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Abigail Gosselin

Associate Professor, Philosophy, Regis University, agosseli@regis.edu

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Cultivating Discernment

Abigail Gosselin
Associate Professor, Philosophy
Regis University
(agosseli@regis.edu)

Abstract

Discernment is critical to Jesuit spirituality and education. Consequently, Jesuit universities should make discernment an integral part of the academic learning environment by structuring the undergraduate college experience intentionally so as to cultivate discernment. This essay gives a brief theory of discernment, explaining its relationship to education philosophy in general and to Jesuit educational goals in particular, and demonstrates how discernment can be cultivated through activity. In my conclusion I will also offer some practical suggestions for how discernment can be incorporated into the college curriculum.

As a philosophy professor, I explain how the discipline of philosophy is uniquely situated to offer important contributions to the teaching of discernment, whether the discernment occurs in discipline-specific philosophy courses or in more general kinds of courses. I explain how I have incorporated discernment in my introductory philosophy and senior seminar courses. The specific goals and expectations for the students differ in each of these contexts, partly because of where students are in their intellectual and emotional maturity, and partly because of the nature of the course and the role that discernment plays within it. In both of these courses, students practice discernment through a project in which they perform an activity of their choice and reflect on the activity and their process of learning from the activity. Through these projects—in which self-directed activity and continuous guided reflection are integral to each other—students develop a habit of discernment about who they are, what they do, and what they value.

Introduction

Discernment, broadly speaking, is a process of reflection aimed at making good judgments. Educational theory and educational philosophy have in recent decades taken up the issue of how to teach discernment. In the 1970s this interest began with innovative interdisciplinary programs, leading to a series of publications on “critical thinking,” most notably those of John Chaffee. Chaffee defines critical thinking as “an active, purposeful, organized process” that involves being aware of how we think, examining our own thinking process and that of others, and practicing our thinking abilities.¹ These thinking abilities—self-awareness, examination of self and others, and practice—are part of discernment, as they are required to make sense of the world and of oneself, and to make judgments, including

judgments about who one should be and how one should act.

Interest in how critical thinking can be taught in education has turned more recently to interest in how we make judgments. Shifting the discussion from the process of thinking to the character development of the thinker, Matthew Lipman discusses judgment-making in terms of the person doing the judgment rather than the act of judgment itself. Lipman says, “It is the thinker, not the thinking necessarily, that is productive of judgments, guided by criteria and standards, sensitive to context, and self-corrective.”² Critical thinking involves not simply logical reasoning but also “creative thinking” and “caring thinking,” which taken altogether strengthen our abilities to make good judgments.³ Moreover, a person’s judgments express who she is: “. . . [I]f there is anywhere that *the style that is the person* gets to be

expressed, it is in that person's judgments."⁴ Having a good character is innately tied to making good judgments. Lipman's focus on these different aspects of critical thinking and judgment, and his emphasis on the importance of character development, provides a new direction for education and new theories of judgment for educational theory.⁵

Because Jesuit higher education is concerned with teaching values and developing good character, it has much to offer to educational theory and philosophy on critical thinking. Jesuit education already accounts for the innate connection between good character and judgment and discernment. The tradition of Jesuit education can expand on this connection by developing its practical pedagogy further.

What makes the college experience at a Jesuit university distinct from that at other institutions is that it is aimed at core Jesuit values including *magis* (excellence or "the more"; acting in the best way, for the greater glory of God), *cura personalis* (care of the whole person), service toward others, social justice, unity in heart and mind, contemplation in action, and finding God in all things.⁶ Students are expected to serve their communities and to become leaders within them; to work for peace and justice; to connect their faith with reason; to put their knowledge and conviction into action; and to do the very best in everything they do. As a result of intentional and systematic focus, Jesuit universities effectively cultivate many of these core values, especially through the pursuit of social justice, the development of leadership, and the commitment to *magis*. One aspect of the Jesuit formation of character that should be given more pedagogical attention is the development of discernment.

Some forms of discernment are commonly practiced in courses, particularly those in which service learning or community-based learning is incorporated into course objectives and methodologies. This essay focuses on cultivating a different form of discernment, however, one that does not take place through service or community activity but rather through careful reflection about what is important, or what is worth paying attention to. While this reflection has an obviously contemplative component, likely to be performed

in solitude, it also has an active, practical component, in which contemplation is performed *through activity*. Thus individuals who engage in this process of discernment can be understood as *contemplatives in action* (one of the Jesuit values), where *action* refers not only to service but also to personal activity that goes beyond—yet is integral to developing—the kind of thinking in solitude that tends to characterize reflective contemplation. The form of discernment that I am considering here, therefore, is not a process of thinking *about* an activity, as when a student reflects on her service or community work; nor even is it a process of *choosing* an activity, as when a student considers her values and interests in choosing what work to pursue. Rather, it is a process of thinking *by engaging in* activity, similar to the ways that we think by writing and by discussing with others, where thought and action are unified and developed concurrently and relationally.

It is important for my purposes that the activity linked to discernment which students engage in and reflect upon is self-chosen and self-directed. The form of discernment that I focus on in this essay and in my teaching is discernment as a *process* that is not linked to particular content, i.e. to a specific object of discernment such as religious or vocational ends, or reflection about service or community work. Lipman identifies this procedural thinking as *reflective thinking*. He says:

Reflective thinking is thinking that is aware of its own assumptions and implications as well as being conscious of the reasons and evidence that support this or what conclusion. Reflective thinking takes into account its own methodology, its own procedures, its own perspectives and point of view. Reflective thinking is prepared to recognize the factors that make for bias, prejudice, and self-deception. It involves *thinking about its procedures* at the same as it involves *thinking about its subject matter*.⁷

Reflective thinking—especially about how one should act and be—cannot be acquired simply through using one's mind in solitude. Developing the capacity for reflective thought requires that one practices reflecting *about* something, but the focus should be on the process of reflection, not its object. If students only reflect about ends that

are given to them in specific contexts—religious or vocational ends, or reflection about service or community work—at least some students will probably focus more on the ends than the process of reflection. Then, while they may have deep and meaningful reflections about the relevant object, they may not have developed broader abilities to discern which they can then carry over to and practice in other contexts. Moreover, since discernment is a way of paying attention (more on this below), students should determine for themselves what is worth paying attention to, i.e. what is of value. Through self-chosen and self-directed activity, students reflect on and decide for themselves what is of value on an ongoing basis.

