

REBECCA ROZELLE-STONE
Beyond Power: Simone Weil and the Notion of Authority,
by Desmond Avery 326

THLEEN WININGER
Introducing Philosophy Through Film,
ed. Richard Fumerton and Diane Jeske 331

Broadening College Student Interest in Philosophical Education through Community Service Learning

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Abstract: The Pulse Program at Boston College is a community service learning program that combines academic study of philosophy and theology with a year-long community service project. An analysis of the Pulse Program during the 2008–09 academic year revealed that participating students demonstrated a significant increase in their interest in philosophy; a greater likelihood of enrolling in additional philosophy coursework; and a deeper interest in philosophy than classmates not participating in service-learning. Interviews with participating students revealed that the Pulse Program highlighted philosophy’s relevance to the “real world” as well as the useful role that philosophy can play in reflecting upon the social issues raised by students’ community service experiences.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 1.5 million students graduated from American colleges and universities in 2007.¹ Fewer than 12,000 of these students earned degrees in philosophy.² Moreover, over the past thirty years, the number of students majoring in philosophy has declined, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the total degrees awarded—a trend which also characterizes the humanist disciplines as a whole.³ In contrast, the number and proportion of college students pursuing degrees in occupational fields such as business and education have risen dramatically. For example, in 2007, approximately 300,000 students—20 percent of all college graduates—earned degrees in business or a business related field.⁴

As for *why* these shifts away from the liberal arts and towards occupational disciplines have occurred, one possible explanation is that contemporary college students appear to view college as a vehicle for

professional advancement more strongly than their counterparts in previous generations. A Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) survey of college freshmen has reported that 69 percent of college freshmen in 2006 expressed their belief that a key reason to attend college is to increase one's earning power.⁵ In contrast, fewer than 50 percent of college freshmen expressed a similar sentiment thirty years earlier. Perhaps, then, fewer contemporary college students are pursuing degrees in philosophy than their counterparts from previous generations because they are entering into their college experiences with more career-oriented goals and objectives. As Trow has written, "[In] recent decades, students . . . have been oriented chiefly toward gaining useful skills and knowledge rather than membership in a cultural elite marked by arcane knowledge and cultivated ways of thinking and feeling."⁶ D. Hildebrand adds that, for such students, philosophy has lost its "apparent relevance."⁷

A number of scholars have lamented these trends and argued for the relevance of the humanistic disciplines in higher education on other grounds, asserting that the traditional liberal arts fields are more effective than the "occupational arts" at strengthening students' critical thinking, writing, and oratorical skills.⁸ Other scholars have credited traditional liberal arts fields such as philosophy with promoting "the intellectual maturation of young people and widening their cultural horizons."⁹ In support of these claims, the aforementioned HERI survey reports that contemporary college students self-report far less knowledge and interest in philosophy, culture, science, literature and the arts than college students in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰ Adelman has attributed these declines, in large part, to students' diminished participation in traditional liberal arts coursework.¹¹

The Pulse Program

In spite of these trends, the Pulse Program at Boston College has had measurable success at persuading a wide range of students that philosophy is a valuable part of a college education. The Pulse Program is a community service learning program sponsored by Boston College's philosophy department. According to the program's website:

The mission of the Pulse Program is to educate our students about social injustice by putting them into direct contact with marginalized communities and social change organizations and by encouraging discussion on classic and contemporary works of philosophy and theology.¹²

The Pulse Program offers a year-long course in philosophy and theology entitled "Person and Social Responsibility, I–II." That course fulfills the entire Boston College core requirement in philosophy and theology (four courses). Students meet three times a week for class

and participate in a weekly discussion section. While the content of the course varies somewhat across the twelve philosophy and theology faculty members who teach in the Pulse program, readings in all sections include works from the history of philosophy (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Boethius, Locke, Rousseau), from contemporary philosophers (e.g., Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, John Rawls, Charles Taylor), and from non-philosophers (Paulo Freire, Jonathan Kozol, Paul Farmer) whose writings touch upon themes (justice, education, theodicy) considered also by philosophical authors. A representative Pulse syllabus from the 2008–09 academic year is available as Appendix A.

In addition to the traditional academic course, all Boston College students enrolled in the Pulse Program are placed at one of more than fifty social service agencies. Their work in these service placements ranges from tutoring urban elementary school student to volunteering at a suicide hotline, from working in an emergency room to helping low-income families apply for affordable housing. Students devote ten to twelve hours a week to their respective service placements (including travel time) for the entire academic year. The Pulse Program conceives of students' time at the service placement, not as a volunteer opportunity but as an additional platform for learning, one which supplements and complements learning on campus. As such, the students are evaluated on their learning at their off-site placements; that evaluation represents 40 percent of their final grade for the course. A Pulse administrative office offers structure and support to coordinate learning on and off campus.

