

The Role of Philosophy in a Contemporary Christian University

Introduction

Our topic for discussions is “The Role of Philosophy in a Contemporary Christian University.” At the outset, let me say identify my main points. First, one important role of philosophy is to help the university be itself. Second, philosophy ought to retain this role in the Christian university, contemporary or otherwise. Third, a Christian university can assist philosophy in being itself. Now I will make a slight diversion before I get back to the main discussion.

That I have been asked to address this topic at the University of Notre Dame, a Catholic university, may no doubt seem strange for at least two reasons. First, my fellow panelists are Catholic philosophers. I am a Baptist teaching at a Baptist university. One of my favorite books and movies is *A River Runs Through It*. You remember the Presbyterian minister who speaks in disgust when he learns that one of his sons is seeing a Methodist young lady. “Well you know,” he says, “Methodists are just Baptists who can read” The stereotype that academic excellence and being Baptist are at odds, I have discovered, is shared not only by Paul’s Presbyterian father’s, but also by a great many people, especially outside the South. At least with regard to matters intellectual and high culture, it is sometimes supposed that being Baptist and being committed to the life of the mind are like mixing oil and water, utterly incompatible of being combined successfully. That I am from Baylor University where Baptists are battling over whether or not Baylor will become a serious research university while remaining confessionally or

faithfully Christian no doubt only reinforces this caricature. Ignorance and prejudice are often wedded, are they not? Yet, anyone who knows the history of higher education in America knows that Baptists, especially Southern Baptists, support more colleges and universities than any other Protestant denomination, but the Methodists. Methodist colleges and universities are second in number only to Catholics colleges and universities in the United States.¹

Suppose you concede that Baptists have been strong supporters of higher education in American, both private and public. Still one might have a second reason to wonder about the wisdom of asking the chair of the philosophy department at Baylor University to speak about the role of philosophy in the contemporary Christian university. After all it is an undisputed fact that the Catholic university or college has always regarded the role of philosophy as essential to the achievement of the ends of the university (higher education). In contrast, the practice of Baptist colleges and universities, at least in the South, that part of the country whose practices I know best, philosophy has not been regarded as essential. Indeed, a review of the colleges and universities aligned with the Association of Southern Baptist colleges and schools shows that philosophy and theology are often the stepchildren in a department of religion or a school of Christian Studies. Take for example, Ouachita Baptist University, an Arkansas college from which I graduated with a BA in philosophy and of which I am quite partial. The Chelsey and Elizabeth Pruet School of Christian Studies have five departments and twelve faculty members. Biblical Studies has four faculty, Christian Ministries and Christian Missions have three each, and Christian Theology and the Philosophy department each have one faculty member. How should we read the distribution of

faculty to discipline? At the very least, as a reminder that Baptists have traditionally viewed the study of philosophy or theology as relatively insignificant, in comparison to biblical studies, and education for professional ministry and missions. So, if you find yourself asking” “Who is he to discuss the role of philosophy in the contemporary Christian university?” I shall give the kind of answer Alvin Plantinga suggested to a question one doesn’t know the answer.² Ignore it.

I

Let’s approach our topic as a series of questions, the first of which is “What is the role of philosophy in the contemporary Christian University? To get at it let’s ask: What is the role of philosophy in the contemporary university?” And one more question: What is the proper role or function of the university?

In the contemporary university, we find at least four competing answers to the question: What is the proper role or function of the university?

- 1) To provide the kind of education that enables the student to perfect his or her human capacities: intellectual and moral and religious capacities.
- 2) to provide the sort of education that enables its graduates to perform well in the role of citizen of the polis or state
- 3) to provide the sort of education that enables its graduates to be successful in a career or profession
- 4) to provide the resources and the sustain the practices necessary to discover and disseminate new knowledge by research, publication, and application

In most contemporary American colleges and universities, these four ends rest in an uneasy and disordered relationship to one another, both in rhetoric and in practice. In many private secular or religiously-identified colleges, (1) and (2) dominate their rhetoric, while (3) typically dominates its practices. In America’s great research

universities, both private and secular, (4) is the end that pushes and pulls the engine, often to the detriment of both (1) and (2), or some critics contend.³

Notice that (3) clearly regards education in instrumental or utilitarian terms and it encourages a narrow, specialized education. While (4) may be understood in non-instrumental terms, but it clearly encourages narrow and specialized studies rather than broad, deep, comprehensive, non-instrumentalist understandings of education.

