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Philosophy

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PHILOSOPHY

By Benjamin Ring, Theodore Messenger and Lynn Lindholm
Philosophy has been a part of the University of North Dakota curriculum since the founding of the University. The 1883 "Act for Establishing a Territorial University at Grand Forks, Dakota" called for the creation of a "college of letters" which would "embrace a liberal course of instruction in language, literature and philosophy." And when William M. Blackburn was chosen to be the University's first president, he was also named "Professor of Mental and Moral Science and Philosophy." During the University's first few years all students were required to take two hours of Logic and six hours of Mental and Moral Science for graduation. Initially, the Mental and Moral Science seems to have been an amalgam of Psychology and the kind of Moral Philosophy course which had traditionally been offered by college presidents as the capstone of an undergraduate education. In 1891, according to the catalog of that year, a course in History of Philosophy was authorized.

Before long this division between logic and moral science was replaced by an arrangement, commonplace at the time, whereby Philosophy consisted of training in Logic, Psychology and Ethics. Initially this mixture—a required 12 hours—was dispensed by Professor Horace Woodworth who was Professor of History and Philosophy. In 1900 Philosophy was split into a required and an elective component; the required component consisting of Logic and Psychology, the elective component embracing the History of Philosophy and Aesthetics as well as Ethics.

The next stage in the history of the Department came with the appointment in 1901 of Joseph P. Kennedy as Professor of Philosophy and Education. Kennedy, who became a major figure in the history of the University, was notable for his role in forging the link between the University and the state public school system, for his stature as a moral leader, and for his effort to see that Philosophy at UND was in step with the most progressive and up-to-date work in the country. He was an ardent disciple of William James and John Dewey. Three statements from the catalogs of those years sum up the spirit in which Kennedy approached the study of Philosophy. Of the discipline itself, Kennedy said, "The aim of Philosophy is to enable the student to construct a complete and systematic philosophy of life and living" and "to harmonize and systematize our highest thinking and by discussion and exchange of thought to become possessed of reasonable conceptions on fundamental questions." One of the clearest clues to the manner in which he believed this could best be done is provided in the statement of purpose of the Philosophical Club which enrolled all those who had completed the second year of the Philosophy sequence: "The aim is candid, free and friendly exchange of views, in a spirit of complete toleration, on any topic of deep human interest."

Under Kennedy, who dominated the teaching of Philosophy from 1901 to 1936, there was a steady emphasis on the use of primary texts, on the need for enlightened rationality, and on the importance of keeping Philosophy relevant to students and to society. There was also a close de facto link between the study of Philosophy and the training of teachers, but Philosophy was a part of the Arts & Sciences curriculum and there was a clear effort to see that Philosophy spoke to the needs of any educated person.
For a time (1913-1919) Professor Todd shared the teaching burden with Kennedy and to some extent Todd bore the brunt of the work in Psychology while Kennedy concentrated on Philosophy, but that division was not sharp or total. In 1920 Professor Humpstone replaced Todd and the division did become sharp; by 1922 the two subjects formally separated, a development which was pretty much in step with the history of the two subjects at other institutions of higher learning. From 1923-1932 the Department of Philosophy was a two-man department. It offered a reasonably broad range of courses and, beginning in 1929, courses offered at Wesley College could be counted toward a Philosophy major. Apparently the normal teaching load for each of the faculty members of the department was 18 credit hours per semester though it is not clear whether that was in fact the teaching load. It appears that normally students interested in Philosophy wound up taking a composite major in Psychology, Education and Philosophy. It is perhaps significant too that all course work in Philosophy, until the 1940's was restricted to junior and senior level students, though it seems to have been possible to receive graduate credit for work in advanced Philosophy courses.