For these reasons, it is important for students to practice discernment in a variety of contexts, and especially to practice discernment about ends which they have chosen themselves through activity which is self-directed. Cultivating discernment in these ways more clearly focuses the development of the *process* of discernment independent of its object (content) or ends (goals or outcomes). Regardless of to what ends it is applied, the process of discernment is valuable in itself and worth teaching as such. While discerning about specific ends (e.g. religious, vocational, or service work) obviously has great value, the cultivation of discernment as a *habit* suggests that teaching discernment as a process, independent of the content-specific uses to which it is often put, is also important, both pedagogically and spiritually.⁸

Discernment in the Jesuit Educational Tradition

Discernment, in the Jesuit tradition, is a process of learning and enacting who we are called by God to be. It involves giving conscious attention to what we value, how we make choices, and what are our responsibilities (as well as to whom or what do we hold these responsibilities).⁹ Paying attention is possibly the most important spiritual activity that we can do in our daily lives. The process of discernment makes our decisions autonomous, coming deeply from ourselves—though with the guidance of God—so that we have ownership over them. By uniting our values and commitments, the choices that arise from

discernment give us integrity. The description of discernment in Boston College’s “A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education: The Habit of Discerning” as a process of exploring and enacting meaning is especially apt here:

We can think of discernment as the lifelong project of exploring our experience, naming its meaning, and living in a way that translates this meaning into action. We can also think of this process as something we focus on with special intensity at particular moments in our lives—during the four years of college, for example, or when we have to make important decisions and want to do so freely and with a sense of what God is calling us to do. At these times, we might be especially conscious of using spiritual exercises to help us negotiate the process. But we can also think of these three movements as the intertwined dynamics of daily life, the moment-by-moment activity of becoming fully human.¹⁰

This process of discernment as paying attention so that we can decide who we are and should be, and how we should act in the world, is my focus in this essay.

Part of the Jesuit educational mission is to teach the habit of discernment. A habit is a *practice*, or an activity that one does consistently. Paying attention, and using that attention to decide who one should be and how one should act, is an activity that one must practice regularly in order that it be a habit. Discernment is not necessarily an activity that comes naturally to people; it must be learned and developed, and exercised continuously over time. As Aristotle noted, in order to develop a good habit (in his context, a virtue) that one does not already possess, the activity that embodies that habit or virtue must be performed repeatedly. At first it may feel artificial, as if one is acting in a play, but eventually the activity will become more comfortable, until finally the habit or virtue becomes one’s own.¹¹ Because many people do not naturally know how to practice discernment, many need to learn what discernment is and to perform it repeatedly before they can adopt the practice as their own.

One of the goals of Jesuit education ought to be, therefore, the intentional teaching of the practice of discernment. Most undergraduate students

enter college without any experience or perhaps even knowledge of discernment. Over the course of their college experience, they should engage in various forms of discernment which are required of them through multiple avenues. Many such opportunities exist, including the aforementioned service and community-based learning components of many classes, as well as spiritual and mission-related activities and retreats; many classes also include various forms of discernment independent of service and community work. While some students take advantage of many of these opportunities, however, others manage to avoid them entirely. Yet, it seems that all students¹² who attend a Jesuit university should be required to practice discernment as part of their college experience. Therefore, the undergraduate college experience should be structured intentionally to cultivate discernment in a more systematic way, spanning the entire time that students are in college. This intentional structuring should account for the fact that discernment is a practice that is developed over time, so that the goals, methods, and expectations for practicing discernment reflect where students are intellectually and emotionally when they enter college and then foster their development of this practice over the four or so years they are in college. The goals and methods of discernment for seniors should be specific to these older and presumably more mature students who will soon be graduating and beginning a life after college.

Discernment and Philosophy

I am a philosophy professor at Regis University in Denver. I teach in Regis College, the traditional-age undergraduate liberal arts college, which has a student population of about 2,000 students. I regularly teach a mix of introductory philosophy courses, integrative core courses, and upper-level philosophy courses. All students are required to take introductory philosophy, ideally as freshmen, as part of the distributive core. While students are expected to complete their distributive core requirements as freshmen and sophomores, they are also required to take four integrative core courses as juniors and seniors in each of four areas: Meaning, Justice, Diversity, and Global Environmental Awareness.

I explain the basic structure of the Regis College's core in order to note that while both parts of the core are designed around Jesuit values—especially *magis*, service, justice, and unity of heart and mind—currently there is no part of the college-wide curriculum that is intentionally designed for the sake of cultivating discernment. Though obviously discernment occurs in certain classes, students' experience with discernment varies widely over the course of their college career. In this section I want to suggest that philosophy is uniquely situated to play a pivotal role in cultivating discernment, and that this should inform how a college curriculum can be intentionally structured to develop in students the practice of discernment.

