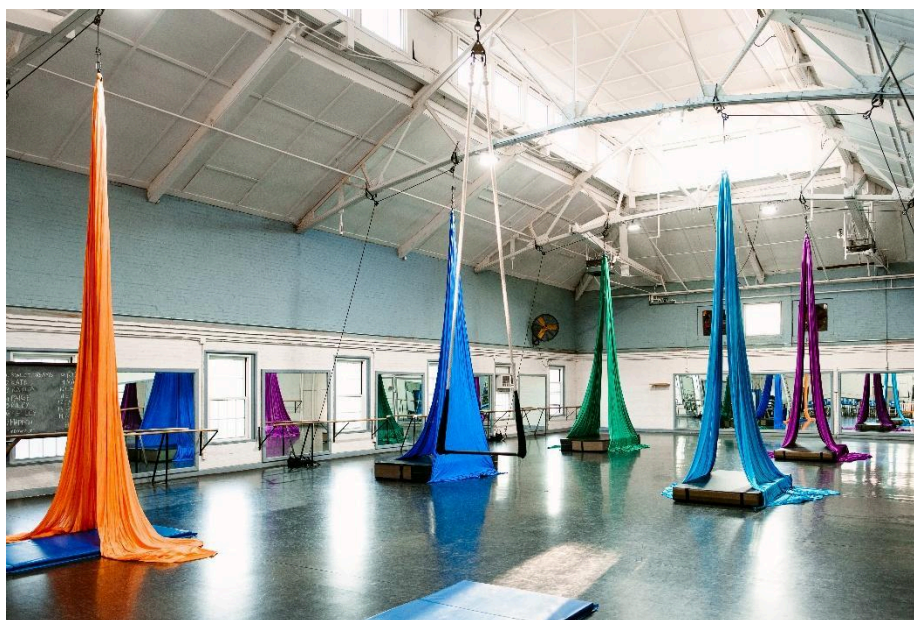


# Philosophy through Spectacle

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*The Circus Lab at the University of Kentucky*  
Photo credit: Ayna Lorenzo

## First Impressions

I'll admit: the first day of *PHI 193 Circus and Philosophy* is kind of weird. Students follow narrow steps into an old open gym with plenty of high windows and natural light. Vividly dyed fabrics hang from the ceiling, improbably rigged 20 feet in the air. It is quite a spectacle. As the students come in, there are audible gasps and whispers, leading to jittery chatter. Faces are filled with expressions of awe and wonder. Many are likely thinking “What kind of wacko class is this?” There's a *lot* of space—more space than anyone should reasonably expect in a normal college course, and certainly more space than anyone should reasonably expect in a normal philosophy course. It invokes a feeling of being unmistakably small in comparison, yet in a way

that is invigorating and inspiring, not defeating. There's an urge to *take this space up* any way possible: to move, to run, to spin, to climb, to swing around on or touch every curious new apparatus or prop. There are odd-shaped objects clearly meant for throwing and (maybe eventually) catching. There's an array of color, an echo of happy claps, occasional woots of encouragement. It's wondrous. Unexpected. And strange.

*Circus and Philosophy* is an explicit mix of theory and praxis. In roughly half of the class sessions, students learn physical circus skills such as juggling, aerial silks, trapeze, and acro-balancing. In the other half, students learn introductory philosophical topics in ethics, aesthetics, social and political philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology.<sup>1</sup>

One of my initial attractions to the idea of combining circus and philosophy was the recognition that the circus arts are already fertile grounds for deep questions about persons, identity, the self, perception, illusion, and magic. This may not be obvious—and it is certainly not obvious if we think of the circus as something we merely *look at* instead of something we *do*. I've been a recreational circuser for nearly a dozen years. In that time, I've realized that one of the best ways to truly understand the value of the circus arts is to actually *do* circus. I've also observed that many of those who *participate* in circus arts—even if only recreationally—are especially attuned to thoughtful reflections on themselves and their place in the world. Moreover, combining circus with philosophy is an innovative way to show students that philosophical theorizing does not have to stay 'in the head.' Students use first-person circus as *a way to* philosophical inquiry. They learn philosophy by *moving*, resulting in a truly embodied education.

