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Philosophy in Our Core

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Abstract

The Jesuit (and Catholic) educational tradition is characterized by a number of identity-conferring basic positions that are incompatible with correlative positions on offer in the popular culture. Some of these fundamental differences between the tradition and the culture are philosophical in nature in that they bear on questions of moral truth and philosophical anthropology. Institutions of higher education committed to forming their students in light of these basic and counter-cultural beliefs must ensure that the incompatible cultural alternatives are carefully examined and the reasonableness of the Ignatian (Catholic) alternatives carefully explored. The discipline Philosophy plays an irreplaceable role in this sort of tradition-culture engagement. With this in mind, institutions of higher education that claim the Jesuit and Catholic tradition as their own must ensure that Philosophy remains (or is restored to) a significant part of their core curricula.

Not too long ago I had the opportunity to work with a cohort of twelve first-year medical students at a local medical school. My task was to deliver to these future doctors the ethics component of a year-long course in the profession of medicine; we would meet three or four times that year and discuss the field of medical ethics. Although our time together would be short, I was keen on getting to know these students on a somewhat personal basis. At our initial meeting I asked each of them where they grew up, where they went to college, why they wanted to be a physician, etc. In the course of that first meeting, in order to gauge their formal preparation for thinking about medical ethics, I also asked them whether they had any undergraduate coursework in philosophy. Only three raised a hand. Of these three, two had a semester-long self-standing course in ethics as part of their undergraduate degree requirements.¹ These two students, the two whose undergraduate education seemed to have left them better prepared than their peers to navigate the moral dimensions of their chosen field, were Jesuit educated; one was from the University of Scranton, the other from Xavier University. I offer this story both as a point of pride for those of us engaged in Jesuit higher education and as a way to emphasize the importance of preserving the study of Philosophy as a distinctive mark of this tradition. It is disturbing to see so many colleges and universities proudly turn out future physicians, nurses, teachers, attorneys, accountants, etc. who are technically proficient yet

unprepared to work through the moral quandaries that await them in their chosen field, and to engage the great existential questions that life will sooner or later press upon them. A core requirement in this ancient discipline would no doubt be a step in the right direction for these institutions, and eliminating or reducing such a requirement would no doubt be a step in the wrong direction for Jesuit colleges and universities.

While it may be the case that decision-makers at Jesuit colleges and universities will continue to ensure that exposure to philosophy remains a distinctive mark of the education these institutions offer, a “some Philosophy, *any* Philosophy” minimalist approach to executing this commitment would surely leave many students underserved. Questions about what our students’ exposure to this discipline should look like must be answered thoughtfully. The breadth of Philosophy and the rather common need to fit a requirement in this discipline into just one or two courses require difficult decisions to be made. Logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and social and political philosophy are just a few of the areas one might like to cover, and each of these branches has subdivisions of its own. To sort through the multitude of options and make appropriate decisions about what all of their graduates ought to know, a Jesuit institution would do well to ask itself what it seeks to accomplish by means of this element of its core

curriculum. Wrestling with that question should raise two other questions: “What do the Jesuit and Catholic traditions—traditions that these institutions publicly claim as their own—have to say about the matter?” and “What feature(s) should a Philosophy requirement at Jesuit and Catholic schools operating in the early 21st-century first-world share?” Such questions draw the focus of decision-makers away from their own philosophical preferences and specialties and place it on two often-clashing outlooks on the human being and the world: that offered by the Jesuit and Catholic tradition, and that offered by the dominant culture from which our students come and to which they will return.

If Jesuit institutions of higher education carefully assess and refine the Philosophy component of their respective curricula in the manner described above, it may very well turn out that their alumni, including the aforementioned medical students from Xavier and Scranton, will enjoy a common philosophical foundation, one that will give them a shared outlook, idiom, and way of proceeding as they—separately and together—respond to the Ignatian challenge to be salt and light in the world. What, though, should that shared foundation look like?

Cura personalis, *magis*, *finding God in all things*, and *metanoia* are Ignatian terms that are employed in much of the serious talk regarding the institutional identity and educational aspirations of Jesuit colleges and universities. These words express ideas that shape our institutions and are frequently offered as ultimate justifications for policies and practices in all areas of institutional life. These ideas shape how we seek to shape our students. Yet what sometimes goes unnoticed in this Ignatian educational discourse is that these words and phrases are philosophically heavy; heavy in what they presuppose and heavy in what they call those committed to this tradition to do (and not to do). Were they to be evacuated of this deeper philosophical meaning, these terms might be reduced to vague, cost-free clichés that give an Ignatian luster to all sorts of policies and proposals that are appealing for any number of other reasons, while demanding little of those who invoke them and offering no guidance to students exposed to them. Here is where Philosophy has an important role to play.

