a mixture of majors and non-majors, or a mixture of graduate and undergraduate students.

How I Implemented Havruta in My Classroom

I began introducing some Havruta-like elements as an advanced graduate student, while TA-ing a course in Theological Aesthetics at a Divinity school affiliated with a private R1 institution in the northeast. I usually had students break into small groups to read passages from the assigned text aloud (students had read the text in full in advance) and try to rephrase it in their own words sentence by sentence. While some students found this helpful, many reported (in informal, anonymous "Keep, Quit, Start" midterm evaluations) that they did not want to continue this form of group work. My suspicion is that many students simply did not know what they were supposed to do in the group or what role they were supposed to play in the group. Holzer and Kent also noted similar difficulties in their study, writing "It would be a mistake to assume that students of all ages easily adapt" to learning in Havruta. "Chances are good," they write, that students "have not had similar (and successful) previous successful experiences. Some may have had collaborative experiences in, say, sports, but unlike the disorganized and open-ended nature of Havruta text study, roles in sports are closely guided by the rules of the game, the coach and the referee" (Holzer and Kent 2014, 60). It was clear, then, that students needed more direct instruction about *how* to learn in Havruta for this approach to be beneficial.

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8   The Socratic method used in law school classrooms is slightly different than the one used in many philosophy classrooms, in part because it uses the Socratic questioning of the teacher as a tool to test the students' comprehension and retention of the material, and not just to probe a philosophical question. This use of the term draws on the power dynamics that I highlighted above: in the law school version of the Socratic method, the questioner is always in a position of power and superiority over the person responding to Socratic questioning.

9   Called the "source sheet," this approach to teaching rabbinic texts is relatively new, though it has spread quite rapidly. The source sheet seems to have come into being with the advent of the copy machine—some credit "Yavneh," an Orthodox student group on American college campuses, with developing it in the 1970s, while others attribute it to Israeli Bible scholar Nehama Leibowitz. See Andrew Silow-Carroll (2017) and Kraut (2011). Thanks to David Wolkenfeld for pointing this out to me.

As I continued to implement Havruta learning in other courses, I found that the two-person partnership was more effective than larger groups, because it made it harder for some students to dominate the group's discussion.[10] For each Havruta Exercise (I called them "Reading Exercises," except in Jewish settings where students were familiar with Havruta from their required Rabbinics courses), I passed out a handout that consisted of three parts: the goal of the exercise, passages from the relevant text(s), and questions for discussion, which appeared either before or after each passage. During the first few weeks of a course, I also included some general instructions about how Havruta should proceed. Upon receiving the handout, students performed all three steps of Havruta learning. After students worked for around twenty minutes in Havruta, we reconvened and discussed our findings as a full class.

Part A of the handout, the goal, is designed to help students know what they are supposed to accomplish in a given conversation. This gives students tools to evaluate how successful they were at a given task, so they do not evaluate themselves based on their expectations about how a "good student" would have done in the exercise. This allows the teacher to signal to students that it is reasonable to have different expectations for different kinds of reading, and to communicate that even if a reading effort does not lead to full comprehension of the text, it can still be productive. For example, below are statements of goals used in Havruta exercises in a course for both undergraduates and divinity school students:

For a discussion of Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*:

This exercise has two main goals:

- To work together to practice reading Kantian prose, such as it is.

- To understand the basic moves/structure of *Kant's argument for the supersensible choice of a radically evil disposition*.

For a discussion comparing versions of the argument from design:

Goal: One of the advantages of doing philosophy in a religious studies department/setting is that we get to pay a little more attention to history. So today, we are going to put on our intellectual historian hats and practice tracing an argument through time.

I would sometimes use the goal as an opportunity to give students a preview of the structure of the argument that they were being asked to reconstruct. I would often use goal statements to preview argumentative structures that we would see throughout the semester. In addition to the problem/solution structure in the example below, I also used similar goal statements to help students learn to recognize arguments from analogy:

Goal: To trace out Reich's basic argument in this chapter. The argument has two parts: (Keep this structure in mind as you read other texts. You'll find it pops up a lot elsewhere.)

