Laval théologique et philosophique

# Philosophy in University Education

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Volume 8, numéro 1, 1952

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019865ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1019865ar

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Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)
1703-8804 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

De Koninck, C. (1952). Philosophy in University Education. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, *8*(1), 123–129. https://doi.org/10.7202/1019865ar

# Philosophy in University Education *

When the Honorary Secretary of our Conference asked me to participate in this symposium which bears the general title "A Philosophy of University Education," he mercifully added : " Should you wish to give a special title to your contribution, different from the general title I have mentioned, I will be glad to make this announcement on the programme." A few moments hence you may feel that I should have used this opening to select a more pertinent title such as : " On the relative impossibility of a Philosophy of University Education." In fact, any one who is aware that philosophy to-day fares no better than the Socrates of *The Clouds* might suggest that such a thesis must turn out too bold inasmuch as even the modest qualification of a " relative " impossibility as opposed to an absolute one might offend all those who either in principle or in practice deny that any philosophy — let alone a Philosophy of University Education — is at all possible ; or who believe that no philosophy can ever be more than a private opinion ; that no matter how many people share a so-called philosophical idea, we could never use it as a guide in public affairs without imposing upon those who disagree. And when we consider that no man who has been called a philosopher ever set forth an idea which was not contradicted by some other man who was also called a philosopher ; or again, that every man whom some have called a philosopher, has also been denied this apparently modest title by others, [1] historical fact seems to favour the skepticism or interdiction we referred to, and incline us to use the term " philosophy " only in connection with the irrelevant opinions of others.

You may already have reached the conclusion that a philosopher, or a professor of philosophy, is of all people the last to be consulted or given a hearing, if ever, on the subject of this symposium. I do not know whether it has ever been put outright in so many words, but surely there could be some reason for saying that if you want to get really confused on a subject, ask a philosopher about it. When we invite him to speak on "A Philosophy of University Education,"

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* Introduction to a subject for discussion, presented at the Laval meeting of the National Conference of Canadian Universities, in the Spring of the current year. Here reproduced with permission of the Conference.

1. E.g., an internationally famous scholar in Greek Philosophy, LÉON ROBIN, in his *Aristote* (Paris, 1944), finally reached the conclusion that Aristotle was not really a philosopher at all, but at best only a professor of philosophy, indeed a sophist. Some no doubt would begrudge him even that. A dead philosopher, it seems, is not more sheltered than a living one.

we must envisage the possibility that he may begin by raising questions such as : What do we mean by the words " philosophy," " university " and " education " ? However, realizing that in view of the circumstances (time is one of them, and what is expected of him, another) he could not go into these questions, he is likely to side-step the difficulty by assuming that "A Philosophy of University Education " probably means a practical conception regarding the purpose of the institution we call a University. He may try to avoid the word " philosophy " altogether, and confine himself to the question : What kind of training deserves the attribute of " University Education " ? He may even reduce the problem to " What is a University " ? " Why should there be the kind of institution we call a University " ? But whatever reduction he may attempt — even changing the subject ! — he cannot escape the word " university. "

Now the most important thing about a word is : " What has it been used to signify " ? " What does it stand for according to custom " ? Alas, even this question is far from simple. For a word may, and usually does, acquire different meanings, according to time and place. Whatever may have been the original meaning of the word " university " when applied to an institution of learning, Johnson, in his Dictionary, defines it to be " a school where all arts and faculties are taught." And the historian Mosheim says that the school of Paris, " which exceeded all others in various respects, as well as in the number of teachers and students, was the first to embrace all the arts and sciences, and therefore first became a University." [1] But even when we agree (and of course I do not dare to say we ought to) that in present usage this name " university " has something to do with universal knowledge, and that this universal knowledge embraces " all the arts and sciences," there remains much room for, and in fact there does exist, fundamental disagreement on what this universal knowledge is supposed to be, and on what kind of knowledge deserves to be called art or science — not to mention the ambiguity of these latter terms. For instance, some hold that knowledge is scientific only inasmuch as it is what others call an art. And of what some people believe to be the queen of the sciences, others will say that it is not even knowledge in its most tenuous sense ; that true science, supplanting all final certitude, actually discards that presumption ; that one of the chief purposes of a University Education is to unmask such pretensions.

The point I want to make is that even when we can reach agreement on the historical usage of a name, we can still ask whether the thing named was actually such as it was assumed to be, and if so, whether it really was as it should be. To know what the name " university " means is one thing ; but to know what a " university "

1. Quoted by NEWMAN, *The Idea of a University*, Toronto 1929, p.20.

should be, is quite another. No one will deny that the University of Paris was called a university. But some would say that actually only part of that institution really deserved this name.

