

## The Future of Philosophy in Jesuit Higher Education



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Ronald Anderson, S.J.

Department of Philosophy  
Boston College

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### 1. Preliminary: philosophy's identity and practices

Any exploration of the future of philosophy in the academy raises the issue about the nature of philosophy, yet defining philosophy is a difficult and contested undertaking. To begin with if one were to seek a characterization that captures the ways in which philosophy has been practiced and understood during its history one confronts a rich and diverse history that precludes any simple specification of what philosophy is on about. In more recent times too we have experienced that diversity with the varieties of Anglo-American philosophy on the one hand, with its analytic, linguistic, and pragmatic threads, focusing on particular problems, and Continental philosophy on the other, approaching issues historically through particular thinkers and texts; two philosophies with different worlds of meaning associated with them."<sup>(1)</sup> Some famous disputes between these two forms of philosophy have highlighted the depth of the fault lines between them and despite the presence now of those familiar with both traditions and the demise of their authority in departments where they once had strongholds, the legacy of decades of divisions between them remain.

Moreover, contemporary historical and sociological studies of knowledge (such as those by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu) have made us sensitive in new ways to how disciplines such as philosophy are the productions of our attempts to understand the world, human nature and society. They have made us sensitive of the factors that work to create and preserve disciplinary identities and boundaries and the ways in which such boundaries can change, blur, and become pervious. The same studies have made us cautious of claims that seek to naturalize particular disciplinary practices and approaches as ones stemming from the "way the world is," and particularly cautious of universal knowledge claims. And in this climate any "meta" theorizing that seeks to order disciplines in some sort of hierarchy based on the nature or comprehensives of their subject matter, or any claim for the existence of an "architectonic" or "master" discipline for assessing features of all knowledge is likely to be viewed as arising from factors extrinsic to the internal claims of disciplines. In addition, exploring how power functions in the generation, formation, and modes of

transmission of knowledge has been extraordinarily productive in contributing to our understanding of the functioning of disciplines in institutional contexts.

As well, time and time again disciplines have peeled away from philosophy to establish their own identities. Logic, for example, in the early part of this century, with the development of the techniques of modern mathematical symbolic logic was one of the more recent to depart from the halls of philosophy. The manner in which the natural sciences have flowered during this century and in recent decades the cognitive sciences in particular, has meant that these sciences are now providing the best contexts in which to pursue some of the traditional philosophical questions of metaphysics and epistemology. I'm thinking here of the big questions about the nature of space, time, causality, and those to do with the genesis, nature, and growth of knowledge. Indeed, as regards the cognitive sciences it is unclear what will be left of traditional introspective epistemologies with their older faculty based categories such as those of "experience" and "understanding" and their various technologies of flow charts to represent knowledge generation after they have caught up with the implications of current studies in these sciences -- it is conceivable they may end up merely having some sort of "folk-epistemology" status. These developments present us not only with examples of shifts in terms of sites for the treatment of identifiable problems but examples of the evolution of discipline of philosophy. The future can only be replete with further such examples.

Given the above features of the academy and the practice now well part of the academy of teaching philosophy with a historical approach **together** with the absorption of the spirit of reflexivity from our postmodern condition we have arrived, I would venture, at an understanding of philosophy such that an intrinsic part of its content and practice entails a self-reflection of the sort that raises issues of its identity, relationship with other disciplines, and awareness of its practices. While such self reflection has characterized philosophy since its origins, philosophy in our contemporary context appears to have become self-conscious in a new, permanently new way." <sup>(2)</sup> Any project then to re-think the place of philosophy in Jesuit Higher Education that entails privileging a particular type of philosophy will need to deal with this self-reflective, self-conscious practice of the **theory** of philosophy, a practice that forever questions the nature, significance, and value of any philosophy. This situation forces us to recognize now how our philosophizing is intrinsically tied to the local context in which it is practiced and thus by necessity must take that context into account, especially if it is to be relevant and alive in the future.

With this preliminary remark on the contemporary status of philosophy's identity and practice I'm going to sidestep in the following the complex issue as to which particular philosophy best fits Jesuit Higher education and instead to sketch a set of **qualities** and **practices** that I'd like to argue are appropriate ones for the practice of philosophy in the context of Jesuit educational enterprises. The focus of my remarks too is largely on undergraduate education. The qualities I admit do in some way suggest particular philosophies, but they are general enough such to be addressed in some way whatever the particular focus of a department or individual philosopher. In this way they address the practical issue that the particular philosophical orientation of any department now is not likely to change for several decades given the tenure system in place, the current hiring practices, and the stability of the larger understanding and practice of philosophy within the American academy. But unless something of the following qualities are maintained or developed the fairly central place philosophy has at the moment in Jesuit Higher Education due to factors such as core requirements will gradually erode away and philosophy will move to the margins of Jesuit Higher Education. To use the crisis language we philosophers

sometimes draw on, philosophy may go the way of classics in Jesuit Higher Education, a discipline that flourished decades ago in curriculums, but now is very much on the margins.

