

Wabash Philosophy NEWSLETTER



Spring 2020



Feminist Philosophy Visits Denison

Tomas F. Hidalgo '21

Last semester I took the Feminist Philosophy course with eight other students. The class was taken in conjunction with a group at Denison University—we were essentially supposed to be one class divided between two locations. This meant that we read the same material, took similar evaluations and met every couple of weeks online in order to have a discussion between ourselves. We met in person at Denison at the end of the semester for an intensive workshop session followed by a guest lecture from one of the philosophers whose work we read, and dinner. This visit was the culmination of what both groups had learned together. There was a bit of a warmup at first but once we got going there was the kind of almost frantic dialogue and debate that happens every so often in philosophy; the kind of discussion that helps people think in ways they never had before and open their minds to new possibilities and understanding. It wasn't just that the twenty or so Denison students were intelligent and articulate, which they were, it was the perspective they provided that we never could have gotten if we had stayed at Wabash or only communicated to them through video calls.

One of the main lessons we learned over the course of the class was to realize and reject the myth that our perspective is the objective and absolute one. Everyone wants to believe that their perspective captures the whole truth: it is why we overestimate the personal biases of those around us but underestimate our own.

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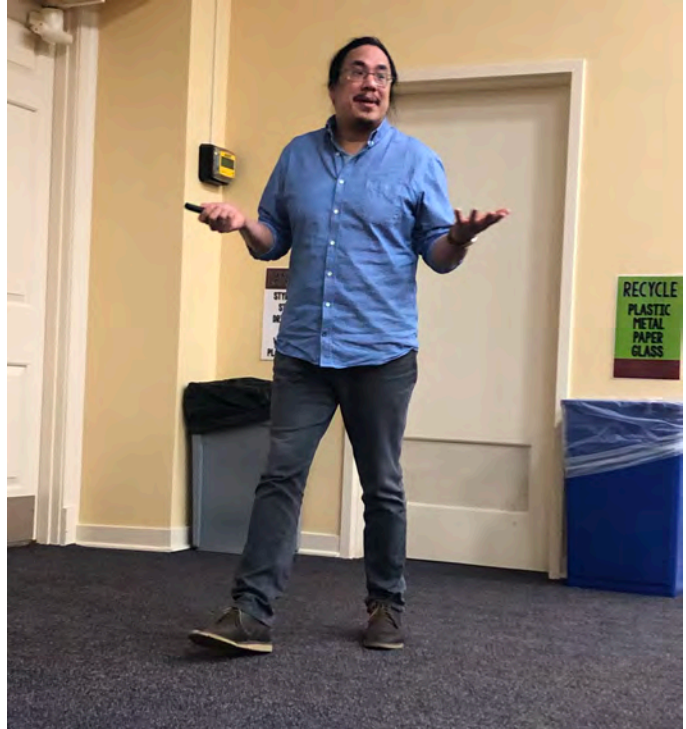
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Thi Nguyen Delivers 2020 J. Harry Cotton Lecture

Professor Matt Carlson

The philosophy department was very fortunate to host its annual J. Harry Cotton Lecture before spring break this year, because this meant that we could host it in person. Our speaker was Professor Thi Nguyen from the University of Utah. Prof. Nguyen's work brings together a variety of apparently eclectic topics concerning community, technology, and art in order to bring into focus various ways in which our rationality and agency are socially embedded. In his lecture, entitled "The Seductions of Gamification," Prof. Nguyen further developed some of the arguments and themes of his recent book, *Games: Agency as Art*.

In his book, Nguyen articulates and defends the thesis that "games are the art form whose medium is agency." The central idea is that in playing games, we take on temporary motivations, goals, and abilities to achieve those goals. That is, playing games allows us to "try on" new ways of acting in the world. It is this increase in agency that makes gameplay a valuable part of our lives, according to Nguyen.