A study conducted during the 2008–09 academic year considered the experiences of 362 Boston College students enrolled in the Pulse Program during the 2008–09 academic year in comparison to 37 Boston College students who had elected to participate in Pulse during the 2008–09 academic year but who were randomly assigned to the Pulse wait list. Because participation in the Pulse Program fulfills Boston College's philosophy and theology requirements, every year nearly 500 Boston College students express interest in the 400 places available in the program. The Pulse Program's process of filling its places via a randomized registration lottery allowed this study to yield robust insights about the impact upon students of combining community service with coursework and readings in philosophy. The 362 students in the Pulse Program and the 37 students on the wait list were proportionally similar in terms of gender, race, age, and religion.

All of these students completed surveys in September of 2008 and then in May of 2009 that solicited students' opinions about a variety of topics raised in the Pulse Program as well as their attitudes about philosophy and philosophy courses. Interviews were also conducted in April of 2009 with a diverse group of thirty Boston College students

enrolled in the Pulse Program. These interviews were approximately one hour in length and engaged students in discussion of their beliefs about the program's effect upon their values, worldview, and attitudes towards philosophy.

The research questions guiding this investigation were the following:

1. What impact did the Pulse Program have upon participating students' interest in and understanding of philosophy?
2. How do Pulse Program participants describe and understand the impact of Pulse upon their interest in and understanding of philosophy?

Four different types of analyses were used to consider the effect of the Pulse Program upon participating students' attitudes towards philosophy. First, we considered whether the students in the Pulse Program demonstrated statistically significant changes in their interest in philosophy.¹³ Next, we considered whether the Boston College students in the Pulse Program demonstrated different attitudes towards philosophy at the end of the 2008–09 academic year than their classmates who had not participated in Pulse.¹⁴ Third, we considered whether the students who most enjoyed their experience in the Pulse Program were also the most likely to express an interest in pursuing additional philosophy coursework.¹⁵ Finally, after the interviews with thirty Pulse students were audio recorded and transcribed, we considered patterns and themes within these interview transcripts of students' experiences within the Pulse Program.¹⁶

We believe that the results of those analyses provide valuable insights not only about the role that service-learning can or ought to play in teaching philosophy, but also about that role that philosophy can or ought to play in contemporary higher education.

Research Context

UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute defines community service learning as "a form of experiential learning where students and faculty collaborate with communities to address problems and issues, simultaneously gaining knowledge and skills and advancing personal development."¹⁷ Opportunities to participate in community service and community service learning experiences are now widespread on American college campuses. According to a recent survey, more than 3.3 million college-aged Americans participated in some form of community service in the past year.¹⁸ On the Higher Education Research Institute's annual survey of college freshmen, 65 percent of students described their respective institutions as offering community service learning opportunities.¹⁹ Finally, Campus Compact—an organization dedicated to promoting community service opportunities on college

campuses—now counts 1100 American colleges and universities among its membership.²⁰

Over the past two decades, contemporary scholars have invoked a wide range of philosophical authorities—from Aristotle²¹ to Levinas²² to Dewey²³—as grounds for using service-learning as a powerful pedagogical tool. However, despite the fact that more than 200 studies of service-learning experiences have been published in the past twenty years, only a handful have focused on the use of service-learning in *philosophy courses*. In part, this paucity of scholarship seems to reflect the rarity of service-learning in philosophy classrooms. Philosopher H. M. Giebel asserts this is largely because philosophy faculty members are reluctant to use service-learning in their courses: they perceive service-learning as either inappropriate to a discipline like philosophy or potentially appropriate, but logistically difficult or impossible to implement for individual professors.²⁴ Fitzgerald observes that "Despite the widespread attention given to service-learning, it has received relatively little attention from ethicists."²⁵ Likewise, Zlotkowski offers the following account of the reluctance of some philosophy faculty to embrace service-learning:

[A colleague] organized a faculty service-learning event and sent out invitations to likely participants. One faculty member, upon receiving the invitation, replied . . . with a memo saluting the work of the program but nonetheless excusing himself from attending the event. Service-learning, he explained, was simply not relevant to his disciplinary interests. This from a member of the philosophy department teaching a course in applied ethics!²⁶

These scholars focus particularly on the reluctance of philosophy faculty to embrace service-learning, but, in fact, Handley characterizes the humanistic disciplines, as a whole, as "playing a minor role in the spread of service-learning. Humanities, it is assumed, is the territory of abstraction and reflection, but not action."²⁷ Bennett concurs that "At the undergraduate level, it is unlikely that history or English, much less philosophy majors, will be required to earn credit in their disciplines through internships."²⁸

Studies on the use of service-learning in philosophy courses, in general, fall into two categories. The majority are descriptive accounts by philosophy faculty of their own use of service-learning. A review of the research literature also reveals a few experimental or quasi-experimental studies of service-learning experiences embedded in philosophy courses. Here, we consider each in turn.

