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Philosophy Forum

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PHILOSOPHY FORUM

PREPARATION FOR A FULL AND HAPPY LIFE

Johanna Forstrom

Why is it important to me that students at Jesuit institutions study philosophy?

College is not about being prepared for a career alone. Rather it is a preparation for a full and happy life in community with others. The study of philosophy greatly aids this preparation by encouraging students to develop as reflective, critical thinkers who can engage in honest intellectual exchange and who are motivated to do so. Knowing yourself allows you to recognize the kindred thinker in others and respond accordingly.

A good philosophy course challenges a student to engage with real questions and provides the texts and tools to do so. It asks questions that will arise again (and again) in the course of a well lived life. Questions about goodness, truth, justice, beauty, the good life, the role of the individual in the community and attendant obligations do not usually have easy uncomplicated answers. A philosophy class can be the place where a student comes to understand this and is challenged to not fall into the easy relativism that sometimes can result when simple truths prove elusive. Just because there may be no one true answer does not mean that all answers are equally worth accepting, defending, or acting on.

From a student's perspective it is likely that the best course of study is the one that leads immediately to a high paying career or distinguished graduate school. From this perspective the courses that I teach are often taken only to fulfill requirements set by the institution and seemingly have little immediate or long term value. Yet I know differently—and so usually does the student by the end of the course or after graduation.

I sometimes see myself planting seeds and cultivating the seeds planted by others. And occasionally I see the flourishing individuals that I hope will result.

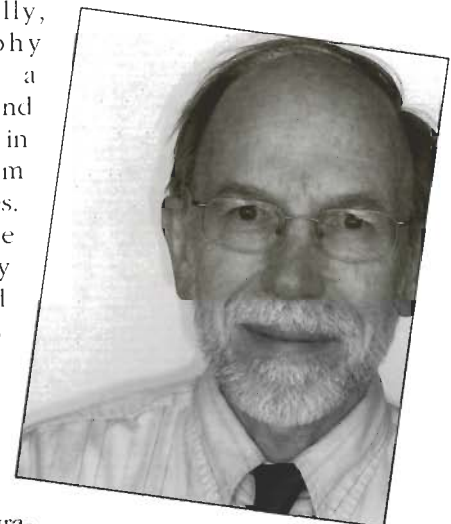
When I meet alumni of Jesuit institutions, I observe the positive results of the philosophy classes taken long ago. And this motivates me to keep challenging my students to do their homework, to read the classic texts and to engage fully in discussion and activities in and outside of the classroom. Because when a student does these things, he or she is being prepared for a good life. ■

Dr. Joanna Forstrom is the associate professor of philosophy at Spring Hill College.

JOHN STUART MILL WAS RIGHT

Eugene Selk

Traditionally, philosophy has had a special and privileged position in the core curriculum of Jesuit universities. Indeed, prior to the 1960s, philosophy often overshadowed theology in its place in the core curriculum I won't rehearse the history here, but like art after the discovery of photogra-



phy, philosophy in Jesuit universities was left with many puzzles after the renaissance of theology in the middle of the 20th century. The old idea that Thomistic philosophy by itself could and should provide the framework of meaning for students seemed to be no longer justified. De facto, however, philosophy



Le Moyne College.

emerged as a flourishing discipline in Jesuit Universities. But why should students in Jesuit universities continue to study philosophy?

I propose that the principal reason is the claim that rational inquiry about ultimate questions (God, meaning, and values) is essential to the sustenance of a mature, durable religious faith (taken in the sense of both trust and commitment to the truth of a religious system of ideas). In brief, rationality and religious faith can be harmonized, and this harmonization is the best way to form a mature, reflective faith. In the words of John Stuart Mill, writing on truth in general, truth claims which are not tested by rational criticism, tend to be "held [as]...dead dogma, not...living truth" (*On Liberty*, chapter 2). With the rise of fundamentalisms in recent years, it is more critical than ever to engage in the examination of religious systems of ideas with critical reason. Fundamentalisms generally eschew rational criticism, including any scientific conclusions which appear to clash with scripture or doctrine. Only the study of theology complemented with philosophy can form within students a religious faith which carries students through the challenges of science, secularism, and fundamentalism.

There are two secondary reasons why students in Jesuit universities ought to study philosophy. The first concerns ethics. Like the contribution of rational inquiry to religious faith, the task of providing students with an analytical framework for ethical issues is

shared by theology and sometimes rather tangentially by the professional codes of the health sciences, law, and business. But philosophy presses to the core of ethics, asks the fundamental questions, and then tries to show how these can be applied to specific problems. Indeed, professional codes and even theological ethics are, to some extent, parasitic on the ground-work done by philosophical ethics.

The final reason concerns interdisciplinary studies. All universities in recent years have re-emphasized interdisciplinary work. Jesuit universities ought to be at the forefront of this because of their commitment to educating the whole person and to carrying knowledge to the realm of practice. Philosophy is better suited than most disciplines to provide the framework for interdisciplinary scholarship because many of the areas of philosophy engage in meta-studies. They engage in the critical evaluation of and reflection on the fundamental presuppositions of other disciplines, for example, philosophy of science, philosophy of art, and so on.

