

# The Problems of Philosophy as a Discipline in Bibliographic Classification: The Example BCI

Steven Chabot

steven.chabot@utoronto.ca

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Professor Clare Beghtol

Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto

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## Abstract

The following paper examines the problems of Philosophy as a discipline in general bibliographic classifications based on educational consensus. Through an examination of the first edition of Bliss' Bibliographic Classification (BCI) and its basis in a theory of a pedagogical order, the following problems are addressed: philosophy and its relation to other disciplines, the distinction between literature and science in philosophy, and the distinction between primary and secondary works in philosophy. Concludes that Bliss' extensive use of alternative locations, particularly in the main class of Philosophy, represents Bliss' inability to successfully deal with these issues.

## Introduction

The order of classes based on academic disciplines is understood to be the main organizing principle of general bibliographic classification systems (Beghtol, 1998). Furthermore, while other general classifications may not explicitly acknowledge their consideration of educational warrant or hold it as their main organizing principle, they do all take into consideration the needs of the academic library (Beghtol, 1986). However, how successful are they at mapping these academic disciplines? The discipline of Philosophy presents particular problems for library classification: while it can at once be seen as the theoretical foundation of knowledge in general, it also touches on all the other disciplines, questioning their theoretical assumptions (Bliss, 1939, p. 80; Langridge, 1976, p.61) . To

illustrate these problems, this paper will present a detailed examination of Class A in the first edition of the Bibliographic Classification (BCI) and its theoretical foundations in the works of Henry Bliss. In doing so the following three problems will be addressed:

1. Philosophy and its relation to other disciplines: while Philosophy may have its own theoretical problems, much of what is discussed in Philosophy departments touches on the subjects of other disciplines. Should these be discussions correlated with the main class of Philosophy or distributed amongst these individual subjects?

2. Philosophy as literature, Philosophy as science: Philosophy is both the the investigation of reality as well as the study of and dialogue with past philosophical writing. This presents a choice between organizing philosophical works by the topic under investigation or by author/historical period.

3. Primary works, secondary works: Opposed to other disciplines such as history or art, criticism in Philosophy is at the same time both derivative and original. To critique the work of another philosopher is to *do* philosophy. By what criteria do we judge a philosophical writer worthy of his or her own place in the schedules or decide to correlate these critical works with their corresponding authors/topics?

While many of these difficulties have been raised, by both Bliss himself (1929, p. 299) and by more recent authors (Langridge, 1976), the problem of these choices has largely been left to the discretion of the classifier through alternative locations, thereby increasing the possibilities for disorder. No sufficient solutions have been suggested, and we will conclude that there are no satisfactory conclusions when working with a single notation system. Later improvements will do much to reign in the level of variability introduced by BCI through the use of alternative locations, but none of these issues can be completely dismissed.

### The Organization of Knowledge and Educational Warrant

For Bliss the order of the academic disciplines is the ultimate culmination of the historical development of knowledge as well as the ultimate expression of the logical order

inherent in nature, and classifications consistent with this order will have a higher educational value (Bliss, 1929, p. 115). Part IV of his *Organization of Knowledge and the System of the Sciences* documents that progressive development, from the first divisions of philosophy into Physics, Ethics and Logic, through the medieval *Trivium* and *Quadrivium* and the Enlightenment *Encyclopédie*, to our contemporary order as exemplified in Bliss' own system. For Bliss this developmental order, exhibited by gradual developments from more general subjects to the more specific, follows the logical order of the sciences which are themselves gradated by speciality. This order in turn follows the evolutionary order in nature, which exists for the positivist and realist Bliss in a sublime regularity and symmetry (1929, p. 185).