Philosophy has much to contribute to developing the practice of discernment.¹³ One contribution is a set of skills that are central to philosophical thinking as well as to discernment. The critical thinking that characterizes much of philosophical thought is analytical reasoning. Through analytical reasoning and writing, students develop an understanding and an ability to articulate various views on an issue and theories about value, justice, and the good life, along with their various justifications. Analysis includes critiquing different views and theories by identifying strengths and problems with the view and by giving reasons for one's assessment. A more advanced step in this analytical reasoning is to develop one's own position on an issue and give reasons in support of it, as well as responses to potential objections, all ideally situated within the context of the tradition of inquiry (i.e. responding to other thinkers) from which the issue emerges. By developing these skills, a student learns how to formulate in a deep way a set of values and commitments, how to justify them, and how to critique them and respond to potential objections. These analytic skills provide tools for reasoning about who to be and how to act, which are important elements of discernment.¹⁴

Philosophy roots a person's own ideas and self-awareness in the historical and cultural traditions that sustain her. Through the Western intellectual tradition, a person can put her own ideas and values in greater intellectual context, situating her identity, values, commitments, and consequently choices. No other academic discipline can provide

the perspective of the over two thousand years of Western thought from which contemporary situations, beliefs, and values have developed. While the history of Western intellectual thought is not part of everyone's cultural background, this cultural history provides a significant part of the backdrop for contemporary social, political, and cultural thought in Western countries like the United States, and it is also (almost too obviously) a crucial part of the cultural and historical fabric of the Catholic Church. For individuals who attend Jesuit universities, the history of Western intellectual thought importantly situates an individual's own understanding of herself—*qua* individual and as a member of various identity-forming groups—and her values and commitments.

Most uniquely, the practice of discernment is a thought process that characterizes what I see as the heart of philosophy. Because philosophy is ultimately a practice of thinking, the discipline of philosophy is uniquely situated to teach the practice of discernment in a way that emphasizes the *process* or *activity* of directing one's conscious attention and thought independently of the *object* of such thought. Discernment is basically an activity of soul-searching. While there are a variety of avenues at a Jesuit university to do soul-searching for specific ends, especially to explore one's relationship with God, to consider vocational aspirations, or to reflect on justice in relation to service or community work, what philosophy can uniquely offer is a practice of soul-searching done for its own sake. In enriching the soul, soul-searching is good for us; it is a prime way that we exercise our humanity.

Discernment, broadly speaking, is itself a significant object of philosophy study. As part of its subject matter, philosophy explores what it is to be a discerner, or an agent. The ability to do the kind of thinking characteristic of discernment is what many philosophers find significant about being human: humans have second-order awareness (awareness of being aware); in other words we can *see* ourselves thinking—and thus we can evaluate and change our thoughts and behavior. While Descartes was one of the first Western philosophers to famously and directly develop the significance of human self-awareness and agency,¹⁵ I would argue that the exploration

of human agency—and the attempt to make sense of the world *as* agents—underlies nearly all of historical and contemporary philosophy. We humans have the ability to peer into our own minds and to examine and reflect upon their contents. We are *agents* because we do not act merely on instinct; we have the ability to think about how we should *be* in the world. As a result we have the ability to *choose* what to do and who to be, and we are therefore responsible for our choice.¹⁶ Philosophy appreciates that the ability to discern is significant in itself independently of what specific ends we are discerning.

In the rest of this essay, I will give two examples of how teaching discernment has been a primary goal in my courses. The purpose of these examples is to demonstrate ways in which discernment can be taught as an end in itself, practiced for its own sake, with the intention of meeting students where they are and leading them through a practice of thinking that allows them to develop their abilities over the course of the semester. Because one discernment project that I describe is for a freshman introductory philosophy course and the other is for a senior seminar, each project carries different expectations for what kind and to what degree a student should be capable of reflection. The different course goals necessitate that the discernment projects differ in scope and direction. In both projects, however, students are asked to engage deeply with their own thought processes, paying attention to who they are, what they value, and why they live as they do.

Teaching the Practice of Discernment: Two Examples

Introductory Philosophy

When I introduce the subject of philosophy at the beginning of a semester, I characterize it as a way to pose and reflect on “the big questions” such as, “Does God exist?” “What is reality?” “What is truth?” and “What does goodness require of us?” Such questions reflect our need to make sense of the world, and behind many of these questions lies a consideration of what it is to be human. *Making sense* of the world, *maintaining awareness* of ourselves as the kinds of beings who need to make sense of the world, and *reflecting upon* what it is to be such beings, are themselves activities in which we as agents *act* through contemplation.¹⁷ An

introductory philosophy course ideally will give students the tools to practice this activity of contemplation.

Typically in an introductory philosophy course, students learn *about* philosophical ideas without actually practicing philosophical thinking.¹⁸ The most common way that this is accomplished is through what I call the “philosopher-a-day approach,” in which students read an anthology that covers an array of philosophers spanning the course of Western history, often organized around philosophical questions like those identified above. With this approach, students cover a wide breadth of philosophical topics, but they tend not to gain depth of understanding with any one of them. Moreover, students can have a difficult time understanding how such abstract topics, explored from perspectives that span millennia, can be applicable to their personal lives and cultural experience. As a result, many students arrive at the end of the semester with breathless relief that they can check off philosophy from their list of core requirements; few, it seems, remember much of what they have learned, never mind have the ability to exercise philosophical thinking or to apply philosophy to their contemporary lives. In my experience this approach has not been effective at deeply engaging students.

An alternative approach is to teach a handful of philosophical texts from different historical periods, spending a couple of weeks on each text in order to develop critical reading and thinking skills that arise from deeper exploration of a thinker’s ideas. While this approach sacrifices some breadth, in my experience it provides more opportunities for students to practice philosophical thinking. The potential problem of randomness or arbitrariness in selecting texts can be avoided by connecting texts thematically. The theme that I often organize my course around is freedom, because it is a concept that resonates deeply. Freedom has multiple meanings and dimensions, including liberty, autonomy, capability, solitude, self-direction, one-ness with God, or tranquility of the soul. A variety of readings can be used to explore this theme, and putting these texts in their historical context can illuminate the ways that the meaning and value of freedom has changed over time.

