Within the Bubble

The philosophy faculty at Beloit is excited to bring you the first issue of our new annual newsletter for philosophy alumni. The dual purpose of Philosophical Fragments is to fill you in on things we’re doing here at Beloit and to solicit updates from you about what’s going on with you “beyond the bubble.”

The first thing to mention is that we now have the privilege of bringing outstanding scholars to Beloit through our Selzer Visiting Philosopher series, supported by a generous gift from philosophy alum John Selzer ‘77. The series brings a leading contemporary philosopher to campus each spring semester to visit classes, discuss their ideas with students and faculty, and give a public lecture. Our first Selzer Visiting Philosopher was Martha Nussbaum, the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago and author of many books, including Cultivating Humanity (1997), Women and Human Development (2000), The Fragility of Goodness (2001), Hiding from Humanity (2004), Frontiers of Justice (2006), and Not for Profit (2010).

Another recent addition has been our Philosophy and Film series, in which faculty and students get together to watch movies and discuss various philosophical issues they raise. In recent semesters we have discussed everything from existential angst in Ingmar Bergman’s The Seventh Seal, to the difference between human and android in Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner, to problems with evidence in Errol Morris’ Thin Blue Line. The series is a great way for Beloit students interested in philosophy to get to know one another better outside of the classroom.

In the classroom, we have been offering courses in a wide range of topics, including seminars on natural disasters and on the law in philosophy and literature. We have been experimenting with our capstone course, Colloquium in Philosophy, to help senior majors develop their research and presentation skills, and we are in the process of developing a pilot Intro to Philosophy course that will involve visits to Beloit area schools to engage elementary school students in debating philosophical ideas and honing their critical thinking skills.

Pictured (from left): Phil Shields, Martha Nussbaum, Kayla Svoboda’10, Ted Towner’10, Matt Tedesco

Martha Nussbaum: Philosophy Rock Star
Kayla Svoboda’10

Last April, Martha Nussbaum, an internationally renowned legal scholar and philosopher, came to campus as the first visitor in the new Selzer Visiting Philosopher series. As a senior, female philosophy major, I benefitted greatly from the experience.

I was first exposed to Nussbaum’s work in Phil Shields’ Ethical Theory, for which my classmates and I read several pieces by Nussbaum, including excerpts from Women and Human Development. I was captivated by the manner in which Nussbaum weds aspects of virtue ethics and liberalism in an applied ethic (spanning topics including women’s rights, the intelligence of emotions, liberalism in light of disabilities and animal rights, and
the value of a liberal arts education) and by the depth and authority with which she writes. Though of course I do not agree with all of Nussbaum’s views, I was happy to have found in her work a platform for my own research for papers I wrote in Ethical Theory, Colloquium, and for my Honors Thesis.

Phil described Nussbaum as a “rock star in philosophy” when announcing her visit, and once she arrived on campus, I followed her around like the devoted fan I had become through my studies. During her visit, we chatted while meandering across campus to different classes, meetings, meals, etc. I couldn’t help but be interested in the details that made her “real”: her pescetarian food preferences, her trademark bright blue skirt suit, her stories about a stint as an aspiring actress while she was an undergrad.

One word in particular came to mind throughout my interactions with Nussbaum: eudaimonia. The concept is featured in Nussbaum’s own work, and while I’m not suggesting that hers is the best or only way to flourish as a human being, I do think anyone would be inspired by someone with such character, intellect, and compassion. She teaches in the Philosophy Department as well as at the Law and Divinity Schools at the University of Chicago. She churns out several articles and about a book per year. She also participates in international think tanks, lectures, gives interviews on television and in print, and has founded centers for the study of comparative constitutionalism and human capabilities. As the ancient Greeks stressed, a healthy mind is correlated to a healthy body. Nussbaum is incredibly fit—she runs for three hours every morning—and this translates into intellectual stamina and acuity. When I asked Nussbaum what one piece of advice she would give to people, she said, “Exercise.” She’s well rounded, too. For example, she cooks with Indian spices and takes singing lessons in her free time.

Nussbaum’s visit included a campus-wide lecture on the capabilities approach, perhaps what she is most well-known for. Developed with economist Amartya Sen, the capabilities approach is a guide for human development based on respect for dignity and a theoretical alternative to GNP-based approaches to measuring welfare. It entails a working list of central human capabilities (e.g., bodily integrity, human relations to other species, control over one’s environment) essential to human flourishing. The capabilities approach demands support for marginalized or disadvantaged populations, while supporting both cultural pluralism and liberal values of autonomy and freedom of choice. That the capabilities approach is highly relevant to our diverse global society was reflected in the crowd of Beloit students and faculty her lecture drew from across disciplines—despite its being held mid-week and with final exams looming.

