

Philosophy in the Jesuit Core: What Vision Is Defensible Today?

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Georgetown University, October 10, 2014

Abstract

A cogent account of the role of philosophy in a core curriculum must cohere with a convincing vision of the general purpose of core curricula in Jesuit education. In this paper I first propose such a vision, and then defend the importance of philosophy as a crucial component in that vision. The proposed vision, however, has implications for the kinds of philosophy courses one can plausibly defend in a Jesuit core.

Introduction

What place does philosophy deserve in core curricula at Jesuit universities? One way to approach this question starts by asking, what purpose does the core curriculum serve? I'd like to take that approach here, by starting with a concrete statement regarding the purpose of the core, namely the Boston College statement, "The Vision Animating the Boston College Core Curriculum."¹ The BC Vision Statement, as I will call it, makes two interesting sorts of claims about the educational function of the BC Core: one unrealistic, the other more plausible. Critically examining these claims leads me to a specific proposal regarding core curricula and the place of philosophy in them. But that place poses some challenges, I suspect, to Jesuit philosophers.

The BC Vision Statement

In Section III of the BC Vision Statement, on the distinctive function of the Core, we read that the Core invites students into a "dialogue of faith and reason in pursuit of truth" (p. 2). Specifically, the Core functions to "counteract the contemporary danger of superficiality" by

¹ Boston College website, Office of the Provost and Dean of Faculties, Sept. 2, 2014; at [http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/avp/pdf/The%20Vision%20Animating%20the%20Boston%20College%20Core%20Curriculum%20\(09%2003%2014\).pdf](http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/avp/pdf/The%20Vision%20Animating%20the%20Boston%20College%20Core%20Curriculum%20(09%2003%2014).pdf), accessed September 21, 2014.

helping students develop the “intellectual, reflective, ethical, and creative habits of mind that will enable students to become lifelong learners, to seek meaning in their lives, and to work toward constructing a more just and human world” (pp. 2-3). This sounds like a worthy aim of Jesuit education.

The Statement then goes on, however, when it treats the substance of the Core in Section IV, to make a striking assumption about what it means to be educated: “Becoming educated requires careful and conscientious study in fields from theology and history to philosophy and literature, from mathematics and physics to the arts to political science and beyond” (p. 3). I am not sure that introductory courses across all these fields qualify as “careful and conscientious study” of a field, though good students can be careful and conscientious in how they conduct themselves in introductory courses. But the second Learning Outcome for the Core appears to require something more ambitious than conscientious conduct: students completing the Core are expected to “understand the major ideas and methods of inquiry of the scholarly disciplines that comprise the university and be able to use those methods of inquiry as beginning practitioners to address complex contemporary problems” (p. 4).

This outcome strikes me as unrealistic for all but extremely talented students. In the sciences, for example, many students qualify as “beginning practitioners” only in their senior year—if even then. But should we expect, say, a core economics course to enable students to “address complex contemporary” economic issues? This Learning Outcome, and the associated statement in Sec. IV, suggest an outdated—and truncated²—idea of the “Renaissance Man,” in the sense of a polymath “whose expertise spans a significant number

² In fact, the more complete Renaissance ideal gave prominent place to character formation and public engagement for the common good. I thank Bill O’Brien, SJ, for this point. I believe this view is supported not only by the Ratio Studiorum, but also by St. Ignatius’ lengthy letter on higher education.

of different subject areas; such a person is known to draw on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems.”³ That ideal was perhaps appropriate for an earlier time, when many disciplines were still in their infancy, but hardly attainable today *simply by taking a set of core courses*.

Interestingly, the University of Southern California also associates the “Renaissance Ideal” (and its Renaissance Scholars program) with polymathy, but in a different sense. The description of the USC Sydney Harmon Academy for Polymathic Study emphasizes cross-disciplinary awareness more than expertise: “The Harman Academy for Polymathic Study offers a series of conversational encounters intended to intensify polymathic (*integrated interdisciplinary*) awareness” (my emphasis). That qualified ideal also appears in the BC document: “The Core Curriculum invites students and faculty to see how the various disciplines, with all their specificity, differentiation, and limitations, might work together to construct an integrated understanding of reality” (p. 3). This goal is attainable through a good core curriculum, and philosophy has an important role in attaining it.⁴

Preparation for Cross-disciplinary Awareness

Seeing how the different disciplines might work together: a core curriculum that exposes one to courses in the major areas of the arts and sciences can go a long way toward that goal.

The third BC Learning Outcome captures this more plausible aim: students are expected to “[b]e able to identify and articulate the strengths and limitations of the disciplines and the relationship of the disciplines to one another, and demonstrate an understanding of the

³ This definition comes from Wikipedia, which links “Renaissance Man” with its article on “Polymath,” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polymath>, accessed Oct. 6, 2014. The definition matches typical dictionary definitions of the term “Renaissance Man”; see, e.g., Merriam-Webster online: “a person who has wide interests and is expert in several areas.” At <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/renaissance%20man>, accessed Oct. 6, 2014.

