The University of Chicago, 1972-1977

This essay retells my experience and changes while teaching at the University of Chicago.

Planning to graduate from Yale in the spring of 1972, I entered the job market at the big philosophy convention during the 1971 Christmas holidays. I had several interviews, the most dramatic from the Department of Philosophy at University of Pittsburgh, at the time one of the best in the country. Eminent philosophers raided from Yale were on the panel interviewing me, I think, because of a recommendation from a logician at Yale who thereafter himself joined the Pittsburgh department. They began the interview by asking me to drink a tumbler of scotch. I was not at my best. Facing 10 people in a semicircle around me. I held my own pretty well, talking about my dissertation, until I was given a hard question by Wilfred Sellars, the most distinguished member of the philosophy department and a thinker whose works I had been reading for a long time. The question required an complex answer about the relation of logic to ordinary language, which I did figure out, but only 24 hours later. That ended the interview with Pittsburgh. I wasn't too worried, though, because I already had a job offer from the University of Chicago in my pocket.

The University of Chicago had called me prior to the convention and flown me out for an interview. The process went well. I had never seen the university, and was surprised by its looks, and more surprised when I received a call the next week offering me a job. I delayed accepting until after the convention. That year the department also hired a woman from Harvard. Eventually I went off to Bates before coming up for tenure at Chicago, while she received tenure at Chicago but later left to teach at the University of Maryland.

So, in late summer 1972 I drove my Ford to Chicago. With the help of a new colleague I was able to rent a pleasant apartment on the 12th floor of a high rise building near the university. To the south and east, beyond the green of Jackson Park I could see along the lake shore the steel mills of South Chicago and Gary, Indiana, all bustling industry and smoke.

Standing by that window I was the first time in my life living by myself alone without any supportive community. I had acquaintances in Chicago from Jesuit and other connections but no close friends. Over time I did gather a group of friends, but the first years in Chicago I felt often bitterly alone, even as I was busy teaching, writing, traveling. Gradually I built up a network of city friends, mostly academic colleagues at the U of C, Loyola of Chicago, Northwestern.

Not to mention that this was the time when I needed to start dating seriously, but whom? Graduate students? Other faculty members? I tried these but no luck. Eventually I asked a friend I had met at a Danforth conference for advice, and her husband introduced me to the director of a continuing education program he taught for downtown. Anne and I were soon serious. By my fourth year at Chicago we were living together, in her twice-as-tall building with a view not of the industrial past but of the futuristic glittering skyline of Chicago and the wide lake.

Chicago was an exciting city, with great art and architecture easy to encounter. Lake Michigan was always inspiring. The weather was not. There was not much open nature in Chicago, and

after New England, Chicago's extensive system of forest parks still seemed limited. Still, the Hyde Park area, where I lived near the University, provided Jackson Park where I walked and ran and, even more important for me, the Point jutting out into Lake Michigan where I could experience the wind and the waves. For me, other than the lake, natural scenery was too far away, and when you got there it was repetitive and flat, though this did bring its own sense of infinite fertility. During my time in Chicago I would leave part of the summer to visit either Texas to see my parents or Colorado to see friends there.

My first summer at Chicago I was invited to an Aspen Institute seminar for executives. An offshoot of the Great Books program at Chicago, this involved reading with the participants a series of philosophical and literary works, discussing them and their relevance to the practical lives of business people. This was my first experience teaching "adults," and I found the seminar quite enjoyable. I was lodged in a comfortable apartment, where I hosted several memorable dinners full of political discussion with Eugene McCarthy. I thought I did well in the course but the Institute never asked me back, and they transitioned from the intense great books discussion approach to focused conferences and TED-style talks.

