

**THE NATURE AND GOALS OF PHILOSOPHY
EDUCATION AT JESUIT SCHOOLS**

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Philosophers in Jesuit Education

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When I was a baby Jesuit, actually when I was a “teenager” Jesuit in graduate studies, I joined a conversation among some fellow Jesuits in graduate study considering whether to found a new Jesuit college. About ten of us batted around the need, the resources, and the eagerness to take on such a project. Call it denial on our part of the onerous burden of writing and finishing dissertations, as it probably was, we even had a target city for such a new founding. I’ll leave you to guess which city.

Today’s topic brings me back to such heady talk. Perhaps inagining the founding of a new Jesuit college can help with such considerations.

What can I say about the nature and goals of philosophy education at Jesuit schools? I today offer some elements, ingredients, for such a topic, not a comprehensive statement.

I will start with what I take philosophy to be. I understand philosophy to be a practice, so a goal of philosophy education is to practice the practice, even though one learns by imitation of those who practice the practice. Philosophy is not an entity that could have a nature that would bring goals natively. But the term nature does signal “given” rather than invented. So let me recall four familiar—

given—definitions of philosophy, perhaps like four sides of a tetrahedron, the four planes of which meet each other.

1. Critical evaluation of received opinions, especially fundamental beliefs.

2. A science of sciences, as in philosophy of biology, philosophy of art, philosophy of religion.

3. Knowledge of ultimates. “That department of knowledge which deals with ultimate reality, or with the most general causes and principles of things.”¹

4. Love of wisdom. With this comes knowledge of what life is for. Such love of wisdom includes not only care of one’s soul but care of the community; and such love flows into action, not just into words, especially in our world, for those whose life is bereft and voice is marginalized.

I add to the definition of philosophy an accolade and vocation for philosophy. “Authentic philosophy is the holiness of reason.” Maurice Blondel

CONTEXT, THE IGNATIAN COMPOSITION OF PLACE

Let me offer remarks on our context, an Ignatian composition of place.

Where are we? What surrounds us, what provides footing for us, what threatens to

1. *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, via *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967) 6:217.

I add, in order to contrast 3 with theology: knowledge of ultimate reality pursued without reliance on *the authority of* divine revelation or *the authority of* a church’s teaching. While “authority” may mean “in charge” (administrative) or “in the know” (expert) or “in good repute” (deserving respect), here “authority” means “in the know” and perhaps “deserving respect”: one may consider revelation or church teaching as testimony having standing or respect or reverence in a community, and consider such testimony in ways like those used when one considers other testimony—as, under some conditions, a source of knowledge.

trap us, what gives us challenge and opportunity. I select a few features of the world within which our conversation takes place. We should imagine the real, in the phrase I find in William Lynch.

Jesuit schools, and specifically Jesuit college and university-level schools in North America are our setting. Jesuit schools typically have commitments to liberal arts, to professional training. I restrict the focus of today's remarks to undergraduate education. I am further restricting my focus to philosophy insofar as it is a requirement for all undergraduates. Further, I consider philosophy in the Jesuit context to be not just one of the humanities.² Some see philosophy as a humanity, *punkt*. Some promote a philosophy cafeteria offering by developing a sexy topic—although I recognize that making a fine course offering does not preclude marketing it with an appealing label.

Some of our context is context for other schools as well: rising cost of private education, and with it rising student debt; the challenge of enrolling students of sufficient talent. Schools are subject to changes which may be cancerous or creative: online education, wrap-around student life for students with less ability to survive and thrive. People are finger-scanning screens rather than facing faces and words. There is religious illiteracy, there is historical ignorance, and there is science ignorance even while students salute “science.” There is a perhaps-local set of lower writing and reading skills, and cultural impatience with thought. There is delayed adulthood. And of course there are budget constraints, perhaps moreso in the current decade.

That's enough for the scope of these remarks about context.

2. See, for example, Bernard Williams, “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline,” *Philosophy* 75, no. 4 (2000): 477–96.

I will return to some of these considerations when at the end I consider three issues regarding philosophy education in Jesuit schools.

TOPICS

Depth is what the current superior general of the Society of Jesus Adolfo Nicolás proposed as a need for worldwide Jesuit higher education. He proposed, actually, not only depth but universality.³

Here I indicate some topics that undergraduate schooling in philosophy should treat, presuming that treatment will aim for whatever depth is possible. I offer the topics for those who sail the seas of life and need a map, and a pump, and a compass. The map presents its own challenge: Where on this map am I? And where is the location of a destination worthy of me? The pumps I need for heavy seas of data that would flood my ship, and the compass keeps me oriented whichever way the wind blows, whatever route I take, mapped or unmapped.

Topics Worth Giving Status To

My list of topics, specific to philosophy, is fairly standard. One topic is the human person, with metaphysical issues that shape the conception of what makes for choosing: matter and mind, agency and passivities, neuroscience, self-determination and other-determination—freedom in some senses of the term.