⁴ “Renaissance Ideal,” USC Undergraduate Education website, at <http://undergrad.usc.edu/renaissance/>, accessed Oct. 6, 2014.

breadth and diversity of human knowledge as well as its openness to integration in more comprehensive wholes” (p. 4). This idea also appears in the Saint Louis University overview of its Core Curriculum, which is supposed to serve “as a catalyst for cross-disciplinary reflection and inquiry. . . .the Core is structured so as to insure acquisition of basic skills and knowledge while providing opportunities for broadening vision and for making connections among disciplines.”⁵

These aims—understanding the strengths and limitations of different disciplines, being able to make connections among disciplinary perspectives—are not only achievable. In my opinion, they have become indispensable in today’s world. More precisely, what has become crucial today is what I’ll call “cross-disciplinary awareness”: an understanding of *disciplines as resources* for grappling with complex contemporary challenges. In contrast to the polymathic interpretation of the Renaissance Ideal, which unrealistically expects the Core to produce students who can *actually use* the methods and ideas of different core disciplines to address complex challenges, cross-disciplinary awareness only requires them to know *where to look for help* in addressing such challenges. Thus the core should introduce students to those disciplines that are most relevant for addressing today’s problems. Behind this thought lies the assumption that our students will eventually find themselves in positions of institutional and intellectual responsibility, facing complex problems whose solutions requires input from multiple perspectives, including multiple disciplinary perspectives. If one does not know what resources exist for successfully grappling with such problems, if one does not understand the weaknesses of each of these resources, one is liable to err in two ways: missing important inputs, and relying too much on a partial picture of the problem.

⁵ Overview of the Core Curriculum, Saint Louis University College of Arts and Sciences, at <http://www.slu.edu/college-of-arts-and-sciences-home/undergraduate-education/core-curriculum/overview-of-the-core>, accessed Sept. 22, 2014.

The Place of Philosophy in Cross-disciplinary Awareness

I thus propose that one of the primary aims of core curricula in Jesuit schools is to instill in students a cross-disciplinary awareness. How does philosophy contribute to that aim? Are some specific philosophy courses more important for that aim?

In general, philosophy can contribute in two ways: first, insofar as philosophy itself constitutes one of the disciplines that can provide substantive resources for addressing contemporary problems; second, insofar as philosophy can provide the skills necessary for understanding the strengths and limitations of different disciplines and for making connections across disciplines whose strengths and weaknesses can complement each other in relation to different contemporary problems. Each of these two ways points to specific core course offerings that should be more readily defensible. I take up each in turn.

Philosophy as a substantive resource. Among the most readily defensible core philosophy offerings are courses in ethics and social justice. If a core has any link to the Renaissance Ideal that retains relevance for today, then it lies not in polymathic expertise but in the Renaissance humanist commitment to moral character, civic consciousness, and the common good. Besides resonating directly with the Jesuit Catholic mission espoused by our institutions, courses on ethics, justice, and the common good provide substantive input for nearly every sort of contemporary problem that involves human beings and their environments. Indeed, failure to place such courses in Jesuit core curricula sends a message at odds with our mission—that many of the challenges of today's society are merely technical problems, which managers can address using cost-benefit analyses and the like.

In my experience at Saint Louis University, the required ethics course is the one core

philosophy course that students are most likely to see as relevant to their education. In fact, members of different disciplines not only understand the need for a core ethics course, they sometimes actively desire such a course. Since I came to SLU in 1992, I have been involved in two cases in which STEM disciplines sought the help of the Philosophy Department in developing an applied ethics course for their majors. In the early 1990s, almost immediately after arriving at SLU, I found myself in meetings with SLU's Parks School of Engineering, in which our charge was to develop an engineering ethics course. I taught the pilot version of that course in Fall of 1996; it is now a requirement for engineering majors and has been offered ever since by a philosopher. More recently, the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science approached the Philosophy Department with the idea of offering an upper-level computer ethics, team-taught by a computer scientist and philosopher, with the introductory ethics course as a pre-req. The pilot version was offered in 2010, and the course is now required of computer science majors.

Philosophical and cross-disciplinary skills. The second kind of contribution that philosophy can make to cross-disciplinary awareness lies at the level of critical and analytic skills. For cross-disciplinary awareness to function intelligently in the face of contemporary challenges, its possessor must have (1) knowledge of the range of disciplines and their different strengths, (2) a critical sense of their respective limitations, in particular limitations set by methodology and background assumptions, (3) the analytic acumen that can parse complex problems and make links to relevant disciplines, and (4) the synthetic ability to bring different disciplines together so that they can cooperate in addressing the challenges at issue. I assume that the different core offerings as a whole provide for the first condition. Thus we should seek the contribution of philosophy in providing skills for (2), (3), and (4).

