

CONCEPTUALIZING PHILOSOPHY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM PLANNING AT A CARIBBEAN UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

Curriculum Planning can be defined for our purposes as the process of decision-making that goes into the creation of an academic plan (Stark & Lattuca, 1997). Consider then, a university deciding to include a program in some particular field of enquiry in its teaching enterprise, or for that matter striving to institute basic changes in an already existing program. It would not be unreasonable to suppose that those in decision-making capacity possess adequate and prior knowledge with regard to the nature of the discipline itself and the aims and objectives of such a field of enquiry. This prerequisite of rational planning would influence the processes (which can and do occur at various levels of decision-making) that would be set in train to determine the particular shape and emphases of the discipline. Whatever the outcome may be, it would be expected that this would be in keeping with the view and aims of that particular university. Settlement of such points would, among other factors pertaining to the elements of curriculum planning, influence the designation of content of courses and also the eventual arrangements and structuring for teaching.

The demarcation of areas of enquiry and the situation with regard to philosophy.

Such a general view of how affairs are, or ought to be handled in instituting or making basic revisions to an academic programme, is a much more complicated affair when the field of enquiry is that of philosophy. This is due to the fact that the question of what is philosophy, is itself a philosophical problem not generally considered to be settled (Lacey 1976, p. 159).

It is true that in fields of enquiry, some more than others, there is some difficulty in arriving at unambiguous definitions and thus clear boundaries. . The further you analyze any given process in any discipline, the more likely you are to cross boundaries. History, language, psychology, sociology and even science have some problems in demarking boundaries. With regard to the latter it can be asked for instance: To what degree do biologists and chemists need to take into consideration quantum mechanics?

In environment studies, there is a mix of the sciences; for cultural studies, management and business studies, computer sciences, gender studies there is a similar type of overlap into other more traditional areas resulting in a mix of some sort. Other areas of ambiguity would be theoretical physics and metaphysics, physics and music, anthropology, medicine and psychiatry.

The recognition of the overlap between disciplines attests to their interdisciplinary nature. If any solution could be considered open to question, so much more in the effort to define philosophy and demarcate its boundaries as to what is properly philosophical.

There are, no doubt, certain features which characterize each grouping of disciplines. The physical sciences might be considered more hierarchical or tightly knit, the social sciences more loosely linked and the humanities most free in form and capable of, expanding in any direction. Faculty within fields like Philosophy and the Social Sciences who lack consensus about dimensions characterizing their discipline, enjoy less accord about what should be taught and learned. Talking a standard approach in being able to identify what is specific to philosophy could easily be seen as in areas such as logic, metaphysics, ethics and epistemology. It can be argued that sustained and systemic attention to areas such as these in themselves, forms the substance of doing philosophy. This would not be inaccurate, however it does not solve the problem since the area of overlap into other disciplines is great.

With the nature of Philosophy and thus the demarcation of boundaries somewhat disputable, I wish to offer reflections on the conceptualization of philosophy by looking at the following possible approaches under the headings:

1. Philosophy is what philosophers do – A multiple or single discipline, autonomous or submerged.
2. Philosophy in the Caribbean – Multiple traditions.
3. Philosophy as a canon of writers.
4. Philosophy as a canon of problems.
5. Philosophy as a history of ideas.
6. Philosophy as a cognitive method and
7. Philosophy as a conceptualization of reality.

While not suggesting that this constitutes an exhaustive list of approaches, or that there is not some measure of overlap, the reflection that ensues under each is sufficient to give a good idea of some of the practical problems and controversial elements involved in any process of formulating an academic plan for the teaching of Philosophy in a university in the contemporary Caribbean.

1. Philosophy is what philosophers do – A multiple or single discipline, autonomous or submerged.

This heading represents the view that only in the act of philosophizing (what philosophers do) can a person learn what philosophy is. Philosophy's coming to be, is part and parcel of its being (Lauer, p.16). In this light, philosophy is a 'hands on' discipline. Knowledge of what philosophers said in the past and even a study of the evolution of ideas certainly includes but still does not exhaust its boundaries. The nature of philosophy is intertwined with the notion of practitioners involved in the engaging of their consciousnesses in various contexts and times – it is an affair that is never permanently resolved. This seems to suggest that the area is forever a shifting one and capable of taking on different forms, but then this is not uniquely a characteristic of philosophy as such.

Persons have in fact made multiple designations as to what engaged philosophers and continues to be the source of the preoccupation of their minds. Persons like Quine (1953)

tend not to distinguish philosophy from science. For Dummett (1978), the theory of meaning of language is central to philosophy and Wittgenstein (1953) saw the philosopher's task as assembling reminders about how words are used and about what words actually mean. Haack (1993) defends philosophy as a theory of knowledge while Hollis and Lukes (1982) as theory in the sociology of knowledge.

