Report on a model curriculum for teaching introductory philosophy, with particular emphasis on Africa

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The Process

In February 1998 I was invited by Prof. Yersu Kim, Director of the Division of Philosophy and Ethics, UNESCO, to investigate the construction of a model curriculum for teaching introductory philosophy, primarily at university level, with special reference to Africa. I submitted the proposal in March/April, and it was accepted in May 1998.

The proposal envisaged a curriculum which was to be outline, but with sufficient content and detail to provide definite direction for its users. It would be supported by an extensive reading list (bibliography) which could be adapted to particular local circumstances. These materials would be constructed through a process of consultation mainly through post, fax and e-mail. The remote consultation would be supplemented and reinforced by some personal visits and meetings.

On this basis a financial proposal was formulated and accepted, according to which the project would be facilitated through the employment of a research assistant to the principal investigator and travel by the investigator to places where useful meetings could be held with African philosophers. There would be postage and stationery costs associated with the correspondence work of the research assistant. Details of the budget which was submitted with the proposal are set out in Annex 4.

I had been asked to undertake this project partly because of my position as chairman of the Teaching Philosophy Committee of the Steering Committee of the International Federation of Philosophical Societies (FISP). I took the opportunity of the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston during August 1998 to begin work on the project. In anticipation of the meeting, during July 1998, I constructed an outline curriculum based on my own experience of teaching introductory philosophy to students who had no (or at least very slight) prior acquaintance with the subject. Since many members of the FISP Teaching Philosophy committee were expected to be at the Boston Congress, the meetings that week would provide an excellent opportunity to consult an international body of experts.

The committee was able to consider the proposal, with twelve of its members present. Their names are included in Annex 3. The meeting generally welcomed and supported the outline curriculum which I set before them. There were a number of observations on details which could be considered further; and two more general points were made. First, there is a need for a bibliography (reading list) to support the delivery of the curriculum; and secondly, the African dimension of the students' experience needs to be recognised in the detailed development of the curriculum.

Another benefit of attending the World Congress was that it afforded me the opportunity to take part in sections and meetings dedicated to African Philosophy. Useful contacts were thereby established, detailed in Annex 3.

These proposals were carried forward during the three main implementation phases of the investigation, which ran from August to February 1998-9, from March to August 1999, and during September-October 1999. During the first stage a research assistant was appointed; she was Oona Hyland-Joyce, a former postgraduate student in the Queen's University of Belfast Philosophy Department. This was a rather slow process, due to the complexities of the employment regulations in Northern Ireland. Following her appointment, she started to develop her knowledge of philosophy and philosophers in Africa, through a process of extensive reading in Belfast. This involved 33 hours of work, mainly during December-February 1998-9.

During January-February 1999 preparations were made for a meeting of African philosophers in Côte d'Ivoire, which was organised by UNESCO and to which I had been invited; the purpose of the meeting was to inaugurate a network in the series Philosophy and Democracy. I planned to use this meeting to advance discussion of the project, and to this end details of the curriculum were sent to some of the participants whom I knew already.

The meetings in Côte d'Ivoire (Abidjan and Yamoussoukro), which took place during March 9-14, 1999, were very successful. During these days there was held a conference on themes in the study and teaching of philosophy in Africa; and following this, a network called Philosophy and Democracy in Africa (APHIDEM) was established. The meeting was an unusual event, not only because of the number (11) and diversity (from Sénégal and Mali to South Africa) of countries represented, but above all because it brought together anglophone, francophone and lusophone philosophers.

During these days I held a number of discussions with African philosophers about my project and the curriculum which was being developed. Some of these had been contacted before; in other cases I was meeting the philosophers for the first time. The names of these philosophers are recorded in Annex 3. The comments of those who had been able to study the documents detailing work in progress were generally supportive of the direction of the project; attention was drawn to the need to ensure the robust presence of an African dimension to the curriculum and the materials associated with it.

During and after the conference I maintained contact with many of the African philosophers whom I met there. This conference was an extremely important event, not least for the facility which it provided in enabling me to establish a comprehensive continent-wide set of consultants.