Freedom provides an organizing theme for addressing important philosophical questions. In my class we start with the question, “What is the good life for an individual?”—or, as the Regis University mission states, “How ought we to live?”¹⁹—using Epictetus and Aristotle to examine different character virtues aimed at different modes of living. In order to address the question, “What is or should be the relationship between the individual and society?” we look at John Stuart Mill and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the significance of liberty, rights, and democracy. We ponder the question, “What is the human condition, and how do we make or find meaning in our lives?” by reading Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Finally, we consider what a personally meaningful life is by reading the biography *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer, which makes freedom a personal matter. These inquiries culminate in the large question of value and human agency, bringing together ideas about liberty, autonomy, free will, social identity, rights and responsibilities, choice, and character: “How ought we to take responsibility for ourselves, given our place in the world—how should we act, and what kinds of people should we be?”

While the bulk of assignments in this course require students to practice and develop the analytical reasoning skills that are inherent to philosophy (including textual interpretation, analysis, and modes of assessment like raising and answering objections, or comparing and contrasting views), the final assignment in the course is a project in which they actively engage and reflect upon the ideas that they have grappled with intellectually over the semester. With this assignment students practice a different form of philosophical thinking: the reflection involved with discernment.

About two-thirds the way through the semester, students write a proposal in which they explain their own views of freedom in relation to the philosophical ideas that they have studied in the class. They respond to each philosopher by explaining which ideas seem relevant and meaningful to them and which do not. Then they choose an activity that allows them to further develop, test, or practice their views about freedom. They perform the activity for about 1-2

hours per week over the course of four weeks. In their proposal they describe the activity and explain explicitly how it allows them to engage with relevant philosophical ideas, and they provide a general timeline so that they have self-direction.

Any activity is acceptable as long as the student can relate it explicitly and meaningfully to ideas studied in class. Students are assessed on criteria related to the process of activity and reflection: creativity and risk-taking, effort, participation (doing the actual activity and meeting deadlines), thoughtfulness in engaging with ideas studied in the course (and doing so explicitly and substantively), thoughtfulness in reflections, and making an engaging presentation. As they perform the activity, students may find their ideas affirmed or strengthened, or they may end up discounting or discarding their previous views; any outcome is acceptable as long as they are reflective about it. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to engage with the relevant philosophical ideas, and no “right” or “wrong” way to do the project. Students have complete freedom in what they think about these ideas, what activity they do, and what the activity—and the ideas—end up meaning to them. (The pun about having “freedom” in how they do the project is intended: that is the point.) What matters here is the process of reflection and engagement, not the content or outcome. Even when students choose projects that initially seem thin philosophically, students often impressively make meaning through their activities—for example practicing experimental cooking as a metaphor for Nietzsche’s creation of values, or applying Epictetus’ self-control and Aristotelian virtues of patience and temperance to fly-fishing.

Through this project, students practice discernment by paying attention to their learning processes and to the formation of their own ideas (namely ideas about freedom, agency, and values). This form of paying attention occurs through activity. The specific nature of the activity—what an individual chooses to do—is irrelevant; what matters are the processes involved, including choosing the activity, justifying its appropriateness for the purpose of the project, and reflecting upon how the process of doing the activity affects (i.e. confirms, strengthens, weakens, discounts, etc.) one’s thinking about the relevant philosophical

ideas. Through their activities and reflection papers, students pay attention to their responses to philosophical ideas learned in class, including their own positions on relevant topics as well as the reasons for supporting or rejecting certain philosophers’ positions; they also pay attention to the historical and cultural contexts for the philosophers’ views as well as their own. They learn to situate—and to *see* how they are situating—their ideas in a broader Western intellectual context.

Other themes besides freedom could be used to frame an introductory philosophy course and to use as an organizational tool for a project of discernment. The two that come to mind most easily are the themes of *responsibility* and *justice*. The latter is a commonly these used in philosophy classes at Jesuit universities, and easily connects to a discernment project involving service learning. Much can be said about organizing a discernment project around the theme of justice, but because I am not focusing on the uses of service learning in discernment, I leave this discussion to others. A class using philosophical texts that span different time periods in Western intellectual thought could easily be organized around the theme of *responsibility*. This class might examine distinctions and relationships between causal and moral responsibility, individual and collective responsibilities, and partial (family, nation, etc.) and impartial (humanity) obligations. A range of historical philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Locke, Hume, Kant, Mill, Nietzsche, and a wide variety of contemporary philosophers could be used. Through discernment projects, students could investigate responsibilities an individual already has and explore responsibilities that one might be obligated to take on (e.g. consumer choices, aiding specific individuals or populations, directing or limiting one’s career opportunities and lifestyle options based on values and commitments). Both of these themes highlight aspects of the central Jesuit question about how best we should live as well as highlight aspects of agency and being human and are thus fruitful themes for philosophical discernment.

Through this project students *practice* philosophical thinking in a way that is concrete and relevant to their daily lives, by reflecting on philosophical questions that are meaningful to them and also

situated in the philosophical tradition. This project meets students where they are as entering freshmen who have little familiarity with philosophy and possibly no experience with discernment, but who relish the opportunity to engage in activity that is meaningful to them, using an academic framework to understand and reflect upon that meaningfulness. This discernment is a good way to introduce freshmen to the deep reflection and the integration of the personal and the intellectual, and the heart and the mind, which we at a Jesuit university expect them to develop over the course of their college experience.

Senior Seminar

At Regis College, we used to have a senior seminar that all graduating seniors were required to take as part of their core. This class was eliminated when we revised our core and replaced the sophomore, junior, and senior seminars with an integrative core. I taught senior seminar twice while we had the course, and in my opinion the course offered a unique and essential opportunity for a semester-long endeavor of discernment. I interpreted the goal of senior seminar to provide a bridge between college experience and life after college. In contrast to most other courses, including my introductory philosophy course, the object of discernment here was not a thematic topic but rather meaning more generally. In bridging academic experience with life after college, this class required students to examine the guiding question of Jesuit education: what is a meaningful life and how ought one to live.