Descriptive Studies of Service-Learning in the Philosophy Classroom

In the past two decades, the journal *Teaching Philosophy* has published a number of accounts by philosophy faculty of their use of service-learning experiences to foster students' engagement and learning. For

example, Fitzgerald characterized his use of service-learning in two ethics courses at Louisiana State University as "an effective way to conduct a socially responsible ethics class."²⁹ In these courses, Fitzgerald gave his students the option of participating in a community service project or writing a research paper. Almost 80 percent of the students in the course chose the community service option, and, at the conclusion of the semester, Fitzgerald surveyed the two groups of students about their disparate experiences. According to Fitzgerald, the service-learning participants expressed a strong belief that the community service had helped them to "understand their social responsibilities" and prepared them "to be socially responsible in the future."³⁰ In contrast, the students in the course who had written the research paper expressed their belief that the experience had prepared them for other university courses. In short, Fitzgerald claims that service-learning represents an opportunity for philosophy faculty to "encourage the moral development of students."³¹

Another scholar, Katherine Kirby, describes her use of service-learning in her course, "Otherness and Marginalization: Levinas and the Alienated." Following Levinas, Kirby asserts, "Any instruction on suffering can only be [offered by] the person who suffers herself. In seeking to understand the suffering or need of another person, I seek to understand something about the world that is essentially off-limits to me. It is something that only she can possibly truly know."³² Kirby begins her course with several weeks of readings on individuals facing marginalization and violence. Later, her students make a number of visits to nursing homes and homeless shelters in which they both participate in community service and engage in conversation with the individuals they encounter there. According to Kirby:

[Students cannot] come to understand the necessity of really listening to those who need our attention and service without having any contact with Others in need. I would suggest that they cannot really feel called or compelled to engagement by reading abstract theories and discussing obligation without the *experience* of feeling the pull of responsibility for the wellbeing of actual individuals.³³

For Kirby, the community service component of her course was not simply an enrichment or extension of her students' learning but rather a critical component of the course that "provides the essential condition" for allowing her students to understand Levinas's perspective on the Other.³⁴

At the University of St. Thomas, Giebel utilized service-learning in two introductory philosophy courses entitled "Philosophy of the Human Person" and "Introductory Ethics." Students in these courses engaged in 10 hours of community service tutoring underprivileged

youth, teaching English as a Second Language, or recording the oral histories of elderly community members. According to Giebel:

A concrete experience demonstrating an application of a philosophical concept or theory often may be . . . difficult to achieve in a classroom setting. Service learning can provide the experience many students need to see, and even bring about, concrete application of abstract theory, and thus come to a better understanding of the theory itself.³⁵

As a final assignment for his "Philosophy of the Human Person" course, Giebel asked his students to draw upon both their assigned readings and their community service experiences to consider whether or not there is an essential human nature. Giebel found this merging of service and learning to be highly effective and concluded that "Directed reflection on a relevant service experience outside the classroom, together with a spirit of Socratic inquiry, can help students to unearth and resolve contradictions and tensions in their own thinking about the issue under discussion."³⁶

Finally, Matthew Altman has argued that philosophy faculty should incorporate service-learning into their courses as a mechanism for preparing philosophy majors for careers outside of the academy as ethics and compliance officers. At both for-profit and non-profit organizations, ethics and compliance officers are responsible for tasks such as developing and upholding an organization's code of ethics, conducting ethics trainings for managers and staff members, and advising the company leadership on ethical issues. Altman conceives of such responsibilities as ideally suited for philosophy graduates, provided that they have supplemented their training in philosophy with an understanding of how organizations work. According to Altman, "One of the most effective ways to do this is to participate in service-learning."³⁷ As an example, Altman describes the service-learning opportunities offered in conjunction with his own medical ethics course and describes one student from this course who "used his service-learning experience as a springboard into ethics work . . . [at] a Fortune Global 500 consulting firm."³⁸ Altman's larger point is that pairing students' philosophy coursework with community service learning "increases the value of their philosophy education and opens up career possibilities that many of them had not previously considered."³⁹