All of this might sound amazing. (*It is.*) Yet there are a number of significant challenges

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<sup>1</sup> For more, see "Circus and Philosophy: Teaching Aristotle through Juggling": <https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2021/12/02/circus-and-philosophy-teaching-aristotle-through-juggling/>

in implementing a class such as this, each one of which, at one point or another during development, seemed to be a perfectly good reason to give up running this course altogether. In what follows, I describe some of these difficulties, detail how I navigated through them, and explain why teaching philosophy this way is nonetheless worth all the trouble. For those like me who are interested in teaching philosophy in extraordinary ways, perhaps an account of my experiences—including what worked and what didn't—will be helpful.

## Challenges

First, there are the logistical challenges. Where could I find a location on campus with enough space for the students to move around? And if I found something, would it be conducive to both students moving around and having substantial philosophical discussions? How can I make sure that the class *meaningfully integrates* physical movement and theory, without it being merely a Frankenstein mash-up of disparate pedagogical parts? Assuming I find a space, how do I equip it? How can I guarantee that it is appropriately rigged and adequately assessed for safety? What about insurance and liability? Does a university waiver cover students flipping upside down on a trapeze? How do I order and fund the circus equipment? And how much will I need? How many students do I expect to enroll in this class? Can I afford 108 juggling balls?

Then there are the pedagogical and organizational challenges. The current philosophical literature on circus and philosophy is nearly non-existent. How do I teach a class on circus and philosophy if there are no philosophical articles or readings on the topic I'm teaching? How do I convince the students and administration that a course on a topic that currently is not taught anywhere else, *should* be taught? Detail questions: How do I design the syllabus, given that so much of the class will be physical movement and circus skill acquisition? How do I grade the circus portions? Do students get As if they can juggle 3 balls, but Bs or Cs if they can't? (At one

point, after I explained that I was offering an honors option for this course, one of my colleagues jokingly inquired: “Do honors students have to juggle *4 balls?!?*”) How should I design assignments? Is it appropriate to only require written papers? Or does that run counter to the whole point of the class, combining theory and praxis? Should the students have a performance at the end? Or some kind of creative project that combines circus and philosophy? What does that kind of final creative project look like? And how am I qualified to grade it? Big picture question: How do I show that there is value in teaching philosophy this way?

## Logistics

To address the first set of challenges, I tried several approaches. At first, I spliced up the class into two different locations. The physical circus days were in one location—an area where the ROTC folks work out, open to through-traffic and without privacy. The philosophical discussion days were in a different classroom in a separate building. Students *loved* the class. But I was frustrated. The physically separate locations severely undercut the pedagogical cohesiveness I’d envisioned. And the public openness of the movement space was incredibly distracting (although, admittedly, my students and I were quite amused by frequent invitations to a circus vs. army climb-off). Next, I tried having the majority of the class in an on-campus black box studio. This worked well for some of the circus sessions—juggling and acro-balancing, for example. And it was intimate enough that we could have fruitful philosophical discussions there, too. Yet in order to do any sort of aerial arts, I needed to have high ceilings and structurally sound beams to rig *from*. The black box theater was not approved for this; in fact, I hauled a structural engineer on campus and got access to the schematic blueprints of the space to double check. So we had to go back to the ROTC space for this part of the course anyway, making this second iteration of the course only marginally better than the first. Again, the students loved it. But,

again, I was frustrated. There simply was no place on campus appropriate for exploring circus arts. And this, I was beginning to realize, was crucial for making the course work.

After taking a break for a year to investigate my options—after many emails, numerous conversations with folks in different areas on campus, and a lot of walking around in random university buildings with unusual classroom spaces—I found an old hidden gym on the backside of an underused building. There were no existing rigging points in this gym, there was no circus equipment, and no one to my knowledge had ever done any circus in this place. But it had potential. *Here* a space for circus arts could be *built*. I brought the structural engineer back to campus to officially inspect it. I checked with facilities and risk management to see what backend permissions would be required, how liability would work, and so on. An aerial rigger was hired. Through various kinds of administrative alchemy that I still don't quite understand (but am incredibly grateful for), and crucial input from numerous individuals who, for whatever reason, thought this wild idea was worth supporting, I somehow secured funding for both the structural build-out and necessary circus equipment. The result was the Circus Lab, a large movement space on campus explicitly designed to encourage interdisciplinary exploration in and cultivation of the circus arts.<sup>2</sup>

The Circus Lab is now (happily) a place where I have everything I need to successfully teach *Circus and Philosophy*. There are 6 aerial dropline points, making it easy to take down and change out aerial apparatuses such as aerial silks, trapezes, ropes, and aerial hoops (lyra). We have an array of safety mats, juggling equipment (yes, 108 juggling balls, along with 30 rings, and a dozen clubs), two unicycles, and more things on the way. Yet it is also a place where we can close the door, turn off the music, sit in chairs or on mats on the floor and have a

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the Circus Lab, go here: <https://megwallace.org/circus-and-philosophy-193/>

conversation. The Circus Lab is a space intended for trying unusual things, messing up *safely*, a place for fostering creativity and play, and then (if so desired) enough space for sitting around and talking about the experience. There are some upkeep and maintenance issues to coordinate regularly—the drop lines, rigging, and anchor points are frequently inspected by an aerial rigger, for example. Otherwise, the majority of the first kind of logistical concerns have been addressed.