## 2. Engaging the worlds of our students

The first quality I would propose is that philosophy of the future engage far more than it does at present with the concerns and worlds of our students. To ask, in the words of John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio*, "radical questions about the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence" as these questions relate to the experiences and worlds of our students."<sup>(3)</sup> Thus, I would maintain philosophy departments should offer courses which reflect on the themes of popular culture, such as those in our contemporary music, art, and film worlds. Courses in which the notions of reality played with in the recent film, *The Matrix*, can be considered, or where the themes of MTV videos can be unraveled, or the significance of the emerging web culture, a site that is becoming increasingly a lived space in our society, can be explored. Another contemporary topic is that to do with religious issues such as the representations of God in the worlds of our students, and that rather hot area at the moment -- the interrelationship between science and religion. Tom Beaudoin's study of the spirituality of Generation X, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*"<sup>(4)</sup> is a study of the worlds where religious meaning is forged for Generation X. The four themes that Beaudoin identifies that matter to this generation, "institutions are suspect," "experience is key," "suffering has a religious dimension," and "ambiguity is central to faith" immediately suggest projects for philosophical exploration. While it is difficult to predict the issues that will dominate our world next century, I suspect those to do with increasing globalization and its effects on local cultures will emerge as a key issue and that too is a topic where philosophy could have many contributes to make."<sup>(5)</sup>

So I suggest we re-think those extensive historically based Great Books style of philosophy courses and explore more directly the themes of the worlds of our students. And on those Great Books style of courses, my heart sinks when I'm at the beginning of a year long introductory course I've sometimes taught at Boston College which is a section in a set program with set texts when I have to take the students through Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The need to work through those abstract complex definitions, those convoluted sentences, those categories of moral life so distant from our own, leave me with a disappointed feeling that even after attempting to make it relevant I'm still not capturing the energies nor engaging in the worlds of my students.

Now I recognize how the promotion of historical, textual approaches to philosophy two or three decades ago provided a ready way to transform programs in Jesuit Higher Educational institutions based on dry scholastic philosophy. It was great political instrument to help in that transformation; but now our needs are different. I recognize too that the one great depository of the tools for any philosophical exploration lie in our historical tradition, that history provides the resources to think outside the confines our local cultures, and that the particularity encouraged by historical investigation is a healthy balance to ungrounded totalizing claims for reason (indeed the spirit of the historicizing--but not relativizing--of knowledge of recent decades is akin to the spirit of many of the qualities I wish to maintain here). Thus, I would not want to suggest that historically based great books approaches be dumped entirely but that they be governed by a concern to bring the project of philosophy alive in contemporary worlds. Let us in the future limit rehashing past dead philosophies, limit focusing on philosophical problems internal to other continents and times, and dig ourselves out from the seemingly naturalness of teaching philosophy through the texts of

former centuries.

### **3. Engaging the disciplines of the academy**

By a philosophy that engages with the disciplines of the academy I am proposing a practice of philosophy that explores topics such as the conceptual structures, foundations, histories, and broad themes of the key disciplines of the academy such as those of the natural sciences and humanities. Philosophy has long been enriched and transformed in this way. Examples of such enrichment include the influence of Newtonian mechanics on Kant's thought and biology on that of Aristotle. One may even faintly hope that the disciplines philosophy seek to engage with could even welcome the philosophers as companions with something interesting to say, although we don't have a good our track record on making such contributions. While engagements of this sort will mean the development of highly technical and specialized forms of philosophy (consider for example the discussions of ontology engendered by quantum theory) at the same time it is a sure way to keep philosophy alive and part of the current world.

In addition, and this can be rather significant for the transformation of the practice of philosophy, it can be via such a close engagement with other disciplines that philosophy can be led into the uncharted terrains of new methods, new techniques, and new disciplinary practices. An example of the emergence of new a disciplinary practice comes from the engagement philosophy has had with science, viz., that discipline commonly known as "philosophy of science." In recent years the impulse behind that study of science has moved the field well beyond the mid-century epistemological focus on scientific knowledge, with its reconstructions of scientific theories and attempts to identify the nature of a "scientific rationality," normative "scientific procedures," and "scientific methods" to ways of exploring how institutional, cultural, and social factors work in the practice of science. In this new discipline often referred to as "Science Studies" increased attention has been given to the role of experimental practices and the sociology of science. The detailed historical studies of scientific periods of these studies have made us sensitive to the local, particular features at work in the growth of science. And the variety of pictures of the sciences (compared with an attempt to form a picture of science) that have emerged are rich and engaging, making the studies of former decades seem dry and antiseptic.

