Teaching Modern and Contemporary Philosophy in Seminary

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Teaching modern and contemporary philosophy in a seminary is a special challenge today. Some people think that because modern and contemporary philosophies contain so many errors, it is simply a waste of time to study them; and even more, some fear that exposure to these errors might endanger personal faith. Others, who perhaps have studied secular philosophy in a contemporary university, may think that the premises and arguments of modern and contemporary philosophy are true from the perspective of reason and are led to accept a type of fideism. By "secular" here we mean to include broadly American, British, and European philosophies which either completely reject or simply ignore God and the metaphysical dimension of reality and which seek to pursue philosophy in rigorous isolation from this transcendent dimension.

Our approach is to engage primary secular texts with selected models of evaluation written by contemporary Catholic authors. This is in keeping with the U.S. bishops' Program of Priestly Formation, which recommends integrating contemporary Catholic authors into the study of philosophy.\(^1\) In what follows we will outline the method and conclude with a few examples from our classes.

A Three-Tiered Approach

Our method employs a three-tiered approach following the recommendations in Fides et Ratio. The three-tiered approach to teaching the history of philosophy integrates 1) traditional Catholic philosophy as articulated in the medieval period, 2) modern and contemporary critiques of medieval philosophy, and 3) contemporary Catholic evaluations and responses to these critiques. This approach replaces a single-tiered approach found generally up to Vatican II of using Thomistic manuals. These manuals restated principles in Catholic philosophy and applied them in a secondary manner to summaries of modern and contemporary Catholic and secular theories.

Our approach also replaces a different single-tiered approach found generally from Vatican II up to the present—with using secular texts with little attention given to traditional Catholic philosophy. These secular texts were often set side-by-side each other with no evaluation aiming toward an objective truth. This latter approach left the impression that secular and modern contemporary philosophy has the "last word" to which the church has no response and that Thomistic positions were old fashioned.\(^2\)

The three-tiered approach followed at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary is part of an integrated program of studies required for all seminarians in the pre-theology cycle. This program requires a careful study in medieval philosophy of primary texts, English translation, and Catholic philosophy as well as systematic Thomistic philosophy in metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, natural philosophy, natural theology, ethics, and social political philosophy. This introduces the seminarian to Catholic philosophy as it was first articulated. The seminarian is also exposed to secular philosophies in a variety of systematic courses including philosophy of science, ethics, social and political philosophy, and electives. The history courses in modern and contemporary philosophy provide the opportunity to introduce
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contemporary Catholic evaluations as a secular philosopher is being discussed.

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Systematic Structure

Each course provides a synthetic structure leading to a clear conclusion. This rejects the cafeteria approach of simply offering one philosopher after another, placing them side by side without providing an integrating framework. This method follows the suggestion of Jacques Maritain, who criticized the lack of systematic structure because "instead of fulfilling himself, ... [the student] disperses himself and disintegrates."3 Msgr. Luigi Guissani also observes how students often degenerate into a "skeptic emptiness that results from an education that lacks a clear hypothesis for interpreting reality."4 The teacher must provide a framework that overcomes an "anarchical" attitude by providing a consistent approach to the transcendental of objective truth.5 At the seminary we use Fides et Ratio as our methodological orientation for the two Catholic pathways to truth: faith and reason.

We also avoid presenting a single Catholic philosopher as the only one to pronounce THE truth. When a single Catholic philosopher's approach is taken as the only viable approach to philosophy in a seminary program, there is a danger of moving away from a vibrant educational environment in which the student is awakened to the field of philosophy as dynamic, engaged, and open. Instead, the seminarian may conclude that there is an attitude of ideological indoctrination present in the classroom, into which he is plunged. He may conclude that philosophy is something to be memorized and repeated rather than to be engaged by the full force of his own reason. In Fides et Ratio, John Paul II, following Pius XII, states that this principle of variety applies to his own philosophy and even to that of St. Thomas:

The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others...Philosophy must remain faithful to its own principles and methods. Otherwise there would be no guarantee that it would remain oriented to truth and that it was moving toward truth by way of a process governed by reason. A philosophy which did not proceed in the light of reason according to its own principles and methods would serve little purpose. (49)

The seminarian is encouraged to think about what he reads and hears in a philosophy course. If he is convinced that there are several different Catholic philosophers who engage with a particular secular philosopher's theory, he can ponder its various merits and defects together with the professor. In this way he can gain confidence in the capacity of human reason, including his own, to approach the truth ever more closely.