Following my return from Côte d'Ivoire, we entered the second implementation stage of the project. My assistant wrote to the new contacts which had been established there. A number of useful comments on the curriculum resulted from this phase of correspondence. Meanwhile we were developing the reading list which would supplement delivery of the course. My assistant worked 121

hours during this second phase of the implementation of the project. I prepared the ground for a visit to South Africa, the aim of which was to submit the curriculum and bibliography to extensive and constructive scrutiny.

In August 1999 I visited Leuven, Belgium, which is noted for its well stocked and easily usable library of Philosophy, and also has a number of Africanists among its staff. During this visit I checked many items that already appeared in our bibliography and improved the accuracy of their reference. I was also able to extend the bibliography, particularly through the inclusion of more francophone items. In addition to this bibliographical work I held a useful meeting with René Devisch, a Leuven anthropologist, who had earlier employed a team of research students to investigate higher education in a number of African countries.

The third phase of the implementation of the project was a visit to South Africa during September 2-17. I held two main meetings, at Pretoria and Cape Town, and a discussion in Grahamstown. The Pretoria meeting was attended by seven philosophers from four Universities in Pretoria and Johannesburg, and the Cape Town meeting by six philosophers from two Universities; and I held a discussion in Grahamstown with one philosopher from Rhodes University. Their names are all given in Annex 3.

The discussion at these meetings focused on the project itself, draft versions of the outline curriculum and the bibliography, and more general issues concerning the present and future direction of philosophy in the continent of Africa. Those who participated in the meetings were supportive of the project, both in its general conception and in the detailed way in which it had been developed.

Discussion centred on three elements: the relation between African philosophy and philosophy in general, the links between respect for tradition and concern for issues of pressing relevance in devising an attractive curriculum, and the best provision of support reading material - both from an ideal perspective and from one that is realistic in terms of current facilities. There was support for the idea that a problem-based approach was generally preferable to a tradition-oriented one; reference to particular individual philosophers or schools of philosophers should be worked into the discussion of problems. In these discussions, more fundamentally, there was endorsment of the idea that a curriculum for introductory philosophy should be constructed in terms of the central elements of the subject. It should also allow ample scope for students to build on interests and problems which arise from their own particular cultural experience; and the presentation and discussion of the course material should have as its goal the education of the students towards membership of the global community of philosophically alert and informed thinkers.

The philosophers whom I met in South Africa were all keen to develop and maintain international links with the wider philosophical community, including particularly philosophers in other African countries. They were very interested to hear about the establishment of APHIDEM; and they expressed the hope that through the support of UNESCO and FISP it would be possible to sustain a

system of fruitful philosophical contact, between philosophers in different African countries as well as among colleagues within each single country.

The discussions in South Africa gave me confidence that the proposal which we had been developing were on generally acceptable lines. I left the material with these colleagues for further comment following my departure. I now judge that all the reaction from this kind of consultation has been received and absorbed, so that it is timely to construct and submit this report.

My assistant worked 25 hours during this final phase, collating correspondence and further checking items in the reading list. I now submit this report on what we have achieved.

The Product

The execution of this project leaves a number of resources for future use and development.

First among these is the outline curriculum, which I present in Annex 1. This sets out a succession of themes that can be developed over a 30-week teaching period, i.e. a year of introductory study in a University (or, if applicable, advanced secondary level) educational context. The curriculum allows for rapid movement from one topic to the next; typically a group of issues occupies no more than two weeks. However a more extended and leisurely exploration of any of the themes is perfectly possible, although that would of course mean that some other part of the syllabus would have to be omitted.

The curriculum is intended to be adaptable to local needs; and it is expected that it will be so adapted. My own view, based on experience, is that it is very helpful to start the students from concepts, issues and problems with which they already have some familiarity in their pre-philosophical experience. In such cases there is no need to explain why there is intellectual work for philosophers to engage in, which can often be alienating for beginners; they are already aware that there are problems which need resolution. The teacher can build on this to develop in the student a sense of the distinctive ways in which philosophy approaches these issues; and at the same time the opportunity can be taken to instil a sense of the nature and power of clear and rigorous argument.

