Fall Semester 2010
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A Message from the Chair

The past academic year has been busy and productive for the Department of Philosophy. Here are some accomplishments culled from various reports we’ve sent forward: In calendar year 2009 we taught 153 course sections (67 of them online), generated 7428 student credit hours, and graduated 15 majors, 6 minors, and 11 MA students. In Spring 2010 we graduated an additional 7 BAs and 10 MA students.

Thomas Knoten, a Philosophy graduate student, was one of three student speakers at the Spring Commencement. Over the past academic year, we devised 5 new courses -- Happiness and the Meaning of Life, Markets and Morals, Philosophy of Science in Historical Perspective, Philosophy of Film, and NeoPlatonism, agreed to develop or revamp several online courses, and participated in the creation of 3 new interdisciplinary programs -- Evolutionary Studies, Neuroscience, and History of Science, with yet another, Science Literacy, now underway. We are also participating in the new Freshman Experience course that debuted this semester.

Our faculty has been equally busy on the research side. Two department members -- Gualtiero Piccinini and Robert Northcott -- won highly coveted NSF awards while another -- Anna Alexandrova — won a prize for the best paper in Philosophy of Science by a recent PhD recipient. Jon McGinnis, together with two colleagues from Washington University, secured a $175,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation to support a series of seminars on the Comparative Study of Cultures. Collectively the philosophy faculty published 3 books and 42 papers in AY 2009/10. In addition, the Department sponsored one graduate and one professional conference and placed 7 MA students in PhD programs.

Though the threat of tough budgetary times to come is already casting a shadow, the Department remains energized. Books and papers are in the works, conferences are being organized, and plans are being devised to more actively recruit incoming majors. If you are curious about our activities, please explore our website, including the personal pages of our faculty. [http://www.umsl.edu/~philo/]. Our spring conferences and colloquia are open to the public. If you are among our alums, we’d love to hear from you and learn how you are putting your degrees to work. Please send me an e-mail (sross@umsl.edu) to catch me up on what you’re doing.

~Stephanie A. Ross

Who the Hell is Avicenna?

When I tell your average non-philosophers that I work on Avicenna, they usually look at me blankly as if I rattled off, “Gmv = 8pTmv,” while when I tell professional philosophers that I work on Avicenna, they look at me as if (and sometimes actually say), “Why would you want to commit intellectual suicide like that?!” Inevitably both groups ask me, “So who is Avicenna and why did you get interested in him?”

Let me begin with how I came to work on Avicenna first. Ever since I was an undergraduate, I have had two unabated passions: medieval thought and science. Thus when I began graduate work at Penn, I quickly decided to work on the history of natural philosophy (what we now think of as physics). I initially began reading late Latin scholastic natural philosophers, but soon realized that, since they frequently referenced medieval Arabic philosophers, an understanding of these Muslim thinkers was going to be necessary. Unfortunately, when I went to find secondary sources on Arabic natural philosophy, I discovered that virtually nothing was available. I also noticed that the trend in classical philosophy was towards research on late Hellenistic thought up through the 500s CE after which philosophy began being done in Arabic. Similarly, medieval Latinists were focusing research on the intellectual precursors to such Latin

~Stephanie A. Ross

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luminaries like Thomas Aquinas, albeit limiting themselves to Greek, Jewish and Latin forerunners, and Muslim thinkers only in Latin translation. Not to put too fine a point on it, both research trends were bumping up against the domain of Islamic philosophy and yet scholars were not entering. It seemed to me that Arabic philosophy was the last unexplored lands of our Western intellect tradition and I wanted to chart the way. Thus in a very mercenary move, I decided to learn Arabic. What followed was a number of intense years studying the language, made possible through a series of Foreign Areas Study Fellowships, Two summer immersion programs at Middlebury College, a Graduate Fellowship at Harvard and finally a Fulbright Fellowship that took me to Cairo for a year.

As for why I finally latched onto Avicenna, this question is perhaps best answered by addressing the initial question, “So who is Avicenna?” Avicenna lived between 980–1037 in what is now modern-day Iran and was something like the intellectual rock star of his time. He was a prodigy, who at the age of 10 had memorized the entire Koran and begun studying law. By around the age of 11 he had outstripped his private teacher in the study of logic, geometry and astronomy. Thereafter he taught himself and claims to have mastered all the sciences by eighteen. Avicenna’s adult life, like that of few others (and even fewer philosophers), has all the elements of a best selling novel: There was political intrigue, battles, imprisonment, harrowing escapes, alleged poisonings, drinking parties and (if one is to believe Avicenna’s biographer) lots of sex. Between afternoons spent working as vizier for the Sultan ‘Alā’ al-Dawla (d. 1041/42) and late evenings given over to riotous parties, Avicenna found time to develop a philosophical system that was a unique mixture of Greek philosophy and science, Islamic speculative theology and a generous helping of plain and simple Avicenna.

