

# PhiloNews

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## ΦΙΛΟΝΟΥΣ

Philosophy Department Newsletter, February 2008



### From the Chair

by Andrew Bailey

The main 'front office' preoccupations for the first two months of 2008 have been graduate admissions, and thinking about our undergraduate curriculum, as part of the internal review of the BA program that is presently under way.

Graduate admissions is a great deal of work—we are the victims of our own success in attracting large numbers of high-quality applicants among whom it is hard to choose!—but offers have now gone out to the select few. Several of the students to whom we have offered admission will be visiting the Department over the next few weeks to check us out, and will no doubt be interested in chatting with faculty and grads. Some more information on the admissions is contained in the report from the Graduate Coordinator, below; here, let me just thank all of you who participated in the process, as paper-report writers or admissions committee members, and especially Pam and Omid who are bearing the lion's share of the burden.

On the undergraduate curriculum front, next year will see innovative new 'capstone' courses coming on line for our program students: a 1.0 (double) credit Honours Seminar, and a double-credit Honours Workshop. Both courses will provide our best students with the experience of working intensively and deeply with a faculty member on a selected philosophical topic, with extensive feedback from both their peers and the professor. The difference between the two is that the Workshop is aimed more at training students in philosophical skills (rather like an undergraduate analog of our MA and PhD Seminars), while the Seminar will be an especially concentrated reading and writing experience; both will be excellent preparation for graduate study.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have greatly expanded the opportunities for small-group work in our largest introductory and 'service' courses.

Meanwhile, under Patricia Sheridan's leadership, we have refreshed our course descriptions to make them more attractive, accurate and clear, and to add links to our website for courses whose content changes each time they are offered; added new Directed Reading course numbers to remove the confusion that currently exists around these courses (and to allow us to control how many such courses an individual student takes); and adjusted the prerequisites for our second-year courses to make it easier for students interested in Philosophy to quickly begin accruing credits towards their program.

Several other exciting ideas have been generated in the Department for incremental pedagogical improvements and added flexibility in course-delivery, several of which we will be discussing at our next Departmental meeting. We will also be responding in the coming months to ideas arising from April's BA Forum. "Nothing endures but change," as some old Greek once said.

## Faculty Research

Each issue of *PhiloNews* we will feature the research activities of four of our faculty.

### Karyn Freedman

Last winter I taught a graduate course on testimony—a hot topic these days in epistemology—and I have been preoccupied by questions relating to testimony ever since. I have been writing a paper on the subject, now in its final stages, called “Testimony and Epistemic Risk: the Dependence Account.” In this paper I argue that the debate between the credulist and the reductivist over the epistemic status of testimonial beliefs can be resolved via a nuanced understanding of justification as an interest-relative relation. (So as not to leave you hanging on the edge of your seat: I come down on the side of the reductivist, though for reasons discussed in the paper I prefer to characterize this position as one of dependence.) When that paper is done I plan to write another one on testimony, this time tying in the topic with my ongoing research on the epistemological significance of violence against women by focusing on the question of when testimony is expert. This issue arises in this context because while knowledge about violence against women (in particular sexual violence) is in most cases acquired by being told, it is typically transmitted through unorthodox sources that lack *prima facie* credibility. I was invited to give a paper on my research on sexual violence against women this past fall, at a family violence conference in Edmonton. This was an exciting opportunity for me to share my philosophical ideas on the subject with individuals who work in the violence against women sector, and it was truly an invigorating experience. I also had two papers published in 2007, both in the journal *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*. One was a feature article, called “Traumatic Blocking and Brandom’s Oversight.” There were three commentaries on my paper, and I had a chance to respond to my critics in a follow-up paper titled “Knowledge Without Citable Reasons.”

### Maya Goldenberg

My work is on the evidence-based medicine movement, which has reigned supreme in medicine for over a decade and has received largely uncritical uptake in all areas of healthcare. The term “evidence-based everything” is now being used to characterize its scope. It’s also said with a healthy touch of cynicism, as quiet rumblings are being heard among front-line workers (nurses, hospital social workers, etc.). There is a small but growing group working out of clinical medicine, the medical humanities, and social sciences, trying to clearly articulate the methodological, epistemological, and ethical difficulties with the evidence-based approach, as well as making proposals for change. Some of my own projects include: participating in a philosophy of medicine round table at the University of Alabama Birmingham in a few weeks, where I will present a paper titled “Rehabilitating the evidence in evidence-based medicine: A Davidsonian account of evidence.” I am also co-editing a volume of *Perspectives in Biology & Medicine* on the hierarchy of evidence in medical research, and contributing a paper, “Iconoclast or Creed? Objectivism, Pragmatism, and the Hierarchy of Evidence,” to that project.

