

## The Study on the Curriculum Setting and Characteristics of Cambridge Undergraduate Philosophy Major

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### Abstract

Education of philosophy is both an old and new topic. It is an important approach for human thoughts propagation and theoretical studies. At the University of Cambridge, philosophy teaching and learning activities have been existed for 804 years, born at the same time with the university. This thesis aims to examine the developmental process of philosophy education at the undergraduate level, to investigate the curriculum of philosophy education of the latest ten years, and to summarize the characteristics of philosophy education at the University of Cambridge.

**Key words:** The University of Cambridge; Philosophy; Curriculum; Characteristics

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The University of Cambridge is one of the first-class universities worldwide. Established in 1209 AD, it

has a history of 804 years. In 1231, the university was granted teaching rights by Henry III. Since then, this university has established 35 colleges, and won more than 80 Nobel Prizes. It has also cultivated a significant number of philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, George Morre, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who have significant impacts on the international stage. The reason why Cambridge has produced so many international famous philosophers is Cambridge's unique open teaching ideas and its innovative teaching goals. The development pattern of philosophy education is the academic teaching management that basically transfers the core from classical education to science education, which integrates teaching and research. The University of Cambridge has a long history of philosophy education, born at the same time with the university. Consistent with the development of the University of Cambridge, the philosophy education is ranked among the best among the world. This thesis attempts to explore the tradition of philosophy education and clarify its education concept as well as its training goals and characteristics, through the development and the curriculum of philosophy education at the University of Cambridge.

### 1. AN OVERVIEW OF CAMBRIDGE PHILOSOPHY EDUCATION

Recalling the development history of Cambridge University philosophy education of the University of Cambridge, we can roughly divide it into six phases. Under the specific historical background, each stage has its unique features:

At the first phase (in the Middle Ages), there was no faculty of philosophy. At that time, philosophy courses were included in arts department and Aristotle's logic was the core course of syllabus. Learning logic was important for undergraduates in their first and second year. In addition, there were other courses, such as speculative

grammar, natural philosophy and metaphysics. Students often acquired knowledge through reading, discussing and debate. In the late Middle Ages, students usually learned philosophy by reading classic literatures on theology.

The second phase was the Opposed Scholasticism (from 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century). At this phase, the teaching content continued to focus on classic arts and theology with the main task to oppose scholasticism. As early as the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Francis Bacon, the real ancestor of United Kingdom of materialism and modern experimental science, studied at Trinity College from 1573 to 1575. He later set up his own laboratory at the University of Cambridge. When he served as a royal minister, he proposed that school should teach encyclopedic knowledge and oppose scholasticism. He also advocated that students should use rational and critical thinking to sort out experienced materials. Bacon's ideas reflect the pursuit of science and truth when British bourgeois was rising. His materialism philosophy and the criticism to university played an important role in changing teaching contents. The most obvious change was the establishment of natural science lectures, which expanded the scope of disciplines. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Christ's college had many Cambridge Platonists, including ethicists Moore, Ralph Cudworth who reviewed Platonist doctrines of innate ideas, materialist Thomas Hobbes and dualist Rene Descartes. At that time, philosophy was not regarded as an independent discipline. Logic, metaphysics and moral philosophy were the main courses. Geometry, grammar and rhetoric were also the key subjects for students to learn. Replacing oral arguments in the first stage, council exam became the main form to evaluate student achievements. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the civil service examination was adopted, providing an opportunity for well-educated bourgeoisie to serve in the government.

The third phase was the philosophy curriculum reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In the first half of this century, the University of Cambridge carried out massive reforms on curriculum, teaching contents. Accordingly, the university also had significant adjustment on philosophy courses. In 1830, it limited the development of "moral theology" and "sophistry theology". In 1848, it conducted a reform on the exam of natural philosophy and moral philosophy. Moral science includes moral philosophy, political economy, modern history, general jurisprudence and UK law. From 1850 to 1859, a moral science committee was established. The purpose was to establish a systematic curriculum and examination system, which replaced the previous unscientific teaching contents and curriculum. It also ensured the core status of moral science and made law become an independent discipline. In 1870, moral philosophy, logic, economics and psychology were made independently from moral science. During this period, two famous figures, the political economist Keynes and the moral philosopher J. M. Ward graduated with distinctive grades.

