

Does Philosophy Still Deserve a Special Role in Catholic Higher Education?

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Abstract

This paper (1) explores the reasons why philosophy was accorded a special role in Catholic higher education in the United States in the decades prior to Vatican II; (2) explains why many of those reasons are now widely seen as attenuated or obsolete; (3) briefly discusses recent changes to the environment of Catholic higher education that have led many to question whether philosophy should still be seen as a high-priority discipline; and (4) makes a case that it should. The author argues that, for all the tectonic shifts that have occurred in higher education in recent decades, philosophy continues to make a special and indeed indispensable contribution to a number of mission-related goals of Catholic universities.

Since the Middle Ages, two disciplines—philosophy and theology—have been at the core of Catholic higher education.¹ In medieval universities, required texts in the baccalaureate arts course were predominantly philosophical (primarily Aristotelian).² In the early modern period, as evidenced by the education René Descartes received at the Jesuit college of La Flèche, philosophy was studied extensively in

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¹ Perhaps surprisingly, this is less true of theology than it is of philosophy. In medieval universities, theology was taught only to postgraduate students. In American universities, theology courses were not typically part of the undergraduate curriculum at Catholic colleges until after 1939. Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 164.

² Lowrie J. Daly, SJ, *The Medieval University, 1200-1400* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 79-80. By 1255, "Aristotle had . . . effectively become the arts course" at the University of Paris, and this remained the case for centuries afterwards." Gordon Leff, *Paris and Oxford Universities in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), 140.

Catholic colleges as part of the three-year-long “philosophical curriculum.”³ Prior to 1954, eighteen hours of philosophy credits were required for graduation at the University of Notre Dame.⁴ In a 1966 survey, only 18.7 percent of American Catholic colleges required fewer than 12 credits of philosophy.⁵ As recently as the early 1970s, it was common at Catholic colleges and universities in the United States to have as many as four required philosophy courses in the general education curriculum. All of this changed in the aftermath of Vatican II. In recent decades, sweeping changes to the landscape of Catholic higher education and its intellectual and cultural milieu have left many wondering whether philosophy should still be treated as a priority or specially high-value discipline. As a consequence, a number of Catholic colleges and universities now include only a single required philosophy course in their general education curricula.⁶

³ Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 52-61. Descartes’ classics-based early education at La Fléche reflected the greater emphasis on humanistic education that emerged in Catholic universities during the Italian Renaissance. Nevertheless, the logic, physics, metaphysics, and ethics of Aristotle remained the core of the arts course. Paul F. Gendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2002), 197. At least three years of “philosophy”—which included large chunks of Aristotelian logic and science—were prescribed in the Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum* (1599). The philosophy courses were taught daily, for two hours. Allen P. Farrell, SJ, trans., “The Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599,” <http://www.bc.edu/sites/libraires/ratio/ratio1599.pdf>.

⁴ Kenneth M. Sayre, *Adventures in Philosophy at Notre Dame* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 21. This changed to twelve credits in 1954 and six credits in 1970. *Ibid.*, 224. In the 1920s and 1930s, fifteen credits (all taken in the junior and senior years) was standard at Jesuit universities. Gleason, *Contending with Modernity*, 139-140. Georgetown required eighteen credits as late as the mid-sixties. Philip Gleason, “American Catholic Higher Education, 1940-1990: The Ideological Context,” in *The Secularization of the Academy*, eds. George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 236. Fewer philosophy courses were typically required at women’s Catholic colleges, perhaps because of the then-widely held belief that only priests should teach philosophy. *Ibid.*, 141.

⁵ Ernan McMullin, “Philosophy in the United States Catholic College,” in *New Themes in Christian Philosophy*, ed. Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 371.

⁶ Examples include (among others): Villanova University, Stonehill College, St. Edward’s University, St. Michael’s University, St. Norbert College, Avila University, Benedictine University, St. Leo University, St. Ambrose University, College of Mount St. Vincent, and Dominican University.

