A Message from the Chair

Our Department of Philosophy is busier than ever. Taffy Ross is our new Director of Undergraduate Studies, Waldemar Rohloff is our new Undergraduate Advisor, and John Brunero is our new Graduate Teaching Associate Coordinator. Oh, and I am the new chair. I want to thank our previous chair, Taffy Ross, for her tireless service on behalf of our department.

We are in the process of hiring a visiting assistant professor and a postdoctoral fellow. Our ranks will soon include two new excellent people.

Our B.A. and M.A. programs are thriving. We continue to teach our wide range of courses. We have three attractive new courses—Choice and Chance; Disagreement, Difference, and Diversity; and Science vs. God—on their way. To help philosophy students with their coursework, for the first time we have hired philosophy tutors. They may be found in the new Writing and Math Center in 222 Social Science Building; their schedule is posted on the department’s website.

Our faculty continues to publish books and articles and present at conferences at the phenomenal rate that has earned us national recognition. For instance, in 2010 John McGinnis published his Avicenna (Great Medieval Thinkers Series, Oxford University Press) while Berit Brogaard is about to publish her Transient Truths (Oxford University Press).

Our student club—the Philosophers’ Forum—is full of initiatives. Their latest is the Big Questions Series, in which one or more graduate students lead a discussion on a provocative question such as, Are You in the Matrix?

The conferences we organize are gaining attention. In September 2011, we hosted a very successful Central States Association Conference; the conference was organized by the Association’s president Berit Brogaard. John Brunero and Eric Wiland continue to run the St. Louis Annual Conference on Reasons and Rationality, popularly known as SLACRR, which has quickly become the most prominent conference in that area of philosophy. And our graduate students are planning their 7th Annual Gateway Graduate Conference.

Finally, we are working on an ambitious reform of our major that streamlines the requirements and introduces six optional concentration tracks. Our tracks are Ethics and Society, Health Sciences, History, Pre-law, Psychology and Neuroscience, and Science Studies. We hope these changes will make our major even more attractive to even more students.

Gualtiero Piccinini
On Writing Reasons

As is true in many other fields, philosophy papers are now often easily accessible on the Internet, and thus (comparably) widely read. Philosophy books? Not so much. It’s said that there are over 130 million different book titles in the world. So it makes sense to wonder: is there any good reason to write yet another book?

Perhaps only a book about reasons, which is what I’ve been doing for the past year or two. I know of no book that introduces the student and the nonspecialist to contemporary debates about the nature of reasons. This is odd. Philosophy is the love of wisdom, and the ancients, at least, identified wisdom as the virtue of the part of you that reasons. So, philosophy is closely connected to doing things for reasons. But what are reasons? Who do you love?

As someone who has published only articles—and usually concise articles at that—I was apprehensive about writing a book. Would I really have enough to say to make reading a book of mine worthwhile? At the time I was mulling this over, I received notice that two British philosophy professors for whom I had once done some work were launching a new book series, one aimed to serve both students and professionals. I casually floated my idea of a book to them, and they responded very enthusiastically. So I was hooked. I negotiated on the due date, signed a contract, and won a UM Research Board grant that freed me up for most of the 2010-11 academic year.

I quickly found writing a long piece to be easier than I feared it would be. Most of the book wound up being neither merely expository nor simply critical, but some of each.

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Philosophy as a Preparation for Law

Philosophy is often touted as an excellent preparation for a career in law. We asked three area lawyers, all of whom were undergraduate philosophy majors, to speak to this connection.

It is often said that an undergraduate philosophy major provides excellent preparation for a legal career. The analytical skills and habits of mind inculcated in philosophy classes help students excel in law school and beyond. And since philosophy majors do exceptionally well on the LSAT, their choice also helps get them to the starting gate! We thought we’d further probe these connections by seeking out and interviewing some area lawyers who majored in philosophy as undergraduates. We asked them the following questions: “What first drew you to philosophy?” “Did you enjoy law school?” “Did your prior philosophy training prove useful?” “Are there ways that philosophical method and habits of mind come into play in your practice of law?” Below are answers interleaved from three respondents: Hollye Atwood (HA), Wash U. Law School, currently a partner at Bryan Cave, Christopher Hoffman (CH), SLU Law School, currently at Korein Tillery, previous stints at Bryan Cave, Sandberg, Phoenix & von Gontard, and Missouri Court of Appeals, Eastern Division, and Thomas Knoten (TK), Wash U. Law School, Brown Shoe Company Law Department. We should note that Tom has come full circle, earning an M.A. in our department after retiring from his corporate legal career.

“What first drew you to philosophy?”

