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When Gorillas Do Philosophy: Philosophy at Pittsburg State University, 1912-1990

Donald Wayne Viney

The gorilla officially became the mascot of Kansas State Teacher's College (now Pittsburg State University) in 1925. According to Gene Degruson, curator of special collections at PSU, "gorilla" was a twenties' slang for "roughnecks," and the mascot was meant to symbolize school spirit by evoking images of ferocity. The concept of the fierce gorilla was in keeping with popular misconceptions of the time. For example, in Edgar Rice Burrough's Tarzan series - into its tenth sequel by 1924 - "Bolgani" the gorilla is portrayed as an irritable bully of the jungle. In *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914), the young Tarzan is mauled by a gorilla and narrowly escapes with his life. Patient observation of gorillas in their natural setting reveals a different picture. The gorilla is a gentle herbivore whose apparent ferocity is mostly a matter of excitement and posturing. In terms of its actual lifestyle and behavior the gorilla is more pensive than it is violent. According to George Schaller, "Gorillas are rather amiable vegetarians."¹ Thus, while the stereotyped gorilla may be appropriate as a mascot for athletics (as it was originally intended), the actual gorilla is appropriate as a mascot for academics, which, contrary to another popular misconception, is the real purpose of a university. The student group responsible for promoting the gorilla mascot in the 1920s had stumbled upon a symbol the true meaning and propriety of which they could not have been aware.

The logo of the Pittsburg State University Philosophical Society - showing a gorilla contemplating a human skull - is congruent with the deeper significance of the university's mascot. PSUPS has been active only since May 1987. But philosophy, as a subject of study, has been part of the school at Pittsburg since 1912, nine years after the State Auxiliary Manual-Training School (as it was first called) was founded. If one makes the students, faculty, and staff who were at the school prior to 1925 "honorary gorillas" then one can say that gorillas have been doing philosophy for seventy-eight years. Let us touch on some of the highlights of this history.

A study of past catalogues reveals that the first courses in philosophy offered at the school were in 1912. The Department of Education listed a course in the History of Philosophy and the Department of History and Social Science offered a course in Philosophy of American History. By 1922 the Education Department had dropped the History of Philosophy but added the Philosophy of Education, a course offered to the present. In the same year the History and Social Science Department offered a course in Ethics. The extent to which these courses treated philosophical topics in a systematic fashion cannot be ascertained. For example, the Philosophy of American History may have had more to do with American History than with Philosophy.

From 1928 until the present philosophy has been taught from three different departments. From 1928 to 1946 philosophy was housed in the Department of Psychology and Philosophy. In 1947 the Department was restructured as Education and Psychology. In 1967 the philosophy courses, with one exception, were moved to their present location in the Department of Social Science. The course titled Philosophy of Education, now a graduate offering, remained in the Department of Education.

Philosophy first became a coherent focus of study under the tutelage of Charles B. Pyle (1872-1957) who taught at Pittsburg from 1924 to 1947, roughly the same period during which philosophy was housed in the Department of Psychology and Philosophy. Pyle did his undergraduate work at Ohio Wesleyan University and his graduate work at Boston University where he studied with the great Personalist, Borden Parker Bowne. Pyle also did considerable graduate work at Harvard, as the two universities practiced cross-enrollment. At Harvard he studied with some of the greatest philosophers of his day, including William James, George Santayana, Josiah Royce, and Hugo Münsterberg. In 1910 he published *The Philosophy of Borden Parker Bowne*. Before completing his dissertation (on the metaphysical implications of behaviorism) Pyle moved to Baldwin City, Kansas, and taught at Baker University. According to Prescott Johnson, one of his students, Pyle completed his dissertation only after coming to Pittsburg. As Johnson relates the story,

He wrote [the dissertation] in the attic of his home, and he remarked how hot it was. E. S. Brightman was his dissertation director. I remember Pyle's telling me that after he had gone back to Boston and successfully defended the dissertation, the degree now being assured, Brightman said to him, "Now, you're made." And Pyle added, with a twinkle, what Brightman really meant was, "And I made you!"

Clearly, Pyle was adequately prepared to bring philosophy to Pittsburg.

Pyle was chairperson of the Department of Psychology and Philosophy from 1924 to 1942. Under his guidance, six new courses were added or joined under the heading of philosophy. Those courses were Introduction to Philosophy, History of Philosophy, Logic, Contemporary Philosophy, Moral Values, and Ethics. These courses, along with Philosophy of Education and Advanced Philosophy of Education, constituted philosophical studies for nearly twenty years.