Scientists and philosophers recognize and intuit this inherent order, and over time this order as exhibited by the disciplines becomes more stable to the point of approaching permanence (Bliss, 1929, p.221). As this order approaches stability, new sciences develop only as reorganizations of minor distinctions, while the main structures of that order—the central concepts and problems—remain constant (Bliss, 1929, p. 209). Bliss seems ambivalent to whether this pedagogic order is the same as the logical and developmental orders, at once arguing this is a “false simplification,” while later arguing that the pedagogical order closely parallels all other orders (1929, pp. 226–7). The pedagogical order, and the educational system supported by it, exists as an expression of the social mind and therefore must contain within it not only our present ideas but also the past history of those ideas in all their organizational forms (Bliss, 1929, p. 227). As these ideas become more stable, the order and consensus of science and education becomes “more dominant and more permanent” (Bliss, 1939, p.37).

The library itself should mimic this pedagogical order: it exists in miniature as the citadel in the city that is the university (Bliss, 1929, p. 115). Beyond just a philosophical principle, the correlation between the successive orders of nature, knowledge, education and the ideal organization of the library is a principle of efficiency. That is, because books are collocated based on the inherent orders of knowledge and the sciences, when a user goes to retrieve material they necessarily will be choosing from a systematically arranged group of

subjects. And as any foray into the world of knowledge naturally falls into previously delineated and unchanging categories, a researcher is less likely to travel between shelves and floors where they may become “impatient” (Bliss, 1939, p. 31). The efficiency of collocation is understood to be the key principle of library classification; Bliss’ originality concerns the relation of that collocation to the educational consensus.

The example Bliss gives is of Education (Bliss, 1939, pp. 33-4), which is main class J. It can be assumed that a user looking for works concerning Education would be more interested in works on Anthropology (H), Psychology (I) and Sociology (a subclass of K) than Astronomy (D) or Jurisprudence (S). No system can be exact, and every system distributes some concepts as it collects others. However, Bliss argues that a system constructed on lines based in the educational consensus and the pedagogical order will provide the maximum efficiency possible, as these relations cohere to the natural system in nature. It is true, as Rafferty (2001) notes, that a classificationist’s motivations of pragmatism often hide an ideological and philosophical bias. However, for Bliss there is no distinction between the philosophical and pragmatic: a library classification following “true” philosophical principles is inherently efficient for the reasons explored above.

### *Criticisms*

This theory of educational consensus does present some problems, primarily the fact that Bliss’ main classes based on academic disciplines are mutually exclusive and relatively unchanging. This is partially a fault of his progressive view of science and research: Bliss saw such contemporary developments such as Psychology and Sociology as only further specializations of the Philosophies of Mind and Human Nature respectively, and did not acknowledge their own unique methods and discourses which had developed. Not simply a differentiation of subject matter, it is this change of discursive method which supports the actual distinctions between the academic disciplines. Pierce (1991) outlines how new disciplines are formed through the development of conceptual and methodological boundaries to the exclusion of outsiders, both amateurs and those from other disciplines.

Scholars who treat similar subjects from different fields are excluded not on the basis of knowledge of those subjects, but on differences of academic culture. However, Pierce is right to consider the fact that when information professionals suggest sources, they should do so on the basis of the seeker's home discipline, because sources from related disciplines may be methodologically deficient for those users even if topically relevant.

A related problem is the concept of interdisciplinarity, which Beghtol (1998) argues makes this structural principle of universal bibliographic classification systems inadequate. She argues that such systems will need to adapt in a hospitable way as interdisciplinarity becomes a major source of new research and knowledge creation. The solution to this problem in BCI is to make extensive use of alternative locations. This is clearly not sufficient for the current proliferation of interdisciplinary approaches and disciplines, and Bliss' use of alternative location was particularly unworkable even in his contemporary period.

#### BCI and the Problems of Philosophy

The introduction to BCI argues that the system outlined is consistent with the systems of education as expressed in their "institutions, *curricula*, and programs" (Bliss, 1940, p. 21). A system organized on those principles should, in Bliss' conception, provide maximum efficiency in retrieving documents. However, examining the first class of the system, Philosophy and General Science, we can find two particular problems. First, the class has almost no resemblance to Philosophy as it is discussed in the *curricula* and programs of the university. Second, the class presents almost no rational order to the alternative locations available for the organization of philosophical works.