“...I needed to take a philosophy course or a religion course to graduate. We first studied Descartes, and I quickly realized that I loved to argue both sides of a given situation and also found myself thinking about philosophical concepts and theories out of class. I almost think that the organization of my brain is well suited to philosophical argument.” (HA)

As a young person, I had entered seminary studies. A major in philosophy was part of those seminary studies in the Chicago suburbs… [the curriculum] provided a thorough foundation in ancient, medieval, early

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Even so, writing is lonely. I experimented with different techniques: writing while standing, writing in the pit of my basement, writing at Meshuggah’s cafe. For a while, I kept track of my daily word count. Some days I wouldn’t feel like working on the current chapter any more, so instead I just worked on a different one. Once in a while, I’d just spend the whole day deleting stuff previously written, or tightening up the prose. Only two months ago, I canned a whole chapter...it just didn’t work in the context of the book.

In the book, I describe six different ways to think about reasons for action: belief-desire psychologism, belief-only psychologism, factualism, hybrid theories, constitutivism, and Anscombean views. (And even for each of these six ways, there are further important subdivisions to be made.) According to psychologism, reasons for actions are psychological attitudes of some sort or another. According to factualism, reasons are facts—either garden-variety facts or facts related to what’s good or to what one ought to do. Hybrid theories attempt to combine the most attractive features of psychologism and factualism. Constitutivist theories, by contrast, hold that reasons for action are necessarily related to what sort of thing action is. That is, we can grasp the nature of reasons for action only by grasping at what actions constitutively aim. Anscombean views are themselves somewhat diverse, but they hold that reasons for action are often other actions to which they are formally related. So, there any many different accounts of the nature of reasons on offer.

Over the course of the book, I articulate four features of reasons for action that any proposed view should accommodate and account for: we act for reasons; reasons in some way justify the actions for which they are reasons; reasons belong to the agent whose reasons they are; and you know the reasons for which you are acting in a distinctively first-personal way. Surprisingly, no current way of thinking about reasons for action meets all four desiderata. But I do argue that some ways comes closer than others. You will have to read Reasons to learn which ways these are. But now you have a reason to read it.

**Did you enjoy law school? Did your prior philosophy training prove useful?**

“I enjoyed law school and found that it not only incorporates many of the best insights of philosophers, but that my training in logic and the philosophy of language were the most useful of all possible skills in understanding and applying the law.” (CH)

“I did enjoy law school and realized quickly that the Socratic method of teaching law was exactly what I experienced in my Philosophy classes.” (HA)

“Yes, my prior philosophy training proved extremely useful at law school. Two salient features come to mind. First, the preeminence of ethics. ... Once at law school, it was the philosophy majors who learned the law and then asked ‘But is it just?’ (TK)

**Are there ways that philosophical method and habits of mind come into play in your practice of the law?**

“Much of the law is textual interpretation. To be successful, an attorney must explain to a Court how often ambiguous language in constitutions, contracts, treaties, executive orders, regulations, and court cases should be interpreted. ... In addition to textual interpretation, an attorney must understand and appreciate the public policy and ethical issues that a case raises. ... Perhaps more than anything, practicing law requires an attorney to be able to weigh evidence, and to explain why evidence supports or does not support a particular conclusion. ... Often the task of the lawyer is to explain how the law applies to possible worlds that are not present in the individual case — to demonstrate how the law under various interpretations will or will not conflict with other principles or laws. This requires the same sort of logical imagination that is developed in logic courses, where, for instance, students must think of counterexamples to proposed rules or theories.” (CH)

“Whenever I think like a lawyer and consider a set of facts, I used the philosophical method and habits of mind. In litigation or in considering the possibility that litigation may result from taking a particular course of action, I always argue at least two sides in my head.” (HA)

“In the Introduction to the textbook for the Philosophy of Law class [I teach] at UM St. Louis, the editor opined that every U.S. Supreme Court opinion on an issue of constitutional law is, in effect, an essay in philosophy.” (TK)
Changes to the Major

We are working to redesign our major. We asked Waldemar Rohloff to summarize the proposal sent forward to the College and Senate Curriculum Committees

What is a philosophy major? The philosophy of philosophy majors? Perhaps … but this summer several professors and an undergraduate philosophy major set out on a more concrete task: to revise our undergraduate major so as to better serve our current students and attract new ones. The result was a proposal for an exciting new major which provides students with a well-rounded education while allowing the flexibility to pursue specific areas of interest. The paperwork has gone forward to make our proposal an actuality. In what follows, we will describe the new major we hope to put in place.