Indeed his philosophical synthesis was one of the most influential philosophical theologies in the Islamic East well into the 19th century (and is still being taught in Iran as living philosophy); it profoundly influenced the thought of Latin Schoolmen like Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus and scores of others; and it provided the philosophical vision of metaphysics that remained the prevailing model even in Europe until Kant. Even within the more traditional scientific disciplines he showed himself a mind with which to be reckoned. For example, his analysis of inclination foreshadows Galileo’s and Newton’s conceptions of inertia, and his theory of motion at an instant with its accompanying account of a limit predates the appearance of the Calculus by 600 years, while anticipating a number of salient features of it. Finally, his Canon of Medicine was the standard medical textbook in Europe until as late as the Eighteenth century and even traditional healers in the Middle East still use it today.

After relating some of these details in answer to the question, “So who is Avicenna?” I always feel free to raise my own query: “The important question isn’t, ‘Who is Avicenna?’ but ‘Why don’t we in the West know who Avicenna is?’”

~ Jon McGinnis
Associate Professor

Back Issues Available
If you didn’t see the previous issues of our Newsletter, please circle back and explore them. They’re available on the opening page of our website, and each issue has short but substantive articles by department members. Vol. 1 features Anna Alexandrova writing on “Do Children Make Us Happy?”, Eric Wiland on “Evaluating Evaluations,” and Stephanie Ross on “What Makes Bad Art Bad?” Vol. 2 features Robert Northcott on “What Makes Something Innate?” Gualtiero Piccinini and Berit Brogaard on Philosophy Blogs, and Ronald Munson on “Perpetual Stranger,” a real-life-based bioethics case.
Dialogue on Neurophilosophy

Gualtiero: Until recently, you were known for armchair philo-

sophizing and not at all for empirical research. Could you
briefly explain how you became interested in doing empiri-
cal research and what your current empirical projects are?

Brit: Actually, I started out in the sciences. I have a 5-year
M.S. in neuroscience from University of Copenhagen and

The Danish National Hospital. My research was on neuro-

transmitters, specifically glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1).

As a hormone, GLP-1 stimulates insulin-secreting cells. As

a neurotransmitter, it modulates stress and anxiety. I was,

and still am, very interested in mood disorders, so I really
loved this project. But owing to a terrifying event described
in the personal information section of my website, I decided
to go to graduate school in philosophy. I already had degrees
in philosophy and linguistics as well. One of my main areas
of specialization in philosophy was, and still is, philosophy
of language. Philosophy of language by its very nature is a
very empirical area of philosophy. We look at what the lin-

guists do, and they look at what we do. But you are right.

Until recently I didn't design my own experiments or studies.

My interest in designing my own studies was sparked by a
series of events taking place around the time of my divorce.

To deal with the consequences of these events, I felt that I
had to expand on my knowledge of the brain. Another coin-
cidence sparked my interest in synesthesia. I am now testing
for unconscious color processing in 40 higher synesthetes.

Owing to a nice McDonnell grant, Kathleen Akins and I will
be able to host a workshop on abnormal color vision
(synesthesia, achromatopsia, color blindsight, etc) next year
in Vancouver. I am also working on a large project about the
effects of personality assessments on judgments of inten-
tional action. That project started out as response to Knobe.

My third project is on blindsight and will be done in collabo-
ration with a team of researchers in Europe. Your own work
seems to be heavily inspired by empirical research. What are
your current projects and how did you become interested in
them?

Gualtiero: Wow, I didn't know you had such a scientific
background. Now I understand why you know so much
neuroscience! A coincidence: I have achromatopsia, so if
you decide to work on that topic, you can use me as a
subject. As to my research, I have three main pro-
jects. The first is on what constitutes concrete computa-
what distinguishes
tion--

cal things that compute from things that
don't. This is rele-
vant to many sciences: computer science, computational
psychology and neuroscience, and even physics. The second
is on how to integrate psychology and neuroscience into a
unified explanation of cognition. It piggybacks on the first
project, because both psychology and neuroscience give
computational explanations of cognition. Once we are clear
on how computational explanation works, we should be in a
better position to say how psychology and neuroscience go
together. The third project is on the legitimacy of data from
first-person reports (and other "first-person data") in psy-
chology and neuroscience. I argue that this kind of data is
scientifically legitimate because such data are actually public
data--the outcome of a process of self-measurement on
the part of the subject. But while my work is deeply engaged
with various sciences, I don't do any experiments, whereas
you do. How hard was it for you to start designing and con-
ducting experiments on your own? Did your prior scientific
training prepare for it or did you need extra help? And do
you now consider yourself a philosopher, a scientist, or
both?