Johnson's recollections of a class in Introduction to Philosophy (Spring 1946) provide a glimpse of the content of Pyle's courses and the style of his teaching. The text for the course was Patrick's *Introduction to Philosophy* with supplemental readings from three books by Eddington: *The Expanding Universe*, *Nature of the Physical World*, and *Philosophy of Physical Science*; Singer's *Mind as Behavior*, and Brightman's *Introduction to Philosophy*. According to Johnson,

We students would report a great deal of this material and Pyle would amplify and discuss our reporting of the material. This was his favorite way of teaching: having us read the material and, in his words, "report it in." He would then explain and clarify the material as we presented it. There was always opportunity for our own questions and contributions in the discussion.

Johnson took other courses from Pyle including Logic, History of Philosophy, Contemporaneous Philosophy, and Systematic Psychology. In each course there was a lot of "reporting in."

Johnson came to Pittsburg in 1945 and had a major interest in philosophy. With Pyle as his main teacher he took an A.B. in 1947 and a Master's degree in 1948, writing a thesis entitled "The Pragmatic Concept of Truth." Although Pyle had officially retired in 1947, he continued to be the director for Johnson's thesis. Johnson says he believes that he was Pyle's last Master's student and that he may have been the only student to have written a thesis distinctively in philosophy. In researching this paper I was unable to uncover any evidence to the contrary.

With the foundations provided by Pyle the future for philosophy at Pittsburg looked bright. From 1955 to 1973 a total of eight new courses in philosophy were added to the schedule, bringing the total to fifteen course offerings. One could study Metaphysics; Scientific Method and the Philosophy of Science; History of Philosophy (from Ancient to Contemporary); Theory of Knowledge; Social Philosophy; and Communism, Fascism and Democracy. There were also directed readings and seminars offered in philosophy.

During this period of growth, the faculty in philosophy increased to two, although there was little stability. From 1954 to 1975, eleven

persons (among them, one woman) taught philosophy. The woman, Judith Presler (1967), was the faculty sponsor for a philosophy club which published "The Student Journal of Philosophy." The journal saw only one issue, although the articles showed promise. Steven C. DeAlmeda, president of the philosophy club, wrote an article entitled "Blanshard's Defense of Reason in Ethics." Bruce McKeynolds wrote an article entitled "Extensionality, Atomicty and Propositional Attitudes." In addition, there were book reviews of Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* and Jung's *The Undiscovered Self* by Gene L. Younger and Alan R. Mielke respectively.

From 1975 to 1984 there was no tenure-earning position in philosophy. Ironically, in 1979, shortly after the school began calling itself a university, five philosophy courses were dropped from the schedule. In 1984 I joined the faculty of the Social Science Department and became the first person at the University in nine years in a tenure-track position specifically designated for teaching philosophy. I did my graduate work at the University of Oklahoma and wrote a dissertation under the direction of Charles Hartshorne.³ Some milestones of my brief tenure as a gorilla include the reintroduction of the course Religions of the World, the reformation of a student philosophical organization, and the hosting of the 1989 Midwestern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers. The Key-Note Speakers at the conference were Frederick Ferré (University of Georgia) and Marilyn and Robert Adams (both of University of California at Los Angeles). To the best of my knowledge, this was the first time in its history that the University had hosted a philosophy conference.⁴

By far the most significant development in philosophy at PSU in the past few years was the formation of the student organization, the PSU Philosophical Society. By organizing fund raisers, supporting public charities, sponsoring guest speakers, and publishing this journal, the members of the Society have made philosophy a visible presence both on campus and in the Pittsburg community. An example of the Society's work was Philosophy Week 1989. April 3rd through the 7th of 1989 was officially declared Philosophy Week by Pittsburg's mayor. During the week there were public lectures on business ethics, feminist philosophy, and quantum physics. The week ended with a panel discussion on the creation/evolution controversy. Through activities of this nature students in the Society have made unique and vital contributions to the history I have summarized.

Notes

1. George B. Schaller, "The Behavior of the Mountain Gorilla," in *Primate*

Behavior, Irvan Devore, ed., New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1965, p. 365.

2. Quotes and information from Prescott Johnson are culled from a personal correspondence dated June 4, 1989.

3. Hartshorne directed the dissertation, mostly by correspondence, from the University of Texas at Austin. The dissertation was published as *Charles Hartshorne and the Existence of God*, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1985.

4. Although the Pittsburg media effectively ignored the conference, the *Wichita Eagle Beacon* ran an article on the event (*Wichita Eagle*, Oct. 14, 1989, p. 8c).