In my course, students explored their answers to this question through a semester-long personal project as well as readings, copious writing, and intense discussion. We started the semester introducing questions of meaning through personal reflection. Students had to brainstorm through writing and discussion answers to questions about to whom and what they felt obligated or responsible for; what relationships and communities were important to them; what their primary values were; how they dealt with obstacles, setbacks, losses, and stresses; what they hoped to accomplish in their lives; and how they saw themselves in the future, i.e. what kinds of lives they hoped or expected to have five or ten years later. We used this brainstorming to see where students were at the beginning of the class

so that we could figure out what was worth addressing and how we should direct our exploration of meaning. (Anxieties about graduation played a significant role in determining direction.)

Because discussion was so central to the course, I structured the class to maximize participation. The class was scheduled to meet twice a week for a 75 minute period each time. For one class period during the week we met all together (about twenty students, which was the cap) to discuss the readings. For the other class period I scheduled an additional meeting time and divided the class in half so that I could meet with each half separately (therefore doubling the time I spent in class that day) so that students could talk more intimately with about ten of their peers about their projects. Since we met in the smaller groups weekly, students had to discuss their projects on a weekly basis. The smaller size ensured that everyone spoke regularly. I strongly believe that discernment, like philosophical thinking in general, occurs not merely through thinking and writing in solitude, but also through thinking "out loud" and bouncing ideas off of other people.

We spent half of our class time looking at examples of different kinds of meaningful lives by reading stories and essays. With Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, we talked about the roles of happiness, self-fulfillment, and gender roles. Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* helped us think about the meaning and appeal of wilderness, the American west, and traveling; the roles of technology, work schedules, and other trappings of modern society in our lives; and the tensions between obligations to others and individual liberty. Greg Mortensen's *Three Cups of Tea* invited us to discuss what role the pursuit of social justice will play in our lives and how obligated we are to help the global poor and other people suffering at a distance from us; we also talked about how to balance the different obligations we have, including those to the needy, to our family, to our neighborhoods and communities, to the environment, etc. With Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, we talked about creativity and the desire to find meaning in the world. Three different books directly addressed spirituality: we used Ronald Rolheiser's *The Holy Longing* to discuss our spirituality in Catholic terms; with *Essential Writings*

of *Thich Nhat Hanh*, we practiced (and reflected upon the experience of) meditation and mindfulness; Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being* presented questions about our place in the world, the grandeur and evils of existence, and our agency and responsibilities. Some of these books I only used in one semester of the course, while others I used in both. Students had to write weekly reflection papers responding to the readings, which prepared them to share their responses in class discussion. The variety of views offered by these books about what constitutes a meaningful life gave students specific ideas about meaning to engage within their response papers and discussion as well as in their personal projects.

For the personal project, students had to engage in activity that would allow them to explore or develop anything that they wished. The only requirement for their topic was that it must be an interest or value that was worth devoting an entire semester's worth of effort. I made it very clear to them that I was not looking for any particular kind of project, any specific outcome, and especially not for a clean resolution, but rather I wanted to see quality of engagement, time, and effort.²⁰

Students submitted a proposal in which they identified the subject of their project and explained what they would explore or develop, and why this was something valuable or interesting enough to spend the rest of the semester on it. They gave an approximate timeline for what they would do, and when, in order to accomplish the project. This provided a guideline so that they knew each week what they should do; while the timeline was revisable at any point, it provided a helpful way for students to hold themselves accountable for carrying out the project. Finally, students identified what the outcome of the project should be (a piece of writing, a presentation, or something else), and a justification for why this was an appropriate product for the activity. Students wrote weekly reflection papers about their progress in their project, explaining and reflecting on what they did and how this impacted where they thought they should go from there.

The midterm and final reflection papers were deeper and longer than the weekly reflections.

Questions students had to answer in the middle of the semester included:

- How much time are you spending on this project (as a weekly average, or altogether so far)?
- What are you getting out of the project so far? What does it mean to you?
- What do you want to get out of this project? What do you realistically hope to accomplish by the end of the semester? What do you hope to take away from the project when the semester (and perhaps even your time in college) ends?
- What should you change (if anything) in order for your project to be the most meaningful use of your time and energy? Please include an updated timeline of what you hope to work on in each of the next six or so weeks left in the semester.
- Finally, what grade would you give yourself on your work on your project (so far), and why?

Students were welcome to revise what they would do with their projects over the rest of the semester if they believed that was appropriate based on where they were.

The final reflection paper asked similar questions but from a purely retrospective perspective. Students had to address the following:

- Explain what major steps you took in your project, and when they occurred. Describe how much time you spent on your project and how much effort you devoted to it. If you did not turn in reflection papers regularly, you will have a heavier burden showing what time and effort you spent.
- What did you learn from your project? How did the steps you took lead you to where you are now with it?
- In what ways did your project change as you went, and why? In what ways did it go exactly as you planned?
- Did you get to the general place that you had hoped when you first wrote your project proposal? If so, what made that actualization possible? If not, why not?

- Do you feel like your project is “finished” now that the semester is nearly over, or do you feel like you will still be engaging with it in some way after the semester ends?
- What growth or development took place as you worked on your project? What did you learn about yourself (or your working habits) through this project?
- What did this project mean to you? Was it worth the time and effort you spent on it? Was it a worthwhile experience to have as a college senior?

I asked students to be frank about mistakes, regrets, disappointments, or failures that they perceived, and I reiterated that they were not graded on the project’s outcome but rather their effort and depth of engagement and reflection.