Brit: I didn't know you had achromatopsia. I certainly will
be working on that topic sooner or later. To begin with your
last question, I consider myself both a philosopher and a
neuroscientist. I have the sufficient background for design-
ing studies and experiments and know statistics pretty well.
But I must confess that I still get help with the statistics part.
Statistics is hard. Kathleen Akins calls herself a
"neurophilosopher." I don't call myself that. I still do some
empirical work! I also draw heavily on other people's
empirical results in my work on psycholinguistics and phi-
losophy of language. When I think about neuroscience, I am
a neuroscientist. But I think I have an advantage. Because I
am a philosopher, I am used to coming up with counterex-
amples (that's what we do, right?). So, when I design studies
or look at data, it is very easy for me to spot alternative hy-

Department of Philosophy Hopes to Sponsor Study Abroad in Turkey

Department members are working to devise a Western Civilization course that looks at the geographical area of modern Turkey during the Greek, Roman, Christian, Islamic, and Ottoman periods (roughly 585 BC to 1600) with onsite visits to Ephesus, Pergamon, Troy, Istanbul, and more. A current member of the department will be in the Department at Bogazici University; we will have several other contacts there as well. Our an-
cient and medieval historian of philosophy, Jon McGinnis, will be the UMSL representative for this venture.
Discoveries in neuroscience can provide counterexamples to theories in philosophy of mind. But philosophy of mind also provides us with results which neuroscience cannot give us. For example, neuroscience as it is currently carried out cannot give us an answer to the question of what consciousness is. Neuroscience, however, can provide an answer to the question of what the correlates of consciousness are. So, both areas have an important role to play. What is your take on the new experimental turn in philosophy? And how do you think results in neuroscience can influence theories in philosophy of mind, and vice versa?

**Gualtiero:** I agree with you on experimental philosophy. I'm always glad when people try to back up their theories with empirical evidence, especially given that some philosophers tend to trust their intuitions too much. If philosophers have the expertise and resources to collect their own data, more power to them. That being said, some experimental philosophers tend to exaggerate the consequences of their theories, as if a couple of simple experiments could easily and directly refute all kinds of theories. Testing theories is harder than some experimental philosophers seem to think.

Even worse, too many philosophers, including philosophers of mind, still act as though empirical evidence is irrelevant to their theories. Occasionally this is true, but many times it's not. And since the mind is a product of the nervous system, it should be blindingly obvious that neuroscience and philosophy of mind have much to learn from each other. Philosophy of mind should look at what is known about the nervous system to constrain its theories, while neuroscience can take much inspiration from philosophical theories about the mind.

This has happened before, by the way. For example Warren McCulloch, a pioneer of computationalism, was a neurophysiologist and psychiatrist but also studied a lot of philosophy. His project was to explain intentionality and knowledge in neuroscientific terms. He didn't quite succeed, but he did make a strikingly innovative proposal that transformed the whole field. If we are going to improve on our current understanding of the mind-brain, we would do well to emulate McCulloch and study both philosophy and neuroscience.

**Brit Brogaard** and **Gualtiero Piccinini** are Associate Professors in the UMSL Department of Philosophy. Brogaard writes the blog “Lemmings” and Piccinini writes “Brains.”

If you are a student reading this newsletter, consider exploring philosophy further. You’ll find interesting links on our Web site page “Why Study Philosophy?”

http://www.umsl.edu/~philo/WhyPhilosophy.html

Descriptions of our Spring 2011 courses are posted on our home page: http://www.umsl.edu/~philo/ Please browse through them and feel free to contact us if you have any questions.
The Humanities Under Attack: The Arts and Humanities are under attack of late, a result of the lingering financial crisis. A recent budget-balancing exercise in Britain will eliminate all state support for the arts and humanities in Britain’s universities. The New York Times has addressed this issue in a pair of debates run on its “Opinion Pages.” The first is from “Philosophy’s New Take on Old Problems” (http://www.nytimes.com, August 23, 2010). The second is from “Do Colleges Need French Departments?” (http://www.nytimes.com, October 18, 2010).

Where the Smart Kids Are
—Brian Leiter

Philosophers from antiquity to the present have been concerned with the nature of the human mind and agency, the sources of motivation, the relative contributions of reason and passion in human behavior, and the capacity for individuals to exercise conscious control over their lives.

Once the scientific revolution of the early modern era reached the human sciences in the late 19th century, a new set of tools became available for assessing the accuracy of claims about these perennial philosophical topics about the mind and action. The idea that philosophical work on these topics could proceed independently of what is now called “cognitive science” — an idea some retrograde philosophers still embrace — is unfortunate. By the same token, cognitive science needs philosophy, to clarify its findings and frame their import.

But the centrality of cognitive science to worthwhile philosophy is orthogonal to the issue of philosophy’s current place in the university. Philosophy has been, for at least 30 years, the most interdisciplinary of all the humanistic disciplines, one that interacts continuously with psychology, biology, physics, linguistics, law, mathematics, and medicine, to name a few of the fields that count philosophers among their active members and contributors.