As a preliminary, if we are to expect a direct correlation between main classes and subject-disciplines, we would have to argue that the inclusion of General Science in this class is a result of a limit of notation (a fault Bliss often charges to Dewey, for instance (Bliss, 1939, pp. 201 ff)). Bliss argues for their close correlation, which may or may not be valid, although it may be desirable to keep Logic with Philosophy and form a separate class with the

remainder of Mathematics and General Science. For our purposes we are interested in Philosophy as a subject-discipline specifically and its classification and not the distinction between Philosophy and General Science.

Limited to what is properly understood as the discipline of Philosophy, BCI presents us with no less than four and as many as five ways of organizing the subject: (a) historically by periods and schools in AA–AD, (b) history and criticism (what I will call here *secondary works*) in AA–AD and original works by philosophers (*primary works*) alphabetically in A5, (c) like (b) but with the more topical works arranged by subject in AF and AH, (d) like (c) but with works treating philosophical movements or views at AG, or (e) original works alphabetically in A5, with biographical works in A4 and historical surveys in A3 as in AA–AD “but less elaborately.” (Bliss, 1940, p. 166). Furthermore, the schedules include alternative locations for Psychology at AI and Religion and Ethics at AJ, while outlining notation for “Relation of Philosophy to *x*” for a number of topics under AF, not to be confused with “philosophical treatments of *x*” which are distributed throughout the schedules, although difference between the two is not entirely clear.

This disorganization is partially due to the difficulties present in classifying philosophical works. The solution, in the case of Bliss, is to allow for many alternative locations in order to give the classifier the maximum amount of flexibility. A quick examination of Class A can see that such numbers of alternative locations are far from sufficient solutions to the problems inherent in organizing Philosophy.

#### *Philosophy and its relation to other disciplines*

Amongst this mass of alternative locations, there are only three subjects which are proper to Philosophy: Epistemology, Ontology and Cosmology, all three being subsumed under the general heading Metaphysics (1929, p. 255). However, when looking at a list of common undergraduate courses (see Appendix) we notice that many particular subjects are missing, such as Aesthetics, Ethics, Philosophy of Law, Philosophy of History and other “Philosophies of”. We would expect to see these collocated with other philosophical topics in

a classification system based on educational consensus. While Bliss does argue that it is difficult to make a distinction between a branch of philosophy and any one of the special sciences (1929, p. 256), he ultimately suggests that these individual philosophical topics are more efficiently classed with their related subject-disciplines, for instance Ethics, which he sees as closely related with Religion (1929, p. 289).

It is curious why, after arguing for the principle of educational consensus, Bliss chooses to place these philosophical discussions under each discipline in opposition to the main class of Philosophy. And while he does make provisions for Religion, Ethics and Psychology through alternative locations, it is curious why he does not do so for topics with equally valid connections to Philosophy, such as Aesthetics, which, it could be argued, has more in common with theories of Epistemology than discussions of specific works of art.

Such a division would necessitate that multiple works by extremely prolific and systematic philosophers would be distributed not simply throughout a single class but throughout the entire library, giving an extreme situation where a student looking for works of a particular philosopher would be literally forced to walk from A to Z to retrieve them. Ultimately, we must conclude that both of these organizations would present efficiencies in some cases and deficiencies in others, a conclusion which throws into question Bliss' confidence in the pedagogical order as a necessary guarantor of efficiency. However, if we are to consider the position of the discipline of Philosophy and its subordinate subjects, clearly the collocation of those subjects with a multitude of disciplines cannot be efficient for those beginning in Philosophy and making their way to disparate shelves.

*Philosophy as literature, Philosophy as science*

Distinguishing the methodologies of the humanities from those of the other sciences, Langridge (1976) argues that the method in the humanities is "scholarship," or the study of works and writings against the study of nature (p. 30). Also, in opposition to science, the humanities tend to work cumulatively, giving ancient writings equal weight beside the most recent works. Philosophy too, classed as a humanity, also works in this way. Not only does it

consider those texts from the beginnings of its tradition alongside more modern works, but a major method in philosophy is the detailed exposition of other philosophers and their works. However, at the same time, philosophy tends to be “scientific,” if we take this to mean it engages in investigations of reality and strives towards truth progressively, often with little regard to the investigations of others. The opposite conception of philosophy often denies the very possibility of truth. This view of philosophy sees the historical development of philosophy as a dialogue of thinkers speaking throughout history. This dialogue reflects the problems inherent in classifying fictional literature more so than those of scientific topics.