- ***Problem*** with Marx/ways that Marx is usually read

- ***Solution*** provided by Freudian psychoanalysis

Identifying these argumentative structures was one tool I used to help make the reading process an explicit part of classroom instruction.

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10 I used this methodology in three courses, two at a private R1 university in the northeast and its affiliated divinity school, and one at a major American Rabbinical school. One of the courses at the R1 institution served a mixture of divinity students, on both the academic and ministry tracks, as well as undergraduates. The second course served entirely undergraduates, and was cross-listed in philosophy, African American studies, and education studies, drawing students from a wide range of majors.

Following the goal, each handout contains a few passages of text. When I was teaching standard, semester-long courses I used excerpts from the assigned reading, but in a summer course that met four days a week, I used Havruta as a tool for introducing students to a wider range of texts without adding too much to their reading load, especially when the course met on sequential days. This allowed me to give students examples to which they could apply theoretical paradigms learned in class.[11]

Selecting passages is an especially difficult part of preparing these exercises; the main challenge is to avoid giving too long a block of text. I usually chose to give no more than a couple of paragraphs, depending on how much time I planned to allot Havruta. (Usually this was no more than twenty minutes in a fifty-minute discussion section. This is a significant difference from the traditional model, which often allows students to sit in Havruta for several hours at a time).

Accompanying each reading were a few questions or prompts, designed to help the students accomplish the goal. For example, the following is an excerpt from Richard Swinburne in a handout on the argument from design with associated reading questions:

> The data inexplicable by science to which I have drawn attention—the uniform behavior of objects in accord with laws of nature, and the special character of those laws and of the intimal (or boundary) conditions of the Universe—are readily explicable in terms of the action of a God, omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing) and perfectly free. He is constantly active, moving the stars and atoms in a regular way (as we may move our bodies in a regular way in the patterns of a dance), and in just such ways as, together with the primeval matter which he makes, to bring forth animals and humans. Being omnipotent, he can do this. Being omniscient, he will see good reason for doing it. A regularly evolving world is beautiful, and the humans who will eventually emerge can learn how the world works—which they can do only if there are simple laws of nature for them to understand—and then they can themselves choose to some extent how to form the world for good and for ill. It is good that there be humans playing a role in the creation process. God, being perfectly free, will not be prevented by irrational forces from bringing about what he perceives to be good. (Pojman and Rea 2014, 209)
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> With your partner, do the following; be ready to share your findings with the class.
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> 1. Make a list of the different ways that Swinburne describes the world. What kinds of terms/analogies does he appeal to?
>
> 2. This paragraph is formulated both as a response to an anticipated objection (something that Swinburne thinks his opponent might argue) and an argument in its own right. Which of the descriptors that you identified in (1) does Swinburne think obviously point to design? Which does he think his opponent might use to refute him?
>
> 3. Compare and contrast Swinburne and Paley's descriptions of the world [a similar passage from Paley appeared earlier on the handout]. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?

The main goal of these questions is to give students a specific task to complete as they read that is more specific than the usual philosophical request for students to "identify" or "reconstruct" the author's argument. Especially when teaching courses in philosophy of religion which often cover texts that use a variety of philosophical methodologies, it is important to teach students that the goal of reconstructing the author's argument can be accomplished in a variety of ways. To help students develop this competency, the handouts allow students to practice several different structured reading strategies; for each, I stated explicitly (either in writing or while introducing the exercise) *why* a given strategy was used for a specific text. For example, we might focus on tracing a given metaphor or analogy through a continental philosophical text, while

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11 For example, in a summer course, Sexual Ethics in Modern Jewish Thought, I provided students with several short excerpts of text, and then asked them to reconstruct what two theorists we had read early in the course—Judith Plaskow and Cynthia Ozick—would make of each passage. The handout for this assignment had students first read and summarize the excerpts themselves, and then apply ideas from Plaskow or Ozick, before selecting textual evidence from those thinkers to support their readings. While many assignments in both philosophy and religious studies ask students to apply theoretical paradigms to examples, breaking down the reading process helps guide students through their first few times using concepts in this way.

focusing on premise-conclusion structure for more analytic ones. I would point to textual cues that made it clear that a particular form of argumentation was being used. This helped students learn that the strategies that competent readers use to understand a text are not chosen at random but are instead informed by features of the texts themselves. By thematizing different reading tools and processes, these worksheets help demystify philosophical reading and combat the brilliance mindset.

