**A Practical Role for Philosophy**

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**Peter Bowden** argues that it is not a choice between education or training: both are needed, and across every discipline. The problem is that the sciences are providing education as well as training, but that the departments of philosophy are not providing the training.

Mary Midgley’s philosophy department at the University of Newcastle-on-Tyne closed down. Peter Rickman’s department at City University in London has closed.*Philosophy Now* tells us that once again philosophy departments across Britain are closing or under threat. And yet Peter Rickman [in his article in Issue 47](https://philosophynow.org/issues/47/Education_versus_Training) argues that philosophy is a necessary part of education in the technical and social sciences.

It is. But he also argues that the choice is one of education versus training. It is not. If training is to provide a student with the skills, knowledge and confidence for the world of work, while education is “fostering the mind, by encouraging it to think independently, and introducing it to knowledge of the physical and cultural world”, then both are required. In the multitude of disciplines that comprise a university, it is the sciences that are providing both, including their own education in philosophical thought. The reason is that many departments of philosophy have not faced the challenge of establishing a philosophical framework that extends beyond philosophy itself – a framework that people in the physical and social sciences can use, let alone the hard-core technologists like dentists, engineers and veterinarians. And where training across a range of philosophical endeavours is a necessary component of a course, even for their own students, most departments of philosophy have failed the challenge. They are too busy educating philosophers.

The failure can be seen in several branches of philosophy. The field where it is most noticeable, however, is moral philosophy, and within that, the teaching of ethics. Findings, drawn from Australia but not significantly different from Britain, illustrate the dilemma facing the sciences. At my university, Sydney, every faculty teaches ethics. A count across the major Australian universities will identify close to thirty disciplines including engineering, medicine and business studies that teach ethics to their students. *Who teaches these ethics courses?* The disciplines themselves. *How do they teach them?* By each lecturer individually working out his or her own moral code and then teaching it. Philosophy has failed dismally to train teachers, as it has failed to develop researchers in moral practices across the other academic disciplines. The educational literature from each of these professions demonstrates the great variety of ethics courses that has resulted from this DIY approach. The diversity is truly amazing, ranging from courses that have no moral educational content at all, to courses that are a little more than an adaptation of a history of ethics course from a department of philosophy. The blame lies with philosophers. There are virtually no training programs in the schools of philosophy for people who want to teach ethics in other disciplines. More worrying, there are very few training courses for people who have to resolve ethical issues and establish ethical practices in the workforce. As the mother discipline, this need can only be satisfied by a school of philosophy.

This training need is a wide one. Regulations on ethical practices throughout the organisations and institutional structures of the country have grown exponentially. Codes of ethics, ethics committees, and internal whistleblowing systems are on the increase, requiring an ever-growing number of people with at least some training in theory and practice to develop and manage them.

Training is needed to meet this demand. Training is the imparting of a specific skill, and building ability in employing that skill. A new graduate faced with a difficult ethical choice will handle it more confidently with an effective training course behind him or her. An experienced, professional graduate who is asked to prepare a code of ethics will be more effective if they have some knowledge of the practices that are employed throughout the world, and of the theories behind them. That graduate will prepare an even better product if they are aware of the regulations and the legislation that affect the organisation for which they work, be it a business, a school or the army. A senior administrator who wants to build a more ethical environment, without knowledge of the organisational approaches that have proved to be successful elsewhere, has to reinvent her own wheel again. Similarly with setting up of whistleblower protection systems. There are an infinite variety of choices. People who investigate the options without a knowledgeable background will come up with the same range of interpretations as the teachers of ethics across the disciplines do currently.

Doubters might object that ‘training’ implies an accepted body of knowledge which can be imparted, and that philosophers – ever questioning – lack such a consensus. But the arguments for ethics training across the disciplines do not conflict with the educational demands that currently exist in the schools of philosophy. The same wide range of differing theories and opinions, the varieties of schools of moral thought, are part of the educational process. The research behind them, and behind the effectiveness of theory and practice, feeds into the training. The research into practice, however, receives just as little attention as does the training. If we search the journals of philosophy, even the applied journals, we find disappointingly few research articles on the practices that would constitute core ethics training topics – the use and impact of codes of ethics, the problems of managing protected disclosures, the building of ethical organisational environments. Even the evaluations of the welter of regulatory and legislative developments on ethical behaviour that have been introduced in recent years are left to the professional journals in the applied sciences. These are the sources that contain the research and evaluation that will lead to a strengthening of training in practice.

It is not only in the moral issues that philosophy has neglected its research and training role. Questions about personal identity – Who am I? What am I? – are also core philosophical issues. Take a look at the journals in the technologies and you will find many introspective analyses of the nature and role of a person as an engineer, an architect, as a biochemist, etc. They even have elements of the mind-body conflict – the body designs bridges, or space stations; the mind wrestles with rocket launchers that may kill people, or newborns who will never function, and what the technologist should believe. The mind ponders the concept of a technologist in today’s society. The fundamental being of the technologist must reflect on this question and be included in his/her education. The answers are left to the sciences and technologies to find themselves.

Philosophy’s training obligation extends even further. Not only does it need to search for and provide moral and philosophical training concepts for the sciences and technologies, it needs to provide this structure for itself. The issues that arise in the professions – what is the nature and role of the profession, what are the moral and ethical issues that it faces, and how are these issues best dealt with in the education and training programs that are provided – are questions that are just as appropriate for philosophy as they are for any other discipline.

Philosophy has an obligation to inquire into whether its graduates are given even the chance, let alone the skills, to investigate practical questions of moral behaviour and individual and professional identity. It also has the obligation to train its own graduates, for the sake of those who choose to join the workforce, to design codes of ethics, advise on creating ethical organisational environments, and manage public interest disclosure systems. Finally it needs to train them to handle difficult ethical conflicts with confidence and skill. Provision of this training will likely result in an increased demand on departments of philosophy.

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