Tradition has it that Philosophy was one of the departments singled out as a luxury in the Depression years. In any case, it is true that from 1936-1955 the department was a one-man department under C. J. Kjerstad. Kjerstad qualified as a philosopher only by accident: He was a psychologist who had taken his degree at Chicago in the days when Psychology was still part of the Philosophy Department, and he avowedly had little interest in or knowledge of Philosophy per se. His handling of Philosophy courses was partly a matter of psychologizing them (Aesthetics became the study of the psychology of perception) and partly a matter of relegating Philosophy to the role of handmaiden to a narrowly conceived natural science outlook. The description of Introduction to Philosophy indicates the flavor which permeated the Philosophy Department during the Kjerstad years: "philosophical concepts are introduced in relation to the physical universe and to the development of science. Philosophical problems found in the fields of inorganic matter, of life and behavior, and mental and psychic phenomena of inorganic matter, of life and behavior, and mental and psychic phenomena are studied. The world of ideas, of knowledge, and wisdom in conduct are briefly sketched and developed." The number of courses being offered was clearly inadequate to meet the requirements for a major program, though the catalog did imply that majoring in Philosophy was possible. It is also clear that in the Kjerstad years the department devoted itself primarily to meeting the needs of the teacher training program both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The chief innovation of this period was to offer, beginning in 1944, an introductory course for freshmen and sophomores, but this was the only course open to lower-division students.

With the arrival of Dale Riepe in 1955 the department underwent a drastic change of orientation. Riepe was the first professionally trained philosopher to head the department, and one of his chief concerns was to prepare majors for graduate work in Philosophy. He was particularly proud of the fact that by 1960 he had gotten one major admitted to a prestigious graduate program. This orientation was also reflected in his effort to see that the faculty in the department had a chance to teach courses in their areas of specialization. Initially this meant developing courses in his own area of specialization, Oriental Philosophy; but it subsequently included the addition of courses in symbolic logic and contemporary British and American analytic philosophy. In 1958 the department again became a two man department, and by the time Riepe left in
1962 the department had been allotted a third position. Riepe's departure was part of a growing rift between those who represented a pre-World War II view of UND, for whom one's first loyalty was to the University, and a newer breed of faculty, for whom one's chief loyalty was to one's profession. As a result the other member of the department left at the same time, which meant that 1962 marked another sharp change in the department's outlook.

When Ben Ring, Kendall Cox, and Leland Creer arrived in 1962 they had the task of practically creating the department de novo, with no sense of earlier traditions or of University expectations. They shared Riepe's commitment to offering solid preparation to a core of students who might be oriented toward graduate school. They also agreed that a solid grounding in the history of Philosophy would be of use both to these students and to students who were exploring Philosophy either out of curiosity or as ancillary to other academic interests. Beyond this, they had very divergent philosophical outlooks, and decided that their very divergence could and should become a source of departmental strength; it was important, they decided, for students to see Philosophy as a field which depends upon dialogue and the reasoned comparison of diverse points of view. The Philosophy Department should not purvey--nor should it be thought of as purveying--a party line. This policy has persisted in the department down to the present day. To assure diversity, each member of the department has been encouraged both to pursue his or her own interests and to use the pedagogical approach which seemed most appropriate to his or her own subject and talents.

However, Cox, Creer, and Ring (with Ring as chairman) quickly discovered that their newness on the scene meant that students were very reluctant to take courses until a departmental track record had been established. Enrollments were sustained only by the fact that the department taught two courses required in the programs of a substantial number of students. These were "Man and Ideas," an introductory humanities course, and a graduate course in the Philosophy of Education. Unfortunately, neither course seemed particularly attractive to the new faculty. Cox and Creer were both uninterested in "Man and Ideas" unless it was essentially an introduction to Philosophy, and in that case they saw it as a duplication of the already existing and under-enrolled introductory course. Ring was more amenable to a broader view of the course but questioned the appropriateness of its being thought of both as an introduction to Philosophy and to Humanities. Ultimately, this problem was resolved by the establishment of an interdisciplinary Introduction to Humanities under a Humanities Coordinator.

The Philosophy of Education presented a different problem. It was the department's only graduate course and was required of all students working for advanced degrees in education. Unhappily, the Philosophy Department members who offered this course found that the students enrolled in it typically lacked the skills in discursive reading and abstract concept manipulation which such a course demanded. The options seemed to be either offering as a graduate-level course one which was in fact less rigorous than the department's freshman-level Introduction to Philosophy; or offering an authentic graduate course and giving the students patently undeserved grades; or offering a genuine graduate course and giving the students low or failing grades. Academic integrity seemed to favor the last alternative. This, however, seems to have alienated the College of Education which after a few years began to offer its own course in the Philosophy of Education and allowing that to satisfy its degree requirements.
The enrollments thus lost were not by this time a serious threat to the department, as enrollments in other Philosophy courses had begun to rise. But the breaking off of formal relations with the field of Education, which had existed at UND since the days of Joseph Kennedy, was and remains a source of regret.