The Centrality of Philosophy in American Catholic Higher Education Prior to Vatican II

Why, in the decades prior to Vatican II, did philosophy play such a large role in Catholic university curricula? While American Catholic colleges had long included some required coursework in philosophy, the primary emphasis throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was on traditional humanistic education, particularly classical studies.⁷ This began to change following the publication of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, in 1879.

Responding to what he saw as a crisis in the social and political order—a crisis he attributed largely to the spread of naturalism, liberalism, and other false philosophies—Pope Leo called for the restoration of “Christian philosophy,” and particularly the teaching of the “Angelic Doctor,” St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), in all Catholic schools. This policy, reaffirmed by later popes, contributed significantly to the rise of the Scholastic Revival and the dominance of Thomism—the philosophy and theology of Thomas Aquinas—in Catholic colleges and universities in the first half of the twentieth century.

In broad strokes, Thomism is marked by a strong reliance on the philosophy of Aristotle, confidence in the power of human reason to know reality (including fundamental religious and moral truths), and faithful acceptance of the teachings of the Church, the Fathers, and divine revelation. As Pope Leo saw it, a return to the “golden wisdom of St. Thomas” in Catholic education would serve a number of important ends.⁸

The first end of Thomistic philosophy was to open “a plain and easy road” to acceptance of Catholic teaching by offering rational proofs of the existence and perfection of God, the immortality of the soul, and the fact of divine revelation.⁹ By solidly establishing these “preambles of faith,” Thomism provides a rational foundation for theology and Catholic doctrine.

Second, Pope Leo argued, Thomistic philosophy helps make theology a true science by providing not only rational foundations and a philosophical vocabulary, but also unifying and justifying principles that

⁷ Gleason, *Contending with Modernity*, 5.

⁸ Pope Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, in *The Church Speaks to the Modern World: The Social Teachings of Leo XIII*, ed., Etienne Gilson (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1954), 50.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

knit Sacred Doctrine into a coherent whole and allot each part of theology to its proper place in that architectonic structure.¹⁰

Finally, Aquinas's philosophy provides a powerful arsenal of rational arguments "to repel powerfully and speedily" attacks on Christian faith "by the hostile arms which reason itself supplied."¹¹ For instance, it can provide effective responses to charges that theism is incoherent or that a loving, all-powerful God would not permit evil.¹² In all these ways, Thomism can inoculate Catholic students against the corrupting influences of modernity, provide a deeper understanding of and commitment to Catholic doctrine, and contribute to the restoration of a healthy social and political order.

Aeterni Patris had a profound effect on American Catholic universities prior to the 1970s. To cite but one prominent example: In 1950, there were thirty regular faculty members in the Notre Dame Philosophy Department (many without Ph.D.s), and nearly all were Thomists.¹³ Each of the six required philosophy courses at Notre Dame prior to 1954 was Thomistic in orientation.¹⁴ Manuals, rather than primary texts, were used in all the courses. Surveys indicated that the courses were generally unpopular with students.¹⁵

Winds of change began to blow in the mid-1950s, for a number of reasons. Reform-minded Catholic university presidents like Theodore Hesburgh saw Thomism as a major obstacle to their campaigns for "excellence."¹⁶ Americans fresh from victory in World War II increasingly

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹² This is the project of "negative apologetics": the attempt to defend Christian belief against various sorts of attacks that have been brought against it. See Alvin Plantinga, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," reprinted in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 198), 336-338.

¹³ Sayre, *Adventures in Philosophy at Notre Dame*, 14, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-21. The one exception was logic, which stressed traditional Aristotelian syllogistic reasoning.