In this first conception we could make the argument that philosophical works would be better classed historically and by author. The second conception of philosophy would see philosophical works classed with the topics they investigate. It is important to note that departments of philosophy are organized along both principles, offering both historical and topical classes (see Appendix). It is clear that Bliss understands philosophy in the second conception, as a system of generalized thought, grounded on knowledge, criticizing intuitive beliefs (1939, p. 80) and striving for truth. At the same time, there are points where he seems to suggest that philosophy is no more than “rational literature” (1929, p. 299; 1939, p. 80). As noted, BCI allows for both ways of ordering. Ultimately, this problem of classification is related to the educational consensus in Philosophy itself, which clearly divides itself between the literary and scientific methods, and often searches for and denies the possibility of truth in the same department.

#### *Primary works, secondary works*

A further distinction between the humanities and sciences made by Langridge (1976) is the humanities’ concern with “specimens,” that is, particular instantiation of human creativity in concrete form—novels, plays, paintings etc. (p. 33). In opposition to this is criticism, the discussion of those works. This distinction is problematic in Philosophy, however, where all but the most general and elementary critical works are in some way a “specimen,” a further example of philosophical discourse, and often original in their own right even when

discussing other writers. At the same time, there are clearly works whose specific purpose is solely the derivative discussion of another philosophical work. Those of the first variety would require their own location, either by author or by topic, with those works which are clearly secondary collocated with them. On what basis are we to make distinctions between the two?

Bliss is next to silent on this problem, although he does make a comment in the Introduction to BCI suggesting that philosophy and writings about philosophy sometimes merge into one another, although the majority of the time things are “clear enough” (1940, p. 75). Langridge (1976) as well draws attention to this problem, concluding that only those who have made an “original contribution” need be classified by name, the others subsumed under the appropriate topic/author (p. 65). This is clearly a problem, as it places too much judgement in the hands of the classifier, an argument Langridge anticipates. He argues that this difficulty only arises for contemporary writers, the reputation of older writers having been already established (p. 65).

The solution to this difficulty is not so clear, as there are often times where we would want an original commentary collocated both with its author and with the subject of its attention. A classic example is Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle, many of which exhibit originality in their own right. A more modern example is that of Heidegger’s (1994) lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Read on their own these works exhibit their own originality; read with their “primary” works these commentaries can be understood on a different and equally important level. Neither can be said to be more important than the other. Clearly, if possible, we would want to class them in both locations at once. This is only a possibility in the classified catalogue, where we can assign multiple notations and subject headings, but is not possible on the physical shelf.

### *Discussion*

These three problems—the problem of other disciplines, the distinction between literature and science, and the distinction between primary and secondary works—are inherent to Philosophy as a form of literature. As we have seen, the solution BCI presents for

this problem is to allocate alternative locations wherever possible to allow for flexibility in cataloguing. Each library would be forced to set its own policies in deciding which of the five schemes of classifying philosophy would be chosen, but would then not be able to share its records with any other library who had chosen either of the others or some amalgamation of them. Without the aid of computers this lack of standardization prevented BCI from gaining a wide acceptance. Furthermore, while we have used Bliss' classification as a backdrop to illustrate these problems, they are not unique to BCI (Langridge, 1976, p.62).

The question could be raised, particularly when looking at the first problem, whether Philosophy is not some kind of interdisciplinary subject. We would hesitate to give it that designation, as Philosophy is better understood logically and historically as the rational foundations of the various disciplines. "Philosophy of Law" is not really any form combination or interaction between two subject domains (Beghtol, 1998), nor can it adequately be described as the treatment of law from a philosophical perspective. The philosophy of a discipline ideally provides the most general theoretical foundations of any subject: not just how one should design, evaluate and institute law, but what "law" means in the first place, what its essence is. We hesitate to add another prefix, and an overused one at that, to the field, but if we had to name it we would call Philosophy a meta-discipline, which deals with the highest levels of abstraction in each discipline.

