

# Philosophy at MSU

*Department of Philosophy/Minnesota State University Mankato*

## **New Ethics Minor Coming Soon**

Recent scandals associated with business and government have made the general public more aware of what many philosophers have long believed: training in ethics is critical for individuals and for society as a whole.

It is not surprising, then, that our department has decided to offer an Ethics Minor in addition to the more general Philosophy Minor. As the name suggests, the new minor will include courses such as Medical Ethics, Business Ethics, and Ethical Theory. What is less obvious is that other courses that focus on values of various sorts will also be included, for example,

social and aesthetic values.

While the new minor will be a natural complement to majors associated with business and health fields, the broad array of courses included makes clear that there is no major that might not be strengthened by being paired with an intense study of ethics.

Of course, for those who seek an education meant to enhance their life as well as their career, the appeal of the new minor will be obvious.

This minor will be open to students as of Fall 2007 and will require 18 hours of course work.

## ***Spring Courses Offer Something for Everyone***

Despite the fact that we are temporarily without Prof. Dick Liebendorfer's teaching talents (he is on sabbatical), the department continues to offer an impressive variety of courses, especially given its small size. A quick survey of special topics courses being offered this spring makes this especially clear.

Although "Philosophy of Film" is being offered as a special topics course by Prof. Brandon Cooke this spring, it will become a course in its own right as of next year. As Prof. Cooke describes, the course will explore questions such as: "What role do artistic intentions play in the interpretation of films?" and "Are films with morally evil messages aesthetically bad?" The class will meet on Wednesdays from 3:00 – 5:45.

Another special topics course, one focusing on the work of David Hume, is being offered for only the second time. Although Prof. John Humphrey acknowledges the importance of understanding the historical connections between Hume and other philosophers, his goal in this course will be to "treat Hume, as much as possible, as a contemporary, who has important and interesting things to tell us about important and interesting philosophical questions." This course will meet Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 10:00 – 10:50.

More detailed descriptions of these courses and the many other courses being offered in spring are available at the Philosophy Department's main office.

## Why Philosophy? From Our Majors and Minors...

I registered as a philosophy minor before taking my first course in the discipline. It was a bold move, but with a year-and-a-half of college behind me, it had become clear that the things I had been thinking about and discussing with friends and family throughout my secondary and university education were intrinsically philosophical. It just took me a while to realize it!

Being a sociology and law enforcement major and a political science minor, I naturally took "Social & Political Philosophy" first. It was my first philosophy course ever, and an upper-level one at that. I was initially intimidated by the material and the students in the class who actually seemed to know of the people we were talking about. However, the

professor was very skillful at keeping the material accessible to all of the students without removing the depth of the ideas. The challenges in my refinement of thought were fleeting given the support and stimulation of passionate professors and engaged students.

The greatest thing about philosophy is that this way of thinking does not dictate the conclusions one must draw about a subject. Philosophy has been, for me, a sort of intellectual liberation, and it has enabled me to develop a deeper and stronger way of thinking that contributes to my perception and appreciation of our world and the responsibilities we possess.

**David A. Luchsinger**

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*"The greatest thing about philosophy is that this way of thinking does not dictate the conclusions one must draw about a subject."*

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*When I began to study philosophy, friends and family often asked what are you going to do with a degree in philosophy? Undoubtedly they were answering their own question with their pragmatic inquiry, although it wasn't so clear to me at the time. My response at the time was simpler and less developed than now.*

*I simply pointed to my friends who had graduated from college and were in fields much different than they majored in. The more refined answer I have gravitated to is that studying philosophy hones critical thinking skills and teaches one to articulate their ideas in a clear, coherent manner, in which case nearly all fields require the skills of a philosopher.*

*In a broader, more general manner, philosophy is useful in everyday decision-making. Many of the philosophy classes/speakers, provided at MSU force one to reexamine beliefs/positions on many ethical/ideological issues.*

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*Exposure to arguments in this subject area has often led me to either abandon my ethical/ideological beliefs or develop them more thoroughly to make a defense of these beliefs plausible.*

*Many of these beliefs are more than simply conceptual; they are beliefs everyone is forced to act upon on a daily basis. For example: Should one eat meat, or not eat meat? Should one believe in god, or not believe in god? What is personhood and how does that affect one's response to abortion or euthanasia?*

*So, my decision to major in philosophy began with a belief that it wasn't important what one majored in, only that one attained a major. It has since evolved into the understanding that the study of philosophy is useful in most employment fields (because of the skills it hones), as well as being useful in one's everyday decision-making.*

**Justin Halvorson**

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## The Enduring Appeal of Philosophy:

### *A Note From the Chair, Cathryn Bailey*

Although it has been almost exactly twenty years since I stumbled upon my first philosophy class, it is only after reading the thoughtful comments of some of our philosophy students (two of which appear in this newsletter) that I've forced myself to deeply consider the questions I asked them: "What first attracted you to philosophy and what keeps you interested?"