¹⁵ Sayre, *Adventures*, 72. According to Harold Attridge, a popular student song at Boston College in the 1950s was "There's No -ism like Thomism." Sung to the tune of "There's No Business Like Show Business," the song runs: "There's no -ism like Thomism/Like no -ism I know/Everything about it is appalling/everything about it is a fraud./It will have you on your knees and crawling/until you're sprawling, before God!/There's no -ism like Thomism," etc. Harold W. Attridge, "Reflections on the Mission of a Catholic University," in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, ed. Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 14-15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

tended to embrace liberal values, and thus were resistant to Thomistic positions on issues such as religious freedom, democracy, freedom of thought, church-state relations, social hierarchy, slavery, and male superiority.¹⁷ Outside of Catholic colleges, Thomism was widely panned by American academics for its reliance on outdated Aristotelian philosophy and science. Enrollments at Catholic colleges were growing rapidly,¹⁸ bringing larger numbers of non-Catholic students to campus, increasing calls for “relevant” courses, and making it more difficult to find qualified instructors to teach Thomism.¹⁹ Leaders of Catholic colleges worried that strong institutional commitments to Thomism might interfere with (re)accreditation efforts, generate lawsuits alleging breach of “academic freedom,” and jeopardize public funding.²⁰ Increasingly, young Catholic philosophers balked at the enormous time commitment required to master the complex and often technical Thomistic system.²¹ Finally, scathing critiques of the low quality of Catholic intellectual and academic life by scholars such as John Tracy Ellis²² led to calls for Catholics to abandon their “ghetto mentality,” improve standards, and join the mainstream and the modern world generally.²³

As a result of such forces, institutional efforts to weaken or end the dominance of Thomism at Catholic universities began in the mid-1950s—well before Vatican II or any official authorization from Rome. A blow-by-blow account of such efforts at one leading Catholic university is provided in the recent memoir by Ken Sayre, *Adventures in Philosophy at Notre Dame*. Sayre notes that a majority of philosophy department hires at Notre Dame during the late 1950s were people with no particular allegiance to Thomism. This trend accelerated in the 1960s, and by 1970 the proportion

¹⁷ Gleason, “American Catholic Higher Education,” 241.

¹⁸ Alice Gallin, OSU, *Negotiating Identity: Catholic Higher Education Since 1960* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 47.

¹⁹ In 1966, 48.3 percent of “Thomist-oriented” philosophy departments reported that they were finding increased difficulty in hiring lay philosophy staff. McMullin, “Philosophy in the United States Catholic College,” 380. At that time, 40 percent of philosophy instructors at Catholic colleges were priests. McMullin, “Philosophy,” 371.

²⁰ Gallin, *Negotiating Identity*, 73, 87.

²¹ Norris Clarke once noted that most competent Thomists would admit it takes “an average of about ten years of steady living with the system of St. Thomas to be able to dominate it enough to see it as a whole and move freely within it.” W. Norris Clarke, SJ, “The Future of Thomism,” in *New Themes in Christian Philosophy*, ed. McInerney, 198.

²² John Tracy Ellis, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” *Thought* 30 (Autumn 1955): 351-388.

²³ Gleason, “American Catholic Higher Education,” 242-243.

of Thomists in the department had dropped below 50 percent.²⁴ Similar shifts occurred at other Catholic colleges and universities. By the mid-1960s, Thomists were a minority at fully one-quarter of Catholic philosophy departments.²⁵ During the sixties, only 30 percent of Philosophy Department hires at Notre Dame came from non-Catholic universities. By the 1980s, the proportion was 89 percent.²⁶ Today, of course, dyed-in-the-wool Thomists are a relatively rare breed in Catholic higher education.

Unconvincing Reasons for Giving Philosophy a Special Role in Catholic Higher Education

Clearly, much water has passed under the bridge since the “massive flight from Thomism”²⁷ that began in the 1950s, and many of the traditional justifications for prioritizing philosophy in Catholic university undergraduate curricula no longer carry much conviction. These include many of the reasons offered by Pope Leo XIII in *Aeterni Patris*.

As we have seen, Pope Leo believed that requiring Catholic students to engage in extensive study of Thomistic philosophy would lead to a restored (i.e., anti-liberal, anti-modern) social and political order, and benefit the students themselves by (1) enabling them to repel attacks on their Catholic beliefs and (2) giving them a thorough grasp of how right reason provides a secure rational foundation for belief in God, the truth of the Catholic faith, and the scientific basis of theology.

