Foreword

by David A. Hoekema

Anyone who has chosen philosophy as a field of study, whether on the undergraduate or the graduate level, has had to face an insistent question from skeptical family members: "What does philosophy have to do with the real world?" History does not record the first time this challenge was put to a philosopher, but no doubt it was already a familiar question by the time Thrasymachus launched it with particularly biting sarcasm at Socrates in Book I of the *Republic*. Certainly no contemporary American student has escaped it entirely.

But this collection puts forward the suggestion that a new answer is being formed from the experience of philosophy instructors and students across the country.

There has been a quiet revolution in undergraduate education during the past decade or two, a revolution whose standard-bearers were the pioneers of service-learning as an element of liberal arts education. A generation ago, every college and university had a catalog full of academic programs, and many of them also maintained an active policy of encouraging students to volunteer for service to local organizations and agencies. But few campuses — and few students — saw any identifiable relationship between these two parts of the picture.

Today that situation has changed dramatically: Voluntary service to meet community needs has become an integral part of the academic experience of many students. Careful and critical reflection of how academic study informs one's role in community service, and on how community experiences illuminate and flesh out academic studies, has come to be highly valued by students, faculty, and institutions across the nation. The service-learning revolution has brought modest but important changes to nearly every college and university.

The service-learning movement has posed the same challenge for philosophy as the skeptical relative, in slightly revised form: What does the study of philosophy have to do with the real world of community service? It is not hard, after all, to understand how students of 20th-century history can benefit from spending some time working with neighborhood associations, or to identify some significant links between the topics studied in a sociology or an economics class and the challenges of helping a welfare client apply for a job

---

David A. Hoekema, former president of the American Philosophical Association, is professor of philosophy and interim vice president for student life at Calvin College.

or a senior citizen arrange for home health care. In English composition and studio art classes, an assigned essay or a portfolio of drawings can be linked to a student's experiences as a playground helper or a tutor in an urban school. But what about philosophy? How can a class devoted to musing about whether there is any real world, or about whether numbers and emotions and moral rules exist, possibly lend itself to effective service-learning? How can philosophers, whose heads are notoriously enveloped in high banks of clouds, come down to earth in ways that make effective use of community service?

The essays gathered in this book provide an answer to this question — or rather a wide variety of different but overlapping answers. Thanks to the work of those whose reflections are collected here and of hundreds of others in the profession as well, service-learning has come to be one of the means by which students learn philosophy and confront foundational questions of meaning, value, and responsibility. The connections between volunteer experience and philosophical exploration are most readily apparent in courses on social ethics and political philosophy, and the essays collected here provide examples. But there have also been successes, some of them documented here, in using service-learning to shed light on other areas of philosophy, from philosophy of art to epistemology. The pedagogical creativity of these examples may inspire readers to carry the study of other philosophical areas — metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, existential philosophy, and more — into the real world, to intersect with the experiences that voluntary service can provide.

Having spent most of my two decades in academia in administrative positions, I have not yet had the opportunity to incorporate a service-learning component into my courses. (I plan to do this when I return to teaching in the near future.) I have, however, had frequent occasion to observe the profound changes that occur in a colleague's courses — and sometimes in the colleague himself or herself, as a teacher and as a philosopher — as a result of such ventures.

I recall talking many years ago with a highly regarded colleague who had become deeply disillusioned with students' apathy and passivity, despairing of his ability to awaken and motivate them in his introductory philosophy classes. Over the course of a few years, as he began to participate in a number of ventures on his campus and elsewhere that involved some form of service-learning, his outlook changed completely. He told me on one occasion, exaggerating only slightly, that he had found the key to overcoming student apathy by incorporating community service and reflection on it into his philosophy courses. Going out into the community and seeing how institutions meet or fail to meet the needs of real people, he observed, compels students to come out of their cocoons and take both themselves and others more seriously.

Another colleague has spoken about how difficult it was to get students to acknowledge the difficulties and ambiguities of moral choices that they regarded as purely black and white until they spent a few hours in community service agencies. Watching real people who struggled to know what was right — whether to have an abortion or carry an unwanted pregnancy to term, whether to tolerate a teenager's alcohol abuse or to evict him from the household until he goes straight — they began to understand the messiness and difficulty of genuine moral choices in situations where every option seems to untangle good and evil.

