

## The Role of Philosophy in a Liberal Arts Education

I am happy to report that the College has decided to reintroduce the philosophy major. We do so for two reasons. First, philosophy has always played a central role in helping to shape the lives of students in a good liberal arts college. This has been true since Plato's Academy in Ancient Greece, as well as in the grand Medieval Universities, and continues to remain true today. It is even more the case in a *Catholic* liberal arts college that cultivating the philosophical mind is a central part of what we aspire to do. If Emmanuel is going to be counted as an excellent educational institution, and we are, then that big empty place in its curriculum where philosophy used to be, just had to be filled in once again.

The second reason for reintroducing the philosophy major was student demand. As our enrollments have increased, so has the academic quality of our students. Students who arrive at college better prepared academically often are more interested in theoretical disciplines. Even before the major was reintroduced we had several students who were individualized majors in philosophy. They were, in effect, philosophy majors. We also have a minor program in philosophy with about many students enrolled. While the numbers are relatively small they show a trend that we will encourage to grow. But why should we do this, why should we encourage a greater role for philosophy in the curriculum and in the lives of our students?

One answer to this question is that philosophy promotes the mission and vision of the College. Some of the goals mentioned in our vision statement include those of encouraging students to become critical thinkers and ethical decision makers. Our mission statement says that an Emmanuel education is rooted in the liberal arts and shaped by strong ethical values and a Catholic academic tradition. The study of philosophy clearly promotes critical thinking skills. One of the central things philosophers do is examine basic beliefs, beliefs that are usually assumed to be true on the basis of little or no evidence. These "basic" include beliefs about such things as the nature of knowledge and reality, about the mind and the self, about the basis of social and political systems, about ethical values and the existence and nature of God—to name a few. To "examine" such controversial beliefs means to consider any evidence that may support or undermine them, and to construct arguments for and against their truth. This is a type of problem solving activity that requires successful students to gather information, identify and construct possible solutions, examine assumptions, formulate arguments and consider implications of one solution or another being true. These are the types of skills, among others, that constitute critical thinking.

It should be clear that philosophy also contributes significantly to the development of our students' ability to make moral decisions. Our many course offerings in ethical theory and applied ethics will attest to that. That philosophy is rooted in the

liberal arts tradition is also true. This is not simply because it always has been. One could argue, for example, that while philosophy may have played a central role in a liberal arts education throughout Western history, it is now science that plays this role, science that answers philosophy's central questions. While the relationship between philosophy and science is too complex to be discussed in this brief article, we can say that the very nature of philosophy lends itself to a cooperative, and not an antithetical relationship with all other disciplines, including the sciences.

This is because philosophy is interdisciplinary by its very nature. Since it examines basic beliefs, and since all disciplines have unexamined basic beliefs, there is always a "philosophy of" any field. The importance of this for an Emmanuel education is that philosophy does not only stand alone as one liberal arts discipline among others, but is really "rooted" in all liberal arts and sciences and thus able to consider issues in an interdisciplinary way, a way that promotes reflection on the nature and methods of various modes of knowing. So, for example, there is a course offered at Emmanuel that is team-taught by a philosopher and a biologist that discusses bioethical issues. Each professor brings his own expertise to this cooperative discussion, allowing students to see more clearly not just biological facts and discoveries, but also their implications for good or evil. Philosophy needs science for discovering truth about the world; science needs philosophy to help understand the significance of these discoveries.

What remains to be discussed is how philosophy contributes to the Catholic academic tradition. After all, philosophy is not supposed to be any more "Catholic" than math or chemistry, so what can we say about Catholic ideas? I think that philosophy has three roles to play here. First, it can clarify the official teachings of the church and the ideas of Catholic theologians. What "Catholic" ideas have to say about morality, society or anything else may be tested in the court of reason like any other ideas. For philosophers, it is not the origin of an idea that is important, but rather its truth or falsity. Second, philosophers can draw historical connections to demonstrate the perennial influence that some ideas have and continue to have. One of the great philosophical visions embedded in the writings of Aquinas, for example, includes the idea that God created the world according to a plan, a set of ideas located in God's mind, that served as a blueprint of creation. Now much of this idea comes right from Plato, even though he would call these ideas "Forms" and not locate them in the mind of God. The third way that philosophers can contribute here is to draw out some of the implications of the philosophical ideas embedded within this tradition. To stay with the idea of Aquinas, for example, we can point out that this is the basis for the confidence present in much of the Catholic academic tradition that there is no conflict between faith and reason. If truths discovered in nature reflect the mind of God, and if those revealed in scripture do the same, then there is no conflict between them that cannot be resolved. There ought to be no fear of science for a believer, for example, since what discovers can be understood as simply revealing the Truth that is God.

Finally, what about our belief that an Emmanuel education prepares students for successful careers? How does an abstract field such as philosophy contribute to that? I have said much about this in the "Value of Philosophy" text. I will not repeat what I said there except to say that in addition to being intellectually exciting and a pathway to answering important questions required for personal development, philosophy is excellent preparation for many of today's most interesting and rewarding careers. Because it develops the thinking skills required for such careers, successful philosophy majors make more money at mid-career than all but one of the majors offered at Emmanuel. So, because it is intrinsically valuable, and because it plays such a central role in all the areas that the College finds important in an undergraduate education, it is with great pleasure and excitement that we announce that the philosophy major is back.