Several other scholars have described their use of experiential learning—a close cousin of community service learning—to inform their students' study of philosophy. For example, in his course on political philosophy, war, and violence, Esquith engaged his students in a project in which they collected and transcribed oral histories from men and women who had participated in war. Then theater students transformed these oral histories into a staged reading for both the university and surrounding community.⁴⁰ According to Esquith, supplementing his

students' reading of political philosophy with this oral history project instilled in his students "a new confidence in their ability to make sense of experiences radically different from their own."⁴¹ Likewise, Donovan teaches a philosophy course entitled "Contemporary Moral Problems" in which she raises the topic of stereotyping through Hurley's *A Concise Introduction to Logic* but also through a series of field trips to sites in New York City such as the Arab-American Family Support Center in Brooklyn and the Mother Zion Church in Harlem.⁴² According to Donovan, these field trips "initiated an experience of dissonance in our students between what they thought they knew and reality. This dissonance primed them to engage more effectively with philosophical theory."⁴³ Having taught the course both with and without the experiential component, Donovan found that including the field trips allowed students to "see the issues [raised by the course] in a manner that is more complex and sophisticated."⁴⁴

Experimental Studies of Service-Learning

As noted above, more than 200 studies of service-learning experiences have been published over the past two decades. Giles and Eyster found that college students participating in a human development course with a "community service laboratory" became more confident about their ability to influence social issues and less likely to blame social service clients for their struggles.⁴⁵ In an American politics course, Markus, Howard, and King found that students participating in service-learning were significantly more likely than their classmates to express a desire to help others in need and an interest in pursuing careers in the helping professions.⁴⁶ Likewise, Kendrick found that the students in a sociology course who participated in a related service project demonstrated higher levels of social responsibility and personal efficacy than their peers who had not participated in the service-learning experience.⁴⁷ In short, a majority of the empirical studies considering university-level service-learning has found positive effects on a variety of outcomes that range from increased racial and religious tolerance⁴⁸ to reduction in stereotypical perceptions of the poor and elderly⁴⁹ to increases in empathy and civic engagement.⁵⁰

However, for the reasons noted above, relatively few of these studies have examined service-learning in the philosophy classroom. In perhaps the best-known such study, Boss found that students in a university-level ethics course randomly assigned to participate in community service demonstrated greater gains in moral reasoning than their classmates in the control group.⁵¹ Likewise, in a study of students participating in two different philosophy courses (one which utilized service-learning and another which did not), Gorman and colleagues found that students in the philosophy course involving community

service "showed a significant increase in moral reasoning on the Rest Defining Issues Test while the comparison group did not."⁵² Finally, in another oft-cited study, Fenzel and Leary considered the impact of service-learning upon fifty-two students participating in a philosophy course and seventy-four students participating in a theology course.⁵³ These scholars found that service-learning experiences, when coupled with reflection, "stimulate students' thinking about issues of justice and faith and can affect students' decisions about postgraduate plans."⁵⁴

It is clear from this review of the research literature that relatively few studies consider the impact of service-learning in philosophy courses at the university level. Furthermore, within this handful of studies, the majority are purely descriptive. Finally, none of these studies focused explicitly on the effect of the service-learning experiences upon students' perception of the field of philosophy itself. In light of the significant decline of students pursuing coursework in philosophy over the past thirty years, we believe that it is important to turn more attention to these areas of research. Our hypothesis is that community service learning has a role to play in countering negative perceptions of philosophy among contemporary college students because it creates a learning context in which students are able to evaluate for themselves the relevance of philosophical education to their own lives. In that context, students have the opportunity to think about their learning in the classroom in relation not simply to what they are doing in the field, but to what they are learning in the field about the world and about themselves.

Results of the Pulse Study

Evidence from the Pulse Surveys

On the surveys that students completed at the beginning and conclusion of the 2008–09 academic year, students expressed their agreement (or disagreement) with the following statement: "I have an interest in philosophy." We used this survey item to compare the attitudes towards philosophy of participants in the Pulse Program to their peers on the Pulse Program wait list who had *not* participated in the Pulse Program. We found no significant differences between these two groups of students in their interest in philosophy at the beginning of the academic year in September of 2008. However, when the two groups were surveyed again at the conclusion of the academic year in May of 2009, the Boston College students who had participated in the Pulse Program demonstrated significantly greater interest in philosophy than their peers who had not participated in Pulse.⁵⁵ Because students were randomly assigned either to participate in Pulse or to the program's wait list, the differing attitudes towards philosophy of these two groups

can reasonably be attributed to students' participation (or lack of participation) in the Pulse Program.