Integration of Catholic Philosophy

There is a natural historical progression in the four traditional courses in the history of philosophy, i.e., ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary. Using a chronological methodology would imply that contemporary Catholic philosophers belong only in the last of the four history of philosophy courses. We have concluded that this chronological approach is not the best pedagogical method for seminary education for two reasons. First, there are so many secular authors who must be covered in contemporary philosophy that often the Catholic philosophers receive only cursory, if any, attention. Second, contemporary Catholic evaluation of particular arguments or claims of secular philosophers are more effective when made at the time the philosopher being critically evaluated is studied.

When a contemporary Catholic philosopher is introduced into a course in contemporary philosophy, the original thought of that philosopher, rather than an observation or criticism of another philosopher, is typically studied. In this case the seminarian loses the opportunity to learn how different contemporary Catholic philosophers integrate with other philosophers such as Descartes, Hume, or Sartre.

Therefore, we have found it more effective to insert contemporary evaluations by Catholic philosophers at the particular time when the secular philosopher is being studied. This can be done either in lecture or by identifying specific pages in a source on a secondary reading list, which is on a reserve shelf readily available in the library. The evaluation often contains both positive and negative aspects. The seminarian then can begin
to perceive that there are positive as well as negative aspects of modern and contemporary secular philosophers from the perspective of Catholic thought.

Negative and Positive Evaluations
Examples of the combined negative and positive evaluation can be found in John Paul II’s critique of Descartes in Crossing the Threshold of Hope, Karol Wojtyla’s critique of Kant and Marx in Person and Community, and Charles Taylor’s work A Catholic Modernity. Taylor says: “The view I’d like to defend, if I can put it in a nutshell, is that in modern, secular culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel.”

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When Catholic philosophers differ among themselves about the value of a particular argument, seminarians realize that philosophy is a continuously dynamic effort of many thinkers to discover truth through the exercise of their reason and the observation of their senses. They recognize that Catholic philosophers are fully engaged in this discovery. Some philosophers are more successful than others on different topics, but “the last word” is still out, and it certainly does not belong to the secular philosophers alone. Contemporary Catholic philosophers become the yeast that, when added to the material of secular modern and contemporary philosophy, hold it together and raise it up in a way that nourishes the intellectual life of the priest and of those with whom he will be engaged in his parish or diocesan work for years to come.

Secondary Sources
In history of philosophy courses, summaries in textbooks or other secondary sources are very useful to support lectures and readings. These
summaries offer the student another way into a text, but they should be used rarely as the primary way a seminarian learns about a philosopher. Some excellent secondary sources by Catholic philosophers include Rev. Frederick Copleston's classic series *The History of Philosophy*, Robert Caponigri and Ralph McInerny's *A History of Western Philosophy*, Etienne Gilson and Thomas Langnell's *A History of Philosophy*, and James Collins' separate works on different periods in the history of philosophy. If a seminarian familiarizes himself with one or more of these trusted histories, then he may turn to them later for clarification about a particular philosopher's thought.

Having completed our identification of basic principles for developing model syllabi to teach modern philosophy and contemporary philosophy in seminarians, we will now turn to consider more specific examples of how modern philosophy and contemporary philosophy are taught at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver.