I am also interested in increasing much needed dialogue between evidence-based supporters and detractors to discuss future change. At present, the two sides publish in different journals and disparage the opposing side (see “Post-modernists Take Another Whack at EBH” for hostile remarks about one of my publications: <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=ind0611&L=evidence-based-health&T=0&F=&S=&P=11566>), which, of course, is not helpful for improving patient care. To this end, I am co-organizing a workshop dedicated to critical debates in evidence-based medicine. It has been funded by the SSHRC Knowledge Cluster “Situating Science” and will take place in November 2008. I also have a standing offer to do grand rounds and staff educational forums on evidence-based health care at any hospital setting in the GTA and vicinity. I have received only a couple of invitations so far.

### Jeff Mitscherling

I spent the Fall 2007 semester as Visiting Professor at the Internacional Academy of Philosophy at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile in Santiago. I continue to wait for Prometheus Books to release *The Image of a Second Sun: Plato on Poetry, Rhetoric, and the Technē of Mīmēsis*. I am currently completing *Aesthetic Genesis: The Origin of Consciousness in the Intentional Being of Nature*, the third and final volume of my project ‘The Revision of Hermeneutic Ontology.’ I hope by the coming Fall semester to have completed two other books, *Aristotle and the ‘Immortality’ of the Soul*, and *The Arguments of the Deductions and Schematism of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*.

### Andrew Wayne

One of my current research projects is on idealization in science, primarily physics. An important development in contemporary physics is the widespread use of highly idealized models. These idealizations are wildly wrong, in the sense that they fail to represent key features of physical systems in even an approximate way. I’ve been arguing that, nonetheless, some highly idealized models in physics have genuine explanatory power, and I’ve extended the explanatory role for such idealizations beyond the scope of previous philosophical

work. I've presented these results at a conference ("Models and Simulations 2", Tilburg, Holland) and in a journal article currently under review.

A related project is to develop an account of emergence that can ground insightful analyses of what appear to be examples of emergent phenomena in physics. I've started by focusing on nonlinear oscillator systems and issues of explanation, reduction and emergence therein. I've presented these results in several talks (Pacific APA, Dubrovnik Philosophy of Science conference, Time and Universe conference at UBC, talks at the University of Western Ontario, University of Toronto and the Physics Department at Guelph) and in a journal article currently under review. During my eagerly awaited (by me) administrative leave I plan to expand this research into a book on emergence in physics. The book will argue that traditional reductionist approaches fail in several important areas of physics, and it will attempt to develop a sensible alternative. I've also got a paper coming out soon, "A Trope Ontology for Field Theory," in an anthology on the ontology of spacetime to be published by Elsevier (this paper and the two under review are on my webpage on the departmental website).

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## Graduate Matters

by Omid Payrow Shabani

The winter term began for the Graduate Committee with the arrival of many PhD and MA applications. It seems that our move toward a stand-alone PhD program, our new hires, our high and consistent placement record, plus the word of mouth from our own graduate students have made our department very attractive. We received 43 PhD applications from many universities in Canada, the US and also from abroad (Germany, China, India and the U.K.). The number for MA applications is slightly higher, 49. Over the past two weeks the Graduate Committee met and made its selection for admission. The offer letters will be sent out soon and we will have new faces to look forward to meeting come September.

[A few statistics: Our admission rate into both the doctoral and MA programs will probably be around 16%. A fifth of the applicants for the PhD this year are non-Canadians (and several of the Canadians are applying from prestigious MA programs outside the country). Over 30% of the MA applicants are from outside Ontario, and a good sprinkling are from non-Canadian institutions such as UCLA or Duquesne.]

On a different note, the end of term is nearing and for the PhD students in their 5<sup>th</sup> term that means it is time for their OQE. This will mean that before the end of term we'll be seeing a quite a few OQEs, which incidentally are open to public. I wish those students giving their OQE this term the best in passing the exam.

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## Philosophy and the Community

The Department (through its committee on external relations) has initiated a process of bringing philosophy to the wider community. The first event in this development was a talk by Patricia Sheridan on "Philosophy and the Witchcraze" which was held on the evening of Wednesday 30 January at the downtown public library. It was a stunning success. Well attended, by members of the public as well as by students and faculty members at the University, the talk generated enthusiastic support by library personnel, who expressed eagerness that similar events take place in the coming months. Patricia gave a PowerPoint presentation on the history and background of the European witch persecution phenomenon, which resulted in the deaths—essentially, the judicial murders—of many thousands of individuals, primarily elderly women, above all in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; ironically, concurrent with the rise of modern science and of philosophical rationalism. Patricia discussed the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of the craze, and explored why it was so intense, so long-lasting, and then so quickly terminated. It was a fascinating and enlightening evening.

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## Other News

Two members of the Department have recently published books. Karen Houle has a new volume of poetry, entitled *During* (Gaspereau Press). And Peter Loftson's new book, *Freedom, Nature, and World* (University of Ottawa Press) has also just been published.

We note also with sadness the passing of a student who was a Philosophy major. Renee Palmer died of cancer early in the new year. She had been a much-liked and respected member of our program.