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A Study on the Curriculum Setting and Characteristics of the Undergraduate Philosophy Major at Oxford University

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Abstract

The philosophy faculty at Oxford University is ancient and stately, with profound cultural background and a good tradition of philosophical concept of education and training target, which influences the philosophical education in Britain and even in the whole world. By cultivating the students' ability of reading, logical thinking and critical thinking, it encourages students to correctly understand the world and use the knowledge effectively to solve various practical problems. This article tries to sort out the development of undergraduates' education of philosophy at Oxford University, to analyze the curriculum setting of philosophy in the latest ten years, and to summarize the characteristics of philosophy education.

Key words: Oxford university; Philosophy; Courses; Characteristics

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INTRODUCTION

Oxford University is an ancient and modern university, which is recognized as one of the top higher education

institutions in the world. As the oldest university in the English-speaking world, Oxford University has a long and unique history. So far, there is no exact time for her foundation, but some scholars think that as early as 1096 to 1167, Oxford University has already become an academic center for cultivating priests and researching knowledge. Oxford University is one of the world's great centers for philosophy research. More than seventy professional philosophers work in there. Each year, more than five hundred undergraduates are admitted to study for philosophy degree at different level in Oxford University and most of them are undergraduates. Through research, the author found that why the Oxford University philosophy is famous for all over the world is largely thanks to its cultural tradition of classical liberalism, the idea of cultivating students' humanistic quality and the unique form of undergraduate philosophy education. Based on this, this paper starts from stretching back to the philosophy history at Oxford University, systematically analyzes the curriculum system and the characteristics of undergraduate philosophy education at Oxford University, aiming to deeply understand the core idea, training target and subject spirit of undergraduate philosophy education at Oxford University.

1. THE PHILOSOPHY HISTORY AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

The emergence of philosophy at Oxford University as the autonomous academic discipline has been a time consuming affair. However, undoubtedly, there already exists philosophy teaching between the scholars and students. It was during the later Middle Ages that the Oxford University acquired an international reputation for its rigorousness and equality of academic research. At that time, lots of famous scholars are at Oxford, such as Robert Grosseteste, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham and John Wycliffe. Throughout this period, instruction occurred in two main forms, the reading of set-texts such as *Aristotle* and *The Bible*, and disputation, a kind of formalized

debate in which the various arguments for and against a given thesis were rehearsed under the guidance of a tutor. Oxford's the first professorial post in philosophy—the White's Chair of Moral Philosophy was established in 1621. And John Locke, one of the greatest philosophers of that age, was appointed as a tutor at the College.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, despite advances in philosophy itself, the traditional curriculum and teaching form changed only slowly. There was not a recognized discipline called “philosophy”, all students studied logic, metaphysics and moral philosophy, which are regarded as the important subjects to get the arts degree. At the same time, they also should study such subjects as geometry, grammar and rhetoric. Except for mastering introductory textbook and manual, students should read a series of texts under the supervising of the tutor.

The second half of the nineteenth century may be the greatest period of Oxford University. There were two new professorial posts both established in 1859. There was a Chair in Logic, now known as the Wykeham, and the first occupied by Henry Wall, while in the same year Henry Longueville Mansel was appointed as the first Waynflete Professor of Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy.

In the early twentieth century, compared with Cambridge University, philosophy at Oxford University developed at a lower level. But important changes did occur in this period. It was in 1913 that philosophy was first recognized administratively as an autonomous discipline, acquiring the status of a sub-faculty to the faculty of Literae Humanities. In addition, Balliol College creatively introduced a three-year “Modern Greats” course in 1920, combining philosophy, politics and economics. Undoubtedly, the combination of three subjects breaks the limitation of single subject, which plays great role in the development of philosophy education at Oxford University.

The post-war period, the philosophy at Oxford University has gradually revived. Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976) was elected to the Waiflike chair in 1945, and did much to raise the standard of philosophy in Oxford University. Under the leadership of Ryle, the number of studying philosophy, politics and economics significantly increased. The process of philosophical diversification, first begun with PPE, continued as new degrees were introduced. The first class lists were published in Philosophy, Psychology and Physiology (1949), Philosophy and Mathematics (1970), Philosophy and Physics (1971), Philosophy and Theology (1972), and Philosophy and Modern Languages (1975).

2. CURRICULUM SYSTEM OF UNDERGRADUATE PHILOSOPHY MAJOR AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

The philosophy faculty at Oxford University has a long history. At present, it's one of the most important philosophy faculties in the world. Curriculum system of undergraduate philosophy has its unique features.