There are certain cultural tendencies, perhaps pre-critical habits of thought, that bump up against the foundational, philosophically substantive commitments of the Ignatian worldview. A student who has been well grounded in Philosophy and who appreciates the philosophical dimensions of these Ignatian commitments will be prepared to go into the world, challenge these “errors of the age,” and offer a better alternative. In doing so these men and women can change the world in ways that others cannot, taking what has been passed on to them by the Jesuit tradition and offering it to their coworkers, their family, their friends, their neighbors. Indeed, the right kind of philosophical background can empower these graduates to become links in a chain that stretches back for centuries and which, through them, will reach into the future.

But what are these “errors of the age” and how do they *philosophically* bump up against the aforementioned ideas at the heart of Jesuit education? In what follows, I offer three. There are no doubt more, and maybe even some that are more profound than the three I examine, but the three I identify are at work in our students’ basic outlook and, at the same time, are deeply at odds with the basic commitments of the Ignatian tradition that we call our own and promise to pass on to our students. The three ideas that I speak of are materialism, individualism, and relativism.

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The “materialism” in play here is *metaphysical materialism*. Let this phrase stand for what Thomas Nagel describes as

a comprehensive, speculative world picture that is reached by extrapolation from some of the discoveries of biology, chemistry, and physics—a particular naturalistic *Weltanschauung* that postulates a hierarchical relation among the subjects of those sciences, and the completeness in principle of an explanation of everything in the universe through their unification.²

Nagel’s words lay out well the grand idea behind what so many students accept as the starting point and reasonable parameters for all serious inquiry

regarding the human person, namely, that everything “really real” about us is fully explainable by reference to our material constituents. The belief is that human beings are *merely* biological creatures, and that the whole of one’s interior life—deliberating, willing, hoping, loving, wondering, worshipping, etc.—is in reality only a complex nexus of biological phenomena. For so many students this is the presumptively-true background account of the human being; the solid ground upon which serious-minded people stride.³ While our culture, including our students, may not have this background anthropology laid out in their minds as elaborately as Nagel’s formulation, it is nevertheless the case that so many believe it to be true. Why is this so?

The materialism uncritically adopted by so many of our students appears to be allied with the epistemological principle, also uncritically adopted, that only “scientific” knowledge is authentic knowledge. These metaphysical and epistemological commitments underwrite the principle that all and only the deliverances of “science” are to be accepted as features of objective reality.⁴ A worldview hangs on this principle; the difference between the propositions *Science gives us knowledge of part of reality* and *Science alone determines what is real* is profound. The latter leaves no room for any matter-independent dimension to reality, and so belief in a soul, God, and free will, that is, belief that these are *really* real despite being empirically undetectable, becomes intellectually disreputable and thus somewhat embarrassing in serious public conversation. While many do believe in such things, these beliefs bear the taint of a dubious provenance given that they are based not upon science but upon the softer ground composed of some mixture of blind faith, upbringing (which means, to some critics, *indoctrination*), and/or a personal (read *purely subjective*) experience. While students may support a certain amount of public space for one “to personally believe” in such things, the consensus view seems to be that these beliefs cannot rise to the status of knowledge because the requisite empirical justification is, by the very nature of the objects in question, unavailable.⁵

It is not difficult to see how this account of what is real conflicts with the Ignatian ideas of *cura personalis*, *magis*, *finding God in all things*, and *metanoia*.

It makes them all to be, at best, ennobling cultural myth and, at worst, naive nonsense. What exactly is an attitude of “care” in this worldview? What are aspirations for “the greater” on this account of the human being? For that matter, what is the measure of the good, the greater, the lesser? What is a “mind” here, and what does it mean to seek a transformation of self? And what a fool’s errand it is to try to find God in anything, let alone in *all* things. If metaphysical materialism is true, then the foundational commitments and animating aspirations of the entire Ignatian educational tradition are—to put it in the most philosophically charitable words—held without warrant.