In addition, at the beginning and conclusion of the Pulse Program, students responded to the following statement: "I intend to take more philosophy classes after Pulse." A comparison of students' responses to this survey item at the beginning of the academic year vs. the end of the academic year revealed that Boston College students participating in the Pulse Program demonstrated a statistically significant increase in their interest in pursuing philosophy coursework.⁵⁶ In other words, the college students who participated in the Pulse Program during the 2008–09 academic year grew significantly more interested in taking philosophy courses over their participation in the program.

Finally, on the follow-up survey conducted in May of 2009, we also asked Pulse participants to express their agreement or disagreement with the following statements about their experience in the Pulse Program:

1. "Because of my Pulse experience, I have been able to clarify my values and beliefs."
2. "Because of my Pulse experience, my overall philosophy of life has been impacted."
3. "Pulse was influential to my personal development."

We used these survey items to consider whether the students who felt they had gotten the most out of the Pulse Program also expressed the greatest interest in philosophy at the conclusion of the Pulse Program. What we found was that, for all three of these survey items, the more impactful a student characterized his or her Pulse experience, the more likely that student was to express a heightened interest in philosophy at the conclusion of the Pulse Program.⁵⁷ In other words, the students who felt they had gotten the most out of the Pulse Program also came away from the experience with the greatest interest in philosophy.

Evidence from the Pulse Interviews

Interviews with thirty Pulse participants about their experiences in the Pulse Program underscored their growing appreciation for philosophy and philosophy texts—in many cases, very much to their own surprise. For example, communications major Cecelia Sullivan explained that Pulse "has really cultivated an interest in philosophy for me, especially with the recent philosophers such as John Rawls, John Stuart Mill, [and] Peter Singer. I really like it."⁵⁸ Sullivan added:

I thought I would hate it because it has a bad stigma attached to it. . . . I thought it would be very dry and pretentious, but it is not like that at all. It was what I always enjoyed talking about, but I was never able to verbalize or put a name to it.

Likewise, French major Kathleen Wilmer explained that, "Just on a day-to-day basis, I never expected to have a little Plato in the back of my mind. [But] I'm kind of guided by that now. It's rather strange, I would say, just because I kind of feared philosophy before I got into it." International studies major Alice McGonagle added that "I really loved Aristotle for some weird reason, just like what he said made sense to me. . . . I actually really enjoyed it even though I didn't really think I would." Pre-medical major, Namwali Ezedi admitted that "Some of the readings I did not expect to get so much out of, but I did. Like old philosophers, Plato readings, where it is like, 'This is how I do my life.' A lot of it was very, very interesting."

Finance major David Burke decided to take on a philosophy minor as a result of his experience in the Pulse Program. According to Burke, "In all honesty, before I came into Pulse, I did not realize the importance of engaging in these sorts of [philosophical] conversations. It is something I would have myself never expected." Similarly, history major Alex Denoble noted that, as a result of his positive experience with philosophy in the Pulse Program, "I am even considering taking more." As these and other students made clear, the extent to which they found themselves engaged by the philosophy component of the Pulse Program was not something they had expected at the program's outset. They expected philosophy to deal with subjects remote from practical or their own personal concerns, and they expected the older texts to be irrelevant to contemporary concerns.

Interviews with Pulse participants also offered insight into *how* the Pulse Program deepened participants' interest in philosophy and in taking additional philosophy courses. In these interviews, three primary themes emerged regarding the mechanisms by which the Pulse Program influenced participating students: 1) the Pulse professors skillfully helped the students to access the philosophical texts, and students recognized that the professors met them at the precise location of their initial concerns about the difficulty and remoteness of those texts; 2) students recognized that the philosophical texts offered them a vantage point for reflecting on their service experience and, in turn, that their service experiences offered them a vantage point for reflecting on the philosophical texts; and 3) students recognized that philosophy as an intellectual discipline was relevant to "the real world." Here, we consider each of these themes in turn.

Faculty-Provided Entry Points

Six students explicitly credited the skillful instruction of their respective Pulse professors—members of Boston College's philosophy or theology faculty—with deepening their interest and engagement with the assigned philosophy texts. For example, Kathleen Wilmer admitted

that "I was actually in tears after the first class. I think it was a Plato reading, but I struggled with it. I didn't understand it. But over the course of the year we have gained tools to understand how to approach the reading." Likewise, psychology major Corey Seaborn explained:

At first, I was kind of turned off to it. The philosophy readings looked dense. It's really intense. You really have to delve into it, and I didn't really know how to do that in the beginning. But it's been really interesting because I think my teacher does a really good job of talking about the books and really just encouraging you to think about it, and that's just really cool because I'd never really done that before.

