From My Desk …

Hello everyone and welcome to our spring 2011 newsletter!

Two weeks ago, I was asked to fill in for Duston Moore in his “History of Medieval Philosophy” class. Duston told me to do something on Anselm of Canterbury’s famous proof for the existence of God, which they had just started. (Maybe you can recall this proof: It argues that if God is defined as “beyond which nothing greater can be conceived,” then God must also exist, for otherwise something greater—namely, a being that has all of God’s properties plus existence—is conceivable.) Instead of plunging right into a discussion of the proof, I began the meeting with mentioning Otto the Great, crop rotation, and the horse collar. Why?

Otto founded the Holy Roman Empire (which, despite its name, comprised mostly of what is known today as the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Czech Republic, and northern Italy), which brought about a stable political structure in which (inter)national trade could flourish and a monetary system could emerge. Such developments came with a growing awareness of political and religious powers surrounding the new empire. The horse collar, an all-iron plowing tool, and the adoption of three-field crop rotation allowed the population to triple. Growing prosperity resulted in accumulated wealth, which then allowed education to move out from monastery schools and into cathedral schools (the precursor of what would later become the first universities). Better education meant that when fierce debate sparked regarding the correct interpretation of certain Christian doctrines, monks like Berengar of Tours could insist the controversy should no longer be resolved through the authority of sacred texts or traditions but that we should, as Berengar put it, “turn in all things to logic and reason” and “thereby honor God in whose image we were created as rational beings.”

What does all this have to do with Anselm? It means a number of things: that Anselm was not doomed to eke out his existence in an impoverished region of the world but was left with choices regarding what to do with his life; that he could leave his father’s castle in northern Italy, since it was safe for him to travel through west Europe; that he had many different schools to choose from when he was looking for a teacher; that a spirit of rational inquiry had begun to gain dominance in places of learning when he finally settled down at the then-famous monastery of Bec in Normandy; that his proof was based on logic and reason alone, since it was meant to appeal not just to his Christian brethren but to all rational men; the empire was aware of—Jews, Muslims, and pagans. To make a long story short, while the specific political, economic, and religious context of the late 12th century did not force Anselm to invent his famous argument, it is hard to imagine that, without all these circumstances, there would have been an Anselm of Canterbury as we know him—and most probably no ontological argument, either.

Why am I sharing all this? This fall, new requirements for our degrees in philosophy and religious studies take effect. The requirements are based on new mission statements which read in part:

We favor a contextual approach to philosophy according to which philosophers are part and parcel of the social, political, and intellectual fabric of their times, seeking solutions for pressing problems. In our history courses, we therefore investigate how past philosophers were involved in the intellectual struggles of their times. We put the emphasis on understanding this bigger context and what philosophy’s contribution to the history of thought and the human condition is.

We favor a transdisciplinary approach to philosophy, according to which philosophical work must be informed by facts and results of cognate disciplines, the sciences, or the arts. After all, for centuries “philosophy” was synonymous with “science.” In our topic courses, philosophical explorations are therefore based upon a foundation that is well-informed by facts and accepted theories, and students are encouraged to pursue our Philosophy Plus Two majoring option, in which up to two other disciplines inform their capstone work in philosophy.

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Faculty News

Ioan Muntean: I presented a paper on explanation and foundationalism in string theory at the Philosophy of Science Association biennial meeting in Montreal in November 2010. My paper "The Fiber Bundle at the Gates of Metaphysics: Challenging Tim Maudlin’s Proposal" will be published by the European Journal for Philosophy of Science this year.

Clark Butler: A Human Rights Institute volume on children’s rights has been approved by the board of Purdue University Press for publication. This includes my essay “Child Rights: A Philosophical and Historical Analysis.” I also have two articles currently at press: “Panpsychism and the Dissolution of Dispositional Properties” in the Southwest Review of Philosophy and “The Coming World Welfare State Which Hegel Did Not See” in Hegel and Global Justice (Springer, 2011). My book The Dialectical Method: A Treatise Hegel Never Wrote is forthcoming this year with Prometheus Books. It has been critiqued by reviewers representing Marxists, psychoanalysis, formal logic, and historians, with appropriate final editing in response. The Human Rights Institute now has a functioning viewing room with internet TV news channels streaming in from around the world. The Human Rights Institute also has a functioning blog for public discussion forums.