As a second year college student I was fortunate to work with a Women's Studies professor whose doctorate was in philosophy. For me, then, it was a surprise to learn that the alliance between feminism and philosophy (with some notable exceptions) was both relatively recent and sometimes uneasy. It was only after I was already up to my neck in feminist philosophy that I learned that, according to some, it was a contradiction in terms. When philosophy is defined as dealing only with the most abstract or general of questions and gender is dismissed as an accidental, empirical detail, the term "feminist philosophy" collapses.

Of course, fewer and fewer scholars operate either with such a narrow definition of philosophy or of gender, and the possibilities that emerge at this intersection are being explored in ways that could hardly have been imagined even two decades ago. What I think now is that it may be the tension between the supposed universality of the philosophical and the particularity of the feminist that helps maintain my interest. The critical skills of the philosopher can be brought to bear on the most explicitly political and ethical claims of feminism. Meanwhile, as feminism refuses the pretense that one can transcend the empirical world, it turns a critical eye of its own toward philosophy,

revealing new contours, both problems and possibilities.

For me, then, the enduring appeal of the work I do is grounded in the ways that feminism and philosophy mutually reinforce and interrogate one another. The incisiveness of philosophers, especially of philosophers who saw themselves as standing outside the tradition, such as Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, demonstrate that those who critique the tradition, as feminists often do, are in very good philosophical company. On the other hand, the courage and intellectual rigor of feminist philosophers, such as Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir, underscore the nuanced ways that philosophy can enhance socially liberatory values.

Whether philosophically inclined or not, many of us are led to believe that our goal ought to be one of excising tensions and apparent contradictions. But part of the ongoing appeal of philosophy for many of us may result from the places of unknowing that tensions can provide, whether between traditional philosophy and feminism or between philosophy and spirituality, science, and other areas. Given philosophers' historically happy, if sometimes frustrating, preoccupation with questions rather than answers, this should come as no surprise.

It seems to me that the view of philosophy as a flexible, open-ended practice, one in critical dialogue with other disciplines and perspectives, is reflected in our department, both in terms of the variety of courses and programs we offer and the attitudes and curiosities of individual faculty members. As we continue to grow in number, with respect to faculty, majors, and minors, we look forward to welcoming all sorts of thinkers, including those who work best at intersections and margins.



## Current Faculty

**Cathryn Bailey**, Professor,  
Chair; Ph.D. University of  
Missouri, 1994

**Brandon Cooke**, Asst.  
Professor, Ph.D. University  
of St. Andrews, 2003

**Melanie Frappier**, Asst.  
Professor, Ph.D. University  
of Western Ontario, 2004

**John Humphrey**, Professor,  
Ph. D. Washington  
University, 1988

**Richard Liebendorfer**,  
Professor, Ph. D. University  
of California Santa Barbara,  
1984

**Craig Matarrese**, Assoc.  
Professor, Ph.D. University  
of Illinois, Urbana-  
Champaign, 2001.

**Beverly Raimann**,  
Administrative Assistant

**We're on the Web at:**  
[www.mnsu.edu/philosophy](http://www.mnsu.edu/philosophy)

## Philosophy Speaker Series Continues

The Philosophy Colloquium continues this year with speakers from MSU and beyond. Professor Dick Liebendorfer began this year's series with a presentation of Wittgenstein's handling of a longstanding epistemological problem.

In October, Professor Lisa Heldke, from Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, presented her work on the philosophy of food, focusing on what she sees as a misguided obsession with "authenticity"

on the part of many food enthusiasts.

In November, recently retired MSU Professor Ron Yezzi explained his analysis of why many academics tend not to be attracted to political conservatism.

Presentations are usually the third Wednesday of each month at 4:00 in AH 215. Those with ideas for future speakers should contact Professor Cooke.

## Go! Go! Go! Game Offers Fun and Mental Challenge

The game, "Go" has origins that can be traced to ancient China. According to the *Wikipedia*, "In game theory terms, Go is a perfect information, deterministic, strategy game, putting it in the same class as chess, checkers (draughts), and reversi (othello)."

The "Go" Club meets every Tuesday at 8:00 p.m. and Thursday at 5:30pm in the seating area outside the CSU Ballroom. "Go" is played by one player placing black and one player placing white stones on a grid (usually 19"X19").

Once a stone is placed it cannot be moved and stones must be played on the intersecting points of the grid. The

goal is to surround large portions of the board with your stones. Doing this makes it your territory. Stones can be captured if they become entirely surrounded by the opponents' stones. These count against your territory later.

The game ends when neither player can gain more territory and the player with the most territory wins.

Frequent participants include philosophy faculty members Craig Matarrese and Dick Liebendorfer.

Kristina Welch

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