In addition, observing what philosophers do could lead to a consideration of what goes on in every discipline (philosophy: of History, of Language, of Economics, of Science, of Mathematics, of Sport, etc). Here philosophy is conceived as a meta subject – looking behind or after (meta) the various disciplines; the conception of philosophy being a 'clearing house' to which is relegated the task of sifting results and records, analyzing concepts, truth claims, methods and assumptions involved in the exercise of other disciplines.

This has direct implications when considering the practicalities of arranging for the task of the teaching of philosophy. The option that emerges for planners is whether to place philosophy as part of other disciplines rather than having an autonomy of its own enjoying the prospects of students being able to read for a major in philosophy.

This has as well other practical spin-offs for a university in Caribbean. The vast majority of students choosing a course or courses in philosophy will not become professional philosophers. In view of this it can be argued that philosophy should interact and interface with concerns pertinent to other disciplines, since this is where people would be doing the philosophizing – in the midst of their respective disciplines.

This conception of philosophy as a service disciple and the consequent arrangement for teaching does have its own dangers. To start with, one can only wonder at what this would mean for the hiring of staff and staff expertise. In addition, persons who conceive the discipline differently could charge that this allows philosophy to be too submerged into others leading to the compromising of large tracts of what was traditionally designated as the domain of philosophy proper. Philosophy teaching could become swallowed up by the particular concerns of different fields and a somewhat piece-meal approach come to stand for what it means to do philosophy.

What would thus be compromised is a traditional view of philosophy as a world-view where opinion is not merely inspected and scrutinized but well organized into a meaningful and coherent system providing a picture of the universe. Would cosmological system builders have any place in such a formulation of philosophy?

Should philosophy be taken to be one discipline, or even to retain some core while servicing other disciplines, there lies a related though further problem of designating its main expression, such as European (Continental or Analytic), Indian, African, Caribbean or what ever category may be deemed suitable as connecting with the realities of being in the contemporary Caribbean.

2. Philosophy in the Caribbean – Multiple Traditions.

In acknowledging its tremendous historical and global influence in thought, Western Philosophy would obviously be taught in a Caribbean University. Yet provision must be made for the unique characteristics of our territories- their, historical, geographic socio/economic and cultural elements. Thus an example of a concrete issue would be the justification of the type of philosophy to be taught in the English speaking Caribbean where the vast majority of the students would be of Afro or Indo ethnic extract.

a) A Caribbean philosophy.

Any attempt at some possible Caribbean formulation of a philosophy, or less ambitiously, elements that would inevitable emerge in the exercise of doing philosophy in the Caribbean or with the Caribbean in mind, cannot preclude a familiarity with Caribbean Literature or ignore the wider intellectual tradition. Authors like W. Harris, C.L.R. James, Walter Rodney, Derrick Walcott, V.S. Naipaul, Eric Williams, Silvia Winters, George Lamming and other noted Caribbean thinkers would inform a philosophy done in the Caribbean (Henry, 2000). This is in keeping with Rorty's point concerning the importance of intellectual histories approach to philosophy (Rorty pp.267 ff).

In keeping with the idea of an intellectual milieu, Caribbean philosophy would also be informed by noted thinkers of the Latin American Region who share with the Caribbean basin a past history of Colonial exploitation. Themes of liberation would hold prominence here and in addition some exploration of modes of social consciousness. Here the oppressed as the presence of 'other' urges for a theory of liberation the elaboration of new integrating categories with respect to 'self-ness' and the redemption of the human person in society (Roig. pp.245 f).

b) African Philosophy.

One school of thought which affirms that there is such a thing as African Philosophy looks to the beliefs, thought and linguistic categories of African peoples as holding the key to its identity and development (Gyekye, 1995).

One major thinker, K. Wiredu, however, holds that there is nothing that can be traditionally termed African Philosophy although philosophy can have an African orientation which contains a sensitivity to what is specific to the African situation. He concedes that an ethnophilosophy would have validity only where the interfacing of traditional viewpoints and modern critical thought is brought to bear on the reading of contemporary events (Wiredu pp.33f).

This can be an interesting guideline for a Caribbean philosophy. In the Caribbean, African retentions in thought and culture (e.g. syncretism in indigenous Caribbean religions) can be examined for their philosophical import and integrated into a critical discourse of an emerging Caribbean Philosophy, what ever shape or character this may take on.

c) Indian Philosophy:

Considering the large populations of Indo-Caribbean peoples in some of our territories, a consideration of Indian philosophy would be in place. Traditionally, nearly all philosophical contributions in India were made by people commenting on already existing texts. To be a philosopher was to be marked out according to the textual tradition and interpretation of this to which they belong. In the last centuries there were several movements in which Indian intellectuals struggled to reconcile traditional Indian ways of thinking with European and especially British influences.