2.1 Major Setting

The philosophy faculty holds that by learning related courses can make undergraduate students understand each course deeply. Therefore, during the undergraduate period, the philosophy faculty doesn't set up separate philosophy major. It sets many compound courses. According to the literature research, nowadays, in the philosophy faculty the major includes the following: Philosophy and Physics (PP); Philosophy and Theology (PT); Philosophy and Modern language (PML); Psychology, Physiology and Philosophy (PPP); Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE); Mathematics and Philosophy (MP).

Specifically, (a) Philosophy and Physics began as a degree course at Oxford University in 1969. It aims to train students to a high level of scientific and humanistic literacy as well as technical and analytic skills. It requires students to acquire the physical theory, and evaluate the contemporary metaphysical theory critically. (b) Philosophy and Theology is mainly studied on theology and history of philosophy to enable students to understand and assess the intellectual claims of religion, and in particular of Christianity. It emphasis on using philosophical skills to the core issues—Is there a god? What kind of Father is God? (c) As for Philosophy and Modern language, it seeks to bring together some of the most important approaches to understanding language, literature and ideas. It not only develops students' analytical and critical ability as well as linguistic skills. (d) Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology course at Oxford University is an interdisciplinary course on the study of the mind and the brain. In the course, students can study thought, emotion and behavior from the perspectives of Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology. Psychology considers subjects as diverse as social interaction, learning, schizophrenia, and artificial intelligence. Physiology examines the functioning of the mammalian and human body and brain from the molecular level to that of the whole animal. Philosophy is concerned with a wide range of issues about ethics, knowledge, and the nature of mind. (e) Philosophy, Politics and Economics seek to bring together some of the most important approaches to understanding the social and human world. The study of Philosophy develops students' rigorous analytical capacity and logical reasoning ability. The study of Politics makes students an understanding of the issues dividing societies and the impact of political institutions on the form of social interest articulation and aggregation and the character and effects of government policies. The study of Economics aims to give students an understanding of the workings of contemporary economies. (f) Mathematics and Philosophy provides the opportunity to attain high levels of two quite different kinds of widely applicable skills. Philosophical training encourages the ability to analyze issues. Mathematical knowledge and the ability to use it is a key element in tackling quantifiable problems

and the most highly developed means of obtaining knowledge through purely abstract thinking.

At the undergraduate stage, this kind of major setting pays attention to break through the limitations of a single major, and also emphasizes on grasping the course structure to realize the combination of different disciplines. It is designed to encourage undergraduate students to master relatively complete knowledge system and relevant professional skills as well as professional quality, also to cultivate students' independent consciousness and creative thinking. There is no doubt

that by studying in the philosophy faculty, students not only obtain scientific and reasonable academic research training, but also improve their ability to analyze and solve practical problems.

2.2 Course Setting

In recent 10 years, the course setting of undergraduate philosophy major at Oxford University is almost the same, only some years have subtle discrepancy. Due to the limited space, this article only attaches the course of undergraduate philosophy major in 2004-2005 (see Table 1).

Table 1
Curriculum Setting of Undergraduate Philosophy Major at Oxford University (2004-2005)

