From the Chair - Dr. Matt Altman

I’m teaching the history of philosophy again this spring, and it’s got me thinking about why we study this stuff. The philosophy major requires three courses in the history of philosophy: Greek and Roman Philosophy, Early Modern Philosophy, and Kant and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy. And the religious studies specialization requires at least some of these courses as well as historically-based surveys in both Eastern and Western religious traditions. Some of you may be asking why we require so many of these classes.

Here’s my answer: Studying the history of philosophy and religion shows us the ways that some of the world’s most brilliant minds have answered some of life’s most difficulty questions. Some of their answers remain compelling many years later, and even when they get things wrong, their failures can help to illuminate the questions themselves. In addition, we can only really understand the current state of a discipline by examining the past, to see how the questions have come down to us and how the debates have been structured by our predecessors. In short, we can’t understand how we as philosophers and students of religion should do what we do without doing some history.

In an open letter to students, philosopher Robert Pasnau at the University of Colorado wrote, “Philosophers who limit themselves to the present restrict their horizons to whatever happens to be the latest fashion, and deprive themselves of a vast sea of conceptual resources.” How our current questions are framed and which answers seem plausible arise out of a rich conversation extending backward through many centuries. Philosophy and religious studies have been around for a long time, and it makes sense to take the long view on the work we’re doing, to see ourselves as writing for the future but also as part of a long line of thinkers that includes Plato, the Buddha, Aquinas, Kant, de Beauvoir, and many thousands of others. When we see ourselves in the context of their work, our own work has the potential to become deeper, more reflective, and most lasting.

CWU at the Pacific University Undergraduate Philosophy Conference

By Melanie Stankus

This year a group of eight philosophy students traveled to Forest Grove, Oregon to attend Pacific University’s 19th Annual Undergraduate Philosophy Conference. About 100 philosophy papers were presented, two of them from CWU students Randeep Chauhan and Melanie Stankus, so it was indeed a full day of philosophy! This year, Daniel Dennett gave his keynote address concerning evolution and his theory of intentionality — an intriguing and thought provoking presentation to say the least. Dennett also joined John Perry and Ken Taylor for the radio program Philosophy Talk that was recorded live at Pacific University; the undergraduates attending the conference provided the audience. While a lot of philosophy was discussed at the actual conference, my peers and I enjoyed philosophical discussion throughout the trip. When you’re shoved in a van together for about five hours (one way!), 1. you learn a lot about your peers, and 2. if you’re all philosophy majors who know each other, the argumentation can get real. At times our private group discussions were deeper and a bit more rigorous than the conference presentations themselves. However, the combination of the philosophy discussed at the conference and the philosophy discussed outside of the conference produced a solid and satisfying two days of philosophy nerd out. :)

SPRING COLLOQUIUM

Wednesday, May 13, 5:00-6:00 PM , Black Hall 152

Dr. Michael Fletcher, The Incoherence of Buddhism: A Tourist’s Guide
Dr. Cynthia Coe, Professor of Philosophy

Where did you get your degree(s), and when?
I earned my undergraduate degree (in philosophy) from Middlebury College in 1994; I minored in Russian History and Russian Language. I received my doctorate from the University of Oregon in 2000.

Where are you originally from? Trick question for me. My father was in the American Foreign Service, and so I spent the first decade of my life in Chile, India, and Ghana. After that, we lived outside Washington, D.C.

Tell us something about yourself. Various students have heard me say this before, but up through college I used to hate speaking in public, including speaking in class. So how and why I ended up as a professor, getting up in front of people and talking every day, is a bit of a mystery. It helps that I’m fascinated by the ideas I’m talking about (and hopefully they become fascinating for others too).

What classes are you teaching now? I’m on sabbatical, so I’m not teaching anything now. But I regularly teach Women and Philosophy; Existentialism; Phenomenology; Western III (now Kant and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy); Race, Class, and Gender (now Philosophy of Race); and Introduction to Philosophy.