On a similar note, English major Eddie McCabe explained that, in Pulse, "We'll take heavy, heavy texts that normally you wouldn't have any idea, dude. And our professor just does a really good job of putting it in layman's terms. Just breaking it down for us to understand." Each of these students expressed appreciation for the way in which their respective professors helped them to engage deeply with the assigned philosophy readings.

Other Pulse participants pointed to specific ways in which their professors sought to help them engage with the course's challenging philosophical texts. Alice McGonagle noted that "You read Plato, you read Socrates, and you know it's very hard almost to relate to that since they were written so long ago." However, McGonagle noted that her professor "always incorporates songs or movie clips from when we were alive. The themes overlap somehow, so you can relate it to your own life. I enjoy it more, I think, just by seeing how it does relate in a lot of ways."

Integrated Learning

Seven of the interviewed students credited their assigned philosophy readings in the Pulse Program with informing their experiences at their community service placements. For example, International studies major Donald Miller explained that his service experience tutoring teenagers from low-income neighborhoods had been informed by Aristotle's writing on friendship. According to Miller:

Aristotle says that there are three types of friendships: [friendships of] pleasure, utility, and goodness. Pleasure is just like you are attracted to the person. Utility is more like, "I'm going to gain something from them, or I have something to give." And then friendship of goodness combines the two, and so I kind of decided that what I was doing [at my community service placement] before was mainly friendship of utility, and I needed to be able to enjoy and foster the relationship other than just me sitting down with them and doing calculus.

Here, Miller describes a widely shared experience amongst Pulse students, namely, how his reading of Aristotle helped him to reflect on

the assumptions with which he entered into his service experience and provided him with a conceptual vocabulary for assessing the adequacy of those assumptions.

Both economics major Lori Clarke and pre-medical major Nambali Ezedi described how Plato's idealism helped them to ward off frustration and discouragement at their respective service placements. According to Ezedi:

A lot of times in Pulse we got so frustrated by the situations [at our service placements] that you almost forget, especially coming into second semester. You do not see things changing, but you are working so hard. It is nice to know that there is a form for every situation. There is a way there, and it is our job as Pulse students, as human beings, to try and find where that is.

For Ezedi, Plato inspired her to continue striving to do good work at her service placement in the emergency room of a public hospital.

Finally, English major Eddie McCabe described connections between readings by the philosopher Boethius and his service placement at a school for children with severe emotional disabilities. McCabe was sympathetic to Boethius's discussion of free will in relation to fortune, fate and providence, and particularly identified with the notion of divine love as an expression of providence:

Every day when I get to Pulse, and I am with a kid and he's yelling and screaming or something. I can either choose to act positively in this situation, or I can choose to scold him and put him down and make it a situation where he is not going to learn. This way obviously, I am going to side with God's love, and this [other] way I am denying God's love really in myself.

As was the case with the previously mentioned students, McCabe's study of philosophy through the Pulse Program shaped his approach to the community service in which he was simultaneously engaged. Alternatively, McCabe was willing to bring his placement and other concrete experience to bear on his reading of philosophical texts and to acknowledge the limits of applying philosophical reasoning to particular situations. Referring to Lady Philosophy's contention that the prisoner in the *Consolation of Philosophy* is confined not so much by his jail cell as by the limits of his own understanding, McCabe responded:

Obviously there is a point where you got to say, in the real world, you can't say when a peasant has been oppressed his whole life that that's okay and the reason he can't be happy is because he can't figure out in his head that he is enslaving himself.

Relevance to the Real World

This relation between philosophy and the "real world" was a frequent theme in the Pulse interviews: ten of the interviewed students cited their burgeoning interest in philosophy as influenced by the growing

recognition of the relevance of philosophy to the real world and to their own lives. For example, Hispanic studies major Frank Hammond explained that, for him, the value of the Pulse Program lay in "just talking about different ethical views, philosophical ways to view how to life your life." International studies major Felicia Santos added that philosophy texts by Aristotle, Socrates, and Machiavelli engaged her interest by focusing on "what betters the community, what is politics' place in all of that. And I just love comparing the philosophies and seeing how they are in play." Economics major Marisa Silver added "It has just been interesting to see different perspectives on what these authors thought. It gets you to contemplate, what is my purpose in life? What am I meant to do? What is my path? What is the good path?" Finally, communications major Cecelia Sullivan noted that the philosophy readings in Pulse "give you the chance to critically look at society. I love talking about them. It is kind of like it puts academics into a lot of humanitarian questions."

