


# Prolegomena to My Cover Letter

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March 16, 2017

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Dear College of Arts & Sciences,

I am writing to apply for your posted position as an assistant professor of philosophy. I believe that my specific qualifications — my postgraduate teaching experience, publications, and professional activities — constitute a very good fit for this position. One might even say a really rad fit.

But I wonder if we might go a tad off script for a moment and speak plainly? Then you can take a crack at my sparkling dossier.

First, it is important to say that I already *am* a philosopher. And yes, as you may surmise, I'm looking to move from one relatively junior-ish post to a slightly less junior-ish post. In so doing, I'm trying to follow the usual professional arc that will allow me to nurse my love of philosophy and teaching in a manner that jives with the capitalist paradigm of contemporary higher education. We're all doing well enough following that arc. But it has come at a cost, no?

I don't mean we're selling our souls to some administrative devil or anything like that. I mean we're compelled to practice our discipline within the grinding gears of a system that, strictly speaking, considers our work useless, or at least a vague junior-varsity substitute for information, creative capital, emotional intelligence, and other high-notes of entrepreneurial promise.

The fact is: We mostly hate task forces and course-assessment protocols, and the consumerist logic of student evaluations of our teaching (although, mine aren't bad, and I have reams of those suckers from four different institutions). We all get a bit ticked off by the cottage industries of big data that await us when we return to our snug offices on a Tuesday afternoon. And we are right to loathe this stuff because it comes at us like crows come hither to

molest the hummingbirds.

Second, if you're like me, you got into philosophy because you sensed it was a way to pay attention to things that mattered. Probably you had an experience where you changed your mind about some issue or belief, and so you wanted henceforth to be a little more careful in your thinking. You learned that confusion can be productive, and that contemporary culture — not philosophy — is mired in “abstractions.” You wanted to concentrate somehow, and yeah, you wanted to feel pretty good at it.

I want to give my students a shot at those same things. I want to help them get agitated about real stuff. I want them to chuck their smartphones at a passing freight train and read a book, write a decent paper, and learn to have a legit conversation that isn't splashed with hashtags. I want to liberate them from the mediocrity of software upgrades, buffering, and Instagrammed identities. I want to help them feel terrible about — though not altogether responsible for — their astonishing degree of thoughtlessness. I want them to be able to write sentences they actually understand, that sound good, that literally *make* sense.

And that brings me to my teaching philosophy: I want to help students learn to think like me, or at least how I try to think. I know that sounds all monological and overbearing, but I don't mean I want them to hold the same beliefs as me. I just want them to think well, to think on purpose, to think and live with all manner of noble afflictions. I've had the good fortune of practicing that very sort of thinking. We all want the same for our students, right?

Third, let me tell you more about myself and the kind of colleague I would be. It's true I'm good at philosophy in all the ways a fortunate little punk is supposed to be good at it. That is, I'm passably good — good enough to win some kids over and boost the stock of faculty publications from time to time. But I'm not stellar or anything. I go to conferences and half the time I'm wondering why I can't think as well as “them.”

Also, my languages are shoddy. When I say I have a “reading knowledge of French and German,” I actually mean: I haven't spoken those things in years, and I rarely read in them (though I could if I had to). Truth be told my high-school Spanish is probably better. I'm not a European or anything.

And then there's my alleged areas of expertise. Mind you, I am good here, but sometimes I hear myself start to say something like, “Well, on my reading of Hegel ...,” and then I'm not sure how to finish the sentence. I have terrible handwriting. I don't know how to use Excel or PowerPoint and I hate whiteboards. I can't abide laptops or “pads” or “pods” or whatever in the classroom. I insist that students order real (not digital) course texts. I won't stand for online sources. And if I ever have a little too much to drink at a department social, I may proceed to update you on my latest anxiety meds.

As for the silver lining: I will win your department some majors. Students will dig my classes. I'll pepper my lectures with engaging Socratic discussions. My chalkboard skills will inspire. I'll show tons of film clips and quote Radiohead lyrics in class. And if they're not into the material then I'll get them interested in my personae. I'll tool around campus on a [longboard](#) or else get some smallish dog to tag along on the way to my office.

In any event, they'll come flocking and a flood of imperatives (“Oh my God, #youhavetotake ...”) will ensue. Plus, I think you'll find that I don't possess the kind of arrogance that is born in seething self-doubt. I won't email around my latest journal article, or turn to you to assure myself that I'm interesting. I'll refill the copy-machine paper tray when it's low, and I'll erase the chalkboards when I'm through teaching. I won't pretend I'm interested in co-teaching or cross-disciplinary work. I'll just be the decent philosophy professor that I am and pitch in with those numerous administrative-service obligations every good citizen of the productivity apparatus must oblige. And in the midst of all this it's entirely possible that you and I might actually promote and practice what is good in philosophy.

Well, I've been a little swashbuckling here, and now my dossier awaits you. It shouldn't be too painful. If you consider it then I'll be grateful. Really, I will. But I'll understand if you don't consider it.

Still, you'd do well to grant me an interview. Even if you don't remotely expect to extend me an offer, I imagine I

could be a great and soothing partner in a kind of mid-interview-day-bitch-session about all you have to put up with in your work. Actually, I think you'd find that I'm the type of person you'd enjoy having around during hiring season on a regular basis. You might even decide to offer me the job on the sole merits of that — and then you'd get my teaching and scholarship as a smart little bonus.

Up to you,

X

P.S. See attached.

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