This quarter I am teaching a course on Kant’s and Aristotle’s ethics. As a classical philosopher I find Aristotle very familiar; he is in my “comfort zone” as a teacher. I have taught the *Nicomachean Ethics* many times and, though I am sure I have made many mistakes in presenting Aristotle’s views in the past, I hope I have learned from them and now teach those views more effectively than I have previously. Not so with Kant. I have taught Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* before, and have a file folder of old lecture notes and study questions to prove it, but I have not taught Kant recently and I don’t consider myself a Kant scholar.

What prompted this pairing of texts? It seems to me that Kant is a proponent of everything Aristotle is against: his is an ethics of absolute principles, grounded in the primary principle of the Categorical Imperative: “Act only on that maxim that you can will to be a universal law.” Aristotle’s ethics, in contrast, is an ethics that is attuned to concrete situations: his standard is a character called the *phronimos* in Greek, the “man of practical wisdom.” The *phronimos* uses principles, but not in the way the Kantian moral agent does; he adapts them to the situation. His ethics is based on the teleological idea of happiness, *eudaimonia* (better translated “human flourishing”) whereas Kant rejects teleology in favor of a deontological approach to ethics: he thinks principles generate absolute duties. Aristotle’s ethics, however, is ethics without moral duty, without the moral “ought.” And so on. You get the idea. I thought, and I still think, it was a good one: to juxtapose these radically different thinkers and give the students by doing so a taste of the complexity of moral theory. Two more bits of background. The course is an upper division one: Classic Issues in Ethics. As a result, it has many excellent advanced students in philosophy enrolled. Now you are prepared to hear two of my “most embarrassing moments.”

Moment number one came when I said in class that I did not believe I had a Kantian obligation to follow the Republican presidential debates; the “shenanigans” of the candidates, as I put it. One student immediately challenged this: Wouldn’t Kant say that we had an obligation as citizens to be
politically informed? And if we did have an obligation, where did it begin? Only once the candidates had been chosen, or before that, during the debates? I had no good answer to his challenge. I had the sinking feeling that he was right about Kant. Was I just evading my moral responsibility because I find such wrangling distasteful? His remarks generated a classroom debate, which is always a good thing. One student came to my defense, saying that my moral duty consisted not in political awareness but in specific function, such as teaching this class. I appreciated the support, but I had the nagging feeling my student critic was right, or at least that Kant would have thought so. Call this “oops” moment number one.

“Oops” moment number two came immediately after, in the same class. Trying to recover, I suggested that people might have different maxims under which they acted. One person might be willing to accept as a universal moral law that everyone should be informed about the Republican presidential debates, whereas another might not. Immediately another student objected: didn’t Kant think that there was only one maxim that people ought to adopt in a given situation? Wasn’t it the task of reason to determine what was universally true, true for everyone? How then could maxims differ? Again, I thought he was right about Kant. How was I to respond?

Fortunately, class ended and I went off to a luncheon where I was asked about the reasons for my success as a teacher. Following a former professor of mine and with these two examples in mind I said I practiced the “method of failure”: I failed in my attempts to explicate Kant (I mentioned the two episodes above) and my students challenged those attempts. Another person at this luncheon said that this generation of classroom debate produced critical thinking, which was just what was wanted. I was grateful for the support, but didn’t feel right about accepting it. After all, I had blundered, twice in one class, and not by design. Method indeed; I should be so lucky. It was as a result of this lunchtime conversation that I was invited to this session.
What did I do? I had to go back into class the next day and say to the student who had challenged me on political awareness that I simply disagreed with him about the maxim under which we should act, but I couldn’t give a reason for my disagreement. On the issue of rationality and maxims, I drew a distinction between representing Kant as he intended, and attempting to make him more palatable to modern tastes. I generally don’t approve of the latter method: I prefer to take my Kant “straight”; but I had, in an attempt to answer my first objector, fallen into that trap. (Perhaps I shouldn’t call it a trap; it is just one method of interpretation.)

What were the results of my two blunders? The students got to see that there is more to the interpretation of Kant (and to moral duty) than they might have expected. They got to see themselves as active participants in an ongoing process, rather than as recipients of a cut and dried product. And I got to learn something about my assumptions, both as a citizen and as an interpreter of Kant. Did I practice a “method of failure?” Yes and no. I would always seek to go back in a subsequent class to correct an error I made in a previous class. I think it is simply a matter of intellectual honesty. I feel responsible for controlling course content, and I would want to make sure that content was as truthful as possible. To that extent I was following a regular practice of mine, if not a method.

On the other hand, I did not deliberately blunder in class, nor did I deliberately try to “trap” students into stating the truth by suggesting something false. I would prefer to project an aura of infallibility as a teacher. I’d like to be seen as the source of all wisdom, the “sage on the stage.” I should say here that I have had two or three teachers in my life, and two other philosophical acquaintances, who fit the “sage on the stage” pattern. They conveyed complete confidence in what they were teaching; such confidence that disagreement seemed scarcely possible. Yet disagreement occurred, and when it did their approach was to stand their ground, point out to the dissident students the error of their ways, and in short to circle the wagons. I found all of these “sages” inspiring, but only one ultimately convincing. I’d gladly have that much confidence myself. I have to admit, however, that over
thirty-five years of teaching have convinced me that this is just not in the cards for me. I make mistakes; sometimes my students correct them. (I could tell you more stories.) And if you are going to make mistakes, and be corrected by your students, perhaps an aura of confidence is misplaced. Does this constitute a method?

The great philosopher of science Karl Popper summarized his “critical method” in the following way: “We learn from our mistakes.” Scientific theories get refuted and get replaced by other, more sophisticated theories. No one wants to be refuted or replaced; we all want to be the last word. But that desire misrepresents the nature of knowledge, whether knowledge of science or knowledge of Kant. Knowledge is a collective, collaborative enterprise. The critic has an indispensable role to play in the advancement of knowledge. For that reason, when our students tell us that we have “gotten it wrong,” we should be grateful. We should accept their criticism, not try to deflect it or deny its validity, learn from it, and move on.