These and other students in the Pulse Program discovered that reading and studying philosophy represented an opportunity to reflect upon important questions in their own lives and in the world around them. The powerful combination of experiential and classroom learning put the students in a position to ask (repeatedly) with a sense of personal urgency two central philosophical questions: "how ought we to live?" and "how ought we to live together?" Many, indeed, most Pulse students come to the program with a hunger for a wider experience of life, experience beyond the confines of their "comfort zone" or "bubble." In the process of satisfying that need by electing to take Pulse, many of those students become aware of an additional need for ways of making sense of and evaluating that wider experience. It is in this context that students come to appreciate the unique resources that philosophy and philosophical education have to offer.

Discussion

With this study, we have sought to demonstrate the potential for community service learning to widen philosophy's intellectual appeal to a range of college students and to spur their interest in learning more about philosophy. Surveys that Boston College students filled out at the beginning and conclusion of the 2008–09 academic year revealed that students participating in the Pulse Program demonstrated a significant increase in their interest in philosophy; a greater desire to take philosophy courses; and a deeper engagement with philosophy than their classmates *not* participating in the Pulse Program. Students who felt they had gotten the most out of the Pulse Program were also the students most likely to express a heightened interest in philosophy

and philosophy coursework. These factors were strongly linked to the overall experiential dimension of learning in Pulse.

We also relied on interviews with Pulse participants to explain *how* the Pulse Program exerted such a powerful effect upon participating students. Specifically, these interviews revealed that students gave their professors significant credit for helping them to recognize the relevance of the assigned philosophical texts. They also credited the Pulse Program's combination of philosophy and service with helping them to recognize the useful role that philosophy can play in reflecting upon the social issues raised by their service experiences as well as with highlighting philosophy's relevance to the "real world."

As noted above in our introduction, a number of scholars have reported on a clear trend in education in which a diminishing number of students are pursuing degrees in traditional liberal arts disciplines such as philosophy while interest in occupational fields such as business and accounting are skyrocketing. Such trends are concerning for those of us who believe that the liberal arts continue to play their traditional role in fostering habits of mind conducive to life-long learning and engaged citizenship. For this reason, Hildebrand has argued that, "If philosophy is going to become part of public life, it must be made relevant to the average first-year student."⁵⁹ He adds that philosophy courses in which "the route from practice to theory (and back) is nowhere evident . . . poses a major obstacle to the interest of new students."⁶⁰ Our study suggests that community service learning offers a powerful pedagogical tool for philosophy faculty to demonstrate the role of philosophy along "the route from practice to theory."

Accordingly, we hope that our study addresses the factors that would deter faculty from employing service-learning on account of its perceived irrelevance to a discipline such as philosophy. Recall the philosophy faculty member described above who excused himself from a seminar on service-learning with the explanation that service-learning was not relevant to his course on applied ethics. While service-learning may have been taken up originally (and enthusiastically) by faculty in occupational fields such as business and social science fields such as sociology, we believe that community service learning certainly can play an equal role, and perhaps even a larger one, in humanistic disciplines such as philosophy. In order to thrive, these fields need to demonstrate their relevance to a new generation of young adults, and community service learning represents an important vehicle for doing so. We believe the successes of Pulse challenge us to ask what role philosophy can and ought to play in contemporary higher education.

In addition, we hope that our study will initiate a broader conversation about the factors that would deter faculty from employing service-learning on account of the difficulties for an individual

teacher in implementing this pedagogical tool. As noted above, much of the scholarship on philosophy and service-learning focuses on the particular efforts of individual faculty. By contrast, it is important to emphasize the numerous ways in which the successes faculty enjoy in Pulse are the result of collective efforts, the ways in which structural and administrative support allows for the powerful impact that Pulse has on participating students: 1) an institution-wide focus on student formation as part of Boston College's liberal arts mission; 2) a year-long philosophy core requirement within which students have an option for service-learning; 3) a program requirement of ten to twelve hours per week at one agency for an entire academic year, with an emphasis on that agency as an additional platform for learning and with grading for the course which reflects that emphasis; 4) ample opportunity in weekly discussion sections, in journals, and, in some cases, during the time in the field for sustained reflection by students; 5) strong, and oftentimes long-standing, partnerships developed and sustained with multiple social service agencies; and 6) a Pulse office with administrative staff and a council of former Pulse students, serving as mediators between the university and the social service agencies. If, as we believe, the successes of Pulse as a program challenge us to ask what role philosophy can or ought to play in contemporary higher education, it also challenges us to ask what must be done, and what we are willing to do, individually and collectively, in order to enact those possibilities.