Course	Course contents and readings
101. History of philosophy from descartes to Kant	Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, often collectively referred to as “the rationalists”, placed the new “corpuscularian” science within grand metaphysical system. Locke wrote in a different, empiricist tradition. Berkeley and Hume developed this empiricism in the direction of a kind of idealism. Kant subsequently sought to arbitrate between the rationalists and the empiricists. Reading: R.S.Woolhouse, <i>The Empiricists</i> ; J. Cottingham, <i>The Rationalists</i> The paper will be divided into three sections and students will be required to answer at least one question from Section A (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz) and at least one from Section B (Locke, Berkeley, Hume). Section C will contain questions on Kant and students taking paper 112 may not attempt questions from this section.
102 Knowledge and reality	Thinking some central questions about the nature of the world Read: Jonathan Dancy, <i>Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology</i> , Chapters 1-3; Michael J. Loux, <i>Metaphysics</i>
103 Ethics	Learning the ethical concepts and thoughts of major historical thinkers and discussing some applied ethical issues. Reading: John Mackie, <i>Ethics</i> , Chapters 1-2.
104 Philosophy of mind	To examine the relation between persons and their minds, our minds and our brains. Read: Paul Churchland, <i>Matter and Consciousness</i> , Chapters 1-3.
105 Philosophy of science and philosophy of psychology and neuroscience	The philosophy of science is concerned with the theory of knowledge and with associated questions in metaphysics. The philosophy of psychology and neuroscience addresses questions that arise from the scientific study of the mind. Reading: Don Gillies, <i>Philosophy of Science in the Twentieth Century</i> Paul Churchland, <i>Matter and Consciousness</i> , chapters 1-3.
106 Philosophy of science and social science	The philosophy of science is concerned with the theory of knowledge and with associated questions in metaphysics, focusing on scientific knowledge, and metaphysical questions - concerning space, time and causation. Reading: Martin Hollis, <i>The Philosophy of Social Science</i> Alexander Rosenberg, <i>Philosophy of Social Science</i>
107 Philosophy of religion	Learning the central thoughts of the western religions. Reading: M. Peterson and other authors, <i>Reason and Religious Belief, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion</i> There may be an optional question in the exam paper about some specifically Christian doctrine.
108 The philosophy of logic and language	Learning the relevant concepts of logic and the very general question how language can describe reality. Reading: Mark Sainsbury, <i>Philosophical Logic</i>
109 Aesthetics	Learning questions about the nature and value of beauty and of the arts, and questions raised by the particular art form. Reading: Plato's <i>Republic</i> , Aristotle's <i>Poetics</i> , Hume's <i>Essay on the Standard of Taste</i> and Kant's <i>Critique of Aesthetic Judgement</i> .
110 Medieval philosophy: aquinas	Learning the concept of the soul in general and of the human soul in particular, the proof of the immortality of the human soul, the nature of perception and of intellectual knowledge, the notion of free will and of happiness, the theory of human actions. Reading: Anthony Kenny, <i>Aquinas</i> ; F.C. Copleston, <i>Aquinas</i> ; B. Davies, <i>The Thought of Thomas Aquinas</i>
111 Medieval philosophy: Duns Scotus and Ockham	Learning the Duns Scotus' discussion about the immateriality and the immortality of the human soul and Ockham's nominalism about universals and the refutation of realism. Duns Scotus, <i>Philosophical Writings</i> ; Ockham, <i>Philosophical Writings</i> R. Cross, <i>Duns Scotus</i> ; M. McCord Adams, <i>William Ockham</i> , vol. 1.
112 The Philosophy of Kant	Learning Kant's moral philosophy. Reading: <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> ; <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i>
113 Post-Kantian philosophy	Learning Hegel and Schopenhauer description of metaphysical systems. Reading: Robert C. Solomon, <i>Continental Philosophy since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self</i>
114 Theory of politics	Learning the main ideologies, such as liberalism, conservatism and socialism, in order to understand their main argument. Reading: Will Kymlicka, <i>Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction</i>

To be continued

Continued

Course	Course contents and readings
115 Plato, republic	Questions of the nature of justice and of what is the best kind of life to lead, and discussion about the nature of knowledge, the Theory of Forms and the immortality of the soul. Reading: Julia Annas, <i>An Introduction to Plato's Republic</i> , Introduction and chapter 1; Plato, <i>Republic</i>
116 Aristotle, <i>nicomachean ethics</i>	Analyses of the structure of human action, responsibility, the virtues, the nature of moral knowledge, weakness of will, pleasure, friendship, and other related issues. Reading: J. L. Ackrill, <i>Aristotle the Philosopher</i> , chapter 10; Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
117 Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein	Learning some classic texts from which emerged modern logic and philosophy of language. Reading: Anthony Kenny, <i>Frege and Wittgenstein</i> ; J. O. Urmson, <i>Philosophical Analysis</i> .
118 The later philosophy of Wittgenstein	Studying some of the most influential ideas of the 20th century. Reading: <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> paras 1-80; <i>Blue Book</i> pp. 1-17; Saul Kripke: <i>Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language</i> ; Marie McGinn: <i>Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations</i>
120 Intermediate philosophy of physics	Studying conceptual problems in special relativity and quantum mechanics.
122 Philosophy of mathematics	Studying the relation of mathematical knowledge to other kinds of knowledge. Reading: Stephen F. Barker, <i>Philosophy of Mathematics</i>

Through comparison and analysis, we learn that compared with 2004-2005 school years, in 2005-2006 school years, the course setting is the same. In 2006-2007 school year, and in 2007-2008 school years, adds a course that is 119(formal logic). In 2008-2010 school years, adds courses 119 and 124 (philosophy of science). In 2010-2014 school year, adds courses 119, 124 and 125 (philosophy of cognitive science). In 2014-2015 school years, didn't set course 105 (philosophy of science). Besides, adds course 127 (philosophical logic). In general, the philosophy faculty at Oxford University mainly adopts compound courses. For example, Mathematics and Philosophy, Physics and Philosophy, Philosophy and Modern language, Philosophy, Politics and Economics and so on. The compound course is aimed at cultivating students' capability to solve different problems.