The fourth phase was the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century when analytic philosophy was booming. Due to Alfred Marshall's effort, the science of economic was separated also from moral science and became an independent discipline in 1906. This resulted in the inclusion of analytic philosophy into syllabus. The first half of the century was a glorious time for Cambridge philosophical development. Three philosophers, Russell, David Hume and Wittgenstein, substantially developed modern logical methods and analytic philosophy. These three philosophers changed the Cambridge philosophy discipline and made the University of Cambridge become the most important center of philosophy.

The fifth phase was concerned with the period since World War II. Under the supportive educational environment at that time, the traditional philosophy education of continued to move forward. In addition to original publications, the university also made great contributions to the development of academic scholarship. The most notable person is Edward Craig, who edited ten volumes in English *Slaughter force encyclopedia of philosophy*. It has been the most authoritative and comprehensive encyclopedia of philosophy in English.

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## 2. ANALYSIS ON THE CURRICULUM SETTING AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CAMBRIDGE UNDERGRADUATE PHILOSOPHY MAJOR

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With time, the role of the philosophy Education at Cambridge underwent fundamental changes during the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries, maintaining pastors and classical music majors. At that time, most of the researchers were pastors, and they were forced to accept and keep the Church of England's 39 articles. In 1944, the British government promulgated an education reform act—*Butler Act*, which granted curriculum decision to school. Except religious education, the educational professionals such as principals and teachers were granted decision on curriculum, for example, what kind of courses and how many courses to open etc. The country does not have formal regulation on the formulation of teaching programs textbooks, and the teacher-centered professionalism dominated the curriculum reform. This is because Britain is a country which has a tradition of "autonomy", with teachers having higher and greater autonomy than their counterparts in other countries. The autonomy mainly reflects in the curriculum, textbook selection and the use of teaching methods and other aspects. It is also the main reason for the absence of national curriculum and syllabus in Britain for a long time. Curriculum is the core of the existence and development of a discipline. The decades of philosophy curriculum at Cambridge were collected and sorted out by

the first author when visiting the British school, with the extensive support and assistance of Ms. Penny Knight, the secretary at the undergraduate Philosophy Department at Cambridge. Because the curriculum was too long, it will not be listed in detailed here.

The curriculum of undergraduate philosophy education at the University of Cambridge is set up for the Bachelor's degree of Philosophy Honors examination. Cantabrigian called this examination 'Tripos', which includes IA, IB and II three parts. Part IA is a compulsory basic course open to the freshmen. It is also the core curriculum, which includes some important texts of metaphysics, ethics, logic and the history of philosophy. It emphasizes the development of students, the training of eloquence ability and the cultivation of students' philosophical problems consciousness and critical thinking skills. Part IB is curriculum for sophomores. In IB, students not only learn the three compulsory courses of IA (metaphysics, epistemology and logic) and write two papers, but also are required to grasp the theme of development and the core issues of the three disciplines as well as to further grasp, correctly understand and then flexibly use the basics knowledge of modern philosophy. In addition, students must choose two courses to learn and to submit papers from ethics, Greek and Roman philosophy, modern and medieval philosophy, philosophy of science, political philosophy and experimental psychology and other disciplines. Part II is curriculum for the third-year undergraduates in Department of Philosophy Cambridge. There are no compulsory courses and thesis is not required. Rather, these have been replaced by a wider range of choices, namely some more extensive and complex theme presentation in part IA and IB, as well as the aesthetic realm which students usually do not come into contact with. Student's thesis topics include metaphysics, philosophy of mind, ethics, Kant's philosophy, and the history of ancient philosophy, mathematical logic, philosophy of logic, special texts, political philosophy and aesthetics.

Specific requirements for conducting the course include: firstly, students shifting into philosophy major from other majors in the first year must learn part IA of the Tripos, or participate in the preliminary examination at the end of first year. Students who passed the exam can enter the learning of part IB of the Tripos; students shifting into Philosophy major at the end of the first year can learn part IB of the Tripos, and students who get excellent score in the exams submit papers 1, 2, 3 and 10, and one other paper; students who do not get excellent score, must submit papers 1, 2, 3 and 10, and two other papers; Students shifting into philosophy major at the end of the first year can also study Part II of philosophy within two years, and the successful candidates in the preliminary examination can enter the study of part II. Secondly, students shifting into Philosophy major at the end of the