Erik S. Ohlander: I continue to conduct research on the history of Sufism, the richly varied mystical tradition of Islam. I recently became executive editor of the Journal of Sufi Studies, a new journal that will be published by Brill. Publishing peer-reviewed articles and reviews in multiple languages, the journal is managed and advised by an international board of scholars. In addition to a handful of articles, encyclopedia entries, and reviews, my forthcoming publications include a new book entitled Sufism and Society: Arrangements of the Mystical in the Muslim World, 1200–1800 (Routledge, 2011), co-edited with John Curry of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Abe Schwab: This year I wrote an invited commentary on the “Two Dogmas of Medical Education” (e.g., trusting intuitions and ignoring social science) in Social Science and Medicine, and two commentaries in the American Journal of Bioethics: one defends setting policy informed by the conclusions of cognitive psychology and another critiques the current regulations governing medical research involving human subjects. I also wrote several book reviews and an article calling attention to conceptually distinct kinds of cost-effectiveness in medical research.

If philosophy does not occur in a vacuum, we have to explain what its context is. This new double focus on context and transdisciplinarity made me first talk about Otto the Great, crop rotation, and the horse collar before I turned to Anselm’s proof. When I teach Philosophy of Mind next fall, I will revise my course contents such that it better reflects “facts and results of cognate disciplines and the sciences.”

We are excited about our new vision for how to teach philosophy and to engage students. While students may certainly continue taking only philosophy courses for their degree, we encourage them to gain expertise outside philosophy on the topic of their capstone essay. Students may take courses in up to two programs outside philosophy (history, economics, psychology, physics, etc.) and have these classes count toward their philosophy degree if they want to write their BA thesis on a related topic (e.g., “Hegel’s philosophy of history” or “Ethical issues of world trade” or “Is having a mind the same as having a brain?” or “Does quantum physics violate principles of identity?”). We call it Philosophy Plus Two. If you know someone who is interested in studying and learning about philosophy informed by a contextual and transdisciplinary approach, please send them our way.

All our best and yours in discourse,

(Bernd Buldt, Professor and Chair)
Alumni Interview: Matt Jehl

[Matt graduated in spring 2010 and is currently a first-year graduate student in the philosophy department at the University of Toledo. Ken Long was able to catch up to Matt in Fort Wayne on March 3, 2011, for the following conversation.]

Ken Long: So, how are things at U of Toledo? Tell me what you’re doing and what you’re majoring in or what your area of research is.

Matt Jehl: Well, I’m a teaching assistant (TA) in a contemporary moral problems class right now, [taking] four courses—a heavy load. I’m taking phenomenology, ancient philosophy, which is a Plato seminar, and recent European philosophy, so a lot of postmodernism and deconstructionism. And then I’m taking a syntax course in the linguistics department.

KL: So, how’s the TA experience going …

MJ: … It’s going pretty well. … I’ve got a good professor to work under and really observe how she directs class. It’s giving me a lot of ideas for when I get to do my own class next year, hopefully.

KL: So, Matt, tell us a little bit about your recollections of IPFW. They should be fresh in your mind.

MJ: I really had a great time at IPFW. The philosophy program’s really excellent, great faculty. Everybody’s always available to talk to students. The Philosophy Club is excellent. It’s a great resource for students. Good course offerings. I felt that I was prepared [for my graduate work]. I’d taken courses that some of the other grad students at [University of Toledo] didn’t get a chance to.

KL: What brought you into philosophy in the first place, your decision to major in philosophy?

MJ: Well, I read a little bit in high school. Mostly classics, some modern philosophy, Locke, Hobbes, stuff like that. I was interested in it and then when I came to IPFW I was undeclared. I took a course with Duston [Moore]. And I really liked that. Then I took more after that and then declared.

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KL: If somebody asked you what would be the importance of having people studying philosophy today, what would you tell them?

MJ: I would say that philosophy is important for proving or fact-checking or making sure that we’re heading in the right direction and that society as a whole isn’t operating upon contradictory beliefs. … Philosophy’s role in society at large, I think, is to help others think critically, to try to keep people on their toes.

KL: If somebody asked you what would be the importance of having people studying philosophy today, what would you tell them?

MJ: I think it would be kind of directionless or kind of open, more open to suggestion or control by interested parties.