Generally speaking, the course setting follows a certain curriculum system. First, basic course is a compulsory subject. Second, core course, namely is professional foundation course. Third, professional course divided into professional compulsory course and elective course. Elective course is the expansion and extension of basic course and core course, which can greatly meet the students' learning interest, and make them more widely contact and absorb new knowledge as well as to further deepen the existing professional knowledge.

On the setting and implementation of the curriculum, in the first year, it mainly set the basic course of the two disciplines; In the second year, it mainly set the core course of the two disciplines; during the third year (or the fourth year), students can choose learn the two disciplines continually or learning one of them deeply according to their interest or the advice of the tutor. We take Mathematics and Philosophy as an example. In the first year, for the mathematics, the basic course includes Mathematics I, covering mainly Algebra, and Mathematics II, covering mainly Analysis, and

Mathematics III (P) (Introductory Calculus, Probability). For philosophy, the basic course includes Introduction to Philosophy, which covers General Philosophy, and Gottlob Frege's Foundations of Arithmetic. In the second year, mathematics has compulsory course, which is Algebra and Analysis. And it also has elective courses: Group theory, Number theory. As for the philosophy course, the courses are as follows: history of philosophy from Descartes to Kant, Knowledge and Reality. In the third year, mathematics sets Logics, Set theory and so on. The philosophy divided into the compulsory and elective courses, for example, philosophy of mathematics, ethics. In the fourth year, students need to study the following courses: model theory, analytical topology, axiomatic set theory, modern logic and so on.

The philosophy faculty at Oxford University also opens a wide of lectures. Each semester, the philosophy faculty will publish a lecture list. Students have the right to choose. However, there are also parts of lectures which are dedicated to a certain course. In this case, the students which study the relevant course must attend the lecture. The lectures of philosophy faculty at Oxford University are mainly composed of four parts: lectures about preliminary (the first public examination), core lectures for the Honor Schools (Finals), special lectures and other lectures. For instance, in Philosophy Lecture Year Plan for 2013-2014, the lecture on preliminary includes Early Greek Philosophy, Moral Philosophy, Introduction to Logic and Elements of Deductive Logic. Core lectures for the Honor Schools (Finals) has the following: History of Philosophy, Knowledge and Reality, Ethics, Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Science and so on. The special lectures includes: The 2014 John Locke Lectures: Anger and Forgiveness, the 2014 Isaiah Berlin Lectures: After Certainty: A History of our Epistemic ideals and illusions. Other lectures include Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Languages, Epistemological Issues

Concerning Religious Belief, Special Topics in Applied Ethics, and Key Topics in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy and so on. These lectures are beneficial for students to plan their future, and to strengthen their professional knowledge.

The compound philosophy courses and lectures interpret the core content and the inner link between the disciplines. From the basic course to core course and the specialized course, we can find that the philosophy faculty at Oxford University sets the course following the principles of gradual. Through the basic course and core course make students have broad basic knowledge and open vision. On the basis, carrying out professional education, aims to enable students to master professional knowledge and update their knowledge structure, which is reflected the talents training goal of Oxford University.

2.3 Examination System

According to the idea and requirements of the compound courses, the examination system is also unique. It is mainly composed of two parts: The First Public Examination also called Preliminary Examination, and Final Honor School, namely Finals. Usually, The First Public Examination holds in the end of the first year, which mainly tests the content of the basic courses. Final Honor School holds in the third year or the end of the fourth year, which pays more attention to the core and professional content of course. Compared with The First Public Examination, it's more difficult. In The First Public Examination, as for the philosophy, it mainly inspects the introduction of philosophy, reasoning logic components and moral philosophy and so on; other disciplines should take part in the corresponding course exam. Overall, the examination system is composed of The First Public Examination and Finals. The former is the basis and premise of the latter. The latter is the progressive and deepening of the former.

3. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF UNDERGRADUATE PHILOSOPHY EDUCATION AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

As for the undergraduate philosophy education, Oxford University inherits its long historical tradition, combining with today's training concept, and has a set of perfect philosophy education system. Flexner, a famous American higher education expert, argued that most undergraduates at Oxford University have reached the graduate level in United States and Germany (Flexner, 2001, p.242). By analyzing the course system, philosophy at Oxford University undergraduate course education mainly has the following features:

First, focus on cultivation of students' comprehensive skills. Basing on the training idea of wideness and specialization, Oxford University pays attention to

cultivate students' comprehensive skills, namely intellectual skills, practical skills and general skills. The cultivation of intellectual skills focuses on the students' ability to construct logically valid arguments with clear identification of assumptions and conclusions, acquired through lectures, classes, tutorials, reading recommended textbooks. As for the practical skills, students are required to master the relevant theory, views or symbol, to debate, argue or calculate skillfully and accurately, in order to solve various practical problems effectively. This can be acquired by class, tutorials and practices. As for the general skills, Oxford University tries to cultivate students' ability to analyze and solve problems, and to reason logically and creatively; ability of effective communication and presentation orally; ability to learn and time managing independently; ability to think critically about arguments and solutions and to defend an intellectual position; ability of collaboration; ability to use of information technology and language skills. These can be acquired by classes, lectures, written work against strict tutorial and class and self-learning. After the long-term and systematic training, the graduates of the philosophy faculty at Oxford University tend to be excellent talents of high quality and ability.

Second, pay attention to analytic philosophy. As is known to all, analytic philosophy is an important part of modern western philosophy, which emphatically cultivates people's logical thinking and analysis ability. In the late 1950s, the "Oxford everyday language school" was one of the schools which have profound influence in analytic philosophy. Under the promotion of Gilbert Ryle, J.L. Austin and others, analytical philosophy stepped into a new era. Given the leading role of philosophers at Oxford University in the analysis of philosophy, Oxford University became the center of analytic philosophy. Currently, Oxford University stresses the study of analytic philosophy, but compared with before, Oxford University philosophy no longer adhere to the strict semantic analysis praised by philosophy of everyday language school, and turns to make a conceptual system analysis of the important philosophical questions in different disciplines or traces the roots of the concept of philosophy.

Third, pay attention to the combination of historical tradition and the frontier problems. From the courses and lectures opened in the philosophy faculty at Oxford University in the latest ten years, it is known that it attaches great importance to study and research in the history of philosophy. As for philosophy history, it sets up a series of courses and lectures named after a philosopher or a certain period of history, such as the study of Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, Medieval Philosophy: Aquinas, Duns Scotus and Ockham, modern representative of rationalism and empiricism Descartes and Hume and, as well as representative of German classical philosophy Kant, etc..

In addition, the accelerating globalization and internationalization prompts the birth and development of diversified culture, and the blend and conflict of culture also cause a lot of new ethical problems bothering people. For example, the rapid development of medical technology makes the previously unimaginable things become reality. People can voluntarily choose euthanasia to end life so as to get rid of the torture of pain. However, we have to think about whether these practices are proper, reasonable and generally acceptable to the ethical and moral. And Oxford philosophy lectures include such research frontier problems, such as ethics, moral philosophy, environmental projects and applied ethics, etc.. Therefore, the philosophy faculty at Oxford University not only attaches importance to explore the historical tradition of philosophy, but also pays attention to the forefront issues, putting the latest achievements of the subject research and development into the lectures. Undoubtedly, the effective combination of them makes their graduates erudite and informed.

Fourth, it pays attention to the diversity of teaching organization form. In the aspect of undergraduate philosophy education, the philosophy faculty at Oxford University takes the tutorial system as a main way to cultivate talents. Besides, it also combines of lectures, seminars and report.

Tutorial system is a core system of the Oxford University. The philosophy faculty will arrange a tutor for every student, aiming to strengthen the communication and conversation between them. For example, for mathematics and philosophy, students have two tutors, which guide and supervise them to study. Tutors will arrange counseling for students, and give some suggestions on academic matters, career planning and so on. In general, the philosophy faculty will publish a lecture list and lecture instruction in the internet at the beginning of each semester. Therefore, before the semester, students should get information from the tutor, and they also advise them to attend which lectures. Seminars also play an important role in the curriculum system. As for psychology, philosophy and physiology, students should communicate with tutors for academic matters in every week. Usually, tutors will ask students to write a summary about this seminar. In addition to the above three kinds of teaching organization form, reports also are important form. In the philosophy faculty, the report is frequent, so students can choose to attend any one. The report mainly has two kinds of types: experts report and students report.

All in all, undergraduate philosophy education at Oxford University is characterized, and makes remarkable achievements. It makes students to correctly understand the real world and society, and cultivate students' ability to analyze and solve problems. At the same time, the philosophy faculty at Oxford University also cultivates many famous philosophers, politicians and leaders, which of them play an important role in the world. More importantly, the philosophy faculty at Oxford University provides a model for universities in the world. They study the unique compound course and examination system from the philosophy faculty at Oxford University., which is undoubtedly beneficial for the development and progress of philosophy.

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