second year and getting an excellent score in the first professional examinations can learn part IB of the Tripos and submit several papers. They must finish thesis 1,2,3 and 10, as well as one other papers. Or they can study Part II and submit a small number of papers, but they must complete the course thesis 12 or a big paper. Thirdly, in addition to learning the part IA, IB and II of the Tripos, students should also read some practical books, such as *Meditations* by Rene Descartes, *The Principles of Human Knowledge* by George. Berkeley, *Philosophical Question* by Jean. Jacques. Rousseau, *Language, Truth and Logic* by A. J. Ayer, *Why is the Philosophy of Language Problems* by I. Hacking, *Body and Soul* by June. Campbell, *Natural Philosophy of Science* by Carl • Hempel, *Utilitarian* by John Stuart Mill, *Morality* by Bernard. Williams, *What's It All Mean* by Thomas. Nagel and *Philosophy of Temptation* by M. Hollis.

Cambridge provides students with flexible options, which aims to offer students with enough time and space to choose their favorite major to study. This approach also enriches students' knowledge structure to avoid the unity of knowledge structure and to reflect the openness and flexibility of Cambridge Education. However, there is no "mixed honors degree training" at Cambridge. When the students are learning philosophy courses, they cannot take math or English elective courses at the same time. They can only select different majors to learn in every year of the three-year undergraduate study. For example, students spend the first two years on learning English and then study philosophy courses in the third year.

Based on the aforementioned Cambridge Philosophy three-year undergraduate curriculum, there are five course structure types in the Bachelor's degree of philosophy education at the University of Cambridge: The first one is metaphysics as a basic training course. Metaphysics always ranks first in the basic courses among part IA, IB and II each year. The so-called metaphysics refers to the study of the primitive nature of the world or the nature of things which is beyond experience. This course is adopted as a basic thinking training course, aiming to train students to have dialectical understanding of metaphysics and epistemology. It is regarded as the core curriculum of philosophy education at the University of Cambridge and even in the history of Western philosophy. The second one is Analytic Philosophy as a technical training course. Analytic Philosophy emphasizes the critical role of analytical methods, considering it the main method, or even the only method, to philosophical studies. The beginning of Analytic Philosophy is in Cambridge where Russell and Moore created the study of Analytic philosophy. These two philosophers entered into the Trinity College to study mathematics and classical science in 1890 and 1892. Later, the rise of mathematical logic provided a powerful analysis tool for Analytic Philosophy. Philosophy of Language is the

focus of Analytic Philosophy. With the development of philosophy, Philosophy of Mind gradually replaced Philosophy of Language, and subsequently developed and affected Britain, and, even the whole West. Adopting the latest research achievements from the fields such as modern brain science, neuroscience and artificial intelligence disciplines,, Philosophy of Mind reinterprets the characteristics and nature of human consciousness activities to further clarify the relationship between mind and body. The third one is ethics and practical reasoning research. Research on ethics and practical reasoning is also the focus of Cambridge Philosophy research. Philosophers usually regard Analytic Philosophy as a research method and they employ this method to address the questions of philosophy ethics and practical reasoning research. For example, a majority of the British philosophers are involved in Analytic Philosophy,, although at various degrees, in an attempt to give answers from their professional backgrounds. The fourth one is that the curriculum is based on the history of ancient and modern philosophy and writings of famous philosophers. The main study content of ancient philosophy is the writings of ancient Greek such as Plato, Aristotle and Lucretius. Modern philosophy includes classic writings on philosophy, for example, Kant, Hegel, and Friedrich. Wilhelm. Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger Martin. Listening masters' wonderful speeches, reading classics of famous philosophers, ideologically bringing in resonance and communication, can be described as a valuable asset of the spiritual world. There is resourceful propaganda of philosophical special reports at the Department of Philosophy, on the college website and in the publicity window. The propaganda aims to cultivate students' reading capacity in original works, broaden their horizons and enrich spiritual comprehension of Cambridge students. The fifth one is branches of philosophy as expanding training courses. The philosophy branches at the University of Cambridge comprise political philosophy, religion philosophy, moral philosophy, science philosophy, logic philosophy and aesthetics, etc. The establishment of these branches is to train students' interdisciplinary knowledge and broaden their vision. It also aims to make philosophical research to move towards realistic and concrete development, and to broaden and deepen the points and aspects of philosophical research as well as to look for new developmental direction of philosophy.

