New Philosophy Professor Asks Cadets To Ask Questions

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The cadet schedule at VMI is meant to keep cadets moving in one direction: forward - toward class, toward formations, toward achievement, toward graduation.

VMI's new philosophy professor is asking cadets to stop moving and to take time to think.

"Philosophy," said assistant professor of philosophy Reshef Agam-Segal, "takes time."

In philosophy, he said, "We don't make progress. If anything, what we're trying to do is show people that progress is not always what they need."

Agam-Segal's classes, which this year will include logic, Greek and medieval philosophy, and one on minds and machines, challenge cadets to question what they think they know.

An example, he said, is skepticism of other minds. "How do you know that I see anything? You have your senses to sense with, but you don't have mine. How do you know that anyone else senses anything? ...Maybe you are the only sensing person in the world, the only one with a mind."

In broad terms, he said, philosophy begins when students find themselves someplace bizarre and unfamiliar; it helps them find a way back. Along the way, they learn to find meaning.

"A lot of what philosophers do is try to restore safety," said Agam-Segal. Imagine a fly entering a bottle with honey inside. The fly cannot find the way out and becomes trapped. But, he said, "The way is open. The bottle is not sealed. There always is a way out. Solving a philosophical problem is not making progress; rather it's returning to a place we have been in before, a place that is familiar to us."

Agam-Segal, a native of lsrael who came to VMI from Auburn University, brings to his classroom his own experience in the Israeli military. He notes that the kind of thinking he asks of his students can be of particular value to those heading for military careers.

Students facing moral questions are very like that fly in the bottle, he said. "When the world doesn't make sense in terms of good and bad, then the world becomes foreign and frightening, and cadets are thinking about ethics all the time. ...Having the right language, knowing how to make sense of your question, is important. Just being able to recognize that you're stuck is tremendously important."

Agam-Segal has been helping them do just that in the classroom and at meetings of the cadet Ethics Club (formerly the Philosophy Club), for which he and philosophy professor Duncan Richter serve as faculty advisers. The club, which meets weekly to discuss topics of interest to the cadets, such as the ethics of drones, has been growing.

Agam-Segal said he encourages cadets to play devil's advocate, to argue against themselves, and to force themselves to explain and give examples. Thus they learn to see themselves through self-examination.

"When students discover that they can do philosophy," he said, "it's like discovering a new sense."

The new professorship in philosophy was funded through a grant from the Jackson-Hope Fund.