

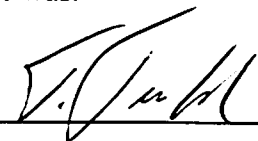
**OBSERVATION REPORT*****Observer:*** Thomas Teufel***Observee:*** Jennifer Corns**Philosophy 1500: TV13****Date:** 03/24/10

Ms. Corns began her spirited class on the spirit—or, more accurately, on Cartesian mind-body dualism as well as Jerry Fodor's objections to this and other conceptions of the mind—with a helpful discussion of the role of *Leibniz's Law* in Descartes' argument for the real distinction between mind and body. This discussion of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles shaped the first half of the class and was as philosophically rich as it was thorough. Ms. Corns went from an account of the intuitive plausibility of the principle, *via* an account of apparent exceptions to it, to an account of the fixes to the law that those exceptions require. In a sure-footed manner, she thus led students to appreciate the Fregean thesis of an exception to the law for which, in the end, there is no fix. Namely, the recognition that Leibniz's Law gives what appear to be counterintuitive results in intensional contexts. Ms. Corns nimbly navigated the abysses of the distinction between intentionality and intensionality and the students were alert throughout and attuned to the details of the unfolding dialectic.

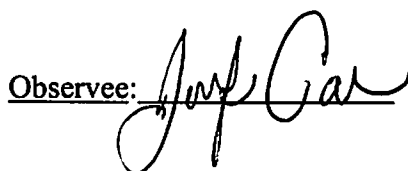
Having thus disabused the class of any illusion that mind/body dualism is quite as easily established as Descartes seems to have thought, Ms. Corns moved, in the second half of the class to a discussion of just what the mind and the mental might be. At this point class-participation became quite animated as a group of 21<sup>st</sup> century young New Yorkers struggled with religious preconceptions and other superstitions in an attempt to explain their conviction in the immaterial nature of their souls. Ms. Corns expertly channeled the emergent conceptions of the mental into three broad views of the mind and then discussed Fodor's criticism of each of those views.

Ms. Corns' class was fast-paced, well organized and at times very funny. The material was difficult, but she maintained the undivided attention of her student's throughout. Ms. Corns is a lively, engaging, demanding and extremely clearheaded teacher, which is to say that she is a lively, engaging, demanding and extremely clearheaded thinker. Intellectually extraordinarily quick on her feet, she did an admirable job of trying to leave no student behind. As it appeared to this observer of an excellent class, none was.

Observer:



Observee:



**JENNIFER CORNS – PEER OBSERVATION REPORT**  
**FALL TERM 2009.**

**Observer: Sandeep Sreekumar.**  
**Course: PHI 1500 (Major Issues in Philosophy)**  
**Date: 9<sup>th</sup> December 2009.**

**I. General Observations:**

This was an altogether exceptional class in philosophy in which Ms. Corns provided a detailed, nuanced, and gripping explanation of some salient features of John Rawls's conception of Justice. There was much that was truly impressive about this class, but I must single out for special mention Ms. Corns's remarkable ability to present complex arguments, counterarguments, and hypotheses lucidly and elegantly while never fudging the genuine complexities of the area under discussion. This was one of those classes which make students feel intelligent merely by being present and attentive.

Which is not, of course, to say that this is all that Ms. Corns's students did: they were highly involved in the classroom discussions and contributed insights and intuitions enthusiastically. Ms. Corns demonstrated a wholly admirable skill in handling and adjusting those insights so as to show them in their best and most philosophically sophisticated light and in integrating those intuitions into her explanations seamlessly. An appealing balance was thus struck between lecture and classroom discussion, and the whiteboard was used to good (and sometimes revelatory) effect.

In all, Ms. Corns is not merely a superlative teacher of philosophy but also one who is liked and respected by her students and one who likes and respects them in turn.

**II. Topics Covered in the Observed Class.**

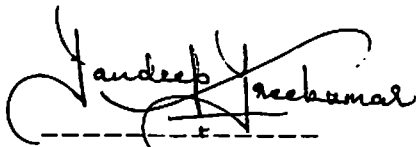
The class that I observed dealt, as mentioned, with Rawls's conception of Justice. Ms. Corns began with an examination of justice as the primary virtue of the basic structure of society. This laid the groundwork for the discussion that followed: first, a tentative definition of *justice* as what is achieved when a society's basic institutions follow *principles of justice* was canvassed and accepted by all; then a characterization of *principles of justice* as the principles that will be freely chosen by rational self-interested agents whose illegitimate biases are corrected by a judicious self-ignorance was examined. This set the stage for a discussion of the Rawlsian Veil of Ignorance, followed by detailed analyses of the two lexically ordered principles that Rawls believes will be generated from behind the Veil of Ignorance, namely the Equality Principle and the Difference Principle. In these analyses, the Rawlsian system was compared to and contrasted with alternative theories and models of justice, especially the Marxist-egalitarian and the Nozickian-libertarian.