But in his lecture, Nguyen exposed a game-related phenomenon that is not, in his view, a valuable part of our lives: gamification. As he put it, somewhat jokingly, the thesis of his talk was: "Games are awesome, but gamification is terrible." By "gamification," Nguyen was referring to the now-common practice of taking activities that are not games and adding game-like elements to them in order to motivate people to engage in them. For example, walking is not a game, but it is gamified by a device like a Fitbit. Fitbit adds game-like elements—such as a score, codified by the number of steps that the device records in a given day—to the activity of walking, thereby gamifying it. This might sound harmless, perhaps even beneficial, but Nguyen argued that gamification typically engenders a problem that he calls "value capture." Walking, one might argue, is good simply for the exercise, and the companionable conversation that it often elicits. Fitbit might motivate a person to walk and thereby achieve those ends, but over time the goal of walking becomes not to achieve the intrinsic goods of walking, but rather simply to get a certain number of steps; to achieve a high score. This is an example of value capture.

Nguyen argued that value capture through gamification occurs in many areas of our lives, and almost always has negative consequences. For example, Twitter gamifies discourse by giving it a score (in the form of retweets), thereby altering the value of the activity. Whereas the value of discourse consists in the exchange of ideas, this value is co-opted by the value of a high score. Discourse suffers on social media, Nguyen argued, because participants are primarily motivated to increase their score, as opposed to being motivated to engage in conversation.

Nguyen's lecture was very well-attended by students and faculty, and was followed by a lively question and answer session. Moreover, Nguyen visited my class (Videogames and Philosophy) on the next day to discuss material from his lecture and his book (which my students had studied prior to his visit). It was probably the best class session of the semester. Prof. Nguyen and I were both very impressed by the high quality of questions that students brought to class, and by the overall quality of the conversation. One good indicator of this was that, by the time we reached the end of our class time, no one was ready to leave. A few students had to go to other classes, but most of the rest of the class stuck around well past the end of our scheduled time to continue the conversation. Nguyen himself took many notes on our class discussion and was very energized by it. He plans to incorporate some of the insights gleaned from that discussion into his future work on this topic, with appropriate credit due, of course, to the Wabash philosophy students who so ably discussed his work with him.

Wabash PPE Goes Live

Professor Jeff Gower

In last year's newsletter, I wrote about the course designation "PPE" newly available to students registering for Fall 2019 classes. I'm glad to report that the major in Philosophy, Politics and Economics is off to a good start.

This year the Philosophy Department added two new classes to the Bulletin that will cross-list with PPE in future offerings, Environmental Philosophy and Philosophy of Gender.

Environmental Philosophy was deeply enriched by a visit in late September from Prof. Johnathan Maskit of Denison University. Prof. Maskit also gave the inaugural lecture in the PPE Speaker Series and delivered a lunch presentation for interested faculty and administrators about successfully designing and running multidisciplinary programs like PPE. Christopher McNally '21 remarks on the impact of Prof. Maskit's visit in the adjacent article.

Philosophy of Gender (taught in Fall 2019 as Feminist Philosophy) also benefitted from collaboration across the GLCA, as Wabash's Prof. Adriel Trott and Denison's Prof. Barbara Fultner taught parallel courses focusing on transnational feminism. The GLCA collaboration broadened the scope of the Wabash classroom and challenged Wabash students to come to terms with new perspectives. In this year's cover story, Tomas Hidalgo '21 reflects on his experience in this multi-campus course.

The spring semester saw the first iteration of our multidisciplinary gateway course, Introduction to PPE, co-taught by me and Prof. Nicholas Snow (Economics). Sophomore and junior PPE majors investigated "Foundational Thinkers," "Core Ideas" and "Hard Cases" for PPE, drawing on readings from all three disciplines. The students rose to the challenge, even under the difficult circumstances occasioned by the transition to virtual classrooms after spring break. The six juniors who took Introduction to PPE this spring will go on to take the first PPE Senior Seminar in the fall and be the first Wabash students to graduate with a PPE major.

Why PPE? Denison University's Jonathan Maskit Visits Wabash

Christopher McNally '21

As a rising senior, if I were to stand on a podium and tell my friends that I came to Wabash College to do pre-med, they would kindly laugh. To be honest, so would I. Quite frankly, I would bet that everyone reading this is now thinking of that similar moment they had their freshman year. Yes, I am talking about when you knew exactly what you were doing with your life when you were 18 years old. So, what made you change your mind? Maybe it was that first calculus class. Even more, it could have been the first biology class in Hayes 101, where the class size is nearly five percent of the student body.