Needless to say, in today’s world all of these contentions are open to challenge. Few would seriously suggest that it is either possible or desirable to require students at all Catholic universities to take multiple classes in Thomistic philosophy. The classes could not be staffed, enrollments and rankings would plummet, and any attempt to impose such courses would provoke tumult and revolt.

Conceding this, Fr. Michael Buckley argues that a convincing case for prioritizing philosophy can still be made along broadly Thomistic lines. Buckley notes that old-style Thomism provided a valuable “architectonic” or integrative function in pre-Vatican II university curricula. Thomism

²⁴ Sayre, *Adventures*, 105. In 1966, 21.4 percent of philosophy staff members at Catholic colleges claimed to be either existentialist or phenomenological in orientation; 57.3 percent claimed to be Thomist. McMullin, “Philosophy in the United States Catholic College,” 372.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁷ Clarke, “The Future of Thomism,” 192.

supplied guiding principles, theoretical foundations, and a common vocabulary that made it possible to view one's college education as a whole as a coherent, integrated plan of learning. Buckley suggests that philosophy can still play something like this unifying role, even though Thomism has largely faded from the scene.²⁸ Philosophy can do this, he argues, because all fields of knowledge have certain presuppositions and root concepts that invite philosophical analysis and critical reflection. The sciences, for example, presuppose the uniformity of nature and the basic reliability of the senses, human reason, and inductive inference. Each of these presumptions is open to philosophical questioning and clarification. Similarly, there are certain fundamental concepts, or "great ideas," that are common to all or most disciplines. These include concepts such as "cause," "definition," "law," "explanation," "nature," "space," "evidence," "matter," and "hypothesis." Philosophy provides what Buckley calls a "philosophic grammar" for the analysis and critical examination of these cross-disciplinary concepts and presuppositions. Because philosophy, and only philosophy, can fulfill this important architectonic function, it should continue to have a prominent role in post-Vatican II Catholic universities, he argues.

Buckley is right that all academic disciplines include concepts and presuppositions that invite philosophical scrutiny. But his conclusion does not follow from his premises. In these days of expanding major requirements, shrinking core curricula, and increasing calls for "relevance," the fact that philosophy plays this architectonic function is not a sufficient justification for prioritizing philosophy in Catholic higher education. There is nothing specifically *Catholic*, or even religious, about the architectonic role Buckley notes. Nor is it clear how this function could be operationalized in actual coursework. Buckley suggests the abandonment of traditional introductory philosophy courses and their replacement by discipline-specific "bridge" courses. The primary aim of such courses would be to engender in students a love of truth and a passion for "radical reflection" by probing the fundamental concepts and presuppositions that underlie their own chosen discipline via Socratic discussion of major works in that field.²⁹ As Buckley notes, this is similar to the kind of interdisciplinary great-books or great-ideas methodology employed by Richard McKeon's Committee on the Analysis of Ideas and the Study of Methods at the University of Chicago, where Buckley received his doctorate.³⁰

²⁸ Michael J. Buckley, SJ, "Philosophic Grammar and the Other Disciplines," in *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998), 151-171.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 161-170.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 166.

There are attractions to Buckley's proposal, but also a number of problems. First, who would teach such bridge courses? Buckley is not clear, but presumably they would either be team-taught with a member of the philosophy department, or taught solo by, say, a physicist or sociologist who has been specially trained to teach philosophy by means of Socratic discussion. Either method would be expensive and require significant training and faculty collaboration.

A second problem with Buckley's proposal is that great books courses are controversial in the aftermath of the "culture wars," and are not always popular with students, particularly those who are less intellectually adventurous and literate. Third, teaching fundamental disciplinary concepts and presuppositions might often be interesting and instructive, but it would come at the expense of basic historical literacy in philosophy, and is unlikely (I suspect) to engender the kind of passion for radical reflection from ordinary students at most Catholic colleges. (How many of today's career-minded students get excited about grappling with different accounts of multidisciplinary concepts like "definition," "hypothesis," and "explanation"?) Finally, there is little chance that one could achieve the necessary buy-in from faculty and university curriculum committees to make Buckley's proposal feasible. As a rule, college professors are uncomfortable stepping outside their own fields of expertise, and few would feel at ease team-teaching a class on, say, definitions with a professional philosopher.

