

THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN JESUIT CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

In order to understand the role of Philosophy in Jesuit – and for that matter all Catholic – higher education, one must first distinguish between undergraduate and graduate education, since their goals, while having some commensurate values, are different in focus and emphasis. Having said this, I will begin with undergraduate education and then move on to graduate education.

Undergraduate Education:

There are multiple roles and, therefore, multiple reasons for the centrality of Philosophy in Catholic/Jesuit education. Let me list them in order of emphasis if not importance: all are essential.

1. Philosophy Departments hand on the Intellectual Tradition of Western Culture. Philosophy has played a defining role in the shaping of Western culture and civilization stemming back to the ancient Greeks who essentially invented science/philosophy. The ancient Greeks (Thales through to Plotinus) provided humankind a way of thinking and inferring that went beyond religion. They invented or discovered the rules of logical inference based upon evidence, not religious conviction. In short, they went beyond (though they did not abandon) narrative to discover truth through reasoned argumentation and not simply or merely the “telling of the stories.” This invention has been foundational in the development of the Western cultural experience and one of the great gifts the West has given to humankind. To understand who and what we are as Westerners, it is imperative that we not only know science, but we also know the historical, intellectual roots of

science and all that it has brought about in the formation of the culture.

2. As part of the handing on of the intellectual, Philosophical/Scientific tradition of the West, Philosophy Departments teach students the central role Philosophy has played in the formulation of the Christian faith especially through the theological debates in the Early Church. Philosophy has been the “handmaiden” of the faith and/or theology since the 2nd Century, at least. The Catholic Intellectual Tradition, her theology, is unintelligible (including the great Councils of the Church, e.g. Nicea) without the knowledge and understanding of the philosophical principles employed in the dogmatic debates of the early Councils. As a Catholic Jesuit institution, students should learn and appreciate the intellectual foundations of their religious convictions if their faith is to be both informed and critical. This is an essential role that Philosophy plays in Catholic Jesuit education.
3. Philosophy trains students to think analytically, that is, with logical precision. From the earliest forms of argument found in Plato and Aristotle, to the most sophisticated forms found in contemporary analytic philosophy, philosophy departments and programs educate students to think about important issues with the kind of precision and clarity that the Western Intellectual Tradition has made available to them. Philosophy enables students to think and argue coherently, not just rhetorically, about matters of great importance in life, questions dealing with ethics, social justice, scientific reasoning, life’s purpose, religion, etc.

4. Philosophy's role is also to teach students some of the dominant philosophical theories, principles and practices in place at this time in our historical/cultural context. Philosophy faculty teach students to know, understand and, to a significant degree, critique the important philosophical thinkers and movements of our times. In short, Philosophy educates students to think reflectively on the important theories and methods of thought that are relevant to and influential in their lives personally and socially within the larger culture and society.
5. In short, Philosophy's role in Catholic education is to guide and educate students into a philosophical frame of mind.

Graduate Education

1. The primary role of Philosophy in graduate education is to "train" professional philosophers for active participation in the philosophical profession. The primary role, then, is to educate philosophers of the next generation.
2. A secondary though essential role of Philosophy in graduate education is to educate and train young aspiring philosophers in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition in order that these young philosophers may not only be competently trained to engage the present philosophical world, but to do so from within the rich tradition that comprises the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.
 - a. They should be trained therefore not only in the best and most current methodologies and theories; they must also be conversant with the major figures within the history of philosophy.
 - b. They should also be cognizant of the role of philosophy as a handmaiden to theology/faith in the Western cultural

tradition. They ought not to be required to be religious, but they ought to be made cognizant and appreciative of the defining role philosophy and theology have played in the shaping of the intellectual culture in the past as well as in the present.

- c. As such, they should be prepared to do philosophy within this larger tradition in a way that is appropriate to first-rate engagement with the contemporary philosophical world.
3. The role of philosophy in Catholic education at the graduate level must therefore produce philosophers of the first tier, judged as such by the profession, who engage the profession at the highest level though from within or, at least, with a view to the overarching Catholic Intellectual Tradition.