KL: So, what about the individual level? We’ve talked about the social benefits of philosophy. What about the individual level?

MJ: Well, for me, I’m really addicted to ideas. And that’s why I do philosophy. I’m always looking for new ideas. And that once you start experiencing that you want to know more. I like to think it has a positive benefit for people. … I think it helps people think more clearly.

KL: So, what ideas are you addicted to at the moment?

MJ: Well, those that are freshest in my memory would be from last night, the recent European seminar. We were talking about Jean Baudrillard (French philosopher, 1929-2007).

KL: So, for those of us who aren’t familiar with him, could you summarize Baudrillard in a couple of sentences?

MJ: (Laughs)

KL: … I said I wouldn’t ask any heavy questions, and here I am.

MJ: Well, yeah, especially because I’ve only read one piece by Baudrillard, something from “After the Orgy.”

KL: So, what was attractive about that or what stimulated your curiosity?

MJ: Baudrillard argues that meta-narratives have kind of lost their function in society and that we’ve reached the point where we don’t need them anymore and that possibly, I mean possibly this is because either we can’t find meaning from them anymore or we don’t need to find meaning from them anymore. …

KL: So, where do you think you’re heading? What do you think you’re going to concentrate on? I know it’s your first year in grad school. Looking ahead, a thesis?

MJ: For my thesis, I’m pretty sure it’s going to be in the realm of philosophy of language. I’m very interested in metaphor figurative language. And on the other side, even language games, and some of the more analytic tradition in philosophy of language. I’m getting ideas from my syntax class. I’m learning all kinds of linguistic kind of methods, so I’m really getting a lot of ideas. So, I’m hoping something fruitful will come out of that.
The Debate Over Scientific Realism

First, let’s talk about realism in general. If there were no people or other conscious beings, would there still be rocks? How about hopes, wishes, and fears—or Santa Claus? Most people would say yes to the question about rocks and no in the other cases. Rocks seem to have the sort of existence that doesn’t require us or our representations of them. But hopes, wishes, and fears seem incapable of existing without people who have them and whatever sort of existence Santa Claus has (as a mental or social construct, say) seems also to be dependent on us. In philosophical terminology, most of us are realists when it comes to rocks but antirealists when it comes to mental states or jolly, fat, Christmas-present-giving elves. Not all philosophers have been rock realists. George Berkeley held that all so-called physical objects like rocks are really just bundles of perceptions, a variety of idealism. Another view is that nothing can be a rock without being conceptualized as a rock, but (1) you need people to have concepts and (2) the concept of a rock (as well as other physical object concepts), while useful to us, is not the only way to organize the world of our experiences. So, although there might well be some stuff out there if there were no people, this does not require that there be any rocks. The rock concept may be useful to us without rocks really existing independently of us. This idea might be called rock instrumentalism. So, among our rock options, we have rock realism, rock idealism, and rock instrumentalism (which should not be confused with loud electric guitars!).

If we think about it a bit we can see typical rock realism is in fact a set of at least three beliefs: the first is the metaphysical belief (about being) that rocks exist independently of us; the second is the semantic belief (about truth conditions) that statements about rocks are irreducible (thus intended to be genuinely descriptive of the world) and that their truth or falsity is an objective matter, having to do with how things are in the world; and the third is the epistemic belief (about knowledge) that we are in fact justified in believing that many such statements about rocks are true. In this formulation of rock realism, the semantic requirement has been fleshed out by what is called a correspondence version of truth (but there are other possibilities, such as a pragmatic or coherence version of truth). So, we see that being a rock realist on the metaphysical level also commits us to certain beliefs about what makes statements about rocks true or false and about our ability to have knowledge of such statements.

Now we can talk about scientific realism: For the sake of simplicity, let’s assume a generally realist attitude towards garden-variety observable objects like rocks. If scientific theories were only about observable objects, then being a scientific realist wouldn’t be much different than being a rock realist, but as you probably know most scientific theories are populated with unobservable entities like electrons and black holes and the free market—and this is where troubles brew for a scientific realist, even if one is already a rock realist. Given that electrons, say, are nonobservables: (1) Why should I believe that they exist mind-independently? (2) Why should I literally believe in the properties they are said to have (like spin, charge, etc.) that are used to distinguish true and false statements about them? (3) Why should I believe that statements about electrons are true or false depending on how the world is? (4) Why should I believe that any theories about electrons count as genuine knowledge? Scientific realists think that, generally speaking, there are good reasons to hold most or all of these beliefs for successful theories while antirealists deny this. But what is a successful theory? One obvious requirement is that it be empirically adequate—that its empirical content (inferences from it about what we should observe) should in fact match our observations—but realists often mention other non-empirical virtues such as (1) the ability to unify scientific domains, (2) explanatory power, (3) predictive power, or (4) some combination of these.