Strategies for teaching introductory philosophy can be oriented towards problems, ideas, history or personalities. Each approach can derive its justification from deep features of the nature of philosophy itself, which has a history built by leading personalities and is an inventory of problems centring upon certain key ideas. The teacher must decide how best to order and present the material to an audience that has no clear idea - indeed probably no idea at all - of the nature of the subject which they are about to study. In these circumstances the approaches that start from ideas and from history are likely to seem very alien to students; the ideas are of their nature abstract and unfamiliar, and the history involves a continuity that makes sense only on the basis of detailed knowledge of the development of philosophy. It is better, therefore, to approach the material by the other two methods of problems and personalities. For the problems involve the ideas and yet can be more readily

understood than the ideas themselves; and the personalities are the linchpins in the historical development.

So the issue about how best to present an introductory course in philosophy comes to down a decision between the methods of problems and personalities. I have reflected on this matter through my personal experience of teaching of introductory philosophy to students, and I have written about it in "Teaching Introductory Philosophy: Problems or Traditions?" (in D.Evans & I.Kuçuradi, Teaching Philosophy on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century (Ankara, 1998), pp.207-20). I believe - and have argued - that there are sound pedagogical and theoretical reasons to support the problem-based approach as preferable. The major consideration is the engagement of the students' interest. This is in no way guaranteed for a philosophy course; and the best way to secure it is through issues that the students find problematic before their philosophical study begins.

So the approach through problems serves as a bridge between the student's pre-philosophical interests and the study itself. That is why I favour this approach; and, as I have said, I have found that it is effective. The philosophers whom I spoke to in Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa also favoured this approach over the alternatives. The general points apply with particular force to Africa, since the canon of historical philosophers belong with a European cultural tradition that is largely distinct from those of Africa.

That is the reason for having the course start from issues bearing on moral and social values and from reflections on what it is to be a human person. The particular form which the treatment of these and other such topics should take, is once again something that can be left to the judgement of the particular lecturer or department which is delivering the curriculum. It is quite likely, for example, that the selection of moral problems will be influenced by the local culture; issues in the management of the physical environment may supply more accessible material than would come from concentration on bioethical topics. For the same kind of reason local cultural conceptions of human identity - particularly as they relate to such matters as our fate after death or the significance of close biological relatedness - should inform the way in which issues of personal identity are handled.

However I am also convinced that the subject and study of philosophy is a single world-wide enterprise, pursued by a global community of enquirers; it is a study with a definite nature, that should be culture-sensitive but not culture-relative. That global community provides an intellectual destination for students of philosophy; and even if many of them may never reach it, it should exercise a control over the direction in which they travel during their studies.

This is why the curriculum has been constructed in such a way that it explicitly addresses topics in the canon of western philosophy. This is the dominant style in the world of philosophers; and it also is well reflected in the actual and projected work of African philosophers - both those currently working in Africa and those whose careers have taken them to other countries. Philosophy students in an African educational context should be better placed than those in many other parts of the world, to

enter the global philosophical community through a process and route that takes its start from their own cultural concerns.

The reading list (or, as I prefer to call it, bibliography) for the curriculum is given in Annex 2. This is a very inclusive bibliography. It consists of over 100 items, of which about 60 are within the genre of African Philosophy, while the remaining 40 are works of western philosophy, predominantly in the analytical style; and a small number of classic texts in the history of philosophy are also included.

I have not matched the items in this bibliography precisely with the detailed topics in the curriculum. This is partly because many of the works that are cited, especially the ones by African philosophers, would be suitable for a number of the different sections of the curriculum; so it would be misleading and restrictive to link them with particular topics. A more fundamental and practical reason is that the library resources in Universities in countries in Africa are frequently so constrained that a very small reading list would stretch them. Therefore I judge it better to present a very comprehensive list, from which a small selection could be made according to the local facilities which may be available.

The spirit in which I offer this material - the curriculum and the bibliography - to potential users is as follows. Where a national education system, a particular country or an individual University has a viable and effective means for delivering introductory teaching of philosophy, the proposals in my report should be regarded as no more than suggestive advice. But if there is a need for friendly direction, then I believe that the system which is offered in this report provides a good outline.