Philosophy, however, has something to say on behalf of the philosophical anthropology that the Jesuit and Catholic tradition offers. Consider Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s observation that *freedom*, *love*, and *evil* are “three themes fundamental to human existence.”⁶ Consider, too, the late 20th century Catholic writer Walker Percy’s observation that

[t]his life is much too much trouble, far too strange, to arrive at the end of it and then be asked what you make of it and have to answer, ‘Scientific humanism.’ That won’t do. A poor show.⁷

Finally, consider Walt Whitman’s experience that “a morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.”⁸ Taken together, these three (of countless) examples manifest the remarkable human capacity to engage in serious philosophical reflection about a wide range of experiences, and to be conscious of oneself engaging in such reflections. Yet all of these activities and experiences are among the data that must be explained, and explained well, by any account of the human being that claims to be complete and credible. Graduates of institutions that place themselves within the Jesuit and Catholic tradition ought to have considered carefully a slew of interrelated philosophical questions provoked by these authors’ words. This tradition is rich with thinkers and texts that model such careful introspection, like St. Augustine’s 5th century *Confessions* and St. John Paul II’s 20th century personalism.⁹ One recurring philosophical question of particular importance here is whether materialism offers a sufficient explanation—that

is, a complete and credible account—for the wide variety of activities and experiences that fill the student’s daily life. The problematic explanatory gap between a third-person objective account of their life as an organism and their inescapably first-person experiences as a self in the world should be familiar territory to them.

Furthermore, while considering accounts that purport to fill this explanatory gap, students should also understand well the inherent weakness of the often-assumed but less-often examined principle that only empirical explanations are acceptable. As contemporary philosopher Edward Feser points out, that kind of popular, pre-critical scientism is either self-defeating or trivially true. The proposition *Only scientific knowledge is authentic knowledge* is not itself scientifically (“scientifically” understood here in a narrow sense of “empirically”) verifiable, and thus the principle eliminates itself. If one were to avoid this difficulty by expanding the meaning of “scientific knowledge” to include any conclusion drawn by means of reasoning from observed data (including first-person data introspectively observed) to unobserved proportionate causes, then the improved statement would become rather less controversial and, more to the point, unable to ground a peremptory dismissal of the metaphysical presuppositions behind the Ignatian ideals we have been considering.¹⁰

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Individualism is another cultural error that bumps up against the accounts of the person, the world, and God that underlie well-known Ignatian commitments. As with materialism, it is likely the case that many students at Jesuit institutions have uncritically adopted this basic stance from the culture rather than appropriated it as their own after a careful philosophical examination of its foundations and implications. The individualism in question here identifies the subject as the uncontested criterion of just about everything that has anything to do with the good for oneself and the kind of life one chooses to lead. This cultural norm leaves little room for anything other than oneself to question the truth of one’s judgments bearing upon such matters. Almost thirty years ago philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre described this cultural shift as heading in the direction of “the

privatization of the good.”¹¹ Two years later the Supreme Court of the United States gave voice and heft to this outlook by proclaiming that “at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”¹²

The more recent phenomenon of publicly identifying as something other than what one manifestly is, and the mutually-affirming narcissism that characterizes much of social media, are perhaps symptoms of this elevation and acceptance of the self as the unquestioned final criterion for answers to an ever-widening set of questions. The commonplace invocation of the principle of autonomy as the (putatively) supreme principle that ought to settle so many morally significant public policy questions (e.g., those regarding access to abortion, physician-assisted suicide, and pornography) both reflects and reinforces this tendency. One notable manifestation of the sort of individualism in question here can be found in the area of reproductive technology. The laboratory production of a child according to the preferences of the parent(s) is a widely accepted project which regularly includes the discarding of other laboratory-generated embryos who do not fit the desired profile. Furthermore, this desired profile may be one that includes a disability. In some cases the production of the preferred kind of child may involve not only the selection of an embryo with a certain disability, but also the subsequent choice by the parent(s) not to mitigate the disability by means of available and effective therapies.¹³ What morally underwrites this practice (insofar as it is ever seriously challenged) are individualized, subjective accounts of *health* and *disability* that are grounded not in the nature of the thing (that is, in the proper functioning of the organs and systems of the human being) but in the preferences of the parent(s).¹⁴ As suggested earlier, a similar autonomy-heavy, individualistic approach to the value of life is found in the standard cases in favor of rights to abortion and physician-assisted suicide.¹⁵

Students emerging from institutions of higher education that claim the Jesuit and Catholic traditions as their own ought to be prepared to challenge philosophically our culture’s habitual and seemingly rarely examined elevation of the

individual. Philosophy does have the resources to lay bare and push back against what so many students seem to take for granted, namely, that each person is *alone* competent to craft his or her own answers to the basic questions, “What am I?”, “What is the value of my life?”, and “How ought I live?”, and that such self-constitution is best done free of any unwanted baggage that family, community, and tradition would offer as guidance. Contemporary philosophers Peter Singer and Alasdair MacIntyre, despite widely divergent views on many important issues, each call attention to the eminently contestable philosophical anthropology that is suggested by this cultural orthodoxy. Singer finds the idea of the “independent individual” to be “unhistorical, abstract and ultimately inexplicable.”¹⁶ MacIntyre elaborates, pointing to some indisputable facts about each of us:

We find ourselves placed at some particular point within a network of relationships of giving and receiving in which, generally and characteristically, what and how far we are able to give depends in part on what and how far we received. . . . So understood, the relationships from which the independent practical reasoner emerges and through which she or he continues to be sustained are such that from the outset she or he is in debt.¹⁷

With each human being having been utterly at the mercy of, and shaped by, particular families, communities, and traditions, the idea of the independent individual on offer in our culture is a fiction, an impoverished account of the concrete person. MacIntyre also points to certain recurring patterns that are no doubt to be found in each student’s life and that generate certain basic commitments that are neither revocable nor conditioned upon one’s changeable preferences:

And the kind of care that was needed to make us what we have in fact become . . . had to be, if it was to be effective, unconditional care for the human being as such, whatever the outcome. And this is the kind of care that we in turn now owe or will owe.¹⁸

The challenge to the individualism of the day offered by just these two philosophers is substantial and sophisticated, and there is more where it came from. Our graduates should know these challenges well.

Perhaps some students have moved past the sort of inchoate individualism in question here and endorse some form of libertarianism. Their strand of individualism may be one that follows the spirit of Ayn Rand, whose character John Galt declares “I swear, by my life and my love of it, that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.”¹⁹ Rand believed that “[i]f any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject.”²⁰ At the heart of this posture towards the world stands the atomic individual, and the development of civilization is to be measured in terms of its “progress toward a society of privacy.”²¹ Yet, as with the aforementioned brand of individualism, this notion of the human being and this account of progress seems conceptually incompatible with the Ignatian ideal of *cura personalis* as a legitimate and authoritative call to serve the authentic well-being of others. The great distance between the ideals of Rand and those of Ignatius is made manifest simply by attending to the sort of *metanoia* that each calls for. Here again, Philosophy has something important to say. For example, Robert George, a contemporary public intellectual who has spent a career philosophically articulating and defending elements of the moral worldview which Jesuit colleges and universities claim as their own, explains that libertarianism

affirms a genuine truth—in this case, the value and importance of liberty or personal autonomy—but affirms it so emphatically and indeed single-mindedly that it winds up denying other equally important truths and values.

Libertarianism of the Ayn Randian sort emphasizes individualism so strongly that it ends up treating human sociability and the values connected to it (e.g., friendship, marriage, community, solidarity) as purely instrumental goods, rather than intrinsic and constitutive aspects of human well-being and fulfillment. The value of human relationships and associations is reduced to their utility and efficiency in enabling

the partners or members to achieve their *individual* goals.²²

George, MacIntyre, and Singer are just a few notable philosophers who offer a reasoned critique of, and plausible alternative to, the individualism that characterizes so much of contemporary culture, the culture from which our students come and to which they shall return. The insights that these and other philosophers offer are grounded in reason and other common elements of the lived experience of these students. This lived experience, together with the kind of sustained critical reflection that characterizes Philosophy, can provide an oft-missing measure of rational depth and force to the Ignatian ideals that shape the identity and characteristic discourse of Jesuit colleges and universities. In this way, Philosophy offers an irreplaceable contribution to our tradition's case that the individualism of the day does not withstand scrutiny, and that the obligations related to *cura personalis* and being men and women for others are more than mere sentiment. This case, grounded as it is in reason and common experience, may travel well as the students leave our institutions and re-enter the world.

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In addition to materialism and individualism, moral relativism—the belief that there are no objective moral truths to be known—is a background belief that so many students bring with them into our classrooms. This belief is to be distinguished from the idea that moral truths are difficult to discern but are, at least in principle, knowable (like, for instance, the truths of particle physics). The underlying metaphysical position is simple: there is no moral dimension to reality that one can *know* in the robust sense of this term. As with the other two background beliefs already discussed, our students' commitment to this kind of relativism seems not to have been borne of careful and sustained philosophical deliberation. Most students seem to take for granted that one can, with persistent and careful study, correctly grasp the nature of quarks and stars and viruses and gravity. These things are, in a loose sense, “out there” to be known; they are “really real” and one can get it right about them (and one can get it wrong, too, as history has shown). With morality,

however, such is not the case. So many students take it for granted that even the most settled moral beliefs are not *really* true in any “hard” sense, that is, in any sense that would allow one to say that those who think otherwise are actually *mistaken*, that they are in error. Their relativism fits rather easily with the materialism and individualism that round out this suite of ideas that shape so much of their worldview. It also disposes them to accept some of the more philosophically elaborated defenses of this position, leaving them to wonder skeptically what sort of empirical confirmation can be found for the belief that something even as odious as slavery is, in fact, *objectively* morally wrong. “Where,” they might learn ask, “would one look, and what would one need to observe, to confirm (or falsify) this proposition?” Finally, if what is authentically good for an individual is simply whatever he or she asserts to be good based upon personal feelings and preferences (which surely have been partly shaped by cultural practices and preferences), on what grounds could one individual claim that another's conception of the good is inadequate, or even mistaken? Can a preference be mistaken? What would such an assertion even mean?