Regardless of the nature of Philosophy's relation with the other disciplines, proponents of faceted systems will argue that any such relations can be expressed (Beghtol, 1998). As a sequel to BCI, the second edition of Class A/AL (Mills & Broughton, 1991) does make some improvements over the original through the use of facets, but does not completely counteract all the problems presented in classifying Philosophy. In consideration of the first problem, BC2 does make some improvements in classing Philosophies of Language, Mind and Ethics with Philosophy, although the editors have made the decision to continue to keep Aesthetics group with the Arts.

The second and third problems of Philosophy are addressed by the use of facets in BC2.

In reference to the second, the facet order of BC2 gives preference to branches of Philosophy and then to historical schools in the citation order, which would bring together all works concerning Epistemology first, then order them by historical treatment. Thirdly, the Viewpoint facet allows for the discussion of one philosopher by, or from the viewpoint of, a second philosopher. While these are improvements over the complications of alternative locations in BC1, they still do not completely solve the problems outlined. For instance, while it is an improvement to be able to group together works related to Averroes' treatment of Aristotle, this still does not satisfy the desire to see all the works of Averroes, including the commentaries, grouped together as original works. Furthermore those who see all of the works of a single author or historical period as a unity would be disappointed by the facet order of BC2.

### Conclusions

This paper has discussed the problems for library classifications in classifying Philosophy as a discipline. First outlining its foundations in educational warrant, Bliss' Bibliographic Classification was examined to illustrate the following problems: the relationship between Philosophy and other disciplines, the competing conceptions of Philosophy as literature and science, and the relation between primary and secondary works in Philosophy. While the later BC2 has addressed some of these problems, particularly because of its strengths as a faceted system, many of these same issues continue to present problems for library classification.

There are no ultimate solutions to these problems, at least when limited to shelf ordering and singular notations. The conclusion drawn by Bliss is to leave the decisions open to each individual library through the extensive use of alternative locations, not only in Class A but throughout the entire schedules, for "special subjects everywhere" (1940, p. 23). Under the rubric of allowing for multiple viewpoints and purposes, Bliss has abrogated his responsibility for coming to a clear decision about these three problems of Philosophy. There is no clear suggestion on how the class should be ordered, and it is questionable how efficient

a class with five different ways of ordering can truly be. Clearly, however, such a large number of alternative locations throughout the system make a strong case against any single order of knowledge as an objective standard for basing such a system.

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## Appendix

Intermediate Undergraduate Philosophy Classes at the University of  
Toronto (2006/2007)

Early Greek Philosophy	Freedom and Human Action
Ancient Philosophy After Aristotle	Minds and Machines
Bases of Cognition	Women in Western Political Thought
Plato	Metalogic
Aristotle	Intermediate Logic
Augustine	Philosophy of Mathematics
Aquinas	Modal Logic
Topics in Medieval Philosophy	Set Theory
The Rationalists	Revolution in Science
The Empiricists	Philosophy of Language
Kant	Philosophy of Natural Science
19th-Century German Philosophy	Philosophy of Physics
Hegel	Philosophy of Biology
Marx and Marxism	Philosophy of History
Philosophy and Psychoanalytic Theory	Political Philosophy
Phenomenology	Issues in Philosophy of Law
Heidegger	Issues in Environmental Ethics
Contemporary Continental Philosophy	Ethics
The Analytic Tradition	War and Morality
Wittgenstein	Global Bioethics
Metaphysics	Ethics and Medical Research
Epistemology	Ethics: Death and Dying
Issues in Philosophy of Religion	Ethics and Mental Health
Islamic Philosophy	Ethics, Genetics and Reproduction
Topics in Chinese Philosophy	Issues in Aesthetics
Jewish Philosophy	Literature and Philosophy
Issues in Philosophy of Mind	Markets and Morals