## Content and Structure

It is true that there is not a lot of philosophical literature about the circus. (Not yet, anyway.) However, there *is* quite a bit of circus literature connected to philosophy, a significant amount of which is related to my primary area of research: metaphysics and epistemology (M&E). So I initially stuck to what I knew.

In *Contemporary Circus* (2019), for example, the authors discuss philosophical theories of personal identity and philosophy of mind to help elucidate the relationship between a circus artist and their apparatus. This provides an unexpected entry into issues about consciousness and mind-body problems, leading us to Descartes' *Meditations*, Dennett's (1978) "Where Am I?" and Clark and Chalmers' (1998) "The Extended Mind". In *The Ordinary Acrobat* (2013), Duncan Wall recounts his experience as a novice in circus school, integrating discussions of circus history with reflections about how the circus is a strive for human excellence. He emphasizes the importance of habit and practice, the challenges and rewards of having physical limitations (the body) and being bound by laws of nature. This easily blends into discussions of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, d'Holbach's arguments for hard determinism in *The Systems of Nature* (1770), and Chisholm on free will in *Human Freedom and the Self* (1964). Many circus high-wire walkers have long been interested in balance as a perceptual sense (in addition to the traditional five) by their many years of cultivating and perfecting their equilibrioception. This

makes a fascinating path into Aristotle's *De Anima*, Petit's first-person accounts of wire-walking in *Man on Wire* (2008), Geurtz's analysis of perceptual knowledge in *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (2003), and MacPherson's taxonomy of perceptual sense in her introduction to *The Senses: Classical and Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives* (2011).

Sticking to familiar M&E literature and merely using the circus arts as a springboard into such topics worked just fine at first. Yet I realized it was more like using circus as some kind of reverse intellectual pick-pocketing: "Look, juggling balls!" I cry, misdirecting the students' attention while I sneakily slip Aristotle and Descartes into their heads. I'm ordinarily pretty utilitarian about pedagogical methodology: *however* I can get students to learn and love philosophy is fine by me. Yet it seemed that there was a missed opportunity here. I didn't want to discuss philosophical issues that merely *happened* to fall out of circus. Rather, I wanted to discuss philosophical issues that were constitutive of the first-person circus experience. I wanted to discuss issues that the students had unique insight into by way of *doing* circus.

The result has been a natural progression from primarily M&E to an intriguing mix of M&E, ethics, aesthetics, social and political philosophy, with a particular focus on issues of personal identity, self-knowledge, trust and community. For example, we discuss paradoxes of tragedy, fear, and failure together with lessons on juggling and acro-balancing, supplemented by Hume's *Of Tragedy*, Carroll's (1990) *The Philosophy of Horror*, and Juul's (2016) *The Art of Failure*. By getting students to try an activity that most people are pretty terrible at (juggling), students start to see the value in messing up and failure, despite how paradoxical doing so might seem to be. We discuss C. Thi Nguyen's (2017) "The Aesthetics of Rock Climbing" together with lessons on how to climb, as we physically navigate ourselves through aerial silks and ropes.

After lessons on skills that focus on the artistry of practiced, repetitive motion (which most circus skills require), we read Barbara Montero (2017) on flow. We also discuss Alex King (2017) on subtlety vs. heavy-handedness in aesthetic judgements, and Jason Leddington (2016) on magic, impossibility, deception, and trust. This leads us to our acro-balancing sessions, which we connect up with Nick Riggle's (2017) discussions on social openings and community building. As you might imagine, the content for this class is (delightfully) constantly evolving, in a way that aims to significantly integrate the students' personal experiences with various philosophical topics as they bumble about learning circus.

