“You know I’m from here.”

When Jakob Dylan uttered these lines last week at the historic F. Scott Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minnesota, I thought, “He’s restoring the roots his father severed when he hitchhiked from Hibbing to New York and never looked back. Robert Zimmerman fading in the rearview mirror as Bob Dylan loomed on the horizon.” My reverie was rather short-lived as Jakob met the bemused shake of his lead guitar player’s head. He looked back over the nearly sold-out crowd and declared over the self-satisfied applause of the Midwestern audience,

“No man, I’m L.A. to the bone.”

In the space of a drum beat you could feel the energy of the crowd turn from euphoria to bewildered disappointment. The guitarist shook his head even harder.

“I can be whatever you want.”

With that, all seemed to be forgiven and forgotten as the tone of the evening fell back into the cadence of “Sixth Avenue Heartache.” Yet as harmonic as the night of poetry and song was, that one moment of dissonance keeps ringing in my head. I can be whatever you want. It was just a flippant response filling space between the tuning of instruments, but there is something profoundly troubling lurking in that phrase. The self-same trouble that has lurked in the minds of philosophers for centuries and boils down to one profound question that we must all face: “Who am I?”

Scholars frequently bemoan the fact that philosophy seems to have fallen out of favor in the mainstream, yet the essential questions of human existence remain. In truth, however, philosophy was never really mainstream. Throughout the history of philosophy was only accessible to a small number of the privileged elite who could afford the leisure of deep, dark thought. Until now that is. Now that we have reached an age of prosperity where philosophy is widely available to the Western world, we don’t seem to have any desire to take advantage of a privilege centuries of our ancestors were denied. Perhaps the options before us are simply too overwhelming to comprehend, or the struggle to make meaning out of this world of sorrow and injustice is too painful to confront, or perhaps the luster of wisdom has lost its shine in the light of commercial abundance.

Yet the human spirit was molded in the shape of the question mark. The fact that our children universally demand that we explain, “Why?” to every new phenomenon they encounter simultaneously demands that we justify the order of a universe we inhabit but don’t fully comprehend and try our patience because we are reminded that somewhere along the line we have lost the energy required to understand the mystery of our lives.

Anyone who has spent any amount of time around playgrounds knows that children take play very seriously. Play is the vehicle rapidly developing minds use to explore real and imagined worlds. Play suspends rules and reshapes ideas. Play is the way children philosophize and they do their best work outside of the classroom. The Institute for Philosophy and Public Life (IPPL) created by Jack Russell Weinstein takes the same approach to its work. This issue of On Second Thought, guest edited by Jack, proves that good philosophy can be playful. As the articles herein prove, hunting, Super Bowl Sunday, and the latest episode of The Simpsons can remind us how to take our play seriously again and recapture the innocent lure of questioning.

As Jakob Dylan reminds us, in the end we have, “Nothing but the whole wide world to gain.”
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Philosophy and its Public:
Mediating the War Between Philosophers and Everyone Else

By Jack Russell Weinstein
In 2005, the American Philosophical Association, a professional organization of eleven thousand philosophers, created a committee to advance the cause of public philosophy. The committee’s mandate was large, to bring philosophical discussion to the general public in as many ways as possible, and its first chairperson was one of the world’s most prominent thinkers, someone in the position to make this happen. However, since then, the committee has filed only two annual reports: they hosted speakers at two APA members’ conferences and expressed support for awarding some folks out of Stanford a grant “in theory.” In other words, according to their minutes, in five years, the APA committee on public philosophy managed to create two events at which professional philosophers met with other professional philosophers to talk about how nice it would be to talk with people who weren’t professional philosophers, and one meeting in which they liked the idea of some other philosophers getting money that the committee themselves did not control. It seems that for the APA, public philosophy is a bit like going to the gym every morning. It’s a nice idea; maybe they’ll get around to it eventually.

Professional philosophers have always had a difficult relationship with other people. The person most often credited with being the first Western philosopher—the ancient Greek thinker Thales—was ridiculed because he fell into an open well while looking at the stars. He enacted his revenge against those who badmouthed him by figuring out that the olive harvest would come early, renting out all of the olive presses in advance, and using his monopolistic control of the machines to make a significant profit. He just wanted to show that he could make more money than others if he desired, but as a philosopher he was interested in other things.