Students were for the most part refreshingly honest in their self-assessments. Some students chose to change the direction of their projects as a result of their midterm reflections, as they realized they were not getting what they wanted out of the experience. The students who had the most difficult time doing this self-assessment tended to be bright, quiet, perfectionist students who had trouble being evaluated, never mind evaluating themselves; and achievement-oriented students who preferred to work toward a specific outcome and did not know how to handle being assessed on their process of reflection and activity. Through discussion I guided these students gently to self-assess and to see its value. Some of these students gained much from the process, while others were simply not in a place where they could practice discernment effectively. Had they practiced discernment more, and in intentional and consistent ways, during their previous years in college, they may have been in a better position to do what was expected of them in this class.

In both of my senior seminar classes students chose a variety of topics to explore. A philosophy major tried to develop a utopian society; several students wrote novels and stories that they had wanted to work on and had not yet found time for. A few students researched graduate schools and occupations; one student explored the possibility of marriage through intense

introspection and discussion with his girlfriend. A chemistry major tried painting for the first time, while a very self-conscious analytical thinker tried photography. A couple of students practiced different life skills each week as they tried to learn how to manage stress. While some students chose projects that seemed superficial to me (e.g. sampling different ethnic restaurants each week) the projects actually had more significance to the students doing them than I had originally thought. (In this case, the two students sampling different ethnic restaurants approached their project anthropologically, seeking out unfamiliar foods in unfamiliar restaurants and speaking with owners and wait staff, some of whom spoke little or no English. Their reflections mainly concerned ethnic identity and diversity as well as the value of risk and experimentation.) While a couple of students seemed to approach the project as an “easy” assignment that they did not have to put much effort into, unfortunately they put no less effort into this class than any other; fortunately, they were a tiny minority.

We ended the semester returning to similar questions of meaning that we had started with. Students wrote about and discussed aspects of meaning that were most important to them and which they had thought about during the semester. They addressed questions about how they envisioned their lives after college; how they thought they would balance the things most important to them (such as work, family, friends, spirituality, exercise, hobbies/interests); what worries they had about life after graduation; how they would deal with stresses, disappointments, and failures; and how they would appreciate and create opportunities, joys, and successes. Whether students changed their views about what constitutes a meaningful life or not, they showed growth in how they thought about these aspects of meaning and had a better sense of what they wanted to do with their lives after college—not necessarily in terms of vocation, but in terms of how they wanted to direct their lives.

One of my most memorable moments was when a student who was not very interested in college, who completed the degree just to complete it and who claimed not to get much out of the experience, told me that this was his best class at Regis because it made him think deeply and

meaningfully about who he was and what he wanted to do with his life after college. He worked long hours as a security guard and, like many of our students, never gave himself down time and always pushed himself physically and mentally. In his project he explored ways to manage his stress and take care of himself, including finding balance in pursuing different things that he valued, and in our small group discussions he was frank about his anxieties about the direction of his life. While I wish he could have done this deep reflection earlier in his college career and gotten more out of his time in college, I am glad that as a graduating senior about to face the world, he had the opportunity to do these reflections at this time in his life. He was the kind of person who would not have elected to take this class on his own, but, given the opportunity and the safe environment to explore what was personally meaningful, he blossomed. His story demonstrates to me why it is important that students take a required course in which they practice discernment: some of the people who benefit the most from the process would never have chosen to take the class on their own. Given gentle guidance and a safe and open environment, most people find that they are not only capable of discerning, but that they find it of great value.

In teaching the practice of discernment, my role was to guide students' engagement with the practice, which I did by providing copious questions that they had to address through writing and discussion. These questions were targeted to where they were in the process of discerning, and many questions were reiterated, either exactly or in revised form, throughout the semester so that students had to keep coming back to where they had been so that they could examine where they now were and where they would be going. Through this rigorous self-examination, students exercised what Matthew Lipman identifies as reflective thinking (see above). By continuously reflecting on their self-chosen, self-directed activity—and who they were in relation to it—students developed skills of discernment which they could then direct at any object or end that they choose.

Since a habit of discernment is developed through continual exercise, intentional cultivation of discernment ought to be structured accordingly,

so that students practice discernment repeatedly through their college careers. The goal of teaching discernment is not for students to become specific kinds of thinkers or to arrive at specific sets of thoughts, but rather to be people who think intentionally about who they are and who they should be. A course devoted to cultivating discernment should guide students in developing their thinking about how they should live their lives and encourage students to make discernment a habit that they will continue to engage in after they leave college.

Conclusion: Incorporating Discernment into the College Curriculum

Approaching discernment as a process that is not linked to particular content (e.g. discernment about religious or vocational ends or reflection about service or community work) requires teaching the method of discernment as a good in itself. In uncoupling the process of discernment from its object, I do not mean to suggest that *any* form of reflection, or reflection about *any* object, would constitute a form of discernment valued in Jesuit education. Discernment requires guidance about *how to reflect about*—and how to enact—meaning and value in one's life. Discernment is not merely reflection in solitude (thinking in one's own mind; writing), though it certainly is this. But it is also thinking by engaging in activity. Projects that require students to reflect in conjunction with activity are ideal ways to teach students how to discern and to develop a habit of discernment.

Whether discernment occurs as a segment of a course (such as in my introductory course) or as a central goal for a course (as in my senior seminar), I believe that a good discernment project meets certain criteria that maximize the depth of discernment that students engage in. These criteria include:

1. The project should be self-directed by the student, so that the student chooses the goal of the project, the specific activity she performs, the outcome she wishes to achieve, and the way that she wishes her activity to be assessed.

2. The focus should be on the *process* in which a student engages in her activity, not on the achievement of a specific outcome. In a way, the outcome is irrelevant.
3. The main purpose of the project should be self-reflection about the process of carrying out the project.
4. The process of engaging in the project and reflection should be guided so as to cultivate growth in thinking and the development of a habit of discernment.