Nussbaum’s biggest impacts, however, were in the interactions she had with students over the course of her visit, as when she visited courses in classics and political science, as well as a capstone seminar on health and human rights. Her visit sparked ethical debates across campus. In a couple of the classes she visited, Nussbaum perched atop a desk at the front of the classroom. Insisting that students begin and sustain the discussion with questions or ideas, she responded in a deeply compassionate way, soberly engaging in and responding to their concerns.

I thank John Selzer for his generous gift which makes it possible for the department to invite prominent philosophers to Beloit’s campus each year. Thanks are also in order for Phil Shields, who organized the logistics of Nussbaum’s visit (twice, since she was originally scheduled for February), in addition to a reading group in preparation for her visit; and the entire Philosophy Department for their work in preparing for and organizing the event.
The Human Mind: Upside-Down?

The Philosophy and Religious Studies Department presents the 2nd annual Selzer Visiting Philosopher series on February 23-25, 2011. This year our visiting scholar will be Daniel C. Dennett, author of numerous articles and books, including Consciousness Explained (1991), Darwin's Dangerous Idea (1995), Kinds of Minds (1996), Brainchildren (1998), Freedom Evolves (2003), and Breaking the Spell (2006). Dennett is Professor of Philosophy and Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. During his time at Beloit, he will visit several classes, meet informally with students and faculty, and give a Faculty @ Four presentation on his work. He will also give a public lecture entitled “A Human Mind as an Upside-Down Brain” in Moore Lounge on Wednesday, February 23 at 7:30 p.m. Please join us if you’re in the area.

Faculty News

Congratulations to Matt Tedesco for earning tenure at Beloit! Matt is on sabbatical during Spring 2011, pursuing research interests in both consequentialism and euthanasia protocols. He'll also be exploring some new philosophical terrain, gearing up for an FYI on beliefs and possible departmental offerings in epistemology. Matt's article “The Friendship that Makes No Demands,” was recently published in the edited volume Facebook and Philosophy (so friend him if you dare!), and his article “Intuitions and the Demands of Consequentialism” is forthcoming in Utilitas.

Robin Zebrowski has been busy building a cognitive science program, which includes some new course offerings. These include Cognitive Robotics (wherein the students play with LEGO robots to understand the nature of embodied cognition) and a version of Intro to Philosophy that involves outreach to school-age children from the city of Beloit by teaching them how to think philosophically, using children's books as the vehicle for abstract thought. Her paper on Merleau-Ponty, Rodney Brooks, and embodied artificial intelligence was recently published in the Journal of Consciousness Studies, and she's currently spread throughout the environment as an extended cyborg system.

Phil Shields continues to explore philosophical discussions that stress the incoherence of conceiving individual persons as morally and rationally autonomous, and that show the depths of our dependence on the body, communal practices, and historical traditions. This exploration has expressed itself in teaching classes that highlight philosophers like Aristotle, Plato, Confucius, Hegel, and Wittgenstein, and in publications including “Some Reflections on Respecting Childhood,” “Dependent Rational Animals,” and most recently, “Some Problems with Communities of Choice.”

Heath Massey received a book deal from the State University of New York (SUNY) Press for The Origin of Time: Heidegger and Bergson, which he plans to complete in summer 2011. A version of the first chapter, entitled “On the Verge of Being and Time: Before Heidegger’s Dismissal of Bergson,” was recently published in Philosophy Today. Heath was also just awarded tenure at Beloit. He and his wife Elizabeth Boone are expecting their first child to arrive in late March or early April. He hopes that this will not interfere too much with his participation in intramural Ultimate Frisbee.
Department Web Site

You’ve probably noticed that Beloit College has renovated its web site. The Philosophy Department has also launched a new site with information about upcoming events (like the Selzer lecture), course offerings, majoring or minoring in philosophy, and other philosophy-related tidbits. You can find it at http://www.beloit.edu/philo/. The site is a work in progress, so email us if you have any suggestions.

Beyond the Bubble

We’d love to hear about what you’re up to these days. And with your permission, we’d like to share some of your stories, insights, and observations with other Beloit alumni. Our plan for future newsletters is to devote this section to updates from you. If want to share anything or just touch base, you can reach us at the following email addresses:

Gary Cook (emeritus) – cookga@beloit.edu
Heath Massey – masseyh@beloit.edu
Phil Shields – shieldsp@beloit.edu
Matt Tedesco – tedescom@beloit.edu
Robin Zebrowski – zebrowsr@beloit.edu

We really look forward to hearing from you!