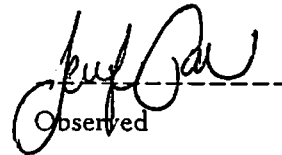
Ms. Corns's treatment of Rawls was as good and very often considerably better than anything I have encountered in any classroom (including the ones in which I happened to be the teacher). A few special notes must be entered here, which pertain to Ms. Corns's ability to transform initially ordinary questions into sharp instruments that probe unusual depths of philosophical thought. No class on Rawls would be complete without some depressingly prosaic soul objecting that the Veil of

Ignorance does not really exist and that the Original Position is not to be occupied by us in even our wildest fits of self-forgetful empathy. The lazy response to this is to ask the student to play along with Rawls for a while (the tacit expectation being that, if he does so, he will eventually get so carried away by the elegance of the thing that he will forget his initial objections). But Ms. Corns, by contrast, used the opportunity to initiate a penetrating discussion of the limits placed by one's identity on one's ability to imagine oneself otherwise (and, in so doing, seemed to me effectively to rebut a few claims made by Michael Sandel). In another instance, Ms. Corns responded to a student's doubt as to why it would be the Rawlsian principles that we chose from behind the Veil of Ignorance rather than Marxist or Nozickian principles by explaining how the Rawlsian principles were likelier to generate structures that preserved some of our basic intuitions about the roles we ourselves would find it desirable to occupy in society. This led to the question (and it is a credit to Ms. Corns's teaching abilities that this question even came up in an introductory class) as to whether Rawls was not assuming a certain 'objective' level of risk-averseness that every individual in the Original Position would happen to have. I would have liked very much to hear Ms. Corns's explanations regarding this, but, alas, we ran out of time.

### III. Suggestions.

I have no suggestions to make about a class of this quality. By contrast, it was I who obtained tips from Ms. Corns's class on how best to explain the Rawlsian system to students.

  
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Observer

  
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Observed

Date: 9<sup>th</sup> December 2009.

6 April 2009

Teaching Observation

PHI 1600 Logic and Moral Reasoning

Instructor: Jennifer Corns

Date: 25 March 2009

The class—an introduction to logic—was devoted to reviewing the material of the previous section of the course in order to prepare the students for an upcoming mid-term exam.

Despite the late hour of the class, Corns showed lots of energy and projected well; it was easy to follow her despite the fact that my day had started at 6am and I was quite tired myself. It seems the students were also following intently, as they regularly responded to prompts by the teacher asking for feedback or for answers to problems written on the whiteboard.

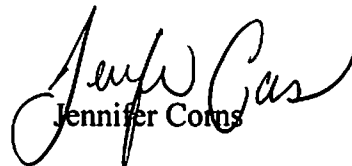
The review was conducted largely by going over short and long truth tables and discussing strategies on how to answer them efficiently on the upcoming exam. Different strategies were emphasized for the long tables compared to the short tables. Corns used numerous examples of each, emphasizing the importance of being able to apply the correct strategy so as not to waste time.

Corns allowed for pauses at regular intervals to make sure students had time to absorb the review and to decide if they had questions. When one student at the back of the class made the remark that the problems were easy to solve (something he had already mentioned earlier in the class) Corns deftly pointed out that while some problems might seem easy to some students, everyone would benefit from reviewing them nonetheless.

At one point, Corns made a mistake in writing out one of the tables on the whiteboard, and a couple of the students immediately noted it and shifted in their seats. Sensing this, Corns looked over what she had written and detected the error herself. Rather than quickly erasing the mistake, she paused and asked others to see if they could point it out as well, using the occasion as a learning opportunity; her self-effacing jokes connected well with the students.

All in all an energetic review on a late Wednesday night.

  
Hagop Sarkissian  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Philosophy

  
Jennifer Corns

OBSERVATION REPORT FALL 2008

Observer: William James Earle

Observee: J. Corns

Subject: Philosophy 1600 "Logic and Moral Reasoning"

Date: December 4, 2008


This class was entirely devoted to 'natural deduction' problems or derivations. This material can be rather on the dry side and I have observed classes (sometimes my own) where the exercise left students either restless or sleepy. Things were very different in Ms. Corn's class. The students seemed completely engaged. They worked on the problems and were very excited when they were able to complete a derivation.

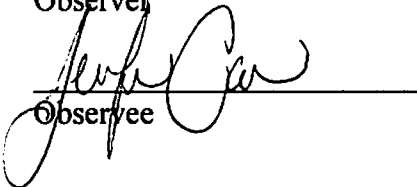
Why this was happening was hardly a mystery. Ms. Corns is lively and energetic with infectious enthusiasm. She acted as a kind of cheerleader to students' fledgling efforts. She called on them by name and it was clear they liked her and felt comfortable trying things out.

Given the nature of the class, I didn't have much chance to evaluate Ms. Corns as a philosophical reasoner or discussant. The closest we got to that was in the strategic tips she gave students: these were always extremely helpful.

I might add that in addition to material available in the classroom Ms. Corns has made other material available on BLACKBOARD and I heard her encourage students to e-mail her with any problems they encountered doing the homework.

All in all I judge that this logic class was conducted exactly as a logic class should be conducted.

 December 11, 2008  
Observer

 12/16/08  
Observee