With the status of moral “facts” thus settled, moral beliefs lose objective measure and, with that, rational force. Contemporary philosopher and teacher James McBrayer finds this downgrading of moral beliefs to be rooted in a dangerous, unsustainable, and demonstrably false distinction between *fact* and *opinion* that has been woven into the curriculum and culture of so many elementary and secondary schools. According to McBrayer, many of our students come to our institutions believing that a *fact* is “something that is true about a subject and can be tested or proven” and a *belief* is merely “what someone thinks, feels, or believes.”²³ Over the course of their primary and secondary education, it becomes axiomatic to these students that each of our claims belongs in one, and only one, of these two categories.²⁴ As soon as the claims of morality are placed in their proper category, namely that of *belief*, the notion that some moral claims could be true and others false becomes intellectually unsustainable (and culturally inappropriate). The fruit of this categorizing and consequent deflating of moral claims is a moral relativism that

undermines any serious moral discourse about what is right and what is good.²⁵

Here is MacIntyre's "privatization of the good" in full bloom. Individualism and moral relativism each contribute to the idea that what is authentically good for any individual is simply what that individual determines to be good for himself or herself, and this determination will be based upon personal feelings and preferences. This account of the human good, and its corollaries in the fields of applied ethics and public policy, seems to function as common ground in our students' moral worldviews, however inchoate these worldviews may be. Because it is rarely, if ever, called into question these students fail to see that this common ground ultimately reduces to what MacIntyre calls "private arbitrariness."²⁶

One of the costs of this moral worldview is the rather stultified moral reasoning that its adherents often engage in. Many students earnestly endorse moral propositions regarding substantive human goods (e.g., *Health care is good; we as a people should promote it.*) that, when coupled with their characteristic default-to-relativism, makes them vulnerable to a certain kind of manipulation. For example, in the morally complex field of biomedical research, proponents of research projects often employ moral terms in their cases for public funding. They explain that the proposed research is aimed at developing cures and therapies for certain diseases and thus is *good* and *ought* to be supported legally and financially. Students are often persuaded by such cases and express support for public policies to protect, and public funding to facilitate, these endeavors. Yet when serious moral objections are raised about some element(s) of an otherwise appealing project (say, that it calls for creating and experimenting upon human embryos) many of these same students summarily dismiss such concerns because, they point out, moral objections are really just subjective preferences that must not be imposed upon others and must not be permitted to obstruct progress. In this way the culture has formed these students in such a way that they constitute easy and reliable support for such morally problematic research.²⁷

Philosophy, though, can help here. It is the discipline best equipped to challenge those for whom moral relativism is the presumptively right position. Instead of treating relativism as the enlightened third way above the fray of ongoing moral disagreement, Philosophy asks, persistently and in an intellectually demanding way, simple but profound questions such as "Is moral relativism *true*?" and "How does one *know* it to be true (or false)?" Furthermore, this discipline teaches us not to accept any answer simply because it is sincerely held. Instead, it demands that all answers be philosophically developed and subjected to sustained critical scrutiny; reasoning and evidence, not feeling and popularity, are the standards that must be met.

James Rachels is one contemporary philosopher who challenges moral relativism by asking relativists why a reasonable person ought to believe their foundational claim that there are no objective moral truths. Rachels reports that the answer he would usually receive was something along the lines of, "Because people *disagree* on moral issues."²⁸ This answer is consistent with the answer that I have been offered by so many students throughout my teaching career. Yet, Rachels presses, how is it that *disagreement* over a particular issue is sufficient to show that there is no objective truth in that area? Perhaps, he offers, one reason there is disagreement in this area is that some people are right and others are mistaken.²⁹ Such is often the most reasonable explanation for disagreement in other areas of human inquiry. Consider history and the various sciences. The story of each of these disciplines is rife with disagreement, yet it is not considered a sign of great wisdom to conclude from this fact that there is no objective truth in these areas. Yet so many students find this to be the only reasonable conclusion to be drawn from the fact of moral disagreement. The inconsistency here is rather noteworthy, but is a problem of which few students seem to take note.