Personally, my mind changed in the fall of 2019 while I was taking Environmental Philosophy with Professor Gower. That is when I finally realized that I wanted to major in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE).

Wait for a second, how did Environmental Philosophy all of a sudden open my eyes to PPE? Well, on September 23rd, 2019, for the first time in my collegiate career, one of the authors we had been reading for a class came to visit campus. During his visit, Dr. Jonathan Maskit, a philosopher from Denison University, delivered the inaugural lecture in Wabash's new PPE Speaker Series and had lunch with those of us interested in learning about the new major.

At the lunch meeting, Dr. Maskit explained the value behind majoring in PPE. Of course, with a major focusing on three areas of study, eyebrows raised about the validity of such a major. Yet, for Dr. Maskit, it was almost as if he anticipated this question because he addressed it before anyone even asked.

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Fall 2020 Course Offerings

PHI 104: Introduction to Philosophy: Nature (Trott)

PHI 110: Philosophical Ethics (Hughes)

PHI 124: Philosophy and Film (Gower)

PHI 213: Philosophy of Law (Hughes)

PHI 218: Philosophy of Commerce (Gower)

PHI 240: Ancient Philosophy (Trott)

PHI 345: Continental Philosophy (Hughes)

PHI 449: Senior Seminar: Plato's Republic (Trott)

Webb Awarded J. Harry Cotton Prize

The J. Harry Cotton Fund in philosophy was established in 1977 to honor longtime philosophy professor, J. Harry Cotton, who taught at Wabash College from 1947 to 1969. A fund was generously endowed by alumni of the College, philosophy majors and minors, who took courses from Prof. Cotton.

The Philosophy Department awards the 2020 J. Harry Cotton Prize to Aaron Webb, philosophy major with a chemistry minor. Aaron has distinguished himself in every way: he earned distinction on his comprehensive exams, was chosen to represent Division II as the student speaker at the Celebration of Research in January, is a recent member of Phi Beta Kappa, and a winner of the Salter Award. Aaron holds himself to the highest academic standards, is a leader in the classroom, and shows himself to have a strong moral compass. Aaron will matriculate at Indiana University's School of Medicine in the Fall.

Philosophy as a Way of Life

Jacob Stump '11 Shares Wisdom with Wallies

Max Atkins '20

This past October, Dr. Jacob Stump '11 returned to campus for a day-long visit that culminated with the workshop "Philosophy as a Way of Life." Dr. Stump was a philosophy major at Wabash, and he finished his PhD at the University of Toronto in 2017, focusing on Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. He started a position at Northeastern University just before his visit to Wabash. These aspects of his professional life were reflected in his campus visit, as he visited Dr. Trott's Ancient Philosophy class and gave a lunch talk in which he reflected on graduate studies and academic careers in the humanities.

I had been contemplating whether graduate school in philosophy was a possibility for me, and the lunch talk was everything that I needed. Going into the talk, my biggest worry about graduate school in philosophy was the idea that I was not smart enough to go. The Wabash philosophy professors are amazing and brilliant professors and the idea of deeming myself smart enough to do what they do seemed impossible. When I went to the lunch talk, I raised this concern and Dr. Stump along with Dr. Trott and Dr. Gower were very sympathetic to this thought. It was Dr. Stump who was the one that reassured me that everyone that goes into graduate school has that same nagging thought and, for him, it didn't go away but was something he had learned to live with. Hearing that I wasn't alone in thinking this reassured me that graduate school was a possibility and allowed me to open the line of communication with my professors to talk about graduate school, which I might not have otherwise done.

After the lunch talk Dr. Stump gave a guest lecture in Ancient Philosophy. Dr. Stump has an enthusiasm for philosophy that comes through in his lectures. He's so engaging in the way he talks about the text and considers the problems that arise. It made the lecture a fun experience.