The biggest change to the new major is the addition of six specialized tracks which students can use to focus their studies on some topic of interest. The tracks include:

- a Pre-law Track especially designed for students planning to attend law school
- a History Track for students with a special interest in the history of philosophy
- a Health Sciences Track intended for students planning on careers in medicine and other health services
- a Psychology and Neuroscience Track for students with an interest in mind sciences
- an Ethics and Society Track which should be of interest to students interested in social issues concerned with social welfare, justice and government
- a Science Studies Track designed to appeal to students with a prior interest in some science – for example, biology, chemistry, physics, economics – who wish to study their science from a more philosophical standpoint.

The creation of these tracks was intended to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of philosophy, and the way that studying philosophy can be a perfect accompaniment to the study of any subject at all.

Besides the addition of new tracks we also made several other significant changes to our major. We began by lowering the required hours for a major to thirty from the previous thirty-six. This led us to restructure our history requirement, so that students must now take two specific, general-content history courses for the major. Feedback from our undergraduates led us to believe that students want and need general background in philosophy, so they can make informed decisions about the courses they take in the future. What better way to provide this background than through the history of philosophy: the shared inheritance of all philosophers. We have also altered our logic requirement by allowing students to satisfy it using either Introduction to Formal Logic or Logic and Language. For students not inclined to take the more technical Formal Logic course, this should be a welcome change, and make the major easier to fulfill. Finally, we changed our Philosophy and Other Disciplines requirement into a junior-level requirement. The idea was to provide a narrowly circumscribed set of courses that would provide our majors with an opportunity to interact with other philosophy majors in courses specifically catering to them.

Waldemar Rohloff is the undergraduate advisor in the department. If you are interested in declaring a major or minor in philosophy, you can find him in his office at 3:30-5:30pm on Mondays and Tuesdays or request and appointment by emailing him at rohloffw@umsl.edu.

Ronald Munson Essay Prizes in Philosophy

The Department of Philosophy is pleased to announce the second annual competition for the Ronald Munson Essay Prizes in Philosophy. Two prizes will be given: one for the best philosophy paper by a UMSL undergraduate, and one for the best philosophy paper by a UMSL graduate student in philosophy. Each prize comes with a $150 award. The essay prizes are named in honor of Ronald Munson, a distinguished medical ethicist and philosopher of science who taught in UMSL's Department of Philosophy from 1967 until his retirement in 2010.

For submission details and eligibility, see www.umsl.edu/~philo.

PHILOSOPHERS’ FORUM

7th Annual Gateway Graduate Conference March 9-11, 2012

Keynote Speakers:
Amie L. Thomasson (Univ. of Miami),
Gillian Russell (Washington University), and
Berit Brogaard (UMSL)

This year’s topic will be “To Be or Not To Be”

For more details, see http://www.umsl.edu/~philosophyforum/.

Deadline for the Call for Papers is January 2, 2012.
The Birth of Philosophy’s Big Questions Series

The Department of Philosophy’s successful Big Questions Series was created by a cluster of first-year students in the department’s M.A. program. It was a response to frustrations felt by some graduate students as well as to recruiting problems with the undergraduate major. As John Camacho recalls, “The Big Questions series initially began with text messages and brief conversations after classes about the graduate-student morale and finding ways to develop a wider philosophical culture in the UMSL community.”

In Spring 2010, six students -- John Camacho, Nick Curry, Michael Neal, Daniel Sahr, Ryan Weed, and Kristian Marlow -- gathered in the Millennium Student Center to talk about the department. Tossing around ideas, they decided their mission should be to expose more people to philosophy. Students already engaged in and enjoying classes often wanted more. Class would end just as discussion was getting really good. But many UMSL students were unaware of the pleasures of philosophy. Since philosophy is not taught in most high schools, undergraduates are hesitant to enroll in the department’s classes where they do not know what to expect. The Big Questions Series was born in part to address these problems. The goal was to create an opportunity to talk philosophy in an environment for students run by students. This seemed a win-win situation. Again quoting John Camacho, “It is in a philosophy graduate student’s self interest to improve the philosophy department and to see that the University System intrinsically appreciates it.”

Nick Curry recalls that the six founders emerged from their initial discussions with a pair of goals for the series: “(1) increase the morale among graduate students by giving them a collaborative project, and (2) recruit more undergraduate philosophy majors.” Curry later produced a Facilitator’s Guide to capture the essence of the series. He listed as its top objective “[t]o pique undergraduates’ interest in philosophy by inviting them to actively participate in conversations about philosophical issues” and “To expose participants to the rigor of philosophical inquiry by challenging them to define and defend their positions.” He closed by list-
(Continued from page 5)

ing three things the Big Questions Series is not: A forum for advocating for a particular philosophical position; a conference presentation; a lecture.