During the philosophy of religion course, some students expressed concern that they could not apply the kinds of close reading that they performed in Havruta for the all texts they were assigned to read on the syllabus; it was simply too slow to apply broadly.[12] When I suggested that they didn't need to do this for every page assigned, but only for some passages, it became clear that students felt unsure about how to select passages on which to focus. This led me to develop an exercise that would allow them to practice a more independent version of the kinds of reading we had practiced in Havruta. Near the end of the semester, I had students generate a set of questions about an assigned text. With their partner, they chose one question to focus on for the class period and then identified a passage they thought could help them answer their question. Then students chose a reading strategy from a list of the strategies we had used. The students then used the strategy to analyze their chosen passage. Each pair discussed which strategy they wanted to use, implemented it, and then evaluated whether their strategy was successful.

Below is the list of techniques I introduced in the Philosophy of Religion course:

1. Spell out an argument in premise-conclusion structure. Assess validity and soundness.

   • Understand any objections that the author considers his/herself. Clarify how they link up with the main argument. Which parts of the argument do they challenge?

2. Begin by offering a tentative definition of a key term in the text, then update your definition in light of the different ways the term is used throughout the text. (We practiced this with Kierkegaard.)[13]

3. Compare and contrast two versions of an argument in order to clarify the similarities and differences between them. (This can be an explicitly historical comparison, but it does not have to be.)

4. Make a list of the descriptive and normative claims in the argument. Clarify the relationship between them. To what extent are they dependent on one another?

5. Consider how these arguments might rub up against particular lived experiences. Do these experiences affect the strength of the argument? If so, how?

Once students had selected which question they wanted to work on, I provided them with the following instructions:

1. Once you've selected your question, think about which of the above strategies would be most useful for answering it. Be ready to explain why you chose this approach to the class.

2. Use this strategy to answer your question as best as possible. Note any areas where you are still confused/ have more work to do.

3. Evaluate how successful your strategy was in resolving your question. What worked well and what didn't?

4. Sometimes the best thing to come out of trying to answer a question is a better, more interesting question. See if you can formulate a "thicker" question (that goes beyond mere comprehension) that has come up as a result of your investigation.

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12 Berkowitz (2016) expresses similar worries about "over-teaching" (from her own reflection on her teaching, rather than from students themselves) in her article.

13 We used this technique for excerpts of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1992).

5. Make a note of any other non-question thoughts/observations that you've developed.

This exercise is designed to help students consolidate the skills that they have developed over the course of the semester, allowing them to begin to implement the kinds of reading that they practiced while working through previous Havruta handouts, but in a more independent way. It may also be helpful to have students self-generate this list of tools for philosophical reading, either as a class or individually, before doing this kind of exercise; this may help them feel more ownership over the techniques that they have learned. Repeating this process a couple of times during the semester, and not just at the end, may also be useful. This kind of exercise could also be tied to passages students need to review for an upcoming writing assignment or exam. It also allows students to assess their own strengths and weaknesses as philosophical readers, recognizing that they may be particularly comfortable with one way of reading but need more practice with another.

Structure in the Classroom

I often used Havruta exercises in the middle fifteen to twenty minutes of a fifty-minute class period. We usually started with a brief introduction of the main questions under discussion, or with a more frontal presentation of key ideas, concepts, or historical background. Then students form pairs and perform the exercise.

Some teachers may worry that Havruta decreases the amount of material that they can cover in a single class session. This is a significant concern, and it highlights the fact that Havruta is best used as a tool in classroom discussion, where the goal is to help students learn to think with the reading, rather than to help them work through a chunk of material in a linear way from beginning to end; it is best used in conjunction with more standard lecture formats, and not as a replacement thereof. Rather than thinking of Havruta as covering less material, it is better to think of it as a way to teach a particular skill—philosophical reading—that would not be covered elsewhere.

