

I would like to begin by thanking Eleonore for inviting me to be a part of this panel discussion, not least because it has prompted some serious and, I think, very much-needed reflection and discussion. As I began to consider the matter, it occurred to me how little time we actually spend – at least in my department – thinking about the nature of philosophy generally, let alone its role in a specifically Jesuit institution, and I was struck by my inability to immediately offer a clear answer to this question. Indeed, I surveyed my department mates, and they were equally flummoxed. As to the *goals*, they offered the usual bromides or platitudes about developing critical thinking skills; or learning how to read texts properly; or introducing students to important existential and moral questions; but these answers sound shallow to my ears (although they make for great assessment language!). Whatever else I was doing when I entered graduate school, developing my critical thinking skills was not on my list as an ultimate end. Furthermore, though philosophy may do these things more perspicuously than other disciplines, quite obviously these are hardly the province of philosophy alone. A good literature course, for example, can do as much.

Of course I can tell you why I chose to study philosophy: I was gripped by questions about the foundations of morality, and I desperately wanted to understand my faith better. (The result of which, I note with some amusement, is that I ended up at the University of Michigan, which – at least at the time – was hardly a place friendly to theism!) Now, this still seems to me a fine aim, but it won't do as a general answer since it depends upon my own idiosyncratic interests.

In what follows, I want to do two things. First, I'll develop an (unoriginal) answer to the question of the aim of philosophy. Second, I'll consider what that answer looks like, or could look like, in the context of my work at Spring Hill College, a small, sort-of liberal arts school of about 1,200 students. Along the way, I'll remark on some of the challenges that we face, at least at SHC.

Seeking an answer, I turned to the thought of Ignatius himself. In part IV of the Constitutions of the Society, he writes that “the aim which the Society of Jesus directly seeks is to aid its own members and their neighbors to attain the ultimate end for which they were created” (293). He goes on to add that “the end of learning which is acquired in this Society is with God's favor to help the souls of its own members and those of their neighbors” (294). Here he is speaking about learning generally, and not just philosophy, but he does regard philosophy as a necessary prerequisite to the study of theology, so I think it's safe to say that he believes that the study of philosophy (presumably properly done) can help souls.

The study of philosophy as an aid to attain our ultimate end: at institutions of learning inspired by the vision of Ignatius, I think that has to be the right answer, but it immediately raises two further issues. The first is this: *how* does the study of philosophy help our souls? Well, if you want to attain your ultimate end, it's helpful to know what that end *is* and what kind of life might help get you there. More explicitly than any other discipline, philosophers ask about what kind of

life is worth living; about the nature of creation, and of ourselves; and about what we can come to know and understand. Engaging with these questions has two very practical consequences. First, each of us must decide what to do with our lives. And this raises the question, whether we wish to confront it or not, of what kind of life is worth living. Increasingly, our students, however indirectly, are asking this question. The 2015 Deloitte Millennial survey says that millennials “overwhelmingly believe that business needs a reset in terms of paying as much attention to people and purpose as it does products and profit.” More and more, as they enter the workforce, students are seeking jobs that they find fulfilling as much as they are profitable. And this is true even for students saddled by large amounts of student debt. Let me add anecdotally here that in the past couple of weeks, I've visited both Assumption College here in Worcester and Elizabethtown College (in PA) as part of a project I'll mention later, and I repeatedly hear this same point from students. They're feeling the pressure, often from parents, to find jobs immediately after graduation, and partly in response to this pressure, they're desperate to hear adults talk to them about finding purpose and meaning in life. I think it should be a hallmark of Jesuit education that we help our students to confront the questions of what is worth doing, and what is ultimately fulfilling, head on. And there's no better help in this endeavor than philosophy.

I'll have more to say on this point later, but let me turn to the second practical consequence of studying philosophy: it helps your prayer life. At the end of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius provides some additional material to aid in contemplating God's love. He tells us to recall the blessings of creation and redemption; what God has done for us; and how much God has shared himself with us. Ignatius then asks us “to consider, according to all reason and justice, what [we] ought to offer the Divine Majesty” in return for all of this. What follows is his famous Suscipe prayer:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will. All I have and call my own, you have given to me; to you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me.

The first time I encountered this prayer (outside, unfortunately, of the context in which Ignatius situates it), I thought: there's no way I could pray this prayer. It's too difficult! My second thought was: there's no way anyone should *want* to pray this prayer! Why would God want my liberty, memory and especially my *will*? Does God want to love a robot? The parable of the three talents (Matthew 25:13-30) came to mind as well: doesn't it sound as though Ignatius is suggesting we just return everything to God, much like the man with one talent? Quite obviously, Ignatius is *not* suggesting that we just give up and do nothing. Less obviously, philosophy can help us to understand why offering your liberty, understanding, memory, and even will to God would make sense, while doing so to another human never would.

Unfortunately, developing this answer is beyond the scope of this talk, so I'll just say that it has to do both with the way we might understand God's grace acting on us as well as with the perfect love with which God loves us. It's one thing to love, but it's another thing to understand that love, and the latter can help the former. For my own part, at any rate, the study of philosophy has deeply enriched my own prayer life.