On a group outing, the seminar members went for a picnic in a closed valley near Independence Pass. The valley ended with a steep slope up to the Continental Divide. Hearing a noise we watched a small V-tailed airplane fly up the valley. The plane, overloaded and flown by an east coast pilot inexperienced in the Rockies, failed to climb over the Divide in the thin air. The pilot attempted a quick turn but a wing hit the steep slope. We watched as the plane tumbled and crashed. Our group divided, with some staying at the base of the slope, others hiking to the crash site a thousand feet above us, while a Chicago bank vice-president and I drove a jeep fifteen minutes back to the campsite at the entrance of the valley. The campsite was almost deserted and devoid of public telephones. We flagged down a car that was heading for Aspen and asked them to notify the authorities. We debated driving the forty-five minutes into Aspen ourselves, but decided we had already sent that message on. We then debated whether to speed up the rescue by breaking a window in the locked Ranger office at the campground, then calling on the telephone that we could see inside. We hesitated, unsure if the phone was connected, and decided not to break in. Then we waited, and waited. We felt guilty, fearing we were putting property rights before human welfare. In fact, though, the folk we had spoken to had indeed notified the state police. The authorities in Aspen first sent a car to us and then drove out to the end of the valley, to determine whether the crash was real. Their delays lengthened the time to hours. When the investigators glimpsed the site up on the mountain and heard from our people who had reached the crash that the passengers had survived but were badly injured, the authorities finally radioed for a helicopter, and the passengers were rescued. Our dilemma made for good group discussion the next day, but it left the banker and I ethically shaken. Concrete situations so often involve conflicting ethical obligations. If we had broken the window and the phone had worked we might have saved half an hour, but fortunately no one died during that time. Aspen brought me a chance to talk with people facing real life issues that might be illumined by philosophical reflection. Our debate about breaking the cabin window was one such issue. Later that kind of discussion developed for me over issues in architecture and city planning.

Hyde Park was a largely white upper-class enclave surrounded by poverty. The day I arrived somebody was murdered on campus. In my first year three of my friends were raped. More were mugged. Getting to downtown Chicago meant a long bus or train ride, or a dicey ride on the El. Like many grad students I haunted the Seminary Co-op bookstore where the new release table keep us up with the latest offerings in philosophy and theology, with the help of the very knowledgeable staff.

The University of Chicago lived up to its reputation for general education in the liberal arts and innovative teaching. At the faculty club and at the various lunch halls one could find intellectual conversations on a vast variety of topics. It was very stimulating, though with lots of the inevitable intellectual jousting and name dropping.

Two more intellectual geological provinces revealed themselves in Chicago. One was the eponymous Chicago school of economics and politics, conservative by my standards but a whole new mode of thought that would expand my concerns about modernity and tradition. As for the second, I thought I was well-versed in analytic philosophy with my knowledge of Oxford ordinary language and Wilfrid Sellars. But Chicago philosophy was allied to the Harvard style of reductive formal analysis following Quine and Davidson. I had more to integrate.

I liked the department at Chicago overall, though I found some of my colleagues difficult to deal with. I especially remember David Malament, a philosopher of science and an avid music collector. He later left Chicago and moved to the West Coast, and when he retired one of his students posted on YouTube a moving tribute to him as a person and as a thinker who has resolved important issues in the philosophy of physics and relativity theory.

I spent a great deal of time with Alan Donagan, who shared my interests in the history of philosophy and the philosophy of religion, though he worked more in ethics and philosophy of mind. I recall many far ranging dinner conversations with him and his historian wife Barbara. He advised me on the ins and outs of faculty politics and we shared hopes for the future of philosophy.

At Chicago I came to know and work with the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. We had met occasionally before, but at Chicago we became friends. He came to Chicago a part of each year, but since the French academic calendar did not jive with Chicago's, he would come early or late for a given course. At his request I would fill in half of his course. We taught Nietzsche together, and two courses on Hegel. He was not present for most of my classes, but I would sit in and add comments when he was teaching. I admired his encyclopedic knowledge and his ability to pull from diverse sources, reframe questions and offer new alternatives. Like me, he was suspicious of any question that demanded the answer be one of only two opposed options.

We met Paul occasionally for dinner in Chicago, and once when Paul was visiting the National Humanities Center near Raleigh, NC, Anne and I spent several days with Paul and Simone driving along the coast and exploring historic Charleston, SC. I visited him in Paris several times, including a short visit with his family at their summer home in Brittany. I should have done that more. It was an inspiring friendship for me and I hope he received some benefits.

The department at Chicago was notably democratic, sharing all except tenure decisions equally. However, we junior philosophy faculty did more than our share of the routine committee work, because some elders felt that they had already served their time. So I found myself in my second year heading the admissions and financial aid committees and serving on others, including two

above the departmental level. I enjoyed the people I met from other departments and was fascinated by the variety I found among the higher level administrators.

Teaching at Chicago was on the quarter system, which provided more variety with three ten-week quarters a year plus the summer quarter, when you could teach a course to lighten your course load during the year. I had been accustomed to studying and teaching in 14-week semesters and I found it awkward at first cramming course material into 10 week segments. This remained difficult for courses studying a large text required time to be absorbed by the students.

I was assigned to teach sections of the general humanities required sequence, which was still blissfully strong at Chicago, even if not what it had been in its glory days. I also taught courses on a regular rotation for the graduate students (high-level undergraduate or beginning graduate level). Beyond that I was free to teach other topics that I thought appropriate. I found my teaching challenging and the freedom to create topics enticing. Indeed, too enticing; I created many different topics rather than focusing that teaching on material derived from my own dissertation, as was the custom.