What would be the role of philosophy if the aim of the university was either (3) or (4)? Philosophy, like any other department or academic unit in the university will understand that it must justify its existence by reference to one or the other or both of these goals. One common strategy, then, will be to convince student's that a major in philosophy will secure success for its graduates in careers and in the esteemed professions and in the culture, especially economic and political life.

So, the philosophy faculty will attempt to convince their colleagues and the consumers (parents and students) of its product – a major in philosophy. One way to do this is to argue that there are some highly marketable skills, let's call them transferable skills -- critical thinking and writing, oral and written persuasiveness, analytic and synthetic reading comprehension, creative powers of imagination and creativity – that are especially well-taught by philosophers, can be acquired at a high rate by the industrious and disciplined student, and permit that student to compete very effectively for entrance into the leading professions (law, medicine, management, government, the academy, and business).

On this view, the role of philosophy is essentially instrumental⁴ -- that of providing transferable skills to students interested in being successful in various highly

valued professions and in our democratic and capitalist culture. Of course, a few of them will go on to graduate school and enter the highly specialized profession of philosophy. Naturally the information and skills necessary for success in graduate school will have utilitarian value.

On this instrumentalist view of the role of philosophy in the contemporary university, one might expect to find a few philosophy courses a ways of meeting various distribution requirements in a general education curriculum and occasionally ways of meeting requirements for other majors as well. If the department and its chair are especially enterprising and well-connected politically in a university that embraces, really embraces the notion that its education produces good citizens of our pluralist democracy or a good citizen of the world, our global community, then there might be a philosophy course that is university-wide requirement because of its alleged contribution to enabling students to become good citizens. Otherwise, the philosophy department competes for students and resources just like any other major and its justifications will be largely instrumental and utilitarian. Thus, most philosophy departments, especially at largely teaching institutions will be small, for its role is small, and its existence may be tenuous.

If the university is a research university and believes that it could advance its status by directing a substantial portion of its resources into philosophy, a Ph.D. program in philosophy, it would have an instrumental reason to do so. It then has the additional task of creating a demand for its classes, its faculty and the graduate students who will at some point teach some of the department's classes. If it manages to position itself politically to have some courses required for all or most students, what will be its justification or rationale?

II

Would adding the adjective Christian make any difference to this instrumentalist conception of the role of philosophy in the contemporary university? It depends on what one means by “Christian”? If ‘Christian’ is narrowed and flattened to mean merely (a) one’s personal relationship to Jesus or (b) only what the Bible says, then the answer is clearly – not much. For if the answer is either (a) or (b), then ‘Christian’ has been denuded of its intellectual and historical content. Moreover, Christianity long-standing commitment to honor reason’s efforts to understand Being, nature, and the human good and faith’s intellectual effort to think through its own commitments and their implications for understanding all of reality are abandoned. The result, of course, is a false dichotomy between head and heart and, consequently, abandonment by Christians of our calling to unify faith and intellect or as Paul puts it, “to take every thought captive in obedience to Christ . . .”⁵

Even Paul’s admonition can be given an instrumentalist or utilitarian reading if it is understood to sanction primarily or only apologetic endeavors against the enemies of faith. Christian colleges and universities whose vision is essentially instrumentalist will certainly require some religion classes, typically a study of the Bible, perhaps a course in apologetics or an philosophy course that is largely apologetic in nature. In addition, Christian colleges and universities of this sort will make available lots of extracurricular religious activities (Bible studies, prayer groups, revivals, and mission trips), a required chapel and perhaps encourage annual campus wide revivals.

Is there an alternative view of the university and the role of philosophy in it? Those of you who have labored in Catholic vineyards of higher education don't need me to remind you that there is of course an alternative view. I have already alluded to it. The university is that institution whose principle function is to order a variety of intellectual modes of inquiry so that we human beings might better understand ourselves and all of reality. The aim is a wide and deep notion called understanding or wisdom and philosophy is a name for a variety of practices and modes of inquiry whose aim is understanding or wisdom. The traditional notion of philosophy as the love of, and quest for, wisdom, is an expression of this alternative vision of philosophy and is a constitutive feature of an alternative view of the university.