There are many ways to arrange Havruta pairs. I usually allow students to select partners on their own, often based on physical proximity in the room (which also helps save transition time). Occasionally I have students count off so they have to work with someone new. Having a consistent partnership seems to benefit some students, since it allows them to build a working relationship with a particular person over time. However, this is a high-risk, high-reward strategy since some partnerships will by nature go less well than others. Though Holzer and Kent report that some students expressed concern about the "match" with their Havruta partner, I found that students' anxiety about working in a given pair was often quite low, because they knew the exercises would be brief and that they would not be "stuck" with any given partner permanently (2014, 72). This is something that has to be negotiated by each teacher and each group of students and is dependent on context.

As Holzer and Kent note, in the traditional structure of a *beit midrash*, teachers are also engaged in their own text study often with a Havruta of their own, while other (usually more junior) teachers circulate to answer questions. This seamless integration is made possible by a relatively smooth intellectual hierarchy, where the boundary between student and teacher is quite fluid, and where there are often several instructors of various levels of seniority available at any given time. This kind of integration of the teacher's own learning and that of the students' may not translate well in many university teaching settings, but it is useful to try to emulate this as much as possible. I made sure to circulate periodically to help students if they were stuck or did not understand a passage or question, but I spent a significant chunk of Havruta time reviewing the texts I had given students to read, being sure to model active reading by marking up the text and taking my own notes. I also instructed students to raise their hands if they needed help; they were uncomfortable with this at first, but after I made a few informal visits to each Havruta, they began to seek me out when they had a question.

These *shoel u-meshiv* interactions are pedagogically important and have the potential to either significantly reinforce or destabilize the brilliance mindset. On the one hand, having someone who is very familiar with the text come over and solve a problem quickly and easily can reinforce the brilliance mindset, making it seem that the instructor has some set of mysterious skills that allows them to decode a text that the students do not understand. Given the brilliance mindset's gendered context, this danger may be especially significant for male instructors helping female students decode a text. To

avoid this, it is important to help the students decode the text on their own, rather than providing them with an answer, even if this would allow the students to proceed more quickly. Many stuck pairs will ask questions in the form of "What does [Author] mean by X?" or simply "I don't get it. What does this mean?!" Borrowing from my own experiences studying rabbinic texts in a *beit midrash*, I began each interaction with a stuck pair not by answering their question directly, but by asking them to first explain what they already understood about the text and the context of the difficult line or term. There are often misunderstandings upstream that cause a problem with answering a given question; after working together to correct these, we can return to the problematic passage, and guide students through figuring out the passage together.

Students sometimes lacked a key piece of context that would have allowed them to decode a particular word or phrase. I was surprised by how many times students were misled by differences between colloquial meanings of terms and technical philosophical uses of the same words. While I sometimes included glossaries of terms I thought would mislead or confuse them on the handouts, my students found many more instances than I was able to recognize. Watching my students read in Havruta allowed me to recognize anew how much of philosophical writing is in its own idiolect, something I rarely notice since I spend so much time with these texts. In these cases, I provided the requisite context or technical meaning of a term, and then allowed the students to try to reconstruct the argument again on their own. If several pairs had the same problem, I would briefly interrupt Havruta learning to explain the relevant term or put it up on the board. I would also emphasize that gaining familiarity with philosophical texts over time would make the relationship between colloquial usage and philosophical usage less mysterious.

When helping a stuck Havruta pair, it is sometimes useful for the teacher to read the passage aloud herself, and then reconstruct how she herself would go about answering the students' questions. This often involves not only translating the text into language the student can understand but also pointing out the textual clues that you, as a teacher and philosopher, use to come to your conclusions about a text. Doing this work is rewarding as a teacher and a scholar; we rarely think about how we do our own philosophical reading, and these kinds of interactions help us clarify our methods.[14]

Occasionally, students get stuck on a difficult term or concept that is one of the central difficult questions under discussion, or something that is a subject of significant scholarly debate. In these cases, it is important to affirm that the students have come up with a solid question which might not have an easy answer, and then ask students to begin to contemplate why this question is important to them. This also helps students learn the difference between comprehension questions that ask what the text is trying to say and evaluative questions that ask about the implications of the ideas in the text. Understanding this distinction is especially important for philosophical writing, and eventually, for independent research in philosophy. If students have significant trouble understanding the basic flow of a text, it will often be very difficult for them to make this distinction.