Among the general education options I taught several sections of a standard Hutchins style philosophy/literature/science combo course and enjoyed the experience, but in the end I settled on doing sections of a western civ course with a Greek emphasis. For my rotating course I taught the Introduction to Greek Philosophy. For my own I taught some analytic courses (Transcendental Method in Philosophy, The Philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars), some straight continental courses (two on Hegel and one each on Nietzsche and Heidegger), some courses which promoted dialogue across the analytic/continental border (Transcendental Method in Philosophy, Analytic and Continental Critiques of Science, Mysticism and Philosophy, Strawson and Heidegger on Kant).

My reasoning was that in a competitive market Chicago graduates would have an advantage if they could demonstrate that besides their finely honed analytic focus they had the background to teach a wider variety of courses in history or applied philosophy. I think this was a sound judgment given the actual market for our graduates, but it was not shared by those department members who thought of themselves as preparing stars for jobs at Harvard. After I left they did hire in such a way as to realize this goal and the department's standing improved as a result.

The undergraduate students I encountered at Chicago were the best group of students I have taught, quirky and hardworking, intellectually curious and demanding. . The best were no brighter than the best elsewhere but the average dedication to study and intellectual matters was high because Chicago's special spirit and self-image recruited and motivated good students. I still recall with amazement the day when a disturbed first year student came to my office asking whether I thought there was something wrong with her because she did not want to become a professor.

The grad students I knew in Chicago were talented as well, but they were hampered by past policy decisions which let the university admit too many students and not provide enough support, so students had to compete with one another for the few funds available. liberal admissions plus stingy finances forced students to worry about how they stood with regard to

one another Nonetheless they worked hard and creatively and formed enduring connections. As the job market was deteriorating those policies had to change and some years later they did.

The U of C campus was compact with some exciting architecture but no signature style. There was a self-satisfied air about the university as a whole, but it was different from the satisfaction Yale had with itself, which depended on Tradition and on being Yale!, whereas Chicago's depended more on continual achievement. This put tremendous pressures on faculty to produce and publish. Tenure brought my friends no letup in this pressure.

I eventually came to realize that the Philosophy department of University of Chicago in those years was a bit isolated from the general spirit of University of Chicago. Just as before I came to Yale there had been tensions in the department so too at Chicago there was a history of tension and division .

One divided the remnants of the special faculty who have been hired to teach in the old Hutchins college, who mostly concentrated on general education for undergraduates, from the newer more professionally oriented and Harvard trained younger faculty who, now older, had come into power. This division was fading but it fostered among the decision makers in the department a distrust for interdisciplinary efforts of teaching that fit the more general Chicago spirit.

A deeper division had come to a head a few years back when Richard McKeon, who had his own synoptic method of classifying and relating philosophical theories ran up against the younger members of the department who refused to certify a PhD candidate of his. McKeon abandoned the department, taking with him his followers to found the Committee on the Study of Ideas and the Analysis of Methods. (The workings of this committee were pilloried in the roman à clef *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*)

There was a third quasi-philosophy department, the Committee on Social Thought, founded to save western culture at the end of World War II. It had more of a literary tone during my time at Chicago but later it developed a close connection with philosophy and shared some positions. One might add a fourth philosophy department as well, considering the work of some of the members of the divinity school faculty.

One effect of this multiply located philosophy was to make the powers in the official philosophy department somewhat touchy about their professional purity.

One year the philosophy department obtained a grant to hold a series of lectures on contemporary analytic philosophy. We debated whom to invite and I suggested Wilfrid Sellars, who was quite influential on language, mind, and ontology. Sellars was invited and in preparation I conducted a ten-week seminar on his writings. He attended a dinner at my apartment for the members of the seminar. Unfortunately, Sellars, perhaps feeling overtaken by the reputation of Quine at Harvard, had decided to repeat his ideas widely instead of developing them further. That plus family tragedy put him on edge. At Chicago his lectures strung together

long passages from his already published essays, and his discussion at our dinner consisted of Scotch-inspired ramblings. No one was happy with the event and I was criticized for suggesting his name. I came to realize that what I had thought of as the systematized core of analytic philosophy in Sellars, was seen by my Harvard trained colleagues as a Pittsburgh outlier from the more reductive Quinean programs.