On the alternative view of philosophy and its role in the university I am sketching, philosophy has three essential tasks: (1) Inquiry-Related Tasks; (2) Integrative tasks; and (3) Regulative Tasks.⁶ Because of a limitation on time, I will focus on the Inquiry and Integrative Tasks.

Philosophy, notes Aristotle, begins with wonder -- wonder about the existence of something rather than nothing, about the intricate regularities, visible and invisible to the naked eye on whose existence the cosmos and even our own lives depend, about the patterns of good and evil that bless and mar our social order, and about the internal struggles whose result is a good or bad character, and many more. Philosophy begins in wonder and is often expressed by questions and pursued by divergent modes of inquiry whose aim to achieve as complete an understanding of nature (the natural world, the social world, the individual) as possible. It is this natural desire for truth and a

comprehensive understanding of matters that matter that distinguishes human beings from other animals.

John Henry Newman identifies this expansive notion of understanding with education, whose aim is “. . . the true enlargement of the mind . . .”⁷ one, but only one, important constituent of which is philosophy. Indeed, what Aristotle and John Henry Newman share in common is the notion that the quest for understanding includes not only the search for truth in discrete and autonomous aspects of the natural and social world by a variety of methods of inquiry, but also the search for truth by attention to larger, more comprehensive, integrated bodies and unified bodies of knowledge and meaning. On this view, a university education enables the properly educated individual to obtain an understanding larger than the understanding obtained by education in one discipline. Essential to the achievement of this kind of education is the integration of the contributions of a variety of disciplines and sub-disciplines.

Philosophy's special task, according to the recently deceased Pope John Paul II, is the search for wisdom, the ultimate and overarching meaning of life. Clearly, John Paul II insisted that philosophy's proper role is to examine the nature of inquiry, both in its own discipline and as found in other disciplines, using its emphasis on unity and comprehensiveness to prompt the effort to integrate these partial perspectives into larger units with the aim of moving our common human understanding to a larger and deeper unity and better representation of all that is.⁸

Of course, on this view of a university, education inevitably forms and transforms the individual engaged in its practices. The presidents of old-time Christian colleges

understood the aim of their colleges to be the education of the whole person -- the intellectual, moral and religious formation and, hence, transformation of persons.

What does 'Christian' add to this conception of the university? Among other things, on the Christian view of things, even if human reason functioned perfectly, our understanding of nature would be incomplete. Our understanding receives correction and extension by means of revelation. So, in a Christian university, the work of the university includes not only the exploration of what is known by means of all the various means of rational inquiry available to fallen and finite creatures, but the integration of such investigations with the truths given by revelation into a larger, more complete whole.

III

How would the sort of understanding of philosophy and the university I have sketched above affect a department of philosophy in a contemporary Christian university? What sort of practices would this ideal give rise to and support in a contemporary Christian university? By virtue of the limitations of time and space, I cannot give a full account, but let me suggest a few of its features.

First, dare I say it, that it is only on these grounds, or something like them, that one or more philosophy courses should be required of all undergraduate students. I imagine these required courses of all students being of two types. One type are courses for students at the earliest stages of their collegiate experience in which they are introduced to philosophy as set of fundamental questions, and a mode or modes of inquiry, whose ultimate aim is wisdom, best understood as a lifelong quest, something which is wide and deep, and deeply important, yet always unfinished business for we

finite and sinful creatures. One constituent of the course is helping students to see the encounter with the texts they are reading, the modes of inquiry they are exploring, the intellectual virtues and the cognitive skills they are acquiring as intrinsically and not merely instrumentally good.

Second order of courses are capstone or bridge courses. These are courses that presuppose the students have been exposed to a subset of modes of inquiry or disciplines. The aim of these courses is to see how the variety of intellectual inquiries characteristic of these disciplines might be integrated and unified into larger and larger wholes.

Second, this leaves us with a big question still to be answered. How will a department of philosophy in a contemporary Christian university of this sort think about a major in philosophy? I think the answer is clear enough: the aim of the department is not so much to produce professional philosophers as to enable the university to educate all of its students as suggested by its highest ideals. To be sure, some will major in philosophy because they recognize or will come to recognize that this is their calling. However, many will major in philosophy just to get the kind of education a good university aims to provide and they recognized their natural gifts and interests will flourish best in the educational environment provided by philosophy department and its courses. Other students have other gifts and interests and other majors will best serve their gifts and interests. However, the philosophy department will be heavily involved in the task of liberal arts education, since its aim is the education of the whole person. Indeed, one aim the philosophy department will share with other departments involved in liberal arts education is the formation and transformation of its students. One way of expressing this

ideal is helping students to desire what they ought to desire rather than merely be clever at getting whatever it is they want. On this both Socrates and the biblical prophets agree.