Different kinds of philosophy courses can contribute to the second asset, the critical sense of disciplinary limitations. For example, much contemporary economics proceeds on idealizing assumptions, based on rational choice theory, about human behavior. Those assumptions represent an important disciplinary limitation, of which one should be aware when considering economic perspectives on social problems. A good illustration is Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, who publicly (and famously) admitted that rational choice assumptions led him to underestimate the risks posed by the housing bubble. Would that Greenspan had only absorbed the lessons of a good philosophy course in human nature! But that is only one example, and much here depends on the content of the philosophy course and how it provides students with a broader perspective, or a kind of contrasting perspective, that makes them aware of disciplinary limitations. To make this contribution, in other words, core philosophy courses must be designed to enhance cross-disciplinary awareness, expressed in BC Learning Outcome 3.

The third asset, the analytic skill to parse complex problems, might be fostered by critical thinking courses. Traditionally, critical thinking courses tend to focus on the analysis of isolated arguments, using various rules for distinguishing valid and invalid, cogent and weak, arguments. The more useful skill, which some textbooks are beginning to target, involves the ability to track a discussion in which multiple arguments and counterarguments are in play, on complex issues whose proper analysis depends on input from a variety of social and disciplinary perspectives. Again, philosophy courses can directly contribute to this skill only if one designs course content in light of cross-disciplinary awareness for problem-solving.

The last asset above, the ability to put different disciplines in conversation with each other, can also be fostered by philosophy courses, but here I suspect that intentional course

design is especially important. Some philosophers tend to draw on multiple disciplines and perspectives in developing their views—John Kavanaugh was a good example—but that does not strike me as the rule. It is not enough, for this fourth skill, simply to bring scientific or literary input into a philosophy course. The trick is to show how multiple disciplines can come together to address a complex problem. A philosophy course can do that, but I am not sure that many do.

Defending Philosophy in Today's Core Curricula

I want to close by pointing out some challenges this analysis presents for philosophers interested in defending the place of philosophy in Jesuit core curricula, on the basis of cross-disciplinary awareness.

Note that two points seem to follow from the above analysis. First, philosophers in Jesuit education should not find it difficult to defend the importance of ethics, applied ethics, and I assume, social justice courses in a core that takes cross-disciplinary awareness as one of its basic commitments. For such courses have substantive relevance for addressing contemporary problems. Second, if we want philosophy courses to foster the skills necessary for cross-disciplinary awareness, then we do best to design specific courses with that aim in mind. One can, to be sure, argue that philosophical thinking in general provides global skills that will help with cross-disciplinary awareness. But that tack does not strike me as politically very promising in today's educational environment. The STEM disciplines have been putting severe pressure on the kind of core curricula one finds in many Jesuit universities. To meet that pressure, philosophers must be able to tie their core-course proposals directly to the dimensions of the core for which philosophy is most obviously indispensable. I doubt that appeals to global skill-sets will get one very far.

So perhaps we must look beyond the specific outcome of cross-disciplinary awareness. Is there an outcome for which philosophy is obviously indispensable? It is likely that the avenues one has for defending philosophy in one's core will depend heavily on how one's institution understands that core, and whether members of the various disciplines find that understanding compelling. In the BC Vision Statement, Learning Outcome 4 strikes me as a possibility: it calls for the ability to engage the "enduring questions and issues that are fundamental to human inquiry and that have shaped the traditions from which the university has emerged" (BC Vision Statement, p. 4). At SLU, a similar rationale provides the main basis for the philosophy component of the SLU Core: "philosophy provides a rational and critical way of examining fundamental, enduring questions about the human condition."⁶

I do not want to disparage that basis for justifying core philosophy cores, particularly in Jesuit institutions. But cross-disciplinary awareness strikes me as a more universally compelling rationale for a core—indeed, a rationale that should have force in any university that does not merely regard itself as a factory for turning out corporate noodles. Thus, cross-disciplinary awareness is not a distinctively Jesuit learning outcome. But its very universality makes it a more reliable basis, I propose, for defending core-course commitments in Jesuit universities. In any case, one should have a stronger basis if one can add the cross-disciplinary rationale to the "enduring questions" rationale.

However, appealing to cross-disciplinary awareness outcome has a price. If we philosophers want to use cross-disciplinary awareness as a basis for core philosophy courses beyond ethics, then we must be ready to rethink how we teach many of those courses, and what kind of courses we propose for the core. Specifically, we would do well to develop

⁶ Components of the Core Curriculum, Saint Louis University College of Arts and Sciences, at <http://www.slu.edu/college-of-arts-and-sciences-home/undergraduate-education/core-curriculum/components-of-the-core>, accessed Sept. 22, 2014.

courses that foster cross-disciplinary thinking, multi-sided case analysis, and integration.⁷

And we had better be ready to let go of some sacred cows of philosophical education. Save those for the majors.

⁷ An example is the Ways of Knowing course at Loyola-Chicago, which ties together inputs from different disciplines into an extended reflection on human knowledge.