From the Chair - Dr. Matt Altman

With the recent groundbreaking of the Science Building (phase two) on campus, we're once again reminded of how much people love the sciences. The humanities and the arts are often overlooked, like a run-over donut. They shouldn't be.

In philosophy and religious studies in particular, we deal with perennial questions of human existence, and it’s by considering these questions that we live up to our humanity. We step back and ask about right and wrong, knowledge, the mind, the basis of law and government, gender, meaning, the transcendent — all of the topics that have been perplexed us for thousands of years. Some of the world’s great artists have majored in philosophy, including writers such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Elie Wiesel, Umberto Eco, and David Foster Wallace; filmmakers Ethan Coen and Wes Anderson; and many others.

The skills that students develop in philosophy and religious studies are also valued in the business world. Every employer looks for people who can think critically, can express themselves clearly verbally and in writing, and can engage people with different viewpoints — and all of these skills are developed especially well in philosophy and religious studies courses. The highest growth in jobs currently is in so-called “interaction-based work” that requires people who are able to communicate well, and in that arena, humanities majors have a distinct advantage over majors in the sciences and even in business. Many of the most innovative and successful business executives in recent years have had undergraduate philosophy degrees, including activist investor Carl Icahn, former chair of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation Sheila Bair, hedge fund manager George Soros, former Time Warner CEO Gerald Levin, Flickr co-founder Stewart Butterfield, PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, and many more.

I've been trying to get this message across for years, but it's about time that people started to realize it: philosophy and religious studies give visionaries and innovators the tools that they need to change the world. Flattened donuts of the world, unite!

John Corvino

On Tuesday, June 3 at 7 PM in the SURC Theatre, Dr. John Corvino will give a presentation titled “Haters, Sinners, and the Rest of Us; The Gay Debate Today.”

Dr. Corvino, Professor of Philosophy and Department Chair at Wayne State University, has written, taught, and lectured extensively on gay rights for over two decades. In this time he became a nationally recognized intellectual by debating prominent opponents of same-sex marriage and gay rights, including Maggie Gallagher of the National Organization for Marriage and Glenn Stanton of Focus on the Family. In this talk, Corvino draws on his experience speaking about gay rights to argue that dialogue and debate concerning gay rights is hindered by stereotyping and name calling. In order to make any headway in this debate, proponents and opponents must work to understand each other’s views rather than relying on standard talking points.

Dr. Corvino combines logical rigor with wit and humor and has been repeatedly nominated as one of America’s Best Campus Speakers by Campus Activities Magazine. He is the author of What’s Wrong with Homosexuality? (2013) and co-author with Maggie Gallagher of Debating Same-Sex Marriage (2012). He is also a contributor to The New York Times, The L.A. Times, The Advocate, the Huffington Post, and the Independent Gay Forum. This event is free and open to the public.
A spotlight on . . . Professor Michael Fletcher

Where did you get your degree(s), and when?
I attended UCLA and UC-Santa Barbara, earning degrees (BA, PhD) in Philosophy. After earning the BA, and considering a number of other career paths, I opted to pursue a PhD in Philosophy at UC-Santa Barbara because no other campus could boast of having its own on-site lagoon.

Where are you originally from?
I’m an LA Dude — an Angelino.

Tell us something about yourself?
Well, I also occasionally work in the entertainment industry as a professional cartoonist. I’ve got a posse of booking agents in Seattle that book me with places such as Microsoft, Google, and Amazon.com. This summer I’m working a huge event for Amazon.com in downtown Seattle. Very cool. I’ve been drawing since I was a fetus and so it’s insanely easy for me. And people really seem to have fun with it. It’s fun being a lamshade every now and again and, yeah, paying it forward.

What classes are you teaching now?
This term, I’m teaching PHIL 101 (Introduction to Philosophy) and PHIL 202 (Global Ethics). In the latter, we’re examining some of the major Anglo-European ethical theories — consequentialism and deontological theories — as well as other forms ethical perspectives represented by non-Western traditions.

What do you love most about teaching?
By teaching Philosophy, I am, like Socrates, attempting to wake students up. The aim is to get them to psychologically “own” their cognitive powers so that they can exercise more cognitive control over their personal attitudes and beliefs, some of which may be psychologically toxic or self-limiting. In doing so, I facilitate a student’s academic self-development, and that is very personally rewarding.

What do you do outside of teaching?
I love to write. (Or, I should say, I love to write when I am writing well.) Producing a solid, conceptually rigorous piece of philosophy is personally thrilling. The life of the mind is not the whole of life. Even a metaphysical dualist can get flabby if he’s not careful. Myself, I love swimming, and I try to get in good “lane time” every other day. Other interests: I’m also a cinephile. I love movies and film, especially those which are philosophically content-rich — films such as Blade Runner, The Matrix, AI, Logan’s Run, to name some of my all-time favs. And who knows, someday I may finally succeed in getting in front of the camera. Eventually, I’m hoping to re-enter the Matrix as a Hollywood actor.

What’s your most embarrassing moment while teaching?
I strongly believe that education and entertainment are not pedagogically incompatible; in fact, I believe that humor — that is, pedagogically relevant humor — can increase student interest in an academic subject that they had initially zero interest in. Additionally, humor allows me to cross the student-teacher divide. Sometimes, though, it does happen that I’ll attempt to say something funny, and I get no response. My delivery falls flat. Totally stillborn from the press (lol). Absolute Buddhist rock garden-quality silence. So, that’s not so fun. But then I’ll say something like “tough classroom,” and that usually gets a laugh.