Third, the department of philosophy at a contemporary Christian university of the sort I am describing will be firmly grounded in the history of philosophy understood as the history of human reflection on the quest for wisdom. Because the university is a child of the Christian church in the West, the department will pay special attention to the riches of the Christian intellectual traditions, the long history of Christians reflecting on perennial philosophical questions, and their engagement with other western and non-western philosophies and religions.

Fourth, it will affirm the special charisms of individual philosophers whose particular gifts gives them interests that are best achieved in specialized areas of expertise, research and publication, regulated by a recognition of how these interests fit in and contribute to a larger whole that is inspires and guides the work of the department. Often the questions raised, modes of inquiry posed as a means to address the questions, and answers offered for reflection will not be explicitly Christian in character.

Fifth, the department will have, as a department, a special interest in philosophical problems that arise specially out of the Christian story about God, God's activity and God's relation to the world and humankind. It will not follow that every person in the department is an expert in these philosophical issues, but some surely will be. And it will follow that some courses address these sorts of issues and that some in the department have research programs which advance our collective understanding as Christians in these fundamental areas.

Sixth, the department has a responsibility in the matter of imitation and edification. Here is what I mean. In the end, the aim for all of us is to become a person of a certain sort, to become, as far as possible, to become reconciled to God in Christ. Or, as we Baptists often say, the sort of person God wants us to be, the sort of person Paul speaks of in Colossians, for example, when he says,

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another, whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.⁹

To embrace this goal is to embrace edification, or the edifying role of philosophy. One of the more important things we Christian philosophers must do to accomplish this aim is to model for our students the intellectual, moral, and religious virtues that reflect the new life we have found in Christ and by participation in the body of Christ, the church, both local and universal. Our special charism, as philosophers, is to affirm that faith and reason are not enemies but co-collaborators, in God's divine economy. Since some students come to us afraid of new ideas and of reason, we model for them a confidence in reason, fearlessness in reading and discussing and taking seriously ideas hostile to our faith. Others come to us in rebellion against the simplistic and stultifying versions of the faith in which they have been nurtured. With such students, we model a sympathetic understanding for their pilgrimage and a patient effort to show that faith is not afraid of truth. We exhibit humility and rigor in discussing a formidable argument, charity and tenacity in disagreement with some point of view, and patience and honesty in the face of genuine perplexity. In short, each person in the department, to the best of his or her

ability, has a responsibility to model for our students a faithfully formed intellect and an intellectually formed faith.

More needs to be said, to be sure, to fill out the conception of a department of philosophy in a contemporary Christian university.¹⁰ But were there such a department in a contemporary Christian university of the sort I describe at the beginning of the paper, the role of the philosophy department is to help the university be true to its calling. In an Christian university, being Christian helps philosophy and its philosophers be true to their own callings.

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¹ See Merrimon Cuninggim, *Uneasy Partners: The College and the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), pp. 144-172.

² Alvin Plantinga, "Prologue: Advice to Christian Philosophers," in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, edited by Michael Beaty (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 15.

³ To cite just two examples, see Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4-12; Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 17-19.

⁴ Pope John Paul II decries reduction of reason to mere "instrumental reason." *Fides et Ratio: On the Relationship between Faith and Reason* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), 47.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 10:5, *Holy Bible: New American Standard* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishes, 1977).

⁶ Clearly, until the 20th century philosophy understood itself as including inquiry, integrative, and regulative tasks. This is seen by examining *The Republic*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Summa Contra Gentiles* or the role of the moral and mental philosophy courses taught in 19th century American colleges, ideals derived in part from Scottish universities of the 17 and 18th century. See, for example, Francis Wayland, edited, and with introduction, by Joseph L. Blau, *The Elements of Moral Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963). John Henry Newman draws from this same vision in his *The Idea of the University*.

⁷ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Discourse VI, 6).

⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 30, 36-48.

⁹ Colossians 3:12-15. *Holy Bible: New American Standard*.

¹⁰ For example, both mentoring and service are issues that should be addressed, had I both time and space.