Engaging the disciplines of the academy is also a way to capture the energy driving the growing emergence of cross-disciplinary subjects. Classics, e.g., has been revitalized by influences from gender studies and literary critical techniques. A glance at the University Press advertisement pages indicates that it is no longer commentaries and analyses of, say, Thucydides but rather studies of "Women's Voices in Greek Tragedy" that now dominate output. Moreover, engaging with the disciplines of the academy is a way to insert philosophy into the wider worlds of the academy and to prevent the temptation that sometimes haunts philosophy departments in Catholic universities in America Ð absorption in a philosophy of another continent and time. The reflection of these values in the curriculum would entail encouraging philosophy to be taken as part of a double major.

### **4. Philosophy as a way of life?**

There's a vital issue for the practice of philosophy in an educational setting -- how does it

contribute to the art of living? In addition, there's a related question -- is there a philosophical way of life? How should philosophy relate now to one of its old aims of helping one to live better? How are the lives of professional philosophers changed and formed by their practice of philosophy?

I'd content that any philosophy that's pursued in the context of an educational institution needs to address these questions. Richard Shusterman begins his fine study *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical life* with the question and comment:

Why undertake the practice of Philosophy? Even readers already deeply engaged in this practice are not spared the question: the critical, self-reflective nature of philosophy demands it. Teachers seeking to convince their students of philosophy's value must repeatedly examine it themselves. Students deciding to devote their lives to philosophy should explore what exactly it offering and amounts to, particularly given its uncertainty as an academic career." (6)

Of all the disciplines of the academy philosophy is surely in a unique place for exploring the issues to do with the art of living. While I have posed the issues as questions I would advocate that in the setting of Jesuit Higher Education philosophy should develop as a site that's relevant for addressing the major decisions we face in life, such as those to do with the choice of work, of who we live with or where we work, and the all important question of who God is for us. Also it would be a pity if we could not tap into the vast concerns that drive those considerable collections in the Self Help and New Age/Spirituality sections of major bookstores, collections that attest to the contemporary need and desire to search for the type of wisdom that helps us along in the journey of life. Of course, the challenge here naturally will be for those of us teaching philosophy and involved in philosophical research to raise the same issues in own lives.

I suggest briefly three very general resources for taking up the challenge to develop a philosophy that can contribute to the art of living, resources that our contemporary academic world has emphasized. The first is the development of the autobiographic voice in any philosophical project. As our post-modern cultures reminds us: knowledge is generated by particular people in particular places, at particular times, for particular reasons, following particular inherited knowledge practices. People are embedded in particular cultures, and particular social situations, to which we bring our particular histories. All this has given a new place for the autobiographic voice in scholarly writing. Here is a way of linking philosophical thinking with the larger context and themes of a person's life. Second, a development of the old Socratic ideal of **continual and seemingly subversive questioning** of systems of thought, of all that constitutes our life -- a practice nicely enhanced by the great tools of contemporary philosophies associated with Deconstruction, tools that enhance an awareness of the constructive representational nature of all knowledge and the ways in which meanings get continually deferred in the syntactical complexity of symbolic linguistic systems. These ideals find a forceful expression in the words of Vaclav Havel:

I too think the intellectual should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be witness to their mendacity. For this reason, an intellectual cannot fit into any role that may be assigned to him .... An intellectual essentially doesn't belong anywhere; he stands out as an irritant wherever he is; he does not fit into any pigeonhole



completely .... To a certain extent an intellectual is always condemned to defeat. He is like Sisyphus in that regard .... And yet in another, more profound sense the intellectual remains, despite all his defeats, undefeated -- again like Sisyphus. He is in fact victorious through his defeats." (7)

Third by inclusion of studies of **power**, of the **body**, and of **culture** in studies associated with formation of knowledge we have further rich resources for clarifying and enriching questions to do with the pursuit of chosen ideals of life.

## 5. Philosophy for a post-foundational world

The role I propose here is for philosophy to provide a way of living and giving meaning to life in the context of world where the possibility of firm foundations are forever gone. The strategies of the sociological studies of knowledge, historical studies, the cognitive sciences and in general, the insights of "postmodernism" have taught us of the local particular and constructive nature of knowledge production. Our presence to ourselves, to others, and our engagement with the world entails continual and unavoidable systems of representation. To use a slogan of our post-modern age: **there is no presence without representation**. The "self" in this world arises from being born into a world of linguistic meaning, a world where those in cognitive studies point out influences and structures our brains in their generation of key human experiences such as consciousness and the sense of self. And our minds through and through reflect the biological embedded natures of our brains." (8)

Such a situation need not remove universalist aspirations just as the Kantian project did not remove belief in a world of nature accessible to us by constructing a mechanism of knowing based on a priori categories but rather our postmodern world has enriched, even if considerably complexified the project of locating the dimension that is genuinely universal, or rather, that which can be translate between cultures. It has considerably enriched any theological enterprise to reflecting on God!

