

"Radical Pluralism and Philosophy Education in Jesuit Universities"

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Pluralism is a fact regarding the contemporary world with which we are all familiar. This fact poses certain problems, but also some opportunities, for those of us who teach philosophy in Jesuit institutions. My brief remarks here deal not merely with the fact of pluralism, but with radical pluralism of the sort found at Seattle University, the Jesuit institution at which I am a faculty member.

The appropriateness of the adjective "radical" is evidenced by several considerations: Seattle is consistently ranked as one of the least churchd cities in the United States; less than half of Seattle University students are Catholic and that percentage is going down; and an even lesser percentage of the faculty are Catholic. This is in sharp contrast to the situation that existed in many Jesuit institutions until the recent past, and which still exists in some Jesuit universities, where virtually all of the students and faculty members share the same "comprehensive doctrine," to use Rawls' designation. I suspect that the degree to which current Jesuit universities are characterized by pluralism varies a great deal, although I have no doubt that pluralism is a fact that must be comprehended if one is to understand any contemporary Jesuit university. Seattle University, at least, is radically pluralistic. My closest friend at the university is a faculty member who is Chinese-American, whose father was Buddhist, and whose mother was a fundamentalist Protestant. This friendship is not at all odd in a condition of radical pluralism.

The radical pluralism I notice applies not only to certain sociological or demographic facts about the teachers and students. It also applies to the conceptual orientations of members of the Philosophy Department itself. The chief division in the department at Seattle University has historically been a split between what is usually called continental philosophy and

non-continental philosophy. Because the most popular contemporary authors in the department are Nietzsche and Heidegger, non-continental philosophy can be defined operationally in terms of any philosophical activity that does not take its cues from these (and related) authors. The point here is that any effort to determine the nature and goals of philosophy education in a Jesuit university can be hampered if the philosophers in question are pulling in different directions.

Several questions come to mind: Why do students attend Seattle University, given the fact that they are for the most part not Catholics (or not practicing Catholics)? Why do faculty members who are not Catholics (or are not practicing Catholics) enjoy teaching at Seattle University? And, in a related vein, why and how does Seattle University as a Jesuit-Catholic institution flourish, given the fact of radical pluralism? The remainder of my remarks will be attempts to respond to these and related questions. These responses are by no means exhaustive or philosophically detailed, but they will enable me to at least gesture toward a view of the nature and goals of philosophy education that is defensible in a contemporary, radically pluralistic, Jesuit university.

First, it should not escape our notice that Jesuit education still has a certain well-deserved reputation for excellence. This in large measure explains why Jesuit universities, in general, and Seattle University, in particular, can flourish even in a condition of radical pluralism. The implication for the teaching of philosophy in such institutions is clear: In order to keep this reputation intact we have an obligation to offer first-rate philosophy courses that are both intellectually rigorous and exciting.

Second, another reason students attend Seattle University is because of our commitment to educating the whole person. Granted, they are not familiar with the nuances of the concept cura personalis, but in a concrete way they do understand the difference between being a student at our major competitor, University of Washington with its 50,000 students, and being a student at Seattle University, where small class sizes allow for

personal attention from teachers. In fact, it is not unreasonable to see a contemporary Jesuit university as a locus for character development in students. Philosophy education can be an important part of this endeavor in that at our best we are encouraging students to develop the intellectual habits of wonder, critical thinking, and moral assessment that are necessary conditions for virtuous lives.

Third, from the time of Pedro Arrupe until the present, Jesuit universities have been committed to educating students to become leaders in a world that is in the process of becoming more just and humane. Many students are attracted to Seattle University, or eventually come to appreciate Seattle University, due to its commitment to social justice. Here philosophy courses can contribute in a significant way by laying out the complexities of the concept of justice as it has developed from Plato's Republic to Thomas' summas to Rawls' contemporary classic A Theory of Justice. Too often the education for justice part of the Jesuit mission of the university is presented in an intellectually thin way. But we have the power to counteract that.

Fourth, even pluralistic philosophy departments often exhibit a common commitment to the history of philosophy. Every member of our department, for example, sees the need to teach Platonic dialogues. Although it would be a stretch to say that there is also a common commitment to the idea of a philosophia perennis (or even a common commitment to the importance of medieval philosophy, which is unfortunate), there is nonetheless a shared sense that an educated person should in some sense be familiar with the history of philosophy, that philosophical concepts are historically sedimented, and that a better future presupposes an understanding of the past.