In short, neither Pope Leo XIII's traditionalist defense of Thomistic philosophy nor Fr. Buckley's "grammatical" rationale provide a compelling justification for treating philosophy as a core or high-priority discipline in today's Catholic colleges and universities. The case—if one can be made—must be made on other grounds.

Sound Reasons for Giving Philosophy a Special Role in Catholic Higher Education

Any compelling rationale for treating philosophy as a core discipline³¹ in Catholic universities must be centered in *mission*. Not only should mission-centered considerations have special weight in guiding

³¹ To be more precise: When I speak of a "special" or "central" role for philosophy I mean, at a minimum, having at least two required philosophy courses in the core curriculum. Beyond this, Catholic university administrators should demonstrate the value they place on philosophy by seeking to build and maintain strong, mission-centered philosophy departments and ensure effective philosophy course offerings.

educational policymaking at Catholic institutions, but as a practical matter, no other sorts of arguments are likely to be convincing to faculty curriculum committees and other relevant decision makers in an era when “turf” looms so large and the humanities are rapidly losing both majors and cachet. In what follows, I will make a mission-focused case for the centrality of philosophy at Catholic colleges. The mission issues I will focus on are *liberal learning*, *values-centered education*, and *reflective engagement with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the problems of faith*.

Liberal Learning

Since the Middle Ages, Catholic universities have strongly emphasized the value of a liberal education. For Catholics, humans are created in the image of God, the archetype and source of all reason, goodness, beauty, and truth. As such, humans glorify God when they perfect their rational powers, pursue truth, or enjoy beauty for its own sake. In Catholic thought, faith does not conflict with reason, the human mind is capable of attaining objective truth, contemplation has intrinsic value, and all of created reality is a sign and an expression of its divine Author.³² While some Christian traditions see liberal learning as a danger to faith and see reason as a snare, this has never been the case in the main current of Catholic thought. On the contrary, the predominant Catholic view has been that he “who lives in accordance with the activity of the intellect . . . lives in accordance with the life most proper to him . . . [and] the person who gives himself to the contemplation of truth is the happiest a man can be in this life.”³³

A liberal education is a course of study and reflection suitable to a free (Latin: *liber*) person. Its ultimate aim is to liberate individuals by broadening intellectual horizons, perfecting cognitive and active powers, developing transferable skills, and overcoming provincialism, biased perspectives, and whatever can narrow or confine the human mind. As Jacques Maritain remarks, in Catholic educational thought the primary goal of education and liberal education are the same: “the conquest of internal and spiritual freedom to be achieved by the individual person, or, in other words, his liberation through knowledge and

³² Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition,” http://myweb.lmu.edu/tshanahan/The_Catholic_Intellectual_Tradition.html.

³³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. C. J. Litzyngier, OP (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), 629-630.

wisdom, good will, and love.”³⁴ In short, in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, the ultimate aim of a liberal education is liberating wisdom.

Philosophy plays a particularly important role in this conception of the aims and value of a liberal education. Philosophy itself, of course, is literally “the love of wisdom.” For all its technicalities and sometimes hair-splitting minutiae, philosophy remains at its magnetic core the search for answers to life’s deepest and most persistent questions. Its focal questions—What is ultimately real? What can I reasonably hope and believe? How should I live? What should my ultimate commitments be?—are also questions that lie at the heart of a liberal education. Philosophy also provides an understanding of our intellectual history and the shifting and sometimes competing ideas and conceptual paradigms that have shaped the world we live in today. Because Catholicism is itself, in broad terms, a “philosophy of life,” and because the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is so saturated with philosophical infusions, it is particularly important that students at Catholic universities acquire a sense of this cultural heritage.