Havruta pairs will naturally finish their work at different paces. It is helpful to include two different sets of material on the Havruta worksheet: one set of material that you want all students to cover and some extra material that quicker pairs can get to if they have time. It is important to impress on students that going faster is not better in this case. I often describe Havruta as a "negative race" where doing well is correlated with going slowly. Allowing students to go at different paces allows for more differentiated instruction than is often possible in seminar settings; this is especially helpful when teaching in mixed graduate and undergraduate environments, or in environments where some students have a great deal of philosophy background and others are new to philosophy.

It was sometimes difficult to predict the amount of time that some Havruta exercises would take. This required my lesson plans to be quite flexible and sometimes created situations where students did not cover all of the material that they (or I) might have wanted them to in a given discussion. On the other hand, this unpredictability was instructive for me as a teacher, because it gave me real-time data on which material was challenging or confusing for students and which they found relatively easy to understand. While it is sometimes possible to do this in a seminar setting, being present as

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14 In the introduction to their book *Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens*, Marjorie Lehman and Jane Karanek describe how explicit reflection on instructors' own reading processes served as the foundation of the pedagogical reflections included in their book (2016, xv–xix).

students read allowed me a much closer view of how my students were learning. This was quite humbling; I was often quite wrong about where students would get stuck. However, I was able to then use this information to develop future lesson plans and assignments.

As Bloch-Schulman ([2016](#)) notes, much of the literature on teaching philosophy relies on what he calls the "unjustified armchair method," where philosophy teachers assume that explanations that clarify ideas for them will also work equally well for students. Bloch-Schulman argues that this approach assumes that "I was able to learn through this method, and thus my students will be able to learn through this method as well," without giving much attention to differences between students and the teacher (2016, 6). The Havruta format, and especially the *shoel u-meshiv* type interactions with Havruta pairs, allows teachers to collect real-time data about how specific groups of students are learning, and what particular challenges they are facing. This goes beyond cultivating a student-centered mindset in which the teacher imagines how their students, given their backgrounds and environments, might react to a given text or idea; it allows teachers to directly observe how they do so.

Finally, each Havruta session was followed by a brief discussion as a whole class. If the goal of the exercise was to reconstruct an argument then the discussion consisted of a brief review of that reconstruction followed by an evaluation of the argument, discussing possible objections and responses to it. Where appropriate, I noted that this was the structure of their paper assignments. Some Havruta exercises also pushed students to think about a comparison or other kind of broad evaluative claim; in these cases, post-Havruta discussion time was used to explore these ideas as a group.

While some have suggested that a "pair and share" model allows quieter students to prepare more to participate in seminar discussions,[15] Havruta offers a much more robust form of preparation for class discussion, since it allows students to engage in more sustained reflection about the text before jumping to the evaluative questions that would often begin a more standard seminar discussion, or even some pair and share models. This approach also helps foster collaboration; students often cite something that they discussed as a pair, or something that their partner had pointed out, and share it with the group. As a teacher, I try to point out and praise students for building on one another's work in this way; this is a good way to help students learn the importance of what Holzer and Kent call "supporting moves" (2014). I also encourage students to share with the class if they and their partner had a significant disagreement, usually by asking one student to reconstruct the other's position; this also helps students see that they are responsible for thoroughly understanding positions with which they disagree.

In the summer course in which I used Havruta, I asked students to write a brief (two to three paragraph) response to some of their Havruta discussions, due before the next class meeting. This provided an opportunity for students to engage in some second-order reflection about their discussions. I saw students frequently discuss their partner's ideas and thinking in these responses, performing both supporting and challenging moves. While writing assignments are not an essential part of the Havruta methodology, they can be used successfully in some settings.