These are but two ways in which philosophy can be an aid in attaining our ultimate end, and I'm sure there are others.

This brings me to my second issue. Philosophy *can* help us attain our ultimate end – but does it? Specifically, does philosophy, as taught and done at SHC, play that role? I'm sad to say that the answer is closer to “no” than to “yes”. None of my colleagues would describe their teaching or research in that way. In virtue of their rejection of theism, they reject the idea of an ultimate end as Ignatius conceives of it. Of course, this is not to say that their work is without fruit; they still contribute to this goal, albeit in an indirect way. In our ethics courses, we have our students encounter, in various ways, the question of what kinds of lives are worth living and what goods are worth pursuing. Students explicitly see the problems with the robust moral relativism with which so many of them enter. Still, given that my colleagues do not share Ignatius's vision or aim, the ways in which they can contribute are limited.

Thus far, I have been speaking mainly about how philosophy might directly aid our students. However, there is another, related role that it can play. Someone – I can't place the reference – once remarked that Catholic colleges and universities are one of the places where “the Church does her thinking.” Philosophy departments can help the Church do her thinking in at least two different ways. First, and most directly, our scholarship can contribute to the academic dialogue on current issues in the Church. Second, in our teaching and service work, we can also help to increase the general level of public discourse, which is none too high (witness the bombast of Donald Trump). More specifically, as my friend and colleague Aaron Cobb has pointed out, we can help students cultivate what he identifies as the virtue of docility: listening to figures (e.g., the Pope) as potential authority figures with something to offer instead of simply listening for points of agreement (=he happens to be right) and disagreement (=he's wrong). This more general aim of helping our students to value educated conversation on issues is something to which my entire department can contribute.

To conclude my thoughts, let me return to the idea that philosophy can help us determine what kind of life is worth living. The context is my second question: how much does it *actually* do so at SHC? I am pleased to say that the College is embarking on a five-year effort to help our students with vocational discernment. (The building of this program, by the way, is what took me to Etown and Assumption.) As we do so, we are riding the coattails of more than a decade of work on this issue funded by the Eli Lilly foundation. Lilly funded purpose-exploration programs

at 88 independent colleges and universities across the country, including multiple Jesuit institutions.<sup>1</sup> In his book-length analysis of these efforts, Tim Clydesdale remarks that

History and culture are important, and when it comes to discernment of life purpose, Jesuits possess both in abundance. Discernment is who Jesuits are and what Jesuits do. Thus, asking Jesuits to participate in a program to encourage purpose exploration is like asking fish to participate in a learn-to-swim program. This advantage explains why Jesuit University exploration programs, more than those of any other college or university participating in this initiative, were first and strongest out of the starting gate (34).

While results (of course) varied, in general Clydesdale found that these programs had a significant impact. When he compared students who went through them to control groups, he found that the participants were significantly more satisfied with their lives, had better articulated senses of purpose, and - most significantly to my mind - were much more resilient in the face of challenges and setbacks. Finally, they were also more likely to see their lives as being lived in service to others.

Now, I can't speak to how much the philosophy departments at Jesuit schools contributed to their respective programs, but it seems to me that they ought to do so. So I will say that philosophy (and theology) departments at Jesuit schools should be places where Ignatius's charism is understood. They should be places where other faculty can look as they work on understanding what it means to be at a Jesuit school. They should be, if not leading, then in the thick of efforts to create and sustain vocational discernment programs on campus.

These are big-picture ideas, so let me conclude with something more specific. My work on vocation has influenced what I do in the classroom. I'm the one who teaches the 200-level philosophy of religion course, and in the past I taught it as a standard survey covering the usual topics - arguments for and against God's existence, etc. The emphasis was on understanding the arguments themselves and the objections to them. That's what we do as philosophers, right? But one can cover much of this same material while including an emphasis on vocation. For example, I think the epistemology of religious experience and testimony is interesting, but rather than emphasizing all of the moves and countermoves, one can work on plumbing the depths of our students' own experiences - and also help them come to appropriate those of others. Practically, this could mean reflection exercises and papers; or journaling; or encounters with people in the community outside of campus. When you give students time and structured opportunities to confront head-on the question of what their own faith lives look like, and what they might look like, and what this material means *to them*, I find that they embrace it wholeheartedly. They want to work on understanding their own vocational stories, if only we ask them.

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<sup>1</sup> Creighton, SLU, Loyola Chicago, Marquette, Fairfield, and Santa Clara

Perhaps all of this is old news to all of you. I can only really speak in detail about my own experience, and that experience is of much time being spent not on helping students find meaning in their own lives but rather in explaining, for the 45th time, how a particular argument is supposed to work or what, say, the principle of sufficient reason is. And that's all well and good - there's truth in those platitudes about teaching critical thinking skills - but there's other work we can do, work that should be a particular focus of philosophy at Jesuit schools.

Thank you.