Furthermore, Rachels and many others suggest that the proponents of this standard case for relativism overstate the nature and depth of the moral disagreement one observes. Does a bit of careful study not reveal at least hints of a historically and culturally transcendent consensus on at least a few foundational principles (e.g.,

Friendship is to be respected; Health should be promoted), a consensus that perhaps points away from relativism? Assuming that anything short of unanimity trumps any claim to truth in this area of inquiry, some thoughtful students might quickly point to individuals who claim to remain outside of this putative moral consensus (in my experience, these individuals are always hypothetical since the students know no real deniers of these propositions) as a defeating counter example. Yet to this granting of veto-power to the (imagined?) gainsayer, 20th century philosopher Anthony Flew had this to say:

The attempt to show that there is no philosophical knowledge by simply urging that there is always someone who can be relied on to remain unconvinced is a common fallacy...I called it the But-There-Is-Always-Someone-Who-Will-Never-Agree Diversion.³⁰

In this way philosophy can diagnose and offer reason-based pushback against the moral relativism that is orthodoxy among so many of our students. This particular error leaves no room for belief in the objectivity and truthfulness of the moral dimensions of Ignatian ideals like *cura personalis*, *metanoia*, and the Ignatian call to be men and women for others; it must be challenged if these elements of our tradition are to be found credible.

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Philosophy is a discipline uniquely equipped to prepare our students to stand athwart the materialism, individualism, and moral relativism of our culture. It offers sustained, reason-based critiques of these cultural presumptions which are in irreconcilable conflict with some of the deepest commitments of the Jesuit and Catholic tradition. Other disciplines—Literature, History, Theology, etc.—each in their own way can challenge these errors, but none can do so in the manner of philosophy. As each of these three errors is, at bottom, a properly philosophical claim, each is in need of a properly philosophical challenge. Furthermore, the Jesuit and Catholic tradition’s respective alternatives to each of these claims are in need of robust and properly philosophical articulation and defense given that each is an

identity-contributing element to this tradition. As educators in institutions committed to the Ignatian principles *cura personalis*, *metanoia*, the *magis*, and *finding God in all things*, is it not our obligation to prepare our students to push back against these harmful and mistaken cultural presumptions by offering them our tradition’s richer and more accurate accounts of the person, the community, and the world?

Consider for a moment just a few of the properly philosophical questions generated by the familiar Ignatian ideal *cura personalis*: What does this phrase mean? Who counts as a *person*: the unborn, the permanently unconscious, the profoundly disabled? Why? Is *cura personalis* objectively obligatory, or merely a suggested way of proceeding? Is failure to care for the person a *moral* failure? What is a moral failure? What is *authentic* care? Is there such thing as inauthentic or false care? By what criteria does one make such a judgment? Are there authentic human goods? St. Ignatius believed the answer to this last question to be “yes.” Plato agreed. In Plato’s *Gorgias* one finds Socrates criticizing the orator Gorgias for pandering to his audience rather than teaching them about right and wrong. “The difference,” Socrates explains, “is that pandering pays no regard to the best interests of its object but catches fools with the bait of ephemeral pleasure and tricks them into holding it in the highest esteem.”³¹ Socrates goes on to declare this sort of approach “dishonorable” in that “it makes pleasure its aim instead of good” and “because it has no rational understanding of the nature of the various things it applies to or the person to whom it applies.”³² Here the great Socrates gestures toward a philosophical claim that forms part of the foundation of the Catholic intellectual tradition, namely, that there are authentic human goods that are the keys to human well-being, and that there are false, counterfeit “goods” that tempt one in the other direction. But is Socrates (and St. Ignatius) *right* here? Is this foundational claim, a claim which anchors the Ignatian notion *cura personalis*, true? If so, what are these authentic human goods that ought to be pursued? These are among the properly philosophical questions that must be addressed systematically if one committed to caring for persons is to be confident that their obligation is real and that the care they are providing is authentic. Given this requirement, an

institution committed to handing on to its students an understanding of, and developing in them a sustained commitment to, the Ignatian ideal *cura personalis* should see to it that these students appreciate the philosophical grounds of this ideal. In doing so, these institutions will be preparing their students to push back against the widespread tendency to level all accounts of what is good and what is right by reducing them all to mere cultural idiosyncrasy and/or personal preference.