Caribbean philosophers may not have any ancient indigenous heritage of written philosophy to refer to, however they have their contemporary problems with which they can grapple. They can be aided by various conceptual tools that may be at their disposal and from whichever sources these come including that of Indian culture and religion. There have been attempts for instance in the aspect of inculturation in Caribbean Theology to render aspects of models traditionally associated with holiness (e.g.. Mary, mother of Jesus) with that of icons of holiness in the Hindu tradition. [Sirju]. Such activity in my mind is very fertile in for the ongoing progress of creative philosophical thought toward a reconceptualization of the Caribbean self.

In this vein students would embrace the possibilities of exploring themes such as the Advaitic conception of liberation and what this understanding of human freedom presents to the Caribbean self, Krishnamurti on learning and knowledge and the explanations of nature, perception and logic as recorded by Dharmakirti in his Seven Treatises.

The point of these foregoing paragraphs is that in decisions to eventually determine the shape of a programme for philosophy teaching, these elements would demand serious attention.

3. Philosophy as a canon of writers.

To try to delineate who are to count as philosophers (another way of delimiting the field of study) and then to establish a canon of those persons could be seen as involving some circularity in reasoning(Lauer p.16).

Rorty criticizes the historical approach as a doxography. This looks at what philosophers traditionally deemed as such had to say about themes traditionally deemed philosophical. The calamity of this is that this approach rigidly fixes the authors and topics worthwhile exploring whereas the fundamental questions of philosophy can be thought-of as the ones persons really ought to have asked and did not (Rorty p.262). Philosophy in this vein would comprise a ready familiarity of past ‘greats’ and the intellectual context of the time but with a creative and critical reading giving rise to new configurations of which thinkers could be designated as capturing the philosophical moment and which themes would count as those worth exploring; or in fact which themes ought to have been explored and which no one even took up at the time.

This approach could prove useful in any ongoing adjustment to a philosophy curriculum here in the Caribbean. Certain Caribbean thinkers could be singled out for their philosophical contributions or areas of investigation earmarked for the blazing of new trails as to where the philosophical eyes should be focused but where it is not at present.

4. Philosophy as a canon of problems.

The focus here is not so much on the thinkers(those who would count as philosophers under the previous category) but on the themes deemed philosophical no matter who may have tackled them.

This approach is also problematic. Many of the issues philosophers raise in their discussion of the theory of knowledge, for example, are also discussed by natural scientists and psychologists. This goes too for questions of ethics and almost every other branch of philosophical discourse (Mandebaum pp. 561f). Drawing the lines which would contain philosophy as a canon of problems seems a very problematic enterprise.

5. Philosophy as a History of Ideas.

This is not satisfactory designation since philosophy not merely looks at ideas but asks about the value of these ideas themselves. In this respect Rorty is once again helpful. To illustrate this point and the complexities raised in consideration of this issue, four methodological genres can be useful.

- a) Historical construction: basically a history of ideas approach.
- b) Rational reconstruction: an enquiry into the truth and significance of assertions arising from the text and making thus conversational partners of the dead.
- c) *Geistesgeschichte* or canon formation: The problem is directed to which problems are the problems of philosophy.
While rational reconstructions would involve differences as to which solutions to problems may be the best, this genre of the history of philosophy disputes rather about which problems need discussion. This may entail a reading out of the canon of a particular philosopher.
- d) Intellectual history – this consists of descriptions of what the intellectuals were up to at given time and of their interaction with the rest of society (Rorty pp.252ff). It involves reproducing what it was like to be an intellectual in a certain spatio-temporal region. It is inclusive of all influential people who would not normally get into a philosophical canon. It requires wide reading and greater breadth of intellectual openness. Here the distinctions between the disciplines are even of less and less importance. What this affects for the canon is a constant revision to bring it in line with the present needs of high culture. The formation of a philosophical canon becomes possible when there is an attention to both contemporary needs and to the recent writings of revisionist intellectual historians.

Intellectual history thus plays a role for the reformulation of philosophical and other canons.

The construction of a philosophy programme and the courses which this would entail, as a survey of what the tradition has been presented to offer, is thus not as straight-forward and uncontroversial as it may at first seem.

To settle on an acceptable collection of which ideas or thinkers are to be included must be the result of much faculty discussion, and as inclusive as possible, in view of Rorty's framework for considering this. It could be envisaged that such an exercise engaged in by faculty in various contexts (and according to the background of their training and their own thought-out positions) would invariably result in different configurations as to what it means to be engaged responsibly in the philosophical exercise in the situation of university teaching.