Philosophy as it is taught today in Jesuit universities may not have the unity of Thomism, but it remains a vital and I believe an essential part of the formation of students in Jesuit higher education. ■

Eugene E. Selk is associate professor of philosophy at Creighton University.

THAT THEY MUST STUDY PHILOSOPHY IS A SIGNAL THAT THEY ARE AT A UNIVERSITY

T. A. Cavanaugh

Students' philosophical study is important in itself; thus, I regard it so. Its significance extends to all who, as Aristotle notes, by nature desire to know. We delight in all knowledge, and are the most curious of creatures while abhorring ignorance. We enjoy seeing, hearing, and touching; gossiping, kibbitzing, and water-cooler-tidbitting; more significantly: knowing nature, ourselves, and that being better than both, the divine. The love of wisdom answers this deep innate human desire to know. In its origin, history, and current exercise philosophy exemplifies the most profound natural attempt to satisfy our knowledge-longing.

As one who professes philosophy, I enjoy the good will of my students *required* to take a philosophy course. This is so for a number of reasons. First, because they know one significance of philosophy: namely, it is the hallmark of a university to teach philosophy. In this respect, universities differ from elementary and high schools which rarely teach philosophy and certainly do not require it of their students. Thus, students know that they are at a university because they must take philosophy. They intuitively understand that to require philosophy of them is simply to require that they study that discipline that exemplifies the university as a university and not the thirteenth grade.

Second, because philosophy addresses that innate yearning to know the lineaments of answers to the most important questions: what am I? what is a good life? how is it related to others' good lives? will death entirely undo me? do I have a creator? can I discern my creator's shadow in nature and myself? Third, and finally, because philosophy essentially embodies an attitude towards knowledge that founds the entire knowledge-project; namely, the love of, delight in, and enjoyment for its own sake of knowledge. No other discipline is named in terms of its *desire* for

or *disposition* towards knowledge. Rather, they receive their names more specifically; namely, the study of: living things, society, God.

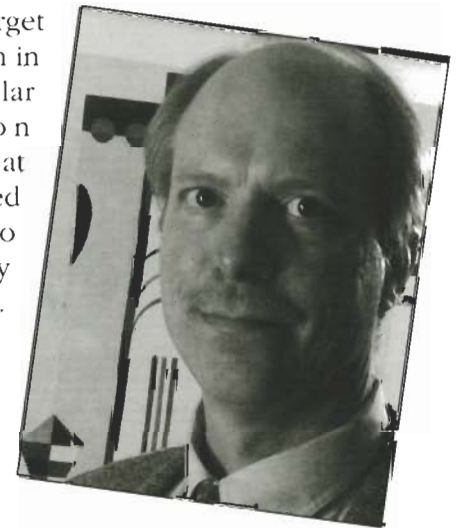
This is not to say, of course, that other disciplines lack love of their subject matters. Pass by any math or language department and one discerns deep intellectual delight. Rather, it is to note that the philosophical stance towards knowledge initiates and sustains the entire enterprise that becomes more specified in the different disciplines. The first academy (it had one prerequisite: geometry) was Plato's school. Our students delight in that grand love-of-wisdom enterprise to this day. ■

Thomas A. Cavanaugh is chair of the philosophy department at the University of San Francisco.

JESUITS WANTED DEEP THINKERS

Paul Kidder

I never forget that I teach in a curricular tradition whose colleges at one time required every student to be a philosophy major or minor. While the philosophy that we teach today differs dramatically from the forms that it took in early Jesuit curricula – exhibiting greater pluralism and greater engagement with the whole range of voices within the discipline – nevertheless philosophy must continue to be taught in ways that are manifestly dedicated to the best intentions of that curricular tradition. Every philosophy department in the country will tell you that it contributes a critical thinking component to its institution's curriculum.





Loyola University Chicago.

But the Jesuits always wanted something more than critical thinkers; they wanted deep thinkers. They wanted to hone the kind of mind that pries into assumptions that others had not even imagined existing, that undertakes matters of ultimate concern that others would find simply unfathomable. Above all, they wanted graduates who had grounded their passions for the good and for God in a cultivated rationality. Such abilities establish a source for that most elusive but necessary component of leadership: vision.

Because of its dialectical nature, philosophy will always pursue its special relation to Jesuit institutional mission in complex ways, questioning even the tenets that it simultaneously seeks to promote. Where thought about “the common good” and “social justice” is absent it will demand that those ideals be thoroughly appreciated, but where there is complacency about the obviousness of their meaning and value it will demand that they be analyzed in light of their most intelligent detractors. Where tradition is unquestioned

it will pose modernist challenges, but where modernism is taken as the whole of wisdom, it will have its students think their way back to the oldest roots of human inquiry.