More empirical work would need to be done to conclusively demonstrate that Havruta can help shape students' mindset about philosophical reading. Nonetheless, anecdotal observations in my classroom suggest that Havruta helps students understand that they are capable of becoming better philosophical readers. In a course evaluation, one student wrote that Havruta was a "good way for each of us to test our own comprehension of the readings and, ultimately, to gain a fuller understanding of them."

Areas for Further Exploration

It might be useful for students to engage in more sustained thinking and reflection about how the process of learning in Havruta differs from other ways in which they have been taught to interact in the classroom. This is especially useful in religious studies and seminary contexts, where engaging in this practice of learning is also experiencing a specific way of

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15 Green notes that some research on college seminars has found that in many seminars four to five students account for over 75 percent of class discussion (2000).

knowing that is historically rooted in a particular religious tradition. Havruta is both a tool used for study and an object of study itself. In explicitly Christian settings, this can also be useful for helping students think about the diverse ways that religious communities approach the study of sacred texts; to that end, comparisons with other methods of reading sacred texts, like *lectio divina,* may be particularly fruitful.[16] Similarly, for students already familiar with Havruta from the study of rabbinic texts, applying this methodology to a new body of texts can prompt productive reflection about genre and about the Havruta relationship.[17]

In the introductory philosophy classroom, however, explicit reflection on the differences between standard seminar settings and Havruta may be counterproductive; focusing too much on how the usual philosophy setting is competitive or adversarial, for example might reinforce damaging assumptions that contribute to the brilliance mindset, or help create a stereotype threat which may hurt the performance of students who are socialized to think of themselves as not combative or argumentative.[18] It may be more useful, in these settings, to simply create a philosophical environment where the kind of collaborative, but still forceful discussion that characterizes Havruta is the norm. Ultimately, students and teachers will have to adjust this to the contexts in which they are working.

It may also be useful to explore how to incorporate Havruta teaching into a fully flipped classroom model that really does have students do their homework (i.e. course reading) in class, while having students watch lecture content at home. It is unlikely that this would fully replace course readings—Havruta allows students to cover only a small fraction of the material that is usually assigned in introductory philosophy courses—but it might provide a vehicle for decreasing the "at home" reading load, while allowing students equal exposure to important concepts. This model has been particular successful in STEM, has been implemented in some humanities courses, and might be particularly useful in philosophy as well.

Conclusion

Louise Antony argued that the persistent gender gap in philosophy best explained by a "perfect storm" of factors which have collaborated to create conditions where women are much less likely to continue their study and advance in the profession (2012). Such a storm is likely also brewing in religious studies and seminary education, though its gusts and currents may blow is in different directions. In both cases, we will need pedagogical, institutional, and even political, innovation if the "perfect storm" is to clear.

Advocating for and working toward such systemic change can seem daunting, especially when there are so many factors at play. As Leslie et al. (2015) show in their study on the brilliance mindset, both men and women, both instructors and students, hold the brilliance mindset about their own field in ways that are correlated with the gender gap. Thus, a real change in the field will require not only changing the way that students think about our field, it will also require us to change our own assumptions about what factors contribute to success in philosophical inquiry and professional life. One of the most effective ways to do this is to watch our students learn that they can, with hard work, *learn* to be good philosophical, readers, writers, and thinkers.

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16 For an overview of one approach to this, see Elkins (2019).

17 Given the gendered history of Havruta described above, it is important to be aware that students who are already familiar with Havruta may have significant assumptions about what Havruta is and who it is for that can impede their learning; instructors should be aware of this as they implement these methods in this context. It may be useful to have students write about their experiences learning in Havruta, both in the past and the first times it is done in class. Holzer and Kent provide several model exercises for doing this with students who have some background in Jewish text study (see chapter 3 of Holzer and Kent [2014]).

18 Some research has shown that the stereotype that some groups are less good at a given task or discipline affects performance in that discipline; the classic case of stereotype effect is that women have been shown to underperform on math tests when told that women are often thought to do worse in mathematics. However, more recent research has challenged this view. For more on this research see Spencer, Steele, and Quinn (1999) and Flore and Wicherts (2015).

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