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The Grad Zone

The UNB Graduate Student Association

On philosophy and graduate education *by Peter Ferguson*

Has it ever struck you as strange that Ph.D stands for Doctor of Philosophy and yet, many (most?) Ph.D.'s have never had any contact with philosophy? "Philosophy" is an archaic term to describe the physical sciences. This helps explain Hamlet's usage of the term when he spoke: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy".

In the medieval universities then, "Doctor of Philosophy" meant "Doctor of Science". The term persists today though it is understood that Ph. D. no longer applies to the sciences.

But what of philosophy as it is meant today? Should the modern Ph.D reflect at least some formal training in philosophy? I have never taken a course in philosophy and have only recently begun to explore the philosophical questions of science, in general, and of my own discipline, biology, in

particular. I have found it a refreshing exercise and plan to continue the exploration. As I was busy burrowing ever deeper in my own research I never felt I was doing anything other than what I should be doing. It felt natural and good to me. But I was increasingly aware that something was missing. It became clearer to me from the teachings of a course where philosophy is approached obliquely that what was missing was perspective. It's a humbling, yet liberating experience to analyze your discipline much as a philosopher would. What is truth? Am I uncovering truth? How do I know? What are the limits of my field? What questions lie outside of discovery?

We deplore the increasing specialization of each of our fields, or at least the graduate school does. The various departments within the graduate school seek to instill a certain

breadth as well as depth among their students. This seems to fly against the prevailing winds of today's "market demands". We have to find our niche which we (a select few) can occupy. Let's face it. Universities and industry hire on the basis of excellence in highly specialized fields. Of what value is a Ph. D. who is a generalist?

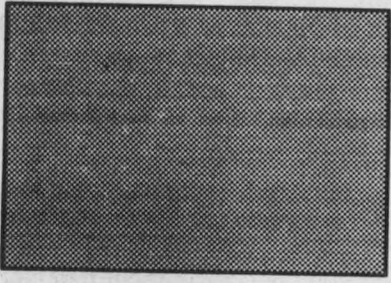
Yet, we still have to talk to each other. Of what use are specialists who dig ever deeper in their hole without contacting those who are digging their own holes? How often do we question ourselves whether we are digging our own holes in the right place? Yes, "X" marks the spot, but what does it mark? A buried treasure or our own "grave"?

In my own department of Biology there is some effort made to give students some breadth of knowledge - in biology. I'm sure the same oc-

curs in Psychology, Business, History, and Electrical Engineering. Breadth is the goal but it is still delimited by the traditional disciplinary boundaries. Should I feel proud if I can honestly call myself a "biologist", too, in addition to the more specialized "molecular biologist"? How do I, as a biologist, hope to share common ground with graduate students in other disciplines (assuming that common ground is desirable)? Are there lessons for biologists, for example, to learn from computer science, mechanical engineering, history, economics, or any other discipline offered at UNB?

Certainly, each of these fields HAS contributed to biology (and to each other) in varying degrees of success. Each time this sharing of ideas occurs ground is broken. We come closer to digging in unison, to building a true foundation of

knowledge. Perhaps, we can truly be Doctors of Philosophy if we take the time to learn from each other the "philosophy" of the various disciplines. In many European universities, Ph. D. students of all disciplines were/are required to study introductory philosophy. This may be an idea long overdue on this side of the Atlantic. All graduate students would have a common ground on which to build truly broad-based knowledge. Specialization is a fact of life. I can't hope to learn all the detailed knowledge of Psychology, Engineering, or Education. But learning the philosophies and basic principles of each is achievable.



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