A second topic is society. Human beings are not alone, even if they should be solipsistic or narcissistic. The given and the constructed social frameworks are

3. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., “Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today,” *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, Fall 2011, 6-9.

essential topics. The aim of the first Jesuit schools was good citizens, and self-understanding as citizens continues to be key.

Self-understanding as person and citizen feeds leads into ethics, not just to the debates and intricate puzzles that lie at the border between the good and the bad, the past and the future, but to reasons why some central strengths need to be recognized and their pursuit be legitimated. One of the best contributions teachers can make is to render legitimate certain ways of thinking and speaking: “It’s OK to think about this sort of thing”; or even needed, necessary. Another teachers’ contribution is that of modeling how to think and act.

Epistemology presents a stumbling block. One of my grad school professors acknowledged that many call for an epistemological grace before any metaphysical meal; but, I, he said, “just plunge right in.” Probably in today’s culture epistemology is a diagnostic enterprise, ferreting out bad thinking, rather than a therapeutic exercise, showing, as needed, how good thinking works. There is a professional penchant, perhaps unavoidable, for avoiding error; seeking truth is secondary.

Finally, there is God. There is a solid tradition of thinking about God, and philosophy in a Catholic context does well to stay between the rumble strips of fideism and rationalism. Of particular merit in this century is the epistemology of testimony, going beyond the call of John Locke to accept only what I see for myself.

Does logic get left out? While I regularly teach logic, I do so with the logic of ordinary language rather than symbolic logic, although I had a large dose of symbolic in my schooling. For the average and the achieving student, attending to the logical structure of ordinary discourse is essential for the appraising that goes by the name of critical thinking. Of particular importance these days are definition, as the process of getting clear what we are talking about, and reasoning by

analogy, a procedure used not only in law but also in classification and recommendation. People follow others' example, and that is a case of Go and Do Likewise.

The reasons for having a list of topics is the fact that philosophy is in a larger context. In a sense, philosophy bakes no bread, but it can illuminate what is genuinely nourishing and what in the long run spawns toxic ingredients. Philosophy is in dialogue with economics, with the marginal and the marginalized. Philosophy is in dialogue with theology, with the understanding of where we are and what we may aspire to in the biggest of big pictures. Philosophy is in dialogue with sciences, with explanations of how things go and at some level how to understand why they go that way.

Sequence of topics is very important. A principal reason why Saint Ignatius changed to the university of Paris is because the Paris schooling had a sequence of study—we today call it prerequisites—so that some courses presumed, and built on, other courses. Sequence and prerequisites, and their implied connections, are a hard sell both currently in a Jesuit school and often in a philosophy department.

There are probably some philosophical attitudes important for Jesuit schools. Among them are: metaphysical realism of some sort; more than eliminative materialism; more than objectivism-libertarianism; sympathy for the common good, conceptually and practically; recognition of the role of the principle of double effect. A faculty member should be disposed against teaching ethics with a pious ecclesial voice or with its opposite, but he or she should be familiar with both poles.

SOME LIMITS UNDER WHICH WE EDUCATE

One limit or constraint is the expectation that validation come from the profession, and from that derivatively to the school, at tenure-decision time. This

expectation may be more important in Jesuit schools that offer philosophy at the terminal degree level, but it affects undergraduate philosophy education also. One is expected to teach non-major undergrads with skill and enthusiasm and imagination while keeping up with the topics that are ‘covered’ in general-education courses.

The profession serves as a settling tank, however, for ideas. Some of the flow into the swirl of thought settles out after a decade or two, and some of this settling-out happens not just in something becoming passé but also in something becoming seen to have less than perduring importance.

Method in philosophy is also a constraint. Sometimes the league of philosophers has rival teams, with rival cheerleaders, and sometimes even boors up in the boxes yelling about what it is that is beneath respectable philosophy’s dignity to think.

Shallow desires are the shadow over the teaching of philosophy; deeper desires need legitimation for them to be at least glimpsed in the classroom. I think here again of the phrase used by Jesuit superior general Nicolás, globalization of superficiality. The flow/tide of the superficial is what we swim against.

One constraint a school has is whether in current economic climate a school can afford a general education requirement, perhaps in the face of some faculty who never had and see no need for any such requirement, unless it is a sop to faculty whose support they need for where they think the school should be really be going.

Another limit is the culture of adjuncts. Core courses often largely taught by adjuncts. Once as chair of the Philosophy Department I needed an instructor of the first course “The Human Person,” and my candidate was a philosophy graduate student who told me all he knew was Fichte--the thought of Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Desperate for a teacher, I proposed that he take some of the thought of

Fichte and bring it to bear on the Human Person topics. My point is that sometimes what is desirable for and even pledged to students is hard for available staff to deliver.

In the present climate of shakeout in higher education, Jesuit-sponsored schools may face the question: Can we afford a general-education program, with history, language, philosophy and theology as required for all? Shall we, must we, hive off the curricula for preparing professionals so that they get just a course in logic or so-called critical thinking. Or a course in profession-focused ethics.