This story is likely apocryphal, but it shows well the I-wasn’t-popular-in-high-school-and-I’ll-get-you-all mentality of the profession. Philosophers love to complain about their lack of respect as well as the marginalization and anti-intellectualism they deal with every day. It doesn’t help their sense of security that Socrates, the most famous of all philosophers, was killed for doing philosophy publicly, that Aristotle had to leave Athens because he feared for his life when public sentiment turned against his patron, and that other philosophers throughout history were exiled, threatened, arrested, and excommunicated for engaging in philosophical inquiry. Of course, the death of Socrates was in part revenge for teaching students who overthrew Athens during a coup, and Aristotle’s danger came from his tutoring a man who would later conquer most of the known world, including Greece. Philosophers throughout history made professions out of challenging governments, attacking church doctrine, questioning accepted knowledge and morals, and putting their own philosophical beliefs above all other social commitments, but what’s a few details among friends? Philosophers see themselves as the innocent victims of a world that does not understand what is truly important, a world that devalues everything they do. Yet they are guilty of the very same arrogance. Even at the moment Socrates is sentenced to die, Plato has him goad his accusers, claiming superiority at every turn. In asserting that the unexamined life is not worth living, he attacks his jury for living a worthless life, and as a bonus jab, he challenges the validity of watching sports. The Olympic athlete, he says, “Only makes you think you’re happy, whereas I make you actually happy.” Today, Socrates would be killed all over again.

Philosophers’ arrogance does come from a genuine power. Historically, they were attacked because they were dangerous. The challenge that philosophy put forth helped whittle down authoritarian power, inspired
tremendous political and religious change, primed the world for modern science, and altered entrenched worldviews, toppling the rich and powerful along the way. Good has come from these acts: theoretical support for the abolition of slavery, describing history in terms of progress, and the development of liberal education, but each of these achievements still marks the destruction of dominant beliefs. To a certain extent then, Socrates and others were killed out of self defense, and after two and a half millennia, the world has finally figured out how to disarm the discipline. Stop killing the philosophers, our societies have declared, sequester them in universities instead. Threaten their funding when they get uppity, bury them with students who resist their classes because philosophy 101 won’t get them a job, and laugh at them as out of touch. No one will be convinced by their arguments if no one reads their research.

Philosophers responded to these changes by becoming bitter and insulated. Professionals of the field now write for, speak to, and read other philosophers almost exclusively—many universities refuse to give any credit to faculty who do philosophy in the community, rejecting their work as unworthy research—and this has led to a crisis. The power of philosophy is diminishing as are job opportunities and institutional support. University philosophy departments are threatened with closure, retired faculty members are not being replaced, and resources for travel, research, and professional development are scarce. There is a complex interplay of forces here, but on the philosophers’ side it boils down to an unfortunate dynamic: philosophers make no effort to reach out to non-philosophers but then lament that non-philosophers don’t see their value. The solution on this side seems clear: open lines of communication and advocate for the discipline by getting people to see the value of philosophy. Get them to see the value of philosophy by doing it with them because when people do philosophy they learn to appreciate it very quickly.

The crisis in philosophy is not entirely self-made. Philosophers share the blame with forces outside the discipline that have equal or greater power. American culture does not value intellectualism and education is becoming more vocational, concerning itself less with cultivating people’s humanity. Furthermore, when philosophers doubt the possibility of doing philosophy with others, they do so because they have been taught to question the general public’s capability of engaging in true philosophical reflection. Unfortunately, what non-philosophers do just isn’t regarded by the profession as philosophy at all. Philosophy requires background knowledge and skills that come from education, effort, and, often, long periods of study. For example, were someone to ask me what medicines best minimize the risk
of high blood pressure, I would not know the answer but I
would know that I did not know. I would consult my doctor
or medical Web sites, I would ask those who research such
things, and only after serious consideration would I come to
a conclusion about such a question and pass it on. But ask a
non-philosopher whether a particular law is just or whether
animals can reason, and each person not only has an
answer, but most believe their position is more correct than
others. Those who don’t think their answers are superior
tend to argue that such claims are matters of “belief,” not
truth. This is itself a philosophical claim, and whether or not
answers are relativistic is a matter of great controversy. But
we’ll avoid this issue here.

In part, philosophers doubt the general public because of
what I call the problem of expertise: it takes knowledge to
debate issues meaningfully, and an uninformed public ends
up boxing at shadows. Consider last year’s debate about
the legitimacy of “death panels” in proposed healthcare
legislation. There were no such panels, nothing even
close. The law only sought to help fund consultation with
a doctor when someone was writing a living will. But the
truth was irrelevant, and the media, pundits, and voters
spent countless hours debating the morality of a policy that
no one had ever proposed and that had no chance of ever
being suggested, let alone passed. Philosophers cringe at
this kind of thing, dismissing it as politics rather than ethical
inquiry.

Let us look at another less controversial example, a blog
post from a philosopher that illustrates well the two sides of
the debate about expertise. The entry is titled, conveniently
enough, “Public Philosophy.”

“[Scene: A smoky dive bar filled with hipsters. A young
woman asks the young man next to her for a quarter....]

Young Man (anxiously searching his hipster bag): I know I
have a bunch of quarters... I think I have a quarter...

Young Woman (annoyed): C’mon.... Jeez....

Drunk Philosopher (to Young Man): If you know that
you have a bunch of quarters, it follows that you have a
quarter.

Young Man: Huh?

Young Woman (to Young Man): What did that guy say to
you? Whatever. Let’s go.... [The couple leaves together.]

The one thing “public philosophy” is good for: getting
other people laid.