Right after class, we transitioned into the workshop for philosophy as a way of life. Anybody interested—philosophy majors, minors, or anybody who wanted to come—came to discuss philosophy and how one might consider philosophy in our everyday lives. With Dr. Stump's love for ancient philosophy, he constructed the workshop to mimic the marketplace of ancient Greece in which different schools would jockey for the admiration of new students who would join their school of thought. To do this, Dr. Stump first gave a general overview of three schools: Aristotelianism, Stoicism, & Epicureanism. Once we had gotten a sense for each school of thought, he asked everyone to either choose a group to which they felt they belonged or join a fourth group for the undecided. Once we broke up into our groups, Dr. Stump then proposed various questions such as, Should one seek love? Each group then answered how they thought their school of thought would answer, trying to appeal to and win over those in the undecided group. The exercise was fun. Everyone discussed these seemingly basic questions in a way many had not contemplated before. After the exercise, we all had dinner together and were able to talk with the professors and Dr. Stump.

Overall, the day was fantastic not only for bringing an alumnus back to campus to provide a new outlook as someone fresh out of their PhD program, but also for bringing all the philosophy students together for a day to discuss not just philosophy but whatever we wanted. The sense of community that was created that day made it a phenomenal activity and I hope it happens again.



Feminist Philosophy Visits Denison

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It is a lot easier to buy into that fallacy when your culture and society are telling you that your viewpoint is THE perspective, that there is no other and anyone who says otherwise does not appreciate that your culture is best, ignoring the way that this claim works to build up the power of one's own culture and to justify the treatment of others. The truth is more complicated and requires recognizing how one's own culture is not always liberatory and that the ones best suited to understanding systems of oppression are the ones who have directly experienced it. You'd think that eight cis-gendered men and one woman who was a Spanish TA taking this class at a school for men that draws mostly from rural Indiana and the surrounding states might struggle to learn this lesson. While there is something to be said about the open mindedness of men willing to come anywhere near a class labeled with "feminist" and "gender studies" at such a school, there was still a limit to our progress considering we only had mostly one kind of gender experience to draw upon. Even hearing the stories and stances of the Denison students didn't mean that we could understand their experience, but it allowed us to be better aware of what we don't know. Ironically, it is the lack of knowledge that I took away from the class that I value most. My awareness of that lack is what makes me hesitate before jumping in with my opinions and beliefs; it is what makes me take another second to just listen and make space for a voice that is not the one that already permeates Western society.

Maskit Visit (continued from page three)

Today, technology has enabled our world to change at an ever-increasing rate. Now, social problems are immensely complex and have a global impact. It is nearly impossible to address them by throwing everything into an economics equation. Instead, to resolve social problems it is essential to analyze the conflicts from multiple perspectives.

By majoring in PPE, obviously, you will not have the amount of political knowledge as you would majoring in political science. Equally, that goes for economics and philosophy. Yet, the purpose of PPE is to develop tools from all three areas of study so you can look at problems through three different lenses. Dr. Maskit put this multidisciplinary approach on display that evening when he gave the inaugural lecture in the PPE Speaker Series, "What Does It Mean to Share the Road?" The talk analyzed road sharing between motorized vehicles and cyclists, showing how it gives rise to conflict and, ultimately, bias in our laws that

favors motorized vehicles over cyclists. To illustrate and critique this bias, Dr. Maskit did not rely on a single lens but explored this phenomenon using a broad scope of methods and concepts from philosophy, political science and economics.

Now that I have completed three years of college, I am proud to say that I will be a part of the first group of students to major in PPE at Wabash College. In my view, solving global problems requires us to step outside of disciplinary silos since these problems cannot be fully grasped from one point of view. In Environmental Philosophy, I learned about how the element that provides life to all living things is in grave danger. From a philosophical perspective, you are forced to evaluate what the most essential things in life are from a moral point of view. Yet, even that is not enough to win the war on climate change. By joining my philosophical knowledge with politics and economics, I can now pull all three viewpoints together and better respond to the challenge both theoretically and practically. While there is still a long way to go, at least now there is a chance.



Dragging Wabash students out of the cave: WLAIP students and Prof. Trott reenact the cave image from Plato's *Republic* at Blue Springs Caverns in southern Indiana.

Congratulations to Professor Matt Carlson, who earned tenure this year and will enjoy a much-deserved sabbatical in the fall!

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