**Modern Philosophy: Some Examples**

For a lecture beginning the topic of Early Renaissance Humanism (1300-1500) we introduce briefly the role of Neoplatonism, Ficino, and the beginnings of humanism by studying the life and method of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). Next we consider the anthropological theme of the dignity of the human person in his text *On the Dignity of Man*. Then we consider the dilemma noted by John Paul II in *Fides et Ration* that positively states: "Modern philosophy clearly has the great merit of focussing attention upon man;" but also negatively observes: "Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned." The context of the study of modern philosophy is an adventure within which the seminarian will discover how to assess where human dignity has been affirmed and developed and where it has been limited and devalued.

The course in modern philosophy also includes a study of rationalism, empiricism, and Kant. While studying British empiricism, Locke usually stuns the seminarians when they reach his distinction between personal identity and human identity—with the former residing in the presence of consciousness of self alone rather than in the soul/body *composit*. A link is traced between Locke's philosophy, the concept of person in the American constitution, and the questions about abortion and persons who do not have self-consciousness in the sense Locke demanded for personal identity. Contemporary Catholic commentators include Charles Taylor on Locke's "isolated ego," John Deely on Locke's theory of signs, John Hittinger on Locke's political philosophy, and John Paul II.

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**Contemporary Philosophy: Some examples**

The course in contemporary philosophy attempts to cover the major philosophical movements from the 19th and 20th century, including German idealism, Marxism, Neo-Thomism, existentialism, phenomenology, analytic philosophy, and postmodernism. One example of our approach in contemporary philosophy is reading selections from Hegel's *Logic* on the nature of the dialectic. The students discern how the dialectic is employed through the discussion of the master/slave in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. John Paul II's evaluation of the master/slave relation in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* is then explored. He criticizes the modern tendency to view all relationships of authority and subservience as based on the Hegelian model of fear and power. The pope claims that we have lost the idea that one would choose to be subservient out of love, not fear, like the son's or daughter's acceptance of the authority of the parent. One of the consequences of the acceptance of the Hegelian view in modern culture discussed in class is hostility to the authority of God and his church and the necessity for recovering an understanding of authority not based upon the model of the master/slave but upon the model of filial love.

A final example is taken from the twentieth century. The study of phenomenology includes a consideration of Edmund Husserl's critique of empiricism and scientism in his article "Philosophy as Rigorous Science." The students are introduced to phenomenology as a science of essences. Next, the basic principles of the
phenomenological method are explored through reading selections from Ideas I. We then turn to the dialogue Edith Stein wrote between Husserl and St. Thomas (in honor of Husserl's 70th birthday), which does an excellent job of comparing and contrasting the two philosophies. Stein wrote this for phenomenologists in order to introduce them to the thinking of St. Thomas. She makes a good case for the compatibility between Thomism and phenomenology, although she also considers important points of disagreement. Stein offers an excellent example of the blending of the phenomenological method with the Catholic philosophical tradition, an approach she shares with other twentieth century Catholic thinkers.

Conclusion

There is an exciting challenge of teaching modern and contemporary philosophy in seminary in the third millennia. One of the goals of seminary formation is to help new priests intelligently engage the Gospel with contemporary culture. Since most members of the laity have been educated directly or indirectly by secular culture and institutions, forming men who will offer informed Catholic perspectives is an important contribution to the new evangelization. A seminary also offers the possibility for a cohesive and integrated program of philosophical study. This, in turn, provides a vibrant context within which Catholic philosophy can be taught in a realistic and meaningful way.

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Endnotes


2. See Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, "Person and Complementarity in Fides et Ratio" for a more detailed analysis of these two different orientations to philosophical education, in David Foster and Joseph Koterski, SJ, The Two Wings of Catholic Thought (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), pp. 36-68.


13. A version of this paper was first presented at the American Catholic Philosophical Association satellite session on the Role of Philosophy in Priestly Formation (October 21, 2003) at Houston, Texas. At the time we handed out copies of the full syllabi for each course. They are available upon request.