THREE ISSUES

The Topics/History Ratio

If there are topics worth giving status to in Jesuit Higher education, what is the role of the history of philosophy in the Jesuit schools?

The problem is at least this. Most Jesuit schools offer philosophy as a requirement, and most also have a philosophy major, perhaps with a modest number of students. Some of these majors go on to a master's degree in philosophy, perhaps after some years out of school. Rare are those who complete a doctoral program, and extraordinarily rare are those who attain a tenured position in philosophy or in a related humanities program.

The major requires not only topics but also history of philosophy. The curriculum required for all students should emphasize topics over history. The philosophy faculty typically differ not only in topics expertise but also in history of philosophy expertise. But history gets less emphasis than topics.

This is acceptable, in my judgment, if much of our reason for having philosophy at all is so that some topics may be subject to the light of philosophical reflection. To give up on topics and to go essentially with history is to give up on

philosophy—although as far as I know no Jesuit school has given up on topics of ethics. There is however a temptation to customize ethics to a major, and thus have business ethics, ethics of sport, ethics of communication, criminal justice ethics. I think it better to recognize there are baseline human ethical concerns and to enable students to do some thinking about common human problems, not just those associated with one's major.

And what should Jesuit schools do with traditions in philosophy? I think of the current philosophical cultures of analytic, Thomistic, and Continental philosophy, with perhaps so-called eastern philosophy. Perhaps at a Jesuit school faculty should be bi-cultural, able to see what a different style of philosophy is doing.

One of the constraints in mustering support for the topics of philosophy is the fact that significant numbers of colleagues in various disciplines have never had any course in philosophy; they don't know what we are talking about. One of my acquaintance proposed a required-curricular version of Noah's Ark: let one of each academic animal have a place in the curriculum before any discipline would have a second.

Pluralism and Wrenches

When I teach ethics, I am required to teach more than one ethical theory. Our understanding of the required ethics course includes that some treatment of natural law ethics be included.

I find that some students look at ethical theory like sets of wrenches brought to pairs of nuts and bolts. If there is an ethical problem, does utilitarianism fit the this bolt? Will Kantian thought get better leverage on this problem, a better yield? If there are a multiplicity of ethical theories, what is the rationale for offering them? Is it to provide a toolbox, and for what task?

There are levels of pedagogy, at least in business ethics. The challenges of the entry-level level employee are different from those of middle management as are those of CEOs and board members. Most undergraduates find it within their grasp to imagine a challenge at the entry-level but beyond their reach to wrestle with a challenge at the board level. You cannot do executive ethics with eighteen-year-olds.

The depth to which Jesuit Superior General Adolfo Nicolás calls Jesuit higher education is, I observe, relative to the maturity, educational background, and life experience of the students who walk into our classrooms.

Relation to Ignatian and Catholic Matters

Our context is changing. The relationship between these schools and the Catholic Church has been changing, from the independence declared in the Land-of-Lakes statement, to the anxiety and sometimes alarm over implementing *Ex corde ecclesiae*, to the eclipse of considering that it is the Jesuits who connect college to church. The curriculum should contribute to students and then graduates ability to have church conversation as well as sciences conversation and arts conversations.

I accept usage of the term “Jesuit” for institutional affiliation, even if “Ignatian” is better for the spirit of the place. But “Jesuit” positions the institution in relation to matters Catholic, and I’d tick off two of what are of a more salient kind regarding Jesuit/Ignatian.

One of an Ignatian kind is discernment of spirits. I find students more than ordinarily attentive when I use Ignatian discernment for that part of my philosophy of religion course that deals with religious experience—if I want to call anything a “religious” experience; I’m sympathetic to speaking simply of ‘experience’, and

offering understandings of one's experience as a process that may be of-God or not-of-God.

One of a Catholic but not just Catholic kind is testimony. Testimony is obviously connected with Catholicism but is equally central to politics. How do we skillfully take reliable testimony in matters political and religious? Epistemology of testimony is as important as epistemology of perception and rules of inference.

The Faith and Reason Requirement at SJU: an Example

If time permits.

WHERE THIS PJE CONVERSATION MAY GO

We consider today some facets of the nature and goals of philosophy education in Jesuit schools.

One contribution our work may yield is external support for curriculum reviews that periodically and advisedly take place in Jesuit schools. I am aware of how statements of the APA are used to support proposals within Saint Joseph's University as well as in tenure applications. Perhaps statements of PJE could be used to bolster good judgment of what would count as improvements in the Jesuit schools whose students we serve. Making some PJE work available to the schools probably should be developed in concert with the chairs of philosophy departments. And it could be more publically situated among the Conferences of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, with a listserv.

Might we imagine cooperation among Jesuit schools, at the level of philosophy? We are accustomed to think more about competition than cooperation.

Does a mission statement offer a mirror in which philosophy faculty at Jesuit schools see themselves? Do they aspire to see themselves in such a statement?

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