Those planning the first Big Questions events spent considerable time choosing the opening topics. John Camacho’s proposal, “Is Dumbledore Gay?” did not win out; they settled instead on “Is God Evil?” and “Is Pornography Art?” Michael Neal facilitated the inaugural session in Spring 2010. He recalls his approach to this issue: “It seemed to me that a lot of people just weren’t asking, at least not on a regular basis, the kinds of questions that philosophers ask. However, I think when we hear those kinds of questions, we naturally pause and wonder about them. So it wasn’t difficult to get people interested in whether or not God is evil. Since polls report that America is predominately a theistic nation, and presumably people don’t naturally think God is evil, most people’s ears perk up when they hear the question.” Nick Curry facilitated the second Spring 2010 event on pornography. Since many works of art portray nudity and sexual themes, Curry asked participants whether there is a substantial difference between pornographic works and non-pornographic works and challenged them to sort hard cases.

The Big Questions Series as devised by the gang of six was incredibly successful, and the UMSL Department of Philosophy has gratefully reached out to embrace it. The Series has been institutionalized as a monthly event. In addition to fine conversation, each session supplies participants with pizza and soda as well as a collectible series of departmental giveaways featuring our new logo and motto.

The Big Questions Series for Fall 2011 began on September 14 with the topic “Are you in the Matrix?” The well-attended session drew students from many different departments, and Michael Neal led a terrific discussion. October’s session entered moral territory with the topic “Can Torture Be Ethical?” Discussion leader Daniel Sahr asked “whether we ever think it is right to authorize, condone, or engage in the torture of another person for any reason.” He adds that “[t]he topic of torture and its permissibility touches on many important issues in politics, national security, and our notions of morality.” In November, the final Fall Big Questions session explored the nature of race --“Is Race a Myth, a Biological Fact, or a Social Construction?” with graduate student Bre’anna Liddell doing a great job facilitating.

The Department is incredibly excited about the Big Questions series. We invite those reading this newsletter to attend the upcoming sessions and also to contact the conveners with suggestions for future topics. Please send comments and proposals to John Camacho at jac68d@umsl.edu.
Department members Jon McGinnis and Irem Kurtsal Steen have worked together to create a version of one of our intro-level classes -- Phil 1110 Western Philosophy I: Antiquity to the Renaissance—that will be offered as a summer study-abroad course in Istanbul, Turkey. The course will allow students to study key developments in Western philosophy, religion, science, and the arts, tracing them through five stages: Greek, Roman, Byzantium, Islamic, and Ottoman. During their 12-day stay, students will make many trips to view the monuments, artifacts, and sites under discussion. McGinnis, an internationally renowned authority on medieval Islam science and philosophy, is the program’s Faculty Director. Kurtsal Steen, a native of Turkey who will be taking up a position at Istanbul’s Bogazici University starting this January, will serve as a second instructor and essential local contact.

Here is a sample itinerary, still subject to change, has been developed for the course:

**Day 1** - Istanbul: Welcome Dinner and Orientation

**Day 2** - Istanbul: Visit Topkapi Palace, Agia Sophia, Blue Mosque, Hippodrome, and Covered Bazaar

**Day 3** - Istanbul: Visit Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, Archaeological Museum and Mosaic Museum

**Day 4** - Istanbul: Visit to local university

**Day 5** - Canakkale-Assos: Depart to Bandirma for Cannakle; Visit Troy and Assos. Group dinner and overnight in Assos

**Day 6** - Izmir: Depart for Izmir and visit the Pergamum including Acropolis, Red Basilica, Asclepion and Thyatria. Group dinner and overnight in Izmir

**Day 7** - Kusadasi: Drive to Ephesus to see the beautiful recreated mosaic floors; ruins of once-great building; and the site of St. John’s Basilica, where the Apostle is buried. Then continue to the house where the Virgin Mary is said to have spent the last days of her life. Group dinner and overnight in Kusadasi

**Day 8** - Pamukkale: Depart for Pamukkale with visits to Sardis and Philadelphia. Group dinner and overnight in Pamukkale. Enjoy an evening swim in the thermal water swimming pool at the hotel

**Day 9** - Istanbul: Visit to ancient Hieropolis and then deport on flight from Izmir to Istanbul

**Day 10** - Istanbul: Visits to Dolmabahce Palace, Kariya Museum and Military Museum

**Day 11** - Istanbul: Course lectures or free day. Group Farewell Dinner

**Day 12** - Istanbul: Breakfast at the hotel, depart for home.

Further information about the course can be found on the Study Abroad section of the Center for International Studies website: [http://www.umsl.edu/services/abroad/summer/istanbul.html](http://www.umsl.edu/services/abroad/summer/istanbul.html)
Keep in touch! Please let us know what's new with you, both personally and professionally.

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Comments or Questions: hendrenn@umsl.edu.

If you care to donate to the UMSL Department of Philosophy, we would gratefully accept your gift. It would be helpful if you use the form below:

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