During Ring's chairmanship, despite several changes in personnel, the Philosophy Department followed the patterns established in the opening years of the period. Since the Political Science Department placed a heavy emphasis on the history of political philosophy, the Philosophy Department dropped its course in this area and gave credit toward the major for work taken through Political Science. To help promote the exploration of ideas through reading and discussion across the University, the department made major commitments to such interdepartmental ventures as the Honors Program and the Humanities Program. Members of the department regularly taught courses for and made other contributions to both of these programs. To encourage good writing among undergraduates, the department began sponsoring an annual essay contest: fifty dollars (wholesale) worth of paperback books to the author of the best essay submitted in a philosophy course during any given year. The members of the department contributed the fifty dollars, and the essays were judged by qualified persons outside the department. Also during this period Riepe's emphasis on preparing students for graduate work was continued, and almost every year one or two students went on to quality graduate programs.

The late sixties found the Philosophy Department with the largest course enrollments and the largest departmental staff in its history. Students throughout the country had become increasingly involved and sensitized, and enrollments in humanities courses—-including philosophy courses—had increased. At this time the department listed among its members Warren Strandberg, associate dean of the New School for Behavioral Studies in Education, and Jackson Hershbell, the first Coordinator of Humanities. Departmental courses were also taught by people from outside the department. For instance, since no member of the department was competent to teach Oriental Philosophy, Riepe's array of courses in this area had been reduced to a single one-semester course which itself seemed likely to be deleted from the catalog. But when it was discovered that the head librarian, Donald Pearce, was quite knowledgeable in this field, he was prevailed upon to teach the course. The result was an extremely popular course and one of very high scholarly caliber. Similarly, no one in the department was expert in existentialism and kindred matters. But Alvin Mattson of the Religious Studies Department had a deep and learned interest in these matters, and began teaching courses for the department which became very popular.

By 1972 when Duane Voskuil became chairman, the department's fortunes had begun to change. Students throughout the country were becoming disengaged and enrollments in humanities courses had begun to drop off. By 1972, Strandberg and Hershbell had left the University, and Alvin Mattson--still only in his forties--had died quite unexpectedly. During part of 1972 Phyllis A. Walden, the department's first woman instructor, replaced Professor Ring while he was on leave. For the next few years the best subscribed philosophy courses were those offered by Robert Mullins, Donald Pearce, and Duane Voskuil. But early in 1975 Pearce resigned, and a few months later, to the dismay of the entire Philosophy Department, Voskuil was issued a terminal contract.
Theodore Messenger chaired the Philosophy Department from 1975 to 1979. During this period a new problem arose for the department. As was stated above, philosophy has been taught at UND from its earliest years. Philosophy itself, however, dates back to at least the fifth century B.C. Thus, although the problem in question may have been new to the UND Philosophy Department, it was by no means new to the traditional field.

The problem can be explained in these terms: In a memorable speech, Socrates defended himself before his Athenian judges in 399 B.C. Two of his most engaging assertions in this defense were that "The unexamined life is not worth living," and that "Virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money and all other good things both in this life and the next." Socrates thought that an ignorant man was dangerous and pitiable. He thought that each individual should seek, not just knowledge, but knowledge plus appreciation, i.e., wisdom. This was to be a life-long quest carried out in dialogue with others engaged in the same quest. Translated into modern educational policies, this would mean that each student should be encouraged to read extensively, to discuss actively, to learn to evaluate critically other people's points of view, to try to understand how each branch of human endeavor contributes to an appreciation of the whole universe and man's place in it. By the exercise of virtue, Socrates meant conscientiously doing one's best. He thought that a world in which each individual conscientiously did his or her best would be the best world imaginable. In modern terms, this would mean that each student should be liberally exposed to examples of human excellence, and given opportunities to discover his or her own abilities and limitations. Moreover, each student should be encouraged to discover a set of ideals and to think of the world as the proper arena for putting these ideals into practice.