Which is odd, since Sellars was even more of a nominalist than Quine. The difference was that Sellars admitted whole sheafs of modal and ordinary language that Quine wanted to discipline away. This made Sellars' system appear more baroque, but in the end Sellars proposed ways to allow the ordinary force of those usages while holding to an ontology even more barren than Quine's. This he proposed to accomplish by treating the offensive usages as involving meta-linguistic norms rather than descriptions of odd objects. This program has been developed by Robert Brandom, and resembles in some ways David Lewis' Princeton strand of analytic philosophy that neither I nor my Chicago colleagues appreciated at the time, when Lewis was most known for his extreme views on modal ontology, which for different reasons were rejected by both Quine and Sellars.

All this led me to find more conversation among people outside the department. Those of us who frequented the excellent bookstore at the Chicago Theological Seminary could find the latest publications laid out on the table together: analytic philosophy, continental philosophy, philosophy and sociology of religion, theology, social sciences, and and intellectual history. It was a wonderful feast. Unfortunately few of the powers in the Philosophy department had a taste for such a diet.

I recall a conversation with Leonard Linsky at a Chicago party that captured the approach to philosophy that I disagreed with. He was asked how one proceeds in philosophy. He explained that you find one solid truth, then make a stand on that and gradually extend the area of truth and certainty as far as you could. This is basically Descartes method. So I asked him where were we to find that fist basic truth. He replied “logic, of course.” This conception of philosophical method is shared by many but not all analytic philosophers. Crystalline logic forms for foundation on which everything else is built. So use logic to "regiment" language. In my dissertation I opposed this conception but only later did I realize what that divergence fully implied.

The rich historical political civilizational conversation the characterized my graduate student conversations at Yale continued at Chicago, with Donagan and Ricoeur, and with students, particularly at a lunchroom not far from my office which I often dropped into for a brief snack.

We junior faculty were given one quarter off as a mini-sabbatical, to help prepare for the fourth year evaluation. I chose to spend those weeks in Texas with my parents, who had retired to outside of Austin. Those weeks in Texas I worked my way through a tall stack of Sellars's difficult prose. This led to an article that the man himself approved of. On the side I poked around a humanities archive at the University of Texas and discovered some medieval manuscripts on logic. With Lewy's Yale class in mind I remembered Quine's number of the

planets example and tried to figure out how the medievals would have handled it. It made a pleasant diversion, two days with old latin logic handbooks, a break from fighting my way through Sellars' difficult arguments and idiosyncratic notation. When I returned to Chicago I gave a talk for the departmental faculty seminar, showing how the medievals made something roughly parallel to the modern set of distinctions. My colleagues were interested, for it flattered their positions. But one was heard to remark "if Kolb has the talent to do that kind of work why is he wasting his time on Hegel?"

I worked at essays and wrote talks for several conferences and conventions each year. At the university I was assigned an office in a corner of the building near other philosophers, and a library carrel. A small room for solitary work undisturbed by students sor phone calls. I was on my on own. Publish or perish. As far as I could tell the department trusted us faculty to choose our own direction for writing, as long as it was of good quality judged by their favorite gatekeepers and moved rapidly. In the next few years I wrote and delivered 13 talks at conferences and symposia, published four talks plus several book reviews.

But those published pieces were moving in too many directions.The university was a live place; I was getting overstimulated. Looking back I wonder if in some ways I was trying to approach continental issues with analytic methods.

The issues that I was trying to introduce from Europe were important, but my colleagues by and large did not think they were. They had hired Ricoeur, the department chair told me, only because he had a big reputation ("like Quine") in Europe, but once he came they found him difficult to understand and made no attempt to enter into dialogue with him. To their loss.

My thoughts about enriching the curriculum were proved correct when, after I left, Chicago found ways to make better connections and now has a reputation as one of the American analytic schools with the best coverage of European thought.

Chicago scheduled a standard fourth-year evaluation on the way to a tenure decision. I prepared the required statements and submitted copies of publications, student comments, and, to show that I was energetic about teaching, I submitted carbon copies of some comments on student papers. I gave students typed comments keyed to numbers in the margins of the paper. This saved me from having to scribble in a small space and, since I could type very quickly, it enabled me to produce comments on many points, sometimes filling one or two single-spaced pages. Students found this helpful.