At the University of Cambridge, the curriculum of any discipline is set up for the Tripos. The final exams of the Bachelor's degree are called Tripos. As such, there is no exception for the degree in philosophy. In the past ten years, there has not been significant change about the course content and examination requirements. Only the specific teaching content is slightly different to meet tutors' requirements. In other words, the professors (teachers?) might have different requirements for

students to understand the theories of philosophies and have different focuses in each chapter. Nevertheless, the names of Cambridge philosophy courses have not been changed for over 10 years, which means that the curriculum and content is completely in conformity with the training goals and educational philosophy of the University of Cambridge.

### 3. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF UNDERGRADUATE PHILOSOPHY EDUCATION

As mentioned above, the curriculum structure at the University of Cambridge is referred to as "Tripos". Tripos stems from the 15<sup>th</sup> century when BA graduates and undergraduates debated in the meaning of the "three-legged stool" story. In Latin, Tripos refers to a three-legged stool, or refers to the triangle table (Tripod). Previously, the University of Cambridge mainly took oral exam as their examination form. This kind of examination required a person to sit on the stool. However, the person was neither the nervous candidate nor the serious examiners, but a fanny prevaricator. When the exam became tense, the prevaricator would tell one or two jokes, so that the exam would continue under a relaxed atmosphere. At that time, if a candidate wanted to get a good result in the exam, he/she had to be possessed with three essential capabilities: enriched knowledge, keen judgment and a sense of humor. These three prerequisites were just like three-legged stool and the three legs implied the students' three capabilities, which reflected the purpose of the Cambridge education of philosophy. Among the three capabilities, the sense of humor usually has more British national characteristics, which had a striking contrast with the traditional German education. Therefore, the philosophy education at the University of Cambridge has the following characteristics:

The first characteristic is the focus on training cognitive ability of philosophical analysis and wisdom. The University of Cambridge pays more attention to cultivate and train students' philosophical analysis ability. From the three years of undergraduate study schedule, it is found that the analytic philosophy is positioned in the first place and is a core fundamental course. Since 1906, the course of Analytic Philosophy has been included in the philosophy study schedule at the University of Cambridge. After over 100 years of development, Analysis Philosophy has laid a solid foundation and has cultivated the world famous analytic philosophers, such as Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein. These philosophers inherited and promote the academic traditions of Analytic Philosophy. The reason for Cambridge's tradition and achievement is closely related to the guiding principles of philosophy education: enriched knowledge, keen judgment and a sense of humor.

The second characteristic is the emphasis on studying masterpiece and historical tradition. According to the study schedule, students should study the history of ancient philosophy, the history of modern philosophy and the related works of famous philosophers. There are two requirements for the study of the history of ancient philosophy: Part A is Plato *Republic*, which includes the analysis and defense of justice, moral psychology, rights, the rule of the philosophers and art criticism; Part B is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which involves happiness, moral character analysis and differential analysis between virtue and self-control, morality and responsibility, lack of self-control and friendships. The requirements of history of modern philosophy consists of studying and answering questions about Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and parts of *Philosophy of science encyclopedia outline*, namely the logic introduction *The history of philosophy lectures* and *Century of the history of geographical foundation*, Friedrich. Wilhelm. Nietzsche's *Moral system*, *The science of happiness*, *The birth of tragedy*, *Beyond good and evil*, and Martin. Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The course names are essentially the same and the differences only exists in the different requirements of knowledge points.

The third characteristic is the focus on academic standards and innovation on the basis of their predecessors. On the basis of studying previous classic works, the University of Cambridge has set up rigorous and standardized academic tradition, which is a critical factor contributing to its success., Without doubt, emphasizing clear philosophical concept and strict logical argumentation has been a fundamental standard to measure the academic achievement adopted by the Cambridge philosophers and even the whole English-speaking world. There are definite requirements for writing an essay in the study schedule. The thesis topics comprise traditional degree thesis and theology degree thesis. Traditional essay topic belongs to the Greek philosophy. Examinees should define their own learning contents by choosing from II the history of ancient philosophy Part B the moral and political thoughts of Plato, Aristotle, the theme of the Greek and Roman phase. In terms of the theology degree thesis, students can choose from II Part B, the C11 and metaphysics., The University of Cambridge is good at dealing with the relationship between retaining traditions and adopting innovations. The comprehension of the traditional literature becomes their primary premise to development innovation and at the same time, the powerful analysis method enables them to innovate constantly. With the demand of the job market, the University of Cambridge also sets up relevant curriculum to meet the needs of students and market.