This entry is both self-deprecating and insulting to those
he describes, but its rhetoric isn’t what concerns me. The
relevant piece of information is that one cannot know
something that is untrue. In other words, one does not
know that 2+2=5. One only believes it because one can
only know that 2+2=4, since when you add two to two, you
actually get four, not five. This piece of information allows
Drunk Philosopher to claim that “if you know that you have
a bunch of quarters, it follows that you have a quarter.”

Since Young Man knows he has a bunch of quarters then
there must, by definition, be a bunch of quarters in his
bag. If there is a bunch of quarters in the bag then, also by
definition, there must be one single quarter in there.
This is a funny story to philosophers, although most will
understand that it is a little obnoxious; snark is the currency
of the blogosphere. But it is impossible to explain why
it’s funny without explaining some epistemology (theory
of knowledge) and by the time you explain that, it’s not
funny anymore. Jokes require spontaneity and background
knowledge.

The claim that one can only know true things is as old is
Plato, and without it, a great deal of human understanding
falls apart. Thus, philosophers look at the interaction in the
bar with annoyance (and disgust) and ask how they can
do philosophy with people who don’t know the basics.
Certainly, they can teach philosophy—most philosophers
are, as we have already seen, teachers—but teaching
people to do philosophy and doing it with them are two
entirely different projects. Thus, if non-philosophers want
to do philosophy, they must take the responsibility to learn
the relevant information. But learning takes time, and thus
public philosophy is faced with another challenge: the
problem of persistence. In other words, both learning and
inquiry require tremendous endurance, and those who wish
to engage in philosophical argument must understand that
not only does an interlocutor need background knowledge,
but he or she must also revisit an argument many times
before anything can be resolved.

This repetition of argument runs counter to the modern
sound-bite mentality. We have a Jeopardy conception
of knowledge, knowing something is memorizing a fact
(there is a bunch of quarters in the bag, for example, or
Bismarck is the capital of North Dakota), but philosophers
see knowledge as something more than that. Again,
as Plato tells us, to know something one must know a
fact or definition, but one must also be able to explain it
and successfully defend it against any claim that it is not
true—John Stuart Mill used this need for debate to justify freedom of speech in liberal democracies.

Such learning, such debate, takes many sittings and many hours, and a philosopher must be willing to persist in inquiry. He or she must acknowledge mistakes and go back to the beginning and start anew, to dedicate time and mental resources to a problem while the public tends to have other priorities. I run a monthly film series in downtown Grand Forks during which community members engage in philosophical discussion. Whether they watch Casablanca or The Blues Brothers, the participants do philosophy by continuing to think about the topics in the film after they leave the discussion, going home and discussing it with their family, becoming conscious of the issues enough to see them manifest in everyday life. To do philosophy, one must continually revisit it.

The movie audience does well, I think, yet many of those in my profession would not call it philosophy at all, a position I find odd. If I were to play a pick-up game of basketball, even if I only played for forty-five minutes, and no matter how badly I played, everyone would still call it basketball. If I were to play hockey or sew, no matter how ineptly I did, I would still be playing hockey or sewing. The same thing is true of the movie audience. They are doing philosophy. Yes, they are doing it briefly and some may even be doing it badly, but they are still doing philosophy. They are still doing the same basic thing that the professionals do; they are just doing it to a lesser extent.

Philosophers will object that a certain threshold of quality must be met before the term philosophy can be invoked. I agree. The person who is kicking the ball across the court is not playing basketball, just as someone who is simply poking fabric with a needle is not sewing. Analogously, individuals yelling obscenities or refusing to listen to competing arguments are not doing philosophy. But if this is what philosophy isn’t, only the most obtuse observer would describe the movie audience as not doing it. Professional philosophers must move from understanding public philosophy as non-philosophy because if they don’t, they won’t engage with the public at all. Even if they see the public as doing bad philosophy they have a clear mission: increase the quality of public philosophy. This they can do.

I would suggest that even the term bad philosophy is a misnomer because again, in my experience the audience does philosophy quite well. Instead, like my basketball playing, this activity should be considered amateur philosophy, not bad. The public dabbles in philosophy and enthusiasts do it as a hobby. The amateur and the hobbyist will always do things worse than the professional; this is just a fact of life. This is true of mechanics, athletes, cooks, writers, pilots, you name it—professionals do all of these better because they have more time to practice their craft. I therefore propose a compromise between philosophers and their non-professional brethren: the general public should get past their sense of pride and acknowledge that professional philosophers usually do philosophy better than them, while professional philosophers should get past their sense of entitlement and recognize the amateur philosophizing as philosophy, as imperfect as it may be. Only then can we have détente.

We have reached a new plateau. Philosophers have agreed that the general public is doing philosophy and the general public has recognized that they could do it better than they already do. If this is as far as we get, we have done a great service to the public humanities. But how do we advance from here? Making philosophy better brings up a whole new problem: the problem of arguing. Non-philosophers unschooled in logic make everyday mistakes called fallacies. (Actually, professional philosophers make them quite often