Appendix A: *Pulse Syllabus*

Person & Social Responsibility 2008–09

Course Description:

This two-semester, twelve-credit course fulfills all core requirements in Philosophy and Theology. Course materials and methods consist of reading of classical philosophy texts, scripture and other readings to be expected in any core Philosophy and Theology course; class meetings will be a mix of lecture and discussion.

In addition to these standard approaches to the study of these disciplines, Pulse requires a significant commitment to community service for the entire two semester course and a once per week discussion group. There is also a requirement for two discussion groups per semester with the other students at your service site. These will take the place of two of the class discussion groups. The dates are to be determined.

Required texts:

Euripides, *Ion*
 Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace*
 Plato, *Republic*
 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
 Michael Himes, *Doing the Truth in Love*
 Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*
 Augustine, *Confessions*
The Catholic Study Bible
 John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*
 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings*
 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*
 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*
 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
 Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*
 Martin Luther King, various speeches and writings

Notes

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11. C. Adelman, *The New College Course Map and Transcript Files: Changes in Course-Taking and Achievement, 1972-1993* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1995).
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13. Considering whether the participants in the Pulse Program demonstrated a significant change in their mean attitude towards philosophy and philosophy coursework involved a paired-samples t-test.
14. Considering the impact of the Pulse Program upon participating students in comparison to the students in the control group (i.e., the wait list) entailed conducting a one-way, between-groups analysis of covariance. In this analysis, participation in Pulse represented the independent variable, students' post-intervention interest in philosophy represented the dependent variable, and students' pre-intervention interest in philosophy was treated as a covariate in order to control for any preexisting differences between the experimental and control groups. Effect size was determined using Cohen's *d*, and a 2 by 2 between-groups analysis of covariance was also conducted to consider the influence of several demographic moderators on the treatment variable.
15. Considering the relationship between students' shifts in attitudes about philosophy and their experience within the Pulse Program entailed conducting ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. In these regression analyses, students' perceptions of their experience in the Pulse Program represented the independent variable, students' post-intervention interest in philosophy represented the dependent variable, and students' post-intervention interest in philosophy was treated as a covariate.

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31. *Ibid.*, 254.
32. Kirby, "Encountering and Understanding Suffering," 153.
33. *Ibid.*, 165.
34. *Ibid.*, 166.
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38. *Ibid.*, 166.
39. *Ibid.*
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55. On the initial survey conducted in September of 2008, the participants in the Pulse program demonstrated a mean interest in philosophy of 3.38 units (SD = .98) along a 5-point Likert Scale while the students on the Pulse wait list demonstrated a mean interest in philosophy of 3.34 units (SD = 1.05). There is no significant difference ($p < .05$) between these two scores. However, on the follow-up survey conducted in May of 2009, the participants in the Pulse Program demonstrated a mean interest in philosophy of 3.67 units (SD = .91) while the students on the Pulse wait list demonstrated a mean interest in philosophy of 3.14 units (SD = .91). Analysis of covariance revealed statistically significant differences between these two groups of students in their post-intervention interest in philosophy at the conclusion of the academic year ($F(1, 376) = 10.80, p < .001$).
56. Participants responded to the aforementioned survey item along a 5-point Likert Scale in which a "1" represented Strong Disagreement with the given statement while a "5" represented Strong Agreement with the given statement. On the pre-intervention survey administered in September of 2008, participants in the Pulse Program offered a mean response of 2.66 units (SD = .97) along this 5-point scale. On the post-intervention survey administered in May of 2009, participants in the Pulse Program offered a mean response of 3.06 units (SD = 1.10) on this same survey item. In short, Pulse participants demonstrated a mean increase of .5 units in their interest in taking additional philosophy coursework over the course of the academic year. A paired samples t-test revealed this shift in attitude to be a statistically significant one ($t(357) = 71.19, p < .0001$).

57. Fitting a taxonomy of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models revealed significant positive relationships between an increased interest in philosophy over the course of the academic year and students' beliefs that Pulse had helped them to clarify their values ($\beta_{\text{VALCLAR}} = .13, p = .03$); impacted their philosophy of life ($\beta_{\text{PHILLIFE}} = .14, p = .04$); and influenced their personal development ($\beta_{\text{PERSONDVT}} = .12, p = .02$).
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