There is a second important way in which the study of philosophy broadens one’s intellectual horizons. As Bertrand Russell pointed out, even in areas where philosophy can provide no definite answers, it often can greatly expand one’s sense of what *might* be the case.³⁵ Cicero may have exaggerated slightly when he said that “nothing is so absurd but that some philosopher has said it.” But it is true that philosophy is a fertile source of unsuspected possibilities and fascinating conjectures. In this way, as Russell notes, philosophy can “suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts” and keep “alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.”³⁶

Philosophy can also contribute significantly to the pivotal liberal learning goals of fostering critical thinking and effective communication. The American Philosophical Association, in its 2008 report titled, *The Role of Philosophy Programs in Higher Education*, points out that while other disciplines certainly promote critical thinking, philosophy “contributes distinctively, intensively, and extensively”³⁷ to this goal. The basic tool of a disciplined thinking—logic—is a subfield of philosophy.

³⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1943), 11.

³⁵ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959; first published 1912), 157.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Available at http://www.apaonline.org/?role_of_phil.

Philosophy is the primary field that studies basic critical thinking concepts (e.g., argument, premise, conclusion, valid reasoning, deductive vs. inductive reasoning, evidence, relevance, rationality, logical fallacies, etc.). And it is philosophy, more than any other discipline, that explores the epistemology of rational or justified belief, including the investigation of the intellectual standards and virtues that govern the “ethics of belief” and the proper conduct of the human mind.

While it is probably impossible to quantify with any precision how much the study of philosophy improves students’ critical-thinking skills and dispositions, it is well-documented that philosophy majors do exceptionally well on the LSAT, GRE, and other standardized tests.³⁸ As practiced in most Anglo-American universities, philosophy places great value on clear exposition, close argumentation, and rigorous standards of evidence and reasoning. As Richard Whately noted, “Familiarity with logical principles tends very much (as all feel, who are really well acquainted with them) to beget a habit of clear and sound reasoning.”³⁹

One of the traditional seven liberal arts was *dialectica* (logic, the art of arguing well). Another is *rhetorica*, the art of effective writing and communication. Here, too, the study of philosophy can make an important and distinctive contribution. To quote the American Philosophical Association:

[P]hilosophy can greatly improve students’ writing. . . . No other discipline emphasizes, in the same ways, verbal argumentation and conceptual analysis. Few other disciplines emphasize, to the same degree, students producing their own theories or critical assessments, as distinct from the exposition of existing material. The argument-focused nature of philosophy requires students to become better writers and speakers if they are to succeed in their courses. . . . Students learn the importance of accurate interpretation, logical organization, clarity of expression, due consideration for others’ positions, the use of concrete illustrative examples, and staying focused on the issues at hand. These qualities of philosophical training in writing and speaking make well-taught courses in philosophy especially valuable to pre-professional students as well as to those pursuing a more general education.⁴⁰

³⁸ See studies cited on the Rutgers Philosophy Department web page, <https://sites.google.com/site/whystudyphilosophy/>.

³⁹ Richard Whately, *Elements of Logic*, 8th ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858), 175. Whately was assisted in writing this popular textbook by a young John Henry Newman. Meriol Trevor, *Newman: The Pillar of the Cloud* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 48.

⁴⁰ APA, *The Role of Philosophy Programs in Higher Education*, http://www.apaonline.org/?role_of_phil. The first sentence of this quoted passage is taken from the 2007 draft, not the final 2008 report.

For all these reasons, a strong case can be made that philosophy makes an unusually significant contribution to the liberal learning mission-objectives that all Catholic universities proclaim.

Values-Centered Education

One of the hallmarks of Catholic education at all levels is an explicit reference to moral and religious values. While it is not uncommon to find secular universities praised for their (alleged) ethical neutrality,⁴¹ Catholic colleges are nearly always up-front about their core value commitments and the intellectual and moral virtues they seek to inculcate in their students.⁴² Thus, Marquette’s mission statement speaks of the university’s “academically rigorous values-centered curriculum;”⁴³ Boston College aspires to foster “the religious, ethical, and personal formation”⁴⁴ of its students; and Notre Dame aims “to create a sense of human solidarity and concern for the common good that will bear fruit as learning becomes service to justice.”⁴⁵ As University of Notre Dame president John Jenkins, CSC, has stated:

Catholic universities embrace an understanding of education expressed in the Greek word *paideia*. In the ancient Hellenic world, such an education consisted not only in the acquisition of knowledge and certain technical and professional skills but also in the formation of moral character, which would include the virtues needed to govern oneself and to flourish in society. With the advent of Christianity this understanding of education was embraced, but the virtues that were to be passed on included specifically Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. In American Catholic universities and at Notre Dame in particular,

⁴¹ See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, “The Aims of Education,” *Philosophy and Literature*, 22:1 (1998): 137-155; and Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a response, see Gregory Bassham, “Mearsheimer’s Mistakes: Why Colleges Should (and Inevitably Do) Provide Moral Guidance,” *Expositions*, 17:1 (2013): 33-41.

⁴² It is for this reason that Martha Nussbaum—a convert to Judaism from Protestant Christianity—“feels at home” when she visits Catholic universities, because such institutions “take as their mission the development of the whole person rather than just the preparation of students for a trade or a livelihood.” Martha Nussbaum, “Marley’s Burden,” *Boston College Magazine*, Fall 1996, at <https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/mission/pdf1/cu18.pdf>.

⁴³ Marquette University mission statement, <http://www.marquette.edu/about/mission.php>.

⁴⁴ Boston College mission statement, <http://www.bc.edu/offices/bylaws/mission.html>.

⁴⁵ University of Notre Dame mission statement, <https://www.nd.edu/about/mission-statement/>.

the education we offer undergraduates is guided by this ideal of *paideia*. Our effort is to pass on not only knowledge but to cultivate moral and religious virtues in our students.⁴⁶

Given the importance of values-focused education at Catholic universities, it is easy to see why philosophy should play a prominent role in their curricula. Philosophy provides a rigorous and systematic approach to the study of values and the moral and intellectual virtues. In philosophy courses such as ethics, social and political philosophy, business ethics, and medical ethics, students are invited to reflect on moral problems and ideals, to engage with the work of great ethical thinkers, to examine and clarify their own personal values, to consider moral issues from diverse perspectives, to reflect critically on social and ethical conventions, and to improve their skills of moral reasoning and analysis. While other disciplines (notably moral theology) also address normative questions, few deal with such questions in the way that philosophy does. As the American Philosophical Association states, “Many of the most important value and normative problems philosophers study are not even raised in other disciplines; and those that do arise in other fields rarely receive the sustained critical scrutiny characteristic of philosophical studies.”⁴⁷

Of course, the degree to which courses in philosophical ethics contribute to the distinctively *Catholic* mission of a Catholic university will depend, in part, on how the courses are taught. This is part of a larger issue of faculty mission-fit that I will return to in a moment.

Reflective Engagement with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Problems of Faith

Former Notre Dame president Fr. Theodore Hesburgh liked to say that a Catholic university is “the place where the Church does its thinking.”⁴⁸ One hopes that the Church does a certain amount of thinking in other settings, but Fr. Hesburgh has a point that is relevant for our discussion. All educated Catholics should, at least at some point in

⁴⁶ John Jenkins, CSC, “The Mission,” <http://magazine.nd.edu/news/9950-the-mission/>. Adapted from an address to the Notre Dame faculty in September 2006.

⁴⁷ APA, “The Role of Philosophy Programs in Higher Education,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 81:5 (May 2008): 71. The quoted passage is from the 2007 draft.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Richard P. McBrien, *101 Questions and Answers on the Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 117.

their lives, reflect seriously and in-depth on their faith-commitments and join the great conversation that is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. What better place to do that than in the agoras of today's Catholic universities?