While I believe that discernment projects offer an important way for students to practice discernment in the college curriculum, I do not think the cultivation of discernment begins and ends with these projects. My worry is that students will encounter such projects and other methods of discernment in an *ad hoc*, rather than systematized, way. Discernment projects would be most effective if they were embedded within a larger structure in which discernment is cultivated systematically over the course of a student's time in college.

A primary goal of my essay has been to demonstrate ways that courses can be designed around the practice of discernment, through the incorporation of discernment projects in which activity and reflection are performed in relation to each other. Another purpose of my essay has been to explain the importance of discernment both to educational philosophy and theory, and to Jesuit education in particular. The implication of this is that since the cultivation of discernment is an important goal for education, and especially to Jesuit education, Jesuit universities ought to find ways to structure the undergraduate college experience so as to cultivate discernment intentionally. In this last section I want to suggest ways in which this could be done.

A university that wishes to make discernment more intentionally incorporated into the undergraduate college experience should identify places in the intellectual, emotional, and moral development of students where discernment should be practiced, and find ways to incorporate

this practice into courses as well as into non-academic spheres of college (for example, University Ministry and Residence Life). Two places in the undergraduate college experience that seem most obviously appropriate for discernment are when students enter college as freshmen and when they prepare to leave as graduating seniors. Let me say a word about how this could work in the curriculum.

One obvious place where discernment should occur is in certain freshman-level disciplinary courses required in the distributive core, such as introductory philosophy, religious studies, and/or English classes. One way to implement this is for departments to accept this mission intentionally as part of their student objectives for their introductory course. This ensures that all students practice discernment through one or more required courses so that chance does not determine who practices discernment based on whether they happened to take the right sections of the course. Above I explained how philosophy is uniquely situated to cultivate discernment. For those reasons, it seems fitting for philosophy departments to make this commitment if they are so inclined. However, there is plenty of room for other disciplines to offer their own unique contributions to teaching this practice as well.

A second place where discernment should occur is in core courses that students take when they are juniors and/or, ideally, seniors. Different liberal arts colleges have different cores, and what core courses are required for all juniors and/or seniors will vary among schools. Two places where discernment may be fostered are in integrative core courses arranged thematically or in a separate required senior seminar or equivalent core course.

As is evident from my discussion above, what I think would be most effective and meaningful is a senior seminar required for all graduating seniors, in which seniors practice discernment in a way that bridges their academic experience with life after college. As I mentioned above, Regis College eliminated its senior seminar a few years ago when it revised the core. While I strongly support the integrative core that replaced the sophomore, junior, and senior seminars, I mourn the loss of senior seminar, and if I had the opportunity to teach the course again, I would be thrilled to do so

and I would teach it exactly as I did before. Because one of the reasons that Regis eliminated the seminars was that they seemed ineffective in certain ways, reinstating a senior seminar would require establishing guidelines for what the class should do and include, especially for the sake of ensuring that professors design their courses to reflect the goal of systematic discernment. Because a course like this could be uncomfortable or foreign to some faculty, incentives such as faculty development support and discretionary funds for student activities should be available in order to attract committed professors.

It must be noted, however, the course would only be successful with faculty who are indeed committed to cultivating and guiding discernment as a process independent of its specific ends. The goal, after all, is for students to develop the habit of thinking intentionally about who they are and who they should be; the goal is *not* for students to become specific kinds of thinkers or to come to specific thoughts. Faculty whose goal is for students to arrive at specific conclusions about issues (politically, religiously, ethically, or otherwise) would not be able to teach discernment as a *process* effectively.


Moreover, the success of a course like this requires faculty to have a certain demeanor: of being gentle, open and open-minded, and non-judgmental. If students perceive that their ideas are being judged pejoratively, they will not share what is personally meaningful to them, and they will consequently lose the opportunity to explore and discern what is of personal value. Students must believe that what they say, believe, and care about has some value and is at least worth examining. Students nervous about the process of discernment must be gently coaxed out of their shells, at least a little bit, and students who are highly self-critical must be encouraged and supported. Students must feel that the classroom environment is a safe place to share what is of personal value so that they can have meaningful discussions from which they can learn from each other and grow. These prerequisites of a successful seminar on discernment require skills and personality traits of faculty that are difficult to acquire; I don't know how one "learns" how to do these things, except by doing them. I suppose they

are acquired through habits that one develops through practice, just like discernment.

There are certainly potential administrative problems with my suggestions, especially when a college core is not already designed to easily incorporate teaching discernment in a systematic way. This problem would probably need to be addressed through a core review. A second potential problem is that it makes yet another demand on overworked faculty. Faculty at liberal arts colleges are asked to incorporate a lot that goes above and beyond what they teach in their discipline, and it can be difficult to design courses that address the relevant subject matter *and* to foster the development of important practices like critical reading, writing, oral communication, ethical reasoning, and active engagement with justice issues. All of these practices are important to both the Jesuit mission and to liberal arts education in general; and they are cross-disciplinary as well, making all faculty responsible for teaching them. Asking faculty to incorporate one more extra-disciplinary practice, discernment, may be asking too much.

I do not think this need be the case, however. Cultivating discernment at a college-wide level requires identifying specific places where teaching discernment is appropriate and encouraging this teaching through proper incentives, including faculty development support and discretionary funds for student activities. Some departments, such as philosophy, are already better situated than others to incorporate discernment into their curriculum. As part of their faculty development, college faculty should have opportunities to learn more about the role of discernment in Ignatian spirituality, as well as to learn about—and indeed practice—Jesuit exercises of discernment. Faculty development opportunities to share ideas about how to incorporate discernment into various courses are also necessary. Because many faculty are indeed already over-committed and over-worked, incentives (financial or otherwise) should be offered so that faculty can justify devoting their time and energy in this way. There are practical ways of decreasing and offsetting the potential burden that my proposal may generate.