This is a 100-level class. No experience in either circus or philosophy is required. Most of the students have never picked up juggling balls, sat on a trapeze, or read (or heard of) Descartes or Hume. It is typical for many students not to even know what philosophy is, or to know that philosophy is a stand-alone subject that students can major or minor in. So it is important that both the primary philosophical content and the circus skills that are taught are accessible. It is also important to keep the class size manageable—for both the students' physical safety as well as for fostering and maintaining a trusting classroom environment for discussion. With this in mind, I cap the class at 36. (It always fills up; there is always a waiting list.) With 6 drop lines, this translates to at most 6 students to each point, which is enough for everyone to have a chance to try everything, but not too many that it makes spotting and physical safety a concern. It also makes discussion sessions intimate enough to give everyone a chance to have their voice heard. In short, the course is a tasting bite of both circus and philosophy for a relatively small group of students, designed to inspire them to want more of each after the class is over. At the end of the semester, if they want more philosophy, they are directed toward the philosophy department's future course offerings. If they want more circus, they are directed to

our undergraduate circus club (which, incidentally, was founded in December 2021 by one of my students after taking *Circus and Philosophy*).<sup>3</sup>

As for *teaching* the circus skills, I had a clear vision from the start: I'd get help. Outsourcing the circus portions allowed me to connect with the local circus community and to bring outside guest instructors to campus. It also helped to ensure that anyone—even if they do not have so many years of recreational circus experience as I do—can run a class like this. This course is designed to be passed down to others.

To craft the assignments, I followed examples of courses in the fine and performing arts (in particular, dance and theater), as well as KHP (Kinesiology and Health Promotion), where in-class active participation is crucial. In addition, I applied to have *Circus and Philosophy* qualify as a UK Core Requirement in *Intellectual Inquiry in Arts and Creativity*. This is part of our university's basic general education program, intended to give students exposure to a broad swath of academic disciplines on their way to getting a specialized degree. Once this was approved, I used our university's basic template for implementing a participation-heavy course, which (by design) included opportunities for open-ended projects meant to inspire the students to substantially engage with the relevant artform or creative process. In other words, there was already a fortunate match between what I envisioned for this course and what the University of Kentucky officially encouraged in one branch of their core curriculum.

As a result, participation and attendance count for a higher percentage of the final grade than in my other philosophy classes, and written work and a final creative project comprise the rest of the assignments. I assign three written papers, each of which is similar to paper assignments in my traditional philosophy courses—except that the prompts require that the

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<sup>3</sup> “Just Clowning Around,” <https://kykernel.com/86471/features/just-clowning-around-uk-circus-club>

written discussion include reflections on the students' first-person circus experiences. The final project is open-ended, intended to give them broad creative license to demonstrate circus skills they've learned, to coordinate with other students, and to innovatively incorporate circus with the philosophical ideas we've covered. (One semester, nearly the entire class arranged a large group presentation which gave a broad overview of the entire course. This involved some of the students demonstrating various circus skills, while others students spoke about the relevant philosophical ideas. It culminated in a collective class-wide acro-balancing exercise requiring them to all work together, as they related it to our philosophical discussions of trust and community. It was *amazing*.)

So, in case you were wondering: students do not fail the course if they can't juggle or can't climb to the top of the silks; no one gets an A if they can. And honors students do *not* get credit for juggling more of the things. They have to write longer papers and are held to higher qualitative standards, just as expected in other, more traditional philosophy classes.

One last comment about the final project. The circus is a performing art. As such, it seemed appropriate for a class such as *Circus and Philosophy* to require the students to *perform* the art. The final project should be some kind of in-person event where students *show* what they have learned. At first, I wasn't sure what this kind of assignment might look like. It seemed that it should at least involve an oral presentation, and perhaps also a physical demonstration of the praxis part of the course. However, I was worried that some students would find this terrifying. Indeed, the thought of such a final project would have made an introverted past version of myself nauseous and running for the bathroom. So why make students go through such an ordeal if there was a chance that it would produce so much anxiety?

Many assume that an education in theater and the performing arts is only for those who

are already inclined toward performance. If you are outgoing and vivacious and love to be the center of attention, then the performing arts are for you. If you are not, then go take Chemistry or English or Statistics where you can happily stay away from unnecessary public engagements. But this is mistaken. The performing arts are not just eccentric extracurricular activities for those who immediately find them easy and fun. They have real life skills to teach anyone—*especially* for those of us who do *not* immediately find being in front of others easy or fun. Lessons in theater and dance—and circus!—are different ways of getting us to be comfortable with our bodies in space. They teach us how to speak and move in front of others, how to read body language, use body language, and how to cultivate the ways in which we understand, empathize, and communicate with other fellow human beings. Learning how to exist comfortably within the gaze of another is just one of many crucial life skills that the performing arts can teach. Yet to assume that we must have this skill before it's taught is, of course, to get the causal order of education backwards.<sup>4</sup>

With this in mind, I decided to require a final in-person presentation.<sup>5</sup> Many students are initially quite apprehensive about this. Yet most of them soften to the idea as the semester rolls on, as they get more comfortable with themselves and each other. By the end of term, many are still nervous, but they do the assignment anyway—sometimes in a group to make things easier.