As Jesuit institutions continue to change, their philosophy programs continue to face new and daunting challenges. How do they remain faithful to their tradition in a truly substantive way despite their expanding openness to an enormous range of philosophical orientations? That is the problem of identity. How do they open further than ever to new philosophical voices, and especially to those that herald the increasing globalization of philosophy? That is the problem of diversity. The two challenges seem paradoxical, and yet I have no doubt that philosophers can meet them. After all, the conundrum of identity and diversity has been a favorite puzzle of theirs for centuries. ■

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LOGIC WILL SAVE OUR STUDENTS FROM THE MEDIA

D. R. Koukal

Philosophy, properly taught, shines the light of reason down into the dark Platonic cave of naïve belief. In this light students may glimpse their heavy chains of passively accepted tradition, authority and convention, so that they may rationally grapple their own most deeply-held convictions. Since we are defined as individuals in large part by our convictions, the slow emergence up and into the light of reason demands a very real courage, because the prospect of changing a conviction amounts to the possibility of changing a part of our very *selves*—a most daunting prospect, but one that can nurture a charitable and open mind, as well as intellectual humility. On the other hand, the philosophical inspection of a conviction can also reveal it to be rationally defensible, bringing us to a firmer understanding of our beliefs and cultivating an intellectual confidence that allows us to dare to think for ourselves. In either case, students move closer to truth, and truth is always a better guide than ignorance.

Struggling to more fully understand their convictions make our students more fully human. But this struggle demands clear and critical thinking, and here philosophy's unique and powerful method of analyzing claims to truth—logic—is indispensable. Our students are familiar with the notion of opinion, to the extent that they all believe they are “entitled” to their opinion. What they don't understand is the duty to defend their opinion in the face of reasonable questions, and this is because they tend to be wholly ignorant of what it means to make an *argument* for an *opinion* they hold. Coming to an understanding of this fundamental distinction through logical critique reaps very real benefits. The formal aspects



of logical argumentation help to discipline the mind in a way very similar to that of mathematics, but has the advantage of being applicable to things that resist quantification. By helping to clarify inherently ambiguous concepts, logic can

help students think more clearly about difficult topics, both in and *outside* of philosophy. This clarity of thought fosters clarity of expression by aiding students in maintaining their topic focus, developing an idea, organizing a coherent paper or presentation, and making sound claims in defense of a thesis—in *any* discipline. In short, the study of logic in philosophy not only benefits our students by making them better thinkers, speakers and writers; as a consequence, it also gives *all* of us better students to work with.

But the study of logic has another, even more vitally important function. Before they can even begin to approach the truth, our students are ever confronted with the vast mechanism of distortion that is our mass media, which daily pollutes the public mind with an immense deluge of unsupported claims, faulty premises, red herrings, weak analogies, false causes, and appeals to bigotry, sensation and dark passions. Fallacies are regularly and repeatedly presented in the guise of received wisdom about matters of great import, pronounced all too often by professional self-promoters, dissemblers and liars whose concern for the truth extends only so far as it is expedient to their interests.

The only thing more distressing than this cavalier attitude towards the truth is that the media are a potent force that shapes the minds and attitudes of our students who, under this powerful influence, cannot be blamed for regarding the truth as just another commodity. To send them out into this highly mediated world unarmed and defenseless against the prattling of panderers, pundits and political proxies borders on educational malpractice.

I regularly teach a modified logic course which seeks to address this deficiency, called Critical Thinking and the Media. More often than not, appreciative students approach me at the

end of the term to declare, "I wish I took this course in my freshman year." I find this enormously gratifying, because the course is designed to send students out into the world with the tools to be fully free citizens of a democracy, capable of rationally debating the important political and moral issues relevant to our common future. To my mind, this is a logical extension of the long Ignatian tradition of seeking truth in the service of social justice. ■

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IS YOUR MIND IN SHACKLES?

Arthur Madigan, S.J.

To unshackle your mind. (Your mind may not know how shackled it is.) To tell sound arguments from unsound arguments, including your own. To know the difference between step-by-step reasoning and root-of-the-matter understanding. Not to be a prisoner of logic: to know when it's time to argue and when it isn't. To know what you are doing when you are knowing, and what the different ways of knowing can give us, and what they can't.

To learn about the nature that you share with the men and women around you. To learn about freedom (and its counterfeits). To embrace your dignity. To learn what you owe to community and tradition, and how to take responsibility for your community and your tradition. To envision what a humane society would look like, and what we can do to make our society more humane.

Some people think ethics can take people without values

and turn them into people with values. I've never seen that happen. Some people think ethics should take people's values, throw them up in the air, and see if they don't all blow away. I don't see the point of that. Ethics is your chance to take yourself seriously: to think about what's really good and bad for you, what it's right and wrong for you to do. OK, some people come out of ethics and all they've learned is how to talk a great game. But Socrates, who asked tough questions if anybody did, lived and died from complete conviction.

If you are a believer, philosophy can help to purify your conception of God. If you don't recognize any power higher than the human, be careful: philosophy has led some people to wonder about the why and wherefore of this world.

Philosophy can introduce you to people who may change your outlook. I've got my list. But please don't think that philosophy is just reading texts and piling up information. It's really a discipline: something you do, and as you do it, doing it changes you. I hear it makes some people full of themselves, but they're not doing it right. Philosophy can help you to be humble, if you let it, humble and free. So don't just study philosophy, practice it. Free up your mind. Free up your self. And if you can do this with friends, so much the better. ■

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