To my surprise, for I thought things were going fairly well, I received a letter saying that my tenure situation was 50-50. There were praises for my teaching but two complaints. First, that I was spending too much time on teaching and student papers. Second, and related, that my scholarly publications lacked a clear direction. As for the complaint about teaching, I disagreed since I knew that working on student papers was productive for my own thinking. The complaint

about focus was justified, if it was, by my seeming to be all over the philosophical map in the courses that I taught, rather than complementing widespread undergraduate courses with a very focused set of graduate courses. There were two causes for this. I saw that the curriculum at Chicago had holes in its coverage of history of philosophy and that the students were not being exposed to issues being raised in European philosophy. I tried to fill those holes, too many of them. This likely made some influential colleagues view me as the departmental Other. (If I had followed up on the issues of my dissertation exclusively I might have prospered more but I was distracted and still working through the Davidson argument. Ironically, my last year at Chicago Davidson himself joined the department.)

That letter caused me to reconsider a position at Bates College which had been implicitly offered to me six months before. When the chair of the philosophy and religion department at Bates College in Maine announced his retirement, the college had gone looking for a replacement. The department members hoped to promote from within but the administration wanted to look outside. A friend from Yale teaching there suggested my name. They contacted me but I said I was not interested. Later they asked me to come and discuss with them at the convention. I did so and still indicated that I was not eager. But a seed had been planted.

Bates asked that spring whether I would consider visiting at the college in the fall. I said yes, motivated by that letter. I went to Maine for the fall. The college was a solid institution with a noble history. A dynamic president and visionary dean were increasing its intellectual quality. I enjoyed my months there. I found the town less than exciting and the Maine landscape beautiful, dramatic, wild but lonely. It was very dark at night; this was not Chicago.

When I returned home Bates offered me their chairmanship once more. I spent several months thinking about it. I felt divided. Bates had proved a good environment but it lacked the intellectual breadth of the University. Colleagues at Bates were more pleasant and appealing people than those in the philosophy department at Chicago, and the administration at Bates was sensible and academically dedicated. I talked long and hard with Anne, and with people I trusted in the philosophy department. My two closest friends and advisers were divided on the matter. Paul Ricoeur wanted me to stay. Alan Donagan thought it would be best if I moved, since sure rather than potential tenure was better for allowing me to develop intellectually. He also, I learned later, told the Chicago department that they ought to offer me tenure immediately, but his suggestion was rejected. He himself left Chicago a few years later.

A crucial moment came, without my realizing it at the time, one day when Paul and I were standing together by the bulletin board in front of the philosophy department office. We were talking in French with little worry about being overheard. Paul said to me “you have to fight.” I replied that I didn’t see how and that I didn’t want to cause a fight. I was thinking to myself that I wasn’t eager to remain in that department with those people for the rest of my academic life. I also was thinking that Paul, a stranger to the American scene, wouldn’t understand what tactics

would be necessary and how slim would be the chance of winning.

That conversation could have been a turning point. About 20 years later I learned from a friend that Paul had then gone to the Dean of the Divinity school at Chicago, where his own appointment was based. He urged Joseph Kitagawa to hire me in the Divinity school away from the philosophy department. The Dean said no, although he told my friend years later that it might have been a mistake on his part.

If I had said to Paul at the time, "tell me how you think we might be able to fight," together we might have been able to convince that dean. I think I might have been good for the Divinity school, given my synthetic abilities and interests. I knew many world-class and openminded teachers there. I had already taught classes there with Paul. My own interests in Eastern language and religion would have been activated and my theological background from the Jesuits and interest in the philosophy of religion could have fit well. It might have meant a more unified and influential academic career for me. That may be retrospective dreaming, a best case scenario for a precarious situation in a divinity school that later had its own problems. Likely, the high-pressure atmosphere at Chicago and the scattered pluralism of the div school faculty would have once again kept me from focusing. Bates provided more space and less pressure and I responded. Anne and I found a higher quality of life in Maine. We had more varied experiences and environments, much more contact with nature, and developed contact with Japan, though that might have happened at the divinity school.

As it was, we moved, and Paul later conceded that it seemed to have been a good choice on my part. Still I feel that I disappointed him and that he felt, perhaps rightly, that I never realized my full potential. Alan Donagan applauded the choice. We kept in contact, as he himself left Chicago after a few years for a position at Caltech that provided him more freedom for his own research. His sudden death some years later brought great sadness.

I stayed in contact with Paul, visiting him in France several times even after he stopped coming to Chicago due to his wife's increasing illness. I should have visited more often. I feel that in leaving Chicago and in not visiting Paris more often, and in other ways, I disappointed him, which makes me sad, but I rejoiced at the second flowering of his career in France during his 70s and 80s, with him writing significant books, burnishing his reputation, winning many awards. I remember sitting with Paul on a park bench near his home, not long before he died, asking, as a believing Christian what did Paul think about an afterlife. His peaceful response was that he would leave it up to God to decide whether or not he was worthy and whether or not there was an afterlife.