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<sup>4</sup> Regrettably, this causal order confusion is quite common. I've frequently heard friends or students say things like "Oh, I could never juggle, I'm too uncoordinated," or "Oh, I can't do yoga, I'm not flexible," or "Oh, I can't take logic, I'm not good at math." In each case, one of the primary reasons to *do the thing* is to *learn to do the thing*. The learning comes *during* and *after* the doing, not before. It's unfortunate that so many of us so often forget this. An indication, perhaps, that more of us need to simmer more seriously over Aristotle. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II)

<sup>5</sup> To be sure, I also have flexibility in this assignment to make accommodations if needed, just as I would on any assignment in any of my other more traditional philosophy classes. Yet for those that do not need accommodations, a final in-person component is expected.

To my delight, they usually surprise themselves by how much they enjoy it, and inevitably, there are lots of laughs and highfives and cheers on performance day. (If you've ever been to a contemporary circus show or tried recreational circus, you'll know what I mean.) It's still unsettling at the start of each term for me to trust that the students will eventually pull it off at the end of term; I'm always a bit unsure of how it will go. Yet despite the initial uncertainty, the final assignment is now one of my favorite parts of the course—and it is often theirs, too.

## Embracing the Spectacle

But why go through all this trouble? What's the point? One reason is simply personal: I love circus, I love philosophy, and I love showing students how these two loves of mine are interestingly combined. Another reason is pedagogical stealth. In my experience, students are incredibly receptive to philosophical content when you come at them sideways with it, distracted with other (non-philosophical) things. Reverse intellectual pick-pocketing *works*. Yet the reason why *circus* makes such a successful diversion is because there's an often unrecognized advantage in getting students to start thinking deeply about the world and our place in it *through* spectacle.

'Spectacle' is often understood as something seen or experienced that invokes a sense of wonder, awe, or curiosity. Overwhelmingly beautiful phenomena in nature—the aurora borealis, the Grand Canyon, a beautiful sunset over the ocean, a double rainbow<sup>6</sup>—are all spectacles in

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQSNhk5ICTI>

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this sense. Man-made examples might include grand architectural feats such as the Great Wall of China, Egyptian pyramids, the Lloyd's Building in London (Dyckhoff 2017). This gets close to the reaction I have seen in students on their first day of walking into the circus lab. The spectacle *sets the mood*. Once students see the wondrous, unexpected, and strange, they immediately get eager to find more. A taste for the spectacular is *contagious*. Yet 'spectacle' is also often used pejoratively. More than merely being a social nuisance, spectacles are sometimes assumed to be aesthetically shallow, devoid of reflective thought or substance.

Yet there is an often-overlooked value in participating in spectacles *with others*. Consider

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contemporary group spectacles such as flash mobs, public celebrations and parades such as Mardi Gras, festivals such as Ren Faires, Comic Cons, or Burning Man. Whether you love them or hate them or find such events confounding or annoying, it seems clear that, for the participants involved, they foster a very strong sense of community and belonging. There is a playful joy that comes about from finding those who share your weird tastes in fun. When we make spectacles of ourselves *with others*, we often experience aesthetic goods such as the pleasure of moving *cooperatively*, or the satisfaction of successfully collectively creating something worth being seen.

It's clear that there are personal benefits to being part of a community with a shared aesthetic: it just *feels* good to find your people. Yet there are also clearly many social goods that come about from creatively cooperating with others: communication, collaboration, trust, and community. The second time I taught *Circus and Philosophy*, one student commented on the evaluations: "...the class made me come out of my comfort zone and become more closely acquainted with people I didn't even know, which contributes to UK feeling more like a community rather than a college of hundreds of strange students." Getting to know people you otherwise wouldn't, forming a community, instilling a sense of trust in yourself and others, cultivating an environment where someone feels comfortable going outside of their comfort zone—*these* are the sorts of goods that teaching philosophy through circus can generate. Moreover, it gives the students an opportunity to *directly experience* these goods for themselves, instead of merely speculating about them as an impersonal intellectual exercise. *This* is why there is value in teaching philosophy this way.

## Notes