The forth characteristic is the attention to the scientific method and logical analysis. At the University of

Cambridge, scientific research stresses the combination of specific experimental science and logical analysis. In particular, it emphasizes the study of the history of science. Specifically: firstly, the study of physics philosophy always stands in the forefront of the world philosophy, Whether the latest research results on the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics or theoretical model structure of physics, They are all done by philosophers. The main representative philosopher is Professor Jeremy Butterfield. In the three years of undergraduate study, "metaphysics" is a required course. Secondly, the history of science and science and philosophy department of the University of Cambridge is a vital base in specializing in the history of science research in the UK. At present, the study focuses on the field of sociology of science, and it emphasizes to analyze the social function of science from the perspective of philosophy. The main representative is Professor Peter Lipton. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* laid the foundation for the logical analysis discipline teaching and research of the University of Cambridge.

The fifth characteristic is the attention to the combination of the realistic problem research and market demand. When Cambridge philosophers tackle important practical issues, they do not discuss the problem in the terms of the problem but they usually find theoretical frameworks or conceptual systems from a more general significance to interpret these practical issues. Their research on the ethics and practical reasoning is always established on the basis of moral philosophy. The University of Cambridge attaches substantial importance to the teaching content and approaches. Although there is no national authority requirement, the University of Cambridge pays attention to distinguishing the basic course and specialized course. While it requires extensive basic courses, it has more demands on specialized courses.

The sixth characteristic is the debate and, student-oriented seminars as the main teaching approaches. In the spring of 2010, during I visit in UK, I had academic exchanges with the Professor Simon Blackburn, the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, during my visit in the UD in the spring of 2010. Professor Simon Blackburn said, "Cambridge University attaches great importance to students' debate activities." Debate is one of the important characteristics of philosophy education of the university. In class, teachers usually don't explain too much, and they prefer to use debate to achieve the teaching goals. Students are required to write their own reading reports after them extensively read classic books and related literatures. Under the guidance of teachers, students can have a heated discussion and refutation on the report content and academic points. The premise of debate is relaxing and democratic, which means that students can openly refute teachers' views, and oppose other students' opinion. In this way, there's no taboo at all, therefore it can truly realize equal academic atmosphere. These teaching approaches

are totally different from the *teacher-oriented cramming teaching* in China. In China, the teaching approaches of the University of Cambridge is considered to be behavior which are neither respecting teachers nor fraternal uniting students. At the University of Cambridge, students study under an equal environment with teachers and their classmates. I believe that in this way students can be more easily to find problems, so they can finally resolve the problems, enlighten thinking, and cultivate their creativity. Their aim is to cultivate students' consciousness of thinking. This is what characterizes Cambridge classroom: by the collision of wisdom, students can develop bidirectional thinking skills, and at the same time, teachers can find and cultivate more creative talents.

The seventh characteristic is the attention to the combination of college and department teaching management model. The decentralized management model is the characteristic of the University of Cambridge: students from different majors live and study in the same college. Undoubtedly, it's beneficial for the intersection of different disciplines and also it's convenient for students to learn different fields. Philosophy education involves the Philosophy Department and the relevant colleges. The Philosophy Department is responsible for the organization of all kinds of lectures, logic courses, discussion groups and seminars, while counselors from each college are responsible for organizing students' special reports (Cambridge called regulatory) and aspects of life. As a result, the relevant colleges make significant contribution to the diversity of philosophy education. The purpose of the tutor system is that tutors can help every student develop their ability and interests. Students spend most of their time in college.

Historically speaking, the Cambridge philosophy has always been seen as the leader and core of the British philosophy. Judged from the theoretical development of philosophy, all the philosophers, whether it's from Bacon to Hume's empiricism tradition, or Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein etc., raised the banner to fight against idealism, they used modern logic and scientific methods to establish the foundation for empirical philosophy and directly introduced Analytic Philosophy which occupied a dominant position in western philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. From the perspective of philosophy education, Cambridge University highlights core courses, and at the same time, takes the needs of society into account. By setting up flexible, various and interesting branch courses, the university meets the needs of various kinds of students. Just as Professor Simon Blackburn states: "the purpose philosophy education at the University of Cambridge is to naturally broaden students' horizon, enlighten their mind, help them see more possibilities and address more complex problems."

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