It should be clear that the foregoing approach is stultified by pressures brought upon students to declare majors either immediately upon matriculating into college or as soon thereafter as possible; to choose majors with primarily vocational goals in mind; and having chosen majors to use their electives, not to broaden their intellectual horizons, but to increase their "marketability." Such pressures were, in the opinion of the members of the Philosophy Department, being exerted on students by persons of high visibility and influence at UND in the later 1970's. Moreover, the only acknowledged realities seemed to be those which were quantifiable and, more particularly, convertible into dollars and cents. Successful research was depicted and rewarded in terms of grant awards, vocationally-oriented training programs, and upwardly mobile career patterns. At committee meetings and public forums during this period the identifying of something as a "philosophic issue" was, almost invariably, treated as sufficient grounds for dismissing it from further consideration.

So for the Philosophy Department of the late seventies there were problems not only of adequate enrollments and staffing but of convincing the university community at large that Philosophy had a significant contribution to make. How was this challenge to be met? Messenger asked Bernard O'Kelly, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, whether a team of outside evaluators could be brought to the campus to assess the department's strengths and weaknesses. This the dean arranged to do; and a team of two evaluators visited the campus in the fall of 1978. The evaluators supported the department's general aims, but suggested various ways of making these aims better appreciated across the campus. In particular, they suggested the recruiting, at an early opportunity, of a young philosopher with interdisciplinary interests to chair the department.
Implementation of these recommendations began immediately; though the opportunity to recruit a new full-time faculty member did not arise until the Fall of 1980.

From 1979 to 1981 Patricia Glassheim chaired the department. By this time the department’s commitment to preparing students for graduate work in philosophy had become less central to its mission insofar as the number of teaching positions available to new Ph.D.’s in the field had become extremely limited. However, departmental alumni from earlier years had by this time completed their graduate studies and established themselves professionally. So in 1980 the Philosophy Department inaugurated a series of what it hoped would be annual Alumni Lectures with the visit to campus of Professor Peter Fritzel of the University of Wisconsin. Also in 1980 a search for someone to fill the position to be created by the impending retirement of Robert Mullins began in earnest. Mullins, who had been associated with the University since 1945 and with the Philosophy Department since 1968, had become fabled for his wide-ranging erudition and his humane concern for students. He had received a Standard Oil Award for Outstanding Teaching in 1975. When he retired in the Spring of 1981, he was named Professor Emeritus.

In these last few years, members of the department have maintained their commitment to the idea that the University should be a place where students can explore the meaning of life, the ways to happiness, the significance of justice and equality, right and wrong, truth and falsehood. There is now some evidence that the national attitude is changing back toward this ideal from a narrow vocationalism; courses of study in the humanities—including philosophy—are becoming again more acceptable as both faculty and students understand that such explorations can aid and fulfill career aspirations and contribute as significantly to a satisfactory life as training in a profession. Citizens at large have also become increasingly aware how much philosophic commitments and problems enter day to day life; debates on abortion, euthanasia, nuclear disaster, the ethics of science and engineering are commonplace now. Academic departments nationwide have been acknowledging the need to make such philosophic discussions part of the educational experience of students so that they can be responsible and thoughtful participants in a complex society.

A recognition of this new place for philosophy in the lives of citizens, in the liberal arts and in general university education is reflected in the appointment in 1981 of a new faculty member, Lynn M. Lindholm, as both teacher and chairperson in the department. Professor Lindholm shares the established commitment of department members to open discussion, critical thinking and imaginative speculation on problems of deep human concern; she joins the department members in thinking that broad questions of significance to real life and human thought—not narrow, professional techniques—are the core of philosophy. Also, Professor Lindholm has developed interests in several of the new philosophical areas such as medical ethics, engineering ethics, and the philosophical and ethical considerations which come into scientific research and technological innovation. Her interdisciplinary concerns will no doubt be reflected in the philosophy curriculum as time goes by; those concerns will further emphasize the central place which philosophy has in our lives and our culture.