In other words, our conception of what a university should be will depend upon our conception of universal knowledge ; upon what we believe to be essential to it. If, say, we believe that true knowledge remains confined to sensible reality, universal knowledge will be restricted to sensible reality. If the ultimate end of man is identical with the enjoyment of whatever the fleeting present can offer, then we should confine the pursuit of learning to the kind of knowledge which leads to such an end.

But they who hold that true knowledge can extend beyond this realm, will imply that in the previous conception the part is taken for the whole — that a university based on such an identification of part with whole is not really a university at all, but a totalitarian institution.

You all know of course which of these two positions I hold to be true, but I hasten to add that it is not for the facile reason that the one who clings to what he believes to be the greater whole can call the other a totalitarian. The problem is not as simple as that. I am well aware of several philosophies which teach that if only our illusory whole did not retard progress and fuller possession of the only truth to be achieved, metaphysics and theology could be tolerated, however weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable all their uses.

You might suggest, at this juncture, a university which would confine itself to those departments of learning upon which all could agree. But this would be only another way of giving every advantage to the one who denies the most.

I believe there is only one way out of this deadlock. How can the universities of a country such as ours, which comprises people of widely different conceptions of life in particular and of reality in general, function without giving all the advantages to those who are the most sweeping in their negations? Let me be frank and put it this way : viz., how can a Catholic university be a university when her philosophy must be according to the mind of Aquinas and not of Kant, or Marx? My reply may strike you as too candid but here it is : Following the directives of the Constitution of our own University, we must present and explain not only the philosophy which we hold to be true, but the other philosophies as well, even such as are the most opposite to our own. And we are bound to do this in a quite objective manner : the interpretation must not replace the exposition. We should not close our eyes to the opposite opinions ; we are repeatedly encouraged to study them more closely, and to take a positive attitude towards them that we may benefit from whatever truth they might contain [1].

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1. " . . . Catholic theologians and philosophers, whose grave duty it is to defend natural and supernatural truth and instill it in the hearts of men, cannot afford to ignore

It seems to me that so long as in our universities we remain faithful to this principle, so long as one can find there an objective presentation of the answers which have been given by ancient as well as by modern philosophers and theologians to questions such as : Why are we here at all ? Where are we heading for ? Does the end justify the means ? — whether it be to reject these answers (not to mention the questions themselves), to confirm them, or to suggest a novel approach or solution — we are performing a task which is essential to the idea of a University [1].

All of which is but one aspect of our general problem. There still remains the question : Of what man can we say that he has a university education ? If, to deserve this title one had to know all that is taught at our institutions of higher learning, no doubt every member of the Faculty would disqualify — not to mention the Board of Directors! How much, then, of what kind of knowledge, should an *universitaire* possess ? Surely one single department of knowledge will not do — not merely because it is lacking in universality, but far more so because the narrow specialist is inclined to be the most sweeping in his judgment of the things he does not know. Notwithstanding philosophy's claim to universality, they who are in this field are not necessarily an exception to that rule. For when a teacher of philosophy passes judgment on a literary, a physical, a biological, or a social theory, we have the right to presume that he is reasonably familiar with the subject of his judgment.

Even the one who has specialized in some branch of engineering, say, would surely be an *universitaire*, so long as he has a fair idea of the relationship of his particular endeavour to the other departments of learning and technique. And this could be a normal achievement for the one who has had the benefit of an early training in the liberal arts, and if the university he attends really has a university atmosphere.

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or neglect these more or less erroneous opinions [monism, pantheism, idealism, immanentism, pragmatism, dialectical materialism, existentialism]. Rather they must come to understand these same theories well, both because diseases are not properly treated unless they are rightly diagnosed and because sometimes even in these false theories a certain amount of truth is contained, and finally because these theories provoke more subtle discussion and evaluation of philosophical and theological truths. If philosophers and theologians strive merely to derive profit from the careful examination of these doctrines, there is no reason for an appeal to the teaching authority of the Church " (PIUS XII, Encycl. *Humani Generis.*)

1. A News weekly reported recently that during World War II, when rumors flew that Stalin might come to the first (1943) Quebec Conference, I suggested that the Soviet dictator be invited to Laval to present his interpretation of dialectical materialism. Perhaps I should add that according to the *Semaine Religieuse de Québec* of that time, my suggestion had been qualified by : " provided he would tolerate contradiction and not have immediate resort to the critique of arms. " The communist jargon " critique of arms " means, in practice, that if you cannot stand up to the argument of an adversary, blow him down — the principle underlying the system of liquidation.