6. Philosophy as a cognitive method.

The normative element in the previous section arises especially in the latter three genres in the approach to the philosophical import of the past. It can be argued though, that approaches through attention to method cannot but be termed philosophical. A philosophical approach could be termed as more strictly objective as in the 'pure' reasoning matters of mathematics and logic to the more heavily normative as in the 'practical' reasoning matters of ethics and aesthetics – which includes issues of life-enhancing alternatives to existing states of affairs

In practical methods, decision-making involves the maximizing of aims. This implies that alternatives are possible including satisficing options. A person judges according to a situation that which fits the bill of 'optimum', where to maximize, and where to settle for a satisficing solution. Engaging in practical reason is philosophical as one attempts justifications for choices.

These approaches however can easily be shown to be not uniquely applicable to philosophy.

It is hard to designate any particular methodology uniquely associated with the discipline. An attempt to identify a form of exposition or argumentation that philosophers use, which is not also used in other fields, is bound to fail. The rules of logic and argumentation hold across the board no matter the discipline while there are normative elements that arise in all areas of enquiry albeit in various extents.

It may be more useful to approach the matter of definition by saying what philosophy is not – the *via negativa*. Thus, philosophy is not a physical exercise but can be recognized in the sphere of the cognitive in that its practice concerns the acquisition of belief. Within this broad sweep it can be distinguished from other cognitive areas of inquiry. Philosophy is not science since the latter deals directly with empirical data. A philosophy of science, as a meta discipline, deals with certain issues arising out of the methodology, categories

of interpretation, examination of truth claims and their justification, of that science (as it can also with a purely theoretical enterprise such as mathematics).

It is not history since history deals particularly with past events, whereas philosophy includes the realm of the purely speculative or goes into areas such as the rules and modes of reasoning itself. It is not theology since theology necessarily involves an encounter with revelation.

7. Philosophy as a Metaphysics or as a Conceptualization of Reality.

Philosophy has its beginnings in the West among the Pre-Socratics, with the arrival of a new rational attitude. In their attempt to come to terms with their reality they engaged in a type of thinking which was in contrast to that of myth, authority, tradition or common opinion (Lauer 1989). The focus here would be on attitude rather than on method.

Rather than being a set of answers to an array of questions, philosophy is seen as an attitude or habit of or commitment to responsible thinking. It involves a determination to know reality as opposed to merely opining or believing. It is an attitude of inquiry that demands a willingness to see all issues against the broadest possible backdrop. It involves the relentless pursuit of intellectual honesty and a valuing of truth. This however once again could be held as true for all fields of enquiry.

Conclusion

Has the elusiveness in the definition of philosophy been mitigated somewhat?

Perhaps what could be termed as a conclusion is that whatever boils down to mean 'philosophy' as practiced in the academic context would be necessarily the result of debate and contestation. Points raised could serve as points for its justification. This would serve it well especially in a Third World context where there is extra pressure to justify the very placing of philosophy on the cards. Many authorities look in the first place as to the role of a field of enquiry in the development process. In this light philosophy is not often considered as significant as other disciplines especially in the context of scarce resources. Even where already existing it stands a good chance of being the first to be scrapped in the face of any reduced subvention to the institution (Etuk p.59).

The practical tasks of curriculum planning such as selecting goals, determining content, sequencing courses and course content, considering the characteristics of learners involved, deciding on instructional approaches, attending to instructional resources, engaging in evaluation exercises, and adjusting course and programme (Stark and Lattuca 1997) are directly related to the outcome of decisions as to what shape philosophy would take in a particular campus. This is further complicated by the fact that decision-making takes place at different levels in the academic institution and adequate consultation with the practitioners of the field aware of its peculiarities, are not always carried out.

Arranging the approach for philosophy teaching (centralized or distributed among departments and faculties) is directly linked to what is held to be the philosophical

enterprise itself. In the context of this continuing flexibility, philosophy could be seen as adaptable to various arrangements. Indeed decision-makers may wish to take a little from each approach and incorporate it into what goes into the final product.

At the end of the day though, one can only express the belief that what does end up as philosophy, does go to serve and benefit all who may be involved in its humanizing exercise.

Finally I would like to reiterate strongly the view mentioned above that doing philosophy in the Caribbean be not only a response to current and historical issue that arise from the peculiarities of our situation in the region but that it build on what already is there in thinkers of various fields of enquiry in order to piece together a body of thought that can be referred to as a philosophy that has emerged from the impact of the Caribbean experience.

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