Discernment is a key part of the Jesuit educational mission. If students leaving college should be able

to determine for themselves the best way to live—which is a primary goal of Jesuit education—they need to develop the tools that will enable them to do this. The practice of discernment should be systematically integrated into the undergraduate college experience, especially in the college curriculum; and in places in the curriculum deemed most appropriate, faculty serve an important role in cultivating this discernment. Besides its central role in Jesuit education, discernment is also an important part of the broader discussions about judgment in education more generally. In addition to highlighting the importance of discernment in Jesuit education and suggesting ways to cultivate discernment, this essay may contribute, perhaps, to the larger discussion about judgment in education as well. 

Notes

¹ John Chaffee, *Thinking Critically*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 35. The first edition was published in 1985 and the 10th edition appeared in January, 2011. John Chaffee, *The Thinker's Way* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998); John Chaffee, *The Philosopher's Way: Thinking Critically about Profound Ideas* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004). Here I paraphrased Chaffee's own phrasing of the three steps of developing the organized and systematic thinking abilities involved in critical thinking.

² Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 62.

³ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵ *Ibid.*; see his theory of "The Wheel of Judgment," 281-293.

⁶ Superior General, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach S.J., Internal Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education, "The Characteristics of Jesuit Education," (December 8, 1986). The wording here comes from Regis University, "What Are Some of the Jesuit Values that Inspire Education at Regis University?" *Regis University*, <http://www.regis.edu/regis.asp?sctn=abt&p1=mjv>, accessed March 15, 2012; see also the websites of other Jesuit universities which describe their commitment to Jesuit values, including: Creighton University, "Characteristics of a Jesuit Education," *Jesuit Values*, <http://www.creighton.edu/students/culturetraditions/jesuitvalues/index.php>, accessed March 15, 2012; and St. Peter's College, "Jesuit Values," *St. Peter's College*, <http://www.spc.edu/pages/3640.asp>, accessed March 15, 2012.

⁷ Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 26; italics original.

⁸ I thank Ivan Gaetz for help in structuring this part of the essay (Part 1) and for clarifying the relationship between discernment and judgment, as well as the role of judgment in educational philosophy and educational theory.

⁹ Lipman calls this "appreciative thinking," which he attributes to John Dewey. He succinctly summarizes it thus: "To appreciate is to pay attention to what matters, to what is of importance." Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 265.

¹⁰ Boston College, "A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education: The Habit of Discerning," *Boston College*, updated December 3, 2010, accessed January 20, 2012, <http://www.bc.edu/offices/mission/publications/guide/discernment.html>.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed. Terence Irwin, Trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999), Book II, Chapter 1, 18-19.

¹² My focus here is on undergraduates, especially traditional-age undergraduates, because this is the population I teach; my remarks in this essay may apply to other populations as well.

¹³ I want to be clear here that I am *not* claiming that philosophers have a monopoly on the skills and expertise relevant to teaching discernment. On the contrary, I believe that faculty from many different disciplines can draw on or acquire various practices, skills, content, and traditions that enable them to make valuable contributions to the teaching of discernment. While I am focusing here on the unique contributions of philosophy, by no means do I intend to exclude the potential contributions of other disciplines and of faculty who are not philosophers.

¹⁴ The importance of these analytical reasoning skills in discernment is evident in Randy Roche's and John Veltri's discussions of the discernment process: Randy Roche, S.J., "Making Decisions," *Loyola Marymount University*, edited March 23, 2010, accessed January 20, 2012, http://www.lmu.edu/libraries_research/CIS/Decisions_by_Discernment/Making_Decisions.htm; John Veltri, S.J., "Decision-Making: A More Useful Format For Discerning," *Jesuits in English Canada*, accessed January 20, 2012, <http://www.jesuits.ca/orientations/bob/Decision-Making%20Format%20For%20Personal%20Use.htm>.

¹⁵ Rene Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," *Selected Philosophical Writings*, Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 73-122.

¹⁶ Here I need to state my uneasiness with this entire characterization of what it is to be human because I am especially mindful that many humans lack the mental capacity to be a rational agent—and consequently to be able to discern. In no way do I wish to suggest that they are less than human or live less valuable or dignified lives. Nonetheless, the abilities to reflect and choose are significant such that to whatever extent individuals have these abilities, they ought to exercise them. (But, to be clear, the inability to do so in no way diminishes one's dignity or value.)

I am also uneasy about characterizing animals as purely lacking these abilities, as if a creature either does or does not

possess these capabilities. While this is the dominant view throughout the history of philosophy and is common even today, based on current science I think it is more reasonable to assume that there is a continuum of reasoning abilities and perhaps even second-order awareness, and that humans as a species are much “higher” on the continuum than other species but that within all species there is much variation among individuals. I do not think that this continuum view diminishes the importance of reflection and agency—nor the moral dignity and worth of various individuals or other species.

¹⁷ One is reminded of Descartes’ “Cogito, ergo sum”—“I think, therefore I am”: I contemplate (and am aware of myself contemplating), therefore I as a contemplating being (an agent) exist. Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” *Selected Philosophical Writings* (1988), 80-81.

¹⁸ By “typical,” I mean typical of the philosophy profession (nationwide), not typical of Regis College.

¹⁹ See “Our Mission,” *Regis University*, accessed January 20, 2012, <http://www.regis.edu/regis.asp?sctn=abt>.

²⁰ The idea of organizing a senior seminar around a personal project did not originate with me; I borrowed it from a colleague, John Kane, professor emeritus of religious studies at Regis University, and made it my own. He structured the class to meet once a week as a reading group and once a week to discuss personal projects, and for him, like me, the *process* of discerning through the personal project was more important than the content of the project. His way of designing the course with the intent of fostering discernment greatly inspired me and I used his structure for my own course. All of the brainstorming questions, project assignments, and readings about meaning (and the organization of their themes) described in this essay are my own.

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