As noted on Notre Dame's core curriculum website, Catholic universities have a special charism that goes beyond merely producing liberally educated women and men who can think critically and are well-prepared for lives of effective citizenship and productive work. Because universities like Notre Dame are Catholic, their "purposes also include the preservation, extension and transmission of Catholic thought."⁴⁹ Accordingly, students at Catholic colleges "should learn to think in depth about the problems posed by a life of faith" and "have the opportunity to learn how the great thinkers of the Catholic tradition approached those problems in the past, and what Catholicism has to say about those problems as they arise in the contemporary world." Because many of the "problems posed by a life of faith" are at root philosophical, and because so many of the "great thinkers of the Catholic tradition" are philosophers, this special charism requires that students have the opportunity to read "seminal philosophical texts" that have contributed to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, and to think deeply about the nature, demands, and rationality of faith and religious commitment. Because "thinking deeply" entails "thinking critically," it is vital that students be exposed to both defenses of *and challenges to* religious beliefs. As the website states, "[s]uch exposure is required, not just by the standards of the Catholic tradition, [but] by any defensible standards of liberal education."⁵⁰

It is evident that such an educational charism can become effective only if a college has philosophy faculty members that are able and willing to carry it out. Needless to say, this is not always the case. In a recent survey of nearly one hundred leading philosophy departments around the world, only 14.6 percent of respondents indicated that they

⁴⁹"Rationale for Two-Course University Philosophy Requirement," <http://corecurriculum.nd.edu/rationales/philosophy>. The document was drafted in 2003 by then-Philosophy Department Chair, Paul Weithman, with advice from Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Loux, and Neal Delaney. Sayre, *Adventures in Philosophy at Notre Dame*, 274.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

were theists (72.8 percent described themselves as atheists).⁵¹ Many philosophy departments at Catholic universities are heavily secular, and there are often no viable ways to quickly change that.⁵² What, then, should be done?

In the short term, several options are available. As we have seen, philosophy makes a significant contribution to Catholic universities' liberal learning and ethical development mission goals. At some universities this might be deemed sufficient to continue treating philosophy as a specially high-value discipline. Moreover, if a university has a philosophy department that is predominantly secular but also includes a fair number of Catholics (or at least theists), the latter can be encouraged to develop and teach courses that engage directly with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. University grants might be made available for this purpose.

The most difficult problems arise when a philosophy department is not only thoroughly secular, but militantly so. (I have met quite a few philosophers at Catholic universities who view Catholicism as a cult-like relic of the Dark Ages, and see themselves as self-appointed torchbearers of reason and enlightenment to their students.) In such cases, the least-worst option might be to reduce one's required philosophy courses for a time, with hopes of increasing them again when the composition of the department is more favorable. While adding additional philosophy requirements to a core curriculum is certainly difficult in today's climate, it is not impossible. At King's College, where I teach, a second core philosophy requirement was added in 1993, after nearly a decade in which only a single philosophy course was required.

In the long term, Catholic universities must think boldly and creatively about how to produce, hire, and retain more top-flight, mission-fit Catholic philosophers. The Witherspoon Institute's annual Thomistic

⁵¹ David Bourget and David J. Chalmers, "What Do Philosophers Believe?" <http://philpapers.org/archive/BOUWDP>. Only 13.7 percent of respondents claimed to believe in libertarian free will. Among non-living philosophers, David Hume was the thinker respondents identified with most. Only one Catholic philosopher (Descartes) made the top 20.

⁵² This creates obvious problems for those, like Daniel Dahlstrom, who argue for a special role for philosophy at Catholic colleges by noting that philosophy can provide an opening for faith by countering fashionable secular philosophies or worldviews, such as reductionistic naturalism. See Daniel O. Dahlstrom, "Philosophy as an Opening for Faith," this issue. This is true and important, but obviously problematic if the philosophy faculty members themselves embrace those fashionable secular philosophies.

Seminar,⁵³ the annual philosophy workshops sponsored by the Catholic and Dominican Institute at Mount St. Mary College,⁵⁴ and the summer graduate seminars on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition sponsored by the Lumen Christi Institute at the University of Chicago are small but promising approaches.⁵⁵ All such efforts will be in vain, however, without the renewal of Catholic intellectual life and the animating gifts of the Holy Spirit, and for this we must pray.

⁵³ <http://winst.org/centers/ceu/summer-seminars/thomistic/>.

⁵⁴ http://www.msmc.edu/About_MSMC/fifth_annual_philosophy_workshop.be.

⁵⁵ <http://www.lumenchristi.org/graduate-seminars/>.