Conversely, the uncritical relativism that many students bring to their study of philosophy, the attitude "My morality is true for me and yours is true for you," is one of the first illusions to disappear when students apply philosophical categories to situations they may encounter in their communities. Few people are insensitive enough to fall back on such evasions when they confront the horrors of parental abuse and neglect, on the one hand, or the inspiring example of a high school principal who won't let his staff or his students give up their ideals, on the other. Whether their starting point is an excessively dichotomized moral world or a vague complacency that sees only gray, students learn from community service that good and evil, justice and injustice, compassion and cruelty, are very real — and very different.

These experiences do not provide easy answers, but they do provide a basis for exceptionally fruitful and realistic philosophical discussions. And there is surely more to be gained in the study of philosophy from a serious discussion of the choices that face a pregnant teenager lacking any family support, particularly when several students know this individual as a person and not just a textbook example, than from a science fiction debate about whether it is immoral to unplug a famous violinist who has surreptitiously tapped into your kidney.

What lies ahead? The uses of service-learning in core areas of philosophy beyond moral and social philosophy have only begun to be explored. In some areas of philosophical study, its usefulness may be very limited. It is hard to imagine how an upper-level course devoted to close textual study of Aristotle or Kant, for example, could be enriched, and not merely diluted and discombobulated, by adding a service-learning component. An introductory course in the philosophy of knowledge, on the other hand, might appear an unlikely prospect for service-learning. Yet several of the writers in this collection suggest ways in which classic philosophical issues concerning the mind and the world can be placed in sharper relief through carefully planned community experiences and reflections on them. The same is surely true for other introductory and intermediate courses, ranging from history of philosophy to formal or informal logic.

And what will this achieve, in the end, for teachers and scholars in phi-

losophy? It will bring a renewed sense of engagement and energy in our students and many new challenges for instructors as we search for ways of exploring familiar concepts in unfamiliar contexts.

Service-learning will not turn a struggling teacher into a star. Nor will it solve our most perplexing philosophical problems about the nature of the person or the reality of evil. Rather, it is a tool that, in the hands of a skilled and dedicated teacher of philosophy, can help our students understand that ideas matter, that critical reasoning solves some problems, and that the real world is actually a very good place to do philosophy. I hope this volume will help many of my colleagues in philosophy make creative and effective use of that tool.

Introduction

by C. David Lisman

This monograph deals with the use of service-learning as an approach to teaching and learning in philosophy. Before providing a summary and analysis of the essays and course narratives included here, I would like briefly to explain this approach and some of the general ways in which it can relate to philosophy as an academic discipline.

Service-learning is a form of experiential education that involves students in community service as part of an academic course and that helps them relate their service experience to course content. Some kinds of service activities students engage in include serving as mentors or tutors in public schools, working at homeless shelters, and working on environmental projects such as park trail improvements and neighborhood cleanups. Integrating service experiences like these into a philosophy course could take several forms. Students in an ethics course could relate their public school tutoring experiences to topics such as racism, gender equity, and distributive justice. They could examine aspects of these topics in the context of their service experience and in a reflective paper explore the relationship among those experiences, course readings, and in-class discussions. Many specific examples of how philosophers have integrated service-learning into academic courses are presented in the pages that follow.

One could, in fact, argue that philosophers have a special role to play in the development and utilization of service-learning as a pedagogical strategy. Philosophers in ethics and in social philosophy classes examine many of the very same fundamental issues that have served to define service-learning as an educational approach. This approach has emerged out of a desire not only to help make learning more practical but also to help promote moral growth, a sense of community involvement, and even a renewal of American education's civic mission. In many cases, philosophers are already discussing in their courses the very issues students are being led to confront in and through their service experiences. Hence, philosophers may rightly be expected to contribute to a deepening of our understanding of this pedagogy as well as to specific techniques for promoting rigorous as well as vigorous student learning.

A major theme of the essays in the first part of this volume is the need for an epistemology that is both implied *by* service-learning and needed *for* service-learning if it is to continue to grow as an effective educational strategy. Several of the essays included here suggest that "postmodernist" philosophical investigations already under way may point in a useful direction.