As I indicate in the next section, the project can be extended to accommodate greater sensitivity to local needs. It is a main element of the thinking of this author that the particular position of a cultural and educational system should be a leading determinant of the route from which philosophical education should take its start. Therefore we should be prepared to offer fine tuning to adjust the curriculum in ways that suit local needs. We are so prepared.

The way forward

The project has yielded a curriculum, with supportive reading list, and indications of how it can be adapted to local circumstances. In carrying out this project the research team has acquired considerable knowledge of relevant bibliography, as well as a data base of names with contact addresses, including e-mail.

For the future we offer the following recommendation. APHIDEM has been established, and we hope that it will flourish and be effective. The meeting in Côte d'Ivoire which inaugurated APHIDEM, also formed an integral part of our project. We hope that the materials in this report can be made available to the new organisation, so that they can build on these resources; and we indicate a willingness to take part in its activities so as to build up continent-wide philosophical contact in Africa.

One message that comes strongly out of the meetings which have been held, is the need for financial resources to facilitate contact among philosophers in Africa. This is a project for UNESCO and APHIDEM. We wish them well in this challenging endeavour

David Evans - February 16, 2000 (revised March 5, 2001)

Annex 1

The Course: a phased outline

I assume a University teaching year of 30 weeks, with staff-student contact for the philosophy course at the rate of about 3 hours per week. These assumptions are not rigid, and in practice the model allows considerable variation of time and space for teaching contact.

Weeks 1-6

Introduction to problems of philosophy

moral and social dilemmas (**weeks 1-2**)

- applications of ethics to problems in medicine and health-care, business and government work, journalism, the environment.

freewill and determinism (**weeks 3-4**)

- arguments for determinism from causality and truth;
- replies from analyses of the role of thought and desire in action;
- resolution in the idea of moral responsibility in the context of a rationally predictable world.

personal identity (**weeks 5-6**)

- mind, body, character and social status as determinants of identity;
- how much can a person change, and yet remain the same?
- could a person survive physical death?

Weeks 7-12

Introduction to argument and critical reasoning

the notions of argument, proof and refutation (**weeks 7-8**)

- difficulties about prediction and projection;
- circular reasoning and begging the question.

decision-theory and moral reasoning (**weeks 9-10**)

- bets and pay-offs; the rationality of subscribing to lotteries, insurance schemes, and similar financial operations.

paradoxes, of knowledge and choice (**weeks 11-12**)

- vagueness and 'sorites' arguments;
- the surprise examination paradox.

Weeks 13-18

Reason and religion

classical proofs for the existence of God (**weeks 13-14**)

- ontological, cosmological, teleological arguments, with comments both on the theological and the general philosophical issues which they raise.

problem cases for philosophical theology (**weeks 15-16**)

- the problem of evil;
- omnipotence and omniscience;
- Pascal's wager.

miracles, the supernatural, and reason (**weeks 17-18**)

- assessment of the evidential base for claims made by particular (including local) religions.

Weeks 19-24

Moral philosophy

the extent of the moral circle (**weeks 19-20**)

- human persons: foetuses, the comatose, the severely retarded;
- animal rights: agriculture, and medical experimentation;
- artificial intelligence, alien beings.

the main varieties of moral theory (**weeks 21-22**)

- deontology;
- consequentialism;
- virtue ethics .

applications of the theories (**weeks 23-24**)

- population management: birth control and labour needs;
- healthcare rationing, screening, experimental treatment;
- the physical environment: shallow and deep ecology.

Weeks 25-30

Knowledge and belief

scepticism and science (**weeks 25-26**)

- the varieties of scepticism;
- reasonable and unreasonable scepticism;
- scientific theories: confirmation and falsification.

the nature and basis of knowledge and belief (**weeks 27-28**)

- knowledge, familiarity, practice, understanding;
- defining knowledge in terms of belief.

understanding and social science (**weeks 29-30**)

- the range of social science: sociology, anthropology, history;
- causal explanation in the human sphere;
- problems in understanding another culture.