What do you love most about teaching? How to say anything that isn’t pretentious and hackneyed here? The work of philosophical thinking is (for me) both enormous fun and profoundly important to living a reflective, morally and politically engaged, and alert life. What I mean by “alert” is being able to see the issues at play in ordinary existence — moral issues, social issues, our immersion in an interlocking series of traditions (political, religious, linguistic, economic, educational). And teaching is participating in, cultivating, and sharing that kind of attunement.

What do you do outside of teaching? I write assessment reports and collect Disney Princess memorabilia. No, wait, only one of those things is true. I have two kids, which means sometimes I find myself yelling at the top of my lungs during swim meets or trying to explain fractions or discussing whether the word “yeti” is singular or plural. I write (especially this year!) — mostly on Levinas’s ethics, the philosophy of history, and feminist theory. I make a mean pie.

What’s your most embarrassing moment while teaching? Just one? I was in my second year of teaching, and I had been observing a more experienced teacher joke around with his students in class, in ways that were pedagogically interesting. I was teaching a Philosophy of Education course, and I decided one day to experiment beyond my comfort zone and talk about discipline in the classroom not just abstractly but with reference to what these particular students did. Well, a young woman walked in late, and I started talking about how a teacher could respond to that horrible transgression, with what I thought was gentle humor. She started crying. I was mortified, and we talked for a long time after class. I was forcefully reminded of the vulnerability of students in relation to the authority of professors, and that vulnerability has to be taken seriously. But one of the best things about teaching (circling back to question #5) is that we get to be creative, to experiment with texts and pedagogical methods and assignments, and sometimes fail and then figure out how to teach better. Hopefully some of that intellectual energy and open-endedness is contagious.

Congratulations to Melanie Stankus!

The paper Melanie presented at this year’s Pacific University Undergraduate Philosophy Conference has been selected for publication in Res Cogitans, the online journal that Pacific University runs in order to publish the best conference papers (http://commons.pacificu.edu/rescogitans/). Only about 20 of the nearly 100 papers presented at the conference each year are selected. (And we’re on a streak! Last year Hannah Hicks had her paper selected.)
Where is Dr. Coe?  By Dr. Cynthia Coe

As some of you have noticed, I’m not teaching this year because I’m on sabbatical. One of the ways that the university supports faculty is by letting them occasionally apply for time off from teaching to work on their scholarship.

Since June of last year I’ve been working on a book-length manuscript on the philosophy of an important twentieth-century Lithuanian-French philosopher named Emmanuel Levinas. I’m arguing that his understanding of time, and its impact on what it means to be human, has significant implications for how we think about a host of key issues, including responsibility and freedom.

A pretty typical conception of time is that it’s the linear order that allows us to make sense of our experiences in the world, and human consciousness has the power of overcoming the passing of time by re-presenting the past in memory and history, and anticipating the future. Levinas claims that although we certainly can synchronize time in this way, we are also affected by the lapse of time, which he calls diachrony. He argues that the experience of responsibility, of feeling obligated to respond to another person’s need, introduces this kind of diachronous time: we experience this obligation before understanding its source or its justification. He therefore talks about responsibility as traumatic, in the sense that it arrives without warning and destabilizes the picture of autonomous subjectivity that dominates modern Western thought.

I’m drawing out the implications of his alternative understanding of subjectivity and time: How does it shift how we make sense of birth and death, suffering, gender, and animality? What room is left for agency and responsibility in the more traditional sense of those terms? How does it impact the methods we use to pursue philosophical questions?

Since I occasionally teach Levinas in my courses, my hope is that this work will not only impact the field of philosophy, but will also enrich what I can offer to students.

Congratulations to Sergio Madrid!

Sergio has been selected to receive the 2015 Associate Dean of Student Achievement Award during the Evening of Recognition on May 20, 2015. Sergio was selected for this distinction by Dr. Jesse Nelson, Associate Dean of Student Achievement.