The foregoing does not come close to exhausting the ways in which one might trace out the philosophical dimensions of the notion *cura personalis*. Notice that if the good of a particular thing is determined by the nature of that thing, then an investigation into the good of the person will involve an investigation into the nature of the person. And here again one sees the Ignatian understanding of the human being to be conceptually incompatible with the materialism discussed above. According to the tradition that Jesuit colleges and universities claim as their own, the person is (in very broad terms) a body-mind combination, each part an essential aspect of the identity of the whole. Care for the *person*, therefore, is care for a being whose body is part of its identity, but which is, at the same time, not *merely* a body. The implications of this philosophical anthropology on what should count as authentic *cura personalis* are profound. Following the Ignatian account, to promote, protect, and respect the living human body, whether an embryo, a newborn, a profoundly disabled child, an aging adult suffering from dementia, etc., is to promote, protect, and respect the person. Our students should, at the very least, understand the nuanced philosophical arguments that underwrite this position. They should come to see just how the de-personalization and instrumentalization of the body on offer in our culture—the renting of surrogate mothers, the purchasing of organs from the poor, the banality of sex in a hook-up culture saturated with pornography, the sexualization of ever-younger girls, the putative “right” to physician-assisted suicide, the normalization of contraception, the laboratory production of embryonic human beings for experimentation, just to name a few—are incompatible with this understanding of the person as essentially, but not exclusively, a living body always at some particular

stage along the continuum of growth and decline. The simple and profound philosophical questions generated by these conflicting anthropologies should be addressed head on: Which is the more adequate account?³³ Are the practices identified above consistent with a correct understanding of the subject who is the object of *cura personalis*? Do such practices serve the authentic good of all those involved? Note, again, that these are properly philosophical questions, and they demand properly philosophical attention. If Jesuit institutions of higher education are going to recommend our vision of the human person over that offered by much of contemporary culture, then it is incumbent upon us to do so in a manner that is philosophically serious. Here, then, one finds a crucial and irreplaceable role for Philosophy in bringing our students to appropriate the truths of our tradition and take them out to the culture.

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The challenge briefly laid out here is nothing new. It is just the Socratic (and Ignatian) call to the examined life. As mentioned earlier, there are many disciplines, each in its distinctive way, which can challenge our students to examine not only their own lives but also the life of their communities and the basic commitments of their culture. Philosophy has an irreplaceable role here, too. To diminish the role of this discipline in our schools is to diminish the preparation we offer to our students whom we challenge to go and set the world on fire. This challenge echoes the challenge that the life of Socrates raises, namely, to do where they live what he did in Athens: revere truth and justice, question the prevailing “wisdom” of the age, irritate, cajole, point to nonsense and call it nonsense, demand and help find better answers. The alternative to this understanding of Philosophy as a friend of *cura personalis*, *metanoia*, etc. is what may be called “Philosophy without commitment.” This alternative understands philosophy to be little more than a buffet of ideas and arguments which equip one to support or to critique just about any position, depending upon one’s desires. Philosophy on this model does not revere truth and justice, does not illuminate *cura personalis*, is not animated by the *magis*, and does not seek *metanoia*. Instead, one engaged in this way

of philosophizing is akin to G. K. Chesterton's new rebel. Chesterton writes,

[T]he new rebel is a skeptic, and will not entirely trust anything. He has no loyalty; he can never be really a revolutionist. And the fact that he doubts everything really gets in his way when he wants to denounce anything. For all denunciation implies a moral doctrine of some kind; and the modern revolutionist doubts not only the institution he denounces, but the doctrine by which he denounces it.... In short, the modern revolutionist, being an infinite skeptic, is always engaged in undermining his own mines. In his book on politics he attacks men for trampling on morality; in his book on ethics he attacks morality for trampling on men. Therefore the modern man in revolt has become practically useless for all purposes of revolt. By rebelling against everything he has lost his right to rebel against anything.³⁴

Standing in contrast to the role that Philosophy might play in the new rebel's life stands the role that Philosophy plays in the Catholic and Jesuit tradition. Philosophy in this tradition, one shaped in part by the ideals and aspirations of *cura personalis, magis, finding God in all things*, and *metanoia*, is Philosophy with a perspective, with deep commitments, with a certain orientation. It is Philosophy that will frequently bump up against, and can stand up against, the aforementioned errors of our age. It is not Philosophy as a buffet of ideas, arguments, and positions that can be used as needed to manipulate others, to advance one's program, to make oneself useful to those who would pursue lesser things. Instead, it is philosophy as Socrates practiced it, it is philosophy in the Ignatian tradition that our colleges and universities claim as their own. Within this tradition, both the role and the value of the study of philosophy far exceed that of cultivating a set of transferrable intellectual skills (critical thinking, etc.). This ancient discipline also offers our students what no other discipline can: a sustained, direct, and nuanced rational articulation and defense of the Catholic and Jesuit tradition's identity-conferring beliefs and ideals. As our graduates leave us we know that they head off to a

culture that will often be at odds with all that we stand for. If we have not prepared them to withstand these challenges and to be leaven in the world by exposing the philosophical errors of the age and offering a better alternative, then we have not done for them all that we could, and should, have done. Indeed, one clear measure of the authenticity and depth of an institution's commitment to its Ignatian beliefs and animating aspirations, and to the well-being of its students, is that institution's commitment to Philosophy in its core curriculum. Maintaining (and restoring, even expanding, where needed) a central role for Philosophy in the core curricula of Jesuit colleges and universities is a necessary element in authentically living out the mission and identity of Catholic and Jesuit institutions of higher learning. HJE

Notes

¹ The third had a couple of weeks of ethics as part of an Introduction to Philosophy elective.

² Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

³ For each of the last several years I have asked the students in my Introduction to Philosophy classes whether they believe that the empirical sciences could, at least in principle, "read" my brain activity and allow others to know precisely what I was thinking about and how I felt about what I was thinking about (e.g., "You are thinking about your grandmother's kitchen, and you feel that you miss her. You also hope to see her again someday?"). In every class to date the vast majority of students answered in the affirmative. When asked what they base this answer upon, they are typically unable to elaborate.

⁴ By "science," I mean empirical investigation, and by "scientific" I mean the data and conclusions generated by empirical investigation.

⁵ For a careful critique of the scientism discussed here see Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Piscataway, NJ: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 9-24.

⁶ Edward Pentin, "Benedict XVI Publicly Responds to Atheist's Critique," *National Catholic Register*, September, 24 2013, accessed January 5, 2017, <http://m.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-benedict-publicly-responds-to-atheists-critique/#.WWJpd4TyuM->

⁷ Lewis Lawson and Victor Kramer, eds., *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 317.

⁸ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Modern American Poetry*, eds. Ed Folsom, Cary Nelson,

and Trish Loughran, accessed January 5, 2017, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/song.htm

⁹ For an undergraduate-accessible account of St. John Paul II's philosophical-theological anthropology, see Michael Waldstein, introduction to *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, by John Paul II, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 1-130.

¹⁰ Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*.

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Privatization of the Good: An Inaugural Lecture," *The Review of Politics* 52, no. 3 (1990): 344-361.

¹² Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey, 505 U. S. 833, 851 (1992).

¹³ For a detailed exposition of these practices see Susannah Baruch, David Kaufman, and Kathy Hudson, "Genetic Testing of Embryos: Practices and Perspectives of US *In-Vitro* Fertilization Clinics," *Fertility and Sterility* 89, no. 5 (2008): 1053-1058.

¹⁴ For a critical elaboration on this point see Luke Gormally, "The Good of Health and the Ends of Medicine," in *Natural Moral Law in Contemporary Society*, H. Zaborowski, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 264-284.

¹⁵ It is my experience that most students see physician assisted suicide as morally licit and a matter of autonomy alone. Indeed, my experience is that upon first considering the issue in class most students have a very difficult time coming up with any plausible philosophical rebuttal to the orthodox autonomy-grounded justification that is on offer in the culture.

¹⁶ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 227.

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Peru, IL: Carus Publishing, 2001), 99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁹ Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999).

²⁰ Ayn Rand, "Faith and Force: The Destroyers of the Modern World" in *Philosophy: Who Needs It?* (New York: New American Library, 1982), 61.

²¹ Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1963), 84.

²² Robert George, "Libertarianism," in *Mirror of Justice: A blog dedicated to the development of Catholic legal theory*, May 20, 2010, accessed December 5, 2016, <http://mirrorofjustice.blogs.com/mirrorofjustice/2010/05/libertarianism.html>

²³ James McBrayer, "Why Our Children Don't Think There Are Moral Facts," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2015, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://mobile.nytimes.com/blogs/opinionator/2015/03/02/why-our-children-dont-think-there-are-moral-facts/>. Note how the materialism and scientism discussed earlier underwrites this distinction.

²⁴ As McBrayer points out, this dichotomy does not withstand scrutiny given that so many claims easily fit into both categories, e.g., *I think that the earth orbits the sun*.

²⁵ David Brooks, "If It Feels Right," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2011, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/13/opinion/if-it-feels-right.html>.

²⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 8.

²⁷ Eric Cohen, "The Ends of Science," *First Things* November 2006, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/11/the-ends-of-science>. Some may notice that here the supposed fact-value dichotomy is either ignored or invoked, depending upon the rhetorical needs of those who support the research in question.

²⁸ James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (USA: McGraw-Hill, 1999), 17ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Antony Flew, *There Is a God* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 41. Flew, a well-known contemporary philosopher and long-time atheist moved late in his life from atheism to deism because, he explains in this book, that is where the evidence lead.

³¹ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin Group, 2004), 464e.

³² *Ibid.*, 465.

³³ This question demands the consideration of another properly philosophical question: *What are the standards for adequacy here?*

³⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Haddonfield, NJ: Dodd, Mead & Co, 2013), 29.