Such an atmosphere is created by the co-operation of the various departments, thanks mainly to the teachers — whether their subject be the habits of predatory insects or the nature of happiness — who possess the art of conveying to the student their own awareness of the limitations of their field, and of arousing in him, imperceptibly of course, an interest in the other departments of learning. Although some of us may be incorrigibly one-track minded, there should be enough Socratic humour around to compensate for this anomaly. To favour the student's interest it might be advisable to arrange annually, as part of the curriculum, a series of inderdepartmental lectures. However, the success of such an arrangement would depend largely upon the disposition awakened in the student within his own department.

It is perhaps a sign of our times that the reality of Communism and the universal menace of its power could be used to persuade us of what a university education should comprise. Things being what they are, surely we may presume that the Faculty know, even more so than the average citizens, just what this communism is ; that they have some idea of what it is, in comparison not only with our own political and economic theories and practice, but, far more deeply, with our own conception of reality, of what it is to be a human being and of his destiny. The most important and characteristic branch of study in a Marxist university is " dialectical and historical materialism. " [1] True, now that the communists have their universities they can no longer afford to teach their own philosophy in a philosophical manner. Yet they do pound it not only into the head of every student but into that of each and all of the professors as well ; every army officer is indoctrinated with this mystifying muddle of dialectics so undeserving of its name when no orthodox Marxist dares set up his basic thought for impartial scrutiny [2] least of all by his own mind ; future generations are being prepared by the recitation of this " scientific " philosophy in the primary schools. Every Marxist would have this happen to us as well, and above all to our children. You have heard of the means they are disposed to employ to this effect and how they seek to justify such practices by recourse to their philosophy of violence. — Cutting all corners, I mean that if we fail now in our regard for philosophy, we may wake up one fine morning to learn that the subject is no longer optional !

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1. JOSEPH STALIN, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, International Publishers, London and New York, 1940.

2. Shortly before his death, Zdanov, who was then held to be the likely successor to Stalin, berated and removed the leading Soviet philosopher for his " objective " approach to the history of Western Thought. The Marxists have now reached the stage where they believe their philosophy has entered the historical phase in the course of which its defence should be left entirely in the hands of armed critique.

Can we find out in our own universities precisely what this philosophy is, and what could be wrong with it — before it is too late? If on the one hand we feel that communism is false and wicked in conception and practice, and since on the other hand its mainstay is ostensibly gathered into the semblance of a philosophical doctrine, why hesitate to equip our minds for attack upon its intellectual core with something like the vigour we demand of our sons whom we send out to defend us in armed conflict? Why must we leave even this unarmed critique in the charge of what could then be no more than political expedience or adventure?

By this I do not mean to convey the wholly unphilosophical idea that if we are to have philosophy at all in our universities, its department should be a hot-bed of ranting anti-communism. There, even communism should be taken philosophically. But neither do I believe that complete scepticism is essential to an objective exposition of what has for so long been called philosophy ; that an open mind must be an empty one ; just as it is not all plain to me that only the thoroughly irreligious person can be an " objective " exponent of religion or of its history, especially when such apparent detachment may well be the mere effect of commitment to a fraudulent dogma of one's own unspoken fancy.

Let me restate the main idea I submit for discussion. If by a university we mean an institution which dispenses universal knowledge, no matter how broad or how narrow is our conception of universal knowledge, we must keep alive and available, through objective presentation, what the great schools of thought, whether we deem them valid or obsolete, have to say on the subject of universal knowledge.

C. D. K.

APPENDIX

In reply to a remark from the floor, on the primary urgency of training scientists and technicians, Dean De Koninck read the following passages from his report to the Massey Commission, on " The Teaching of Philosophy in French Canada " * :

" Many people are apt to believe that, in the face of such a threat, it is enough for us to keep our military power at a level of superiority. Yet, unfortunately, military power does not preclude spiritual vulnerability : a moral weakness, that is, which might easily make ourselves the first victims of our armed might. The true power of a nation (or of an alliance of nations) resides by no means wholly in the material riches at its disposal, but in the good in whose service it will place them. A nation that were to put all its efforts into the exploitation of its natural resources and the training of its

* See, in this same issue, p.103.

technicians would not thereby alone insure itself against servitude : indeed, all that capital might still be used for contrary ends. A trifle would suffice to turn its power against those who have put their trust in it. For armaments are neutral, but they who use them are not " (Vol.II, p.137).

" In view of the incalculable sums we are bound to spend for defence — which, be it well understood, is in our philosophy an essential condition of peace — it may not unreasonably be asked whether our precautions are wisely balanced. The training of a single air force pilot entails higher costs than the inscription fees of a whole Faculty of Philosophy. No doubt the enemy also is training escadres of airmen, but at the same time he is busy preparing a whole army of " commissars, " whose principal weapon is nothing other than philosophy. And these " commissars " are far more to be feared than the bombers destined to clear the path for their entry into our midst. Do we not, after all, rely upon arms much more exclusively than the Communists ? Surely, here is a fact that calls for reflection " (p.142).