There is an additional point that I would like to make regarding philosophy education in a Jesuit university characterized by radical pluralism. But before I do so I would like to respond to those who might trivialize the significance of the first four points, especially the first three. I can easily imagine someone who might suggest that by merely educating the whole person for social justice we are providing thin gruel when

contrasted to the feast that could be provided by a more detailed engagement with the Catholic intellectual tradition. Bringing the richness of this tradition to bear in our philosophy courses is, in fact, a desirable goal as I see things, but it is a goal constrained by the fact of radical pluralism. That is, I do not think that we ought to trivialize the efforts to have our students grow as whole persons and to help to make the world a better place. Educating the whole person and educating for justice are by no means thin gruel. Rather, they provide the connective tissue that binds together the students, faculty, and staff at Seattle University and that enable them to see their work at the university as both intrinsically worthwhile and instrumentally efficacious.

More needs to be said. I can imagine a second critic who might suggest that, although these points are legitimate, they do not differentiate Seattle University from any one of a number of other small colleges or universities. Is there anything distinctive about philosophy education in Jesuit universities?, it will be asked. I am reticent to say that there is nothing distinctive about the sorts of commitment to educating the whole person and to social justice found in Jesuit universities. The moral worth of persons is sedimented into the Catholic intellectual tradition in a distinctive way that is nonetheless compatible with philosophy education even in a condition of radical pluralism. To cite just one example, Mary Ann Glendon details the history of the United Nations "Declaration of the Rights of Persons," a document whose principal author was Jacques Maritain. That is, the various rights movements can themselves be seen as outgrowths of the Catholic intellectual tradition, even if the church hierarchy ironically seems to resist some of these movements.

And fifth, philosophy education in Jesuit universities can provide a unique service to contemporary society by keeping alive the concept of God, questions regarding the existence of God, and the effort to understand religious belief in an extended period of Weberian disenchantment. By presenting to our students theistic metaphysics and/or religious belief as open questions, we can contribute to the reenchantment of the world, a reenchantment that is compatible with the philosophical

orientations of almost all philosophers in Jesuit institutions. This fifth point really does distinguish philosophy education in Jesuit institutions, if not from philosophy education in other religious institutions, then at least from philosophy education in other liberal arts colleges or in large state universities. It is this openness to, and deep exploration of, religious questions that makes me especially proud to teach in a Jesuit university and to feel at home intellectually in such a university. I think that I am not alone in this regard.

There are many ways in which philosophy is taught at Jesuit universities. I would like to indicate my own idiosyncratic way of doing so, which might be illustrative of what is required, in general. The stance I defend is usually called "process philosophy," but a more accurate label borrowed from Charles Hartshorne is "neoclassical theism." The "neo" part of this position is partially at odds with the classical theism that has dominated Jesuit education since its inception, whereas the "classical" part of neoclassical theism is at odds with dominant atheistic or agnostic tendencies in philosophy. The point I would like to make here is that in a condition of radical pluralism there is an advantage to approaches to philosophy that are themselves internally pluralistic, that both borrow in significant ways from tradition and that are open to creative ways of advancing into the future. Too often academics, in general, and philosophers, in particular, settle into intellectual clubs that admit new members only if they already know the secret handshake. Or again, philosophy education in a condition of radical pluralism is not likely to succeed if philosophers tend to think of themselves and those in their circle as Pythagorean mathematikoi who really understand the truth, in contrast to the akousmatikoi, benighted colleagues who hear the words of the master (whomever this might be), but who are not able to understand them.

Another idiosyncratic interest of mine that might shed light on what is needed, in general, is the thought of the later Rawls, who encourages us to practice the translation proviso when communicating with those who affirm comprehensive doctrines different from one's own. Because in a condition of radical pluralism people do in fact affirm different comprehensive

doctrines (sometimes uncompromisingly so), such efforts at translation can be especially helpful. There is no moral requirement to translate one's own comprehensive doctrine for others in that philosophers are free to exercise their right to defend whatever view they wish as long as it is "reasonable," as this semi-technical term is used in political liberalism. But there is nothing objectionable in encouraging them to speak in ways that adherents to other comprehensive doctrines can clearly understand and possibly accept. To put the point in stronger terms, not to engage in such translation efforts could be seen as a failure to come to terms with the fact of radical pluralism.

In any event, I would like to conclude by expressing my gratitude for being able to be a student or teacher at Jesuit universities for over 40 years. The fact that undergraduate students are still required to take philosophy courses (at Seattle University, two of them), whatever their major, is evidence of a commitment to philosophy education that is quite remarkable when the curricula of other universities are examined. It is our job to convince our students of both the intrinsic value of philosophical activity and its instrumental value in the task of more closely approximating a just and humane world.