Antirealism can take several forms. The logical empiricist holds that theoretical terms for nonobservables (like “electron”) can be eliminated without loss by analysis into observational terms. This is like saying that “rock” can be eliminated by analysis into pure observation terms involving shapes, colors, etc. (so-called “sense data”). Instrumentalists hold that, although such terms are not reducible to observation terms, acceptance of statements containing them commits us only to their usefulness for predictive or experimental purposes, but not to an independent existence of the corresponding entities or forces. This is like saying that even though “rock” talk can’t be analyzed away, it’s still just a useful concept. Another antirealist view is called constructive empiricism; it holds that theoretical terms should be construed literally but also that, since the aim of science should simply be to produce theories that are adequate to the phenomena we experience, acceptance of scientific theories involves only the belief that they are in fact empirically adequate. Finally, there is the antirealist view that all science is a “social construct”, to be viewed as we do any other social construct—sociologically, historically, and psychologically—but not as real or true or false independently of society. Originating in Great Britain, strong versions of this “sociology of scientific knowledge” are maintained by members of the “Edinburgh School”
what we should believe in are these preserved explanatory structural aspects plus whatever implications such preserved structures have concerning the properties of unobserved entities. Regarding the latter, I am looking at ways to say that, even if two theories X and Y are “observationally equivalent”, a realist commitment to X can be justified by appealing to greater virtues in the areas of explanation, simplicity, and unification.

Perhaps I’ll get a chance to talk more about this fascinating issue in a future edition of our newsletter. Until then, happy philosophizing!

Kenneth A. Long

Reader Feedback

I just received the first edition of Philosophy News and was thrilled. I graduated in 1977 in philosophy from IPFW. Probably Bill and Sheila Bruening are the only ones there who would vaguely remember me. I went on to get a graduate degree in theology and an MBA. I have to say that my undergrad degree in philosophy from IPFW provided a firm foundation and a framework for asking the right questions and challenging assumptions throughout my life.

Thanks and keep up the good work. Please greet Bill Bruening for me. He had a profound effect on my life. Best wishes for much success.

—Jeff Bermel

Hello - Just writing to thank you for the recent issue of Philosophy News. Apparently, this became tucked away with a pile of papers, so I was pleasantly surprised today upon weeding my stacks of stuff to find it. I was convinced that nearly all of the faculty I studied under were gone so it was good to hear a bit about the Bruenings, Squadrito, and Butler. I would like to suggest that every once in a while you include an update on past staff and faculty members. Looking forward to my next issue. Thanks again.

Ann-Margaret Rice
Head of Adult and Young Adult Services
Goshen Public Library
Goshen, IN
IPFW Philosophy 1999

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Reader Feedback (continued from page 2)

Please accept my personal congratulations and commendation for the new IPFW Philosophy newsletter. I was pleased to receive the Churchill scholarship from the department and graduated from the program in 1991. My debt to the department, especially Drs. Fairchild and Bruening, is greater than I can express. They remain not only my favorite professors, but also two of my most influential life mentors to this day. Seeing the update on all of the professors was a real treat. If you have the opportunity, I would be most appreciative if you are able to pass on my greetings and deep thanks to Dr. Fairchild and Dr. Bruening. I remember their teaching and quote them to others (including my own children, all now in college, with two getting ready to take their first philosophy courses) to this day. Dr. Fairchild is responsible for me regularly using the phrases “arbitrary but not capricious” and “a difference that makes no difference is no difference,” and Dr. Bruening opened the treasure trove of Catholic medical ethics teaching to me, which continues to challenge and encourage me still.

If you’re able to forward my email to Dr. Fairchild and Dr. Bruening just so they can know the difference they made in my life, I would be especially grateful.

With warmest regards,
Eric Foley

Join our department’s student “Phi-Club” on facebook. Log in to your facebook account, search for “Phi-Club IPFW”, and connect!