Rather than seeing this world as nihilist, deconstructivist, and relativist the exciting challenge is to undertake the project of actualizing values and developing new ways of thinking and feeling within such a world. Persistent negative critiques of post-modernism then I would suggest are a wasted effort, helpful least of all to our students. As Richard Rorty notes of our new world: "it is not something we can remedy by a firmer resolve, or more transparent prose, or better philosophical accounts of man, truth or history. It is just the way things happen to have fallen out." Yes, with the assistance of Foucault, Derrida and others we have been forever expelled from the Garden of secure foundations. And as Milton ends *Paradise Lost* with Adam and Eve soon wiping away their tears as they realize the way back to Paradise is closed to them and observing that a new world was waiting for them to explore, the present times extend the same invitation and opportunity to us of a new terrain awaiting our exploration." (9)

## 6. Philosophy that engages its institutional context: public philosophy!

The final quality I would wish for philosophy in the future is one that reflects deeply on the context in which it is located. That is, a philosophy that explores persistently, thoughtfully, and steadily all aspects of institutional context where it is practiced. One that explores, for

example, the functioning the university or college administration, the institution's articulation of its purpose, mission, and educational policies. Thus, for philosophers part of an educational institution with a Jesuit affiliation to be reflectively and constructively critical of how the very project of Jesuit higher education is articulated and embodied in the context where they teach, research, and write. Naturally this places a demand on the quality of life of the philosopher: to use Gandhi's words: "We must be the change we wish to see in the world."

We should not expect institutions of Jesuit Higher Education to be free of the grow of the corporate model in the running of higher education of the sort that has marked American Higher Education towards the end of this century -- where faculty are in the puzzling situation of having little input on decisions to do with the life of university. To balance this and bring about a change in this situation will require a deliberate faculty based command of the public discourse within a university.

As an example of the forces against such a role I mention a recent article by Kevin Mattson, a research director at the Walt Whitman Center for Culture and Politics of Democracy at Rutgers University on the institutional and social reasons for the paucity of young leftist intellectuals in our culture. One of the reasons for Mattson has come from changes in higher education where young professors are forced to teach more classes and write more articles for specialized journals, leaving "little time to write for a wider public, let alone think outside the terms set by academia." <sup>(10)</sup> His analysis is convincing and to overcome these forces that silence the possibility of a public philosophical voice some direct advocacy by those in philosophy departments is needed.

Unless philosophy follows some of the above ways in the future then it will be in sad violation of its long vision as a discipline that fuses what is best in the exercise of the mind with a pursuit of the best way to live. With good reason then it will being rail roaded to the margins of the university missing an opportunity to be the most appropriate site in the academy to exploring the deep questions of human existence.

## Notes

1. [\[Back to text\]](#) In making the distinction between Analytic and Continental philosophy in this way I am drawing on one given by Simon Chritchley in *A companion to Continental Philosophy*, ed. Simon Chritchley and William R. Schroeder (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1998) at 3f.
2. [\[Back to text\]](#) For a fine exploration of the issues of disciplinary identities in the American academy see: David. A. Hollinger, "The Disciplines and the Identity Debates, 1970-1995," *Daedalus*, **126** (1997) 333-352. A. J. Mandt explores the identity issue of contemporary philosophy in "The Inevitability of Pluralism: Philosophical Practice and Philosophical Excellence" in *The Institution of Philosophy: A Discipline in Crisis?* edited by Avner Cohen and M. Dascal (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989) 77-101
3. [\[Back to text\]](#) John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, "Fides Et Ratio," paragraph 5.
4. [\[Back to text\]](#) Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998). We need to note, however,

that the present incoming freshmen, being born around 1982, form a post Gen-X, generation.

5. [\[Back to text\]](#) See, Oliver Leaman, "The Future of Philosophy," *Futures*, **27** (1995): 81-90, especially 87 for a discussion of such a role for philosophy.

6. [\[Back to text\]](#) Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), at 1.

7. [\[Back to text\]](#) Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the peace* (New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, 1990)

8. [\[Back to text\]](#) " George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books 1999) remark on 3 that the three major finds of cognitive science of relevance to central philosophical questions are: "The Mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical."

9. [\[Back to text\]](#) Several of us Jesuits, largely at Boston College, but involving Jesuits elsewhere, over the last decade have developed a project "Jesuit Scholarship in a Post-Modern Age" to bring the resources of our academic worlds to bear on rethinking the nature of our Jesuit identities. Details may be found at: <http://fmwww.bc.edu/JSPMA>.

10. [\[Back to text\]](#) Kevin Mattson, "Where are the Young Left Intellectuals," *Social Policy* **29** (1999), 53-58.

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