The curriculum is inclusive; it permits specification and the detailed application of local cultural interests, without requiring this. However there are particular points at which the insertion of African material could be specially appropriate. These are:

[**weeks 1-2**] environmental issues; justifications for using non-renewable resources; conservation and tourism;

[**weeks 5-6**] the relations between persons, families and groups; Akan conceptions of personal identity;

[**weeks 17-18**] application of theological beliefs specific to the particular culture;

[**weeks 19-20**] consideration of the concept of ubuntu; the role of the wider community of human beings in determining the limits of morally accountable units;

[**weeks 23-4**] questions of ecology and the justification of environmental policies; demographic policies, and issues of aid; health-care policies;

[**weeks 29-30**] understanding a culture from within and from outside; the relation between philosophy and anthropology.

Of course, material of this kind could be expanded beyond the two-week slots assigned in the outline curriculum, in accordance with the general principle stated in the first paragraph on p.9.

Here is a slightly expanded description of the contents of the five main blocks of topics.

[**weeks 1-6**]

Students are introduced to how philosophy addresses certain pressing moral and social dilemmas. Discrimination, taking human life, censorship, whistle blowing are examples of practices for which it is possible to make a strong case both in favour and against. There are also forms of these activities (e.g. positive discrimination) the moral value of which is far less clear. Similar dilemmas arise when we consider the arguments for determinism, which tend to exclude the possibility of free human choice, against our strong subjective sense of freedom of decision. The problems of personal identity are developed by considering how it is possible to reconcile the fact that human persons can undergo considerable changes, both physically and psychologically, with the conviction that persons retain numerical identity over time. The discussion of all these difficulties aims for conceptual clarification and the defence of specific positions.

[**weeks 7-12**]

In this section students are taught respect for the nature and power of rational argument. Specific concepts such as argument, premise, conclusion, proof, position, refutation, objection, are examined; and we consider the relation between their informal use outside philosophy and the somewhat more hard-edged sense which they acquire within philosophy. The use of more precise and formal techniques of reasoning and argument is then applied to the familiar experience of assessing the costs and benefits of different outcomes; and the problems raised by our common use of properties with soft boundaries is shown to be problematic. Paradoxical arguments are developed; and the intention in this section is both to intrigue the student and to instil a sense of respect for the ability of careful and disciplined argument to advance our understanding of matters.

[**weeks 13-18**]

The existence of God is a fruitful introductory topic, both because it is an issue of metaphysical dispute and because many challenging arguments cluster around this theme. We examine these arguments, concentrating on the three classical proofs for God's existence, the disproof indicated by the argument from evil and the paradoxes raised by the attributes of omniscience and omnipotence, and the pragmatic argument for God's existence indicated by Pascal's wager. Consideration of this last argument leads on to the question of the rationality of religion; and this question invites epistemological analysis of the typical contents of revealed religions, such as miracles and

prophesies. The detailed content here can be adapted from the religions in the students' own culture if the teacher deems that a prudent and useful strategy.

[**weeks 19-24**]

We return to moral philosophy, approaching the issues now in a somewhat more sophisticated and theoretical way. While the discussions in weeks 1-6 proceeded on the assumption that human beings are the only moral agents, here this assumption is questioned as we examine the moral status of non-human animals, intelligent machines and exobiological entities. These reflections can be effectively tested against the three leading theoretical positions in moral philosophy, since these positions can be usefully calibrated by the extent to which they place human beings, with their particular psychology and biology, at the centre of moral assessment. In the light of the theories, we investigate further practical dilemmas in the areas of bioethics and the environment. Here again particular local interests may determine which issues receive primary focus.

[**weeks 25-30**]

In this section we address explicitly the epistemological issues which have been suggested by many of the earlier discussions. The concept of knowledge is subjected to scrutiny, and the exacting tests for it proposed by some philosophers are examined. We compare and contrast scepticism and fallibilism The complexity of the concept of knowledge is emphasised; and the role of practice, which emerges in this analysis, leads to a discussion of knowledge in the social sciences. Knowledge of the human sphere poses special problems, having to do with cultural pluralism and relativism. At this point in the course questions of anthropological understanding, which have interested a number of African philosophers, can be introduced and examined.