Despite this, philosophy, like other humanities fields, is under attack at many institutions of higher education. This attack has other causes. The current crisis of capitalism has increased anxiety about the short-term “market value” of all courses of study. That pressure has been felt most keenly at schools more dependent on tuition revenue. While the so-called “elite” universities have uniformly sustained and in some cases increased their commitment to philosophy and other humanities disciplines, other schools have been more short-sighted. I am skeptical that at these schools philosophy informed by cognitive science would stand a better chance of dodging the bullet from administrators consumed with “the bottom line.”

What might help philosophy is the more widespread recognition that philosophy remains the only humanistic discipline that really teaches students to think critically and analytically, which is why philosophy students remain the leading performers on professional school exams like the LSAT. Even in the 21st century, smarts matter — to lawyers, to doctors, to problem-solvers in all fields, as well as to a good life. After nearly 20 years in law teaching, I can confirm that no one is smarter than the serious undergraduate philosophy major. Any school that cuts philosophy might as well put up a sign that says, “The smart kids should apply elsewhere.’

The Point of Education
—Louis Menand

First, no department is an island. Universities are places where scholars in one field have opportunities to debate, collaborate with, and learn from scholars in very different fields. The loss of any department is a loss to every department at that institution.

Second, what parent does not want his or her child to have access to literature, philosophy and the arts? Who thinks those are dispensable luxuries for educated professionals in an advanced society? You would have to have a very primitive view of the purpose of education to believe that the cultural heritage of humanity has no place in it.

Finally, of course the humanities teach something. Their subject matter is culture, and since everything human beings do is mediated by culture -- by language, by representations, by systems of values and beliefs -- knowing how to understand other languages, interpret cultural expressions, and evaluate belief systems is as indispensable to functioning effectively in the professional world as knowing how to use a computer. This knowledge may or may not make you a better person; it can certainly make you more productive and successful in the workplace.

One might wonder how much attention was given to these sorts of considerations at Albany. The reason for closing departments, as everyone knows, is because that is the only way to lay off tenured faculty. Humanities divisions tend to house many small departments.

This fact, and not some genuine pedagogical calculation, is what makes them vulnerable to the budgetary reaper. It looks like you are merely clearing away some of the underbrush. But you are damaging the ecology of the entire institution. And SUNY Albany was a great flagship public institution.

Brit Brogaard is finishing up her monograph, Transient Truths, which is forthcoming from Oxford University Press. John Brunero’s paper "Instrumental Rationality, Symmetry and Scope" has been accepted for publication in Philosophical Studies. He will also be giving two APA presentations this academic year: "Instrumental Rationality, Symmetry, and Scope" at the Eastern APA in Boston in December, and "Evidence, 'Ought' and the Mine Shaft Paradox" at the Pacific APA in San Diego in April. Also, John and Eric Wiland are organizing SLACRR 2, after a very successful conference last year. Jamie Dreier (Brown University) will give the keynote address. See: http://www.umsl.edu/~slacrr/ for updates on the conference.


Waldemar Rohloff has a paper forthcoming in Grazer Philosophical studies on Bolzano and Kant, and another paper forthcoming in a special edition of Bolzano’s New Anti-Kant. This fall he presented a paper on Kant’s philosophy of geometry at the Midwest philosophy of mathematics workshop at Notre Dame.

Congratulations to our 2010 MA Graduates
Now Enrolled in PhD Programs:

Jeff Dauer: Washington University
David Pruitt: University of Connecticut
David Redmond: University of Iowa
Pendaran Roberts: University of Nottingham
Jonathan Spelman: University of Colorado
Katie Tullmann: City University of New York
Jim Virtel: University of Illinois at Chicago

Call for Abstracts
The second St. Louis Annual Conference on Reasons and Rationality, with keynote speaker James Dreier of Brown University, will take place May 22-24, 2011, at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The conference is designed to provide a forum for new work on practical and theoretical reason, broadly construed.

Please submit an abstract of 500-1000 words by December 31, 2010, to SLACRR@gmail.com. In writing your abstract, please bear in mind that full papers should be suitable for a 30-minute presentation. We are also interested in finding commentators for papers, so please let us know if you would have an interest in commenting.

Call for Papers:
6th Annual Gateway Graduate Conference April 8-10, 2011
Keynote Speaker: Eric Schwitzgebel (UC-Riverside)

This year’s topic will be “Introspection,” broadly construed. Possible areas relevant to this topic include philosophy of mind, cognitive science, philosophy of science, epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of religion.

Deadline for the Call for Papers is January 15, 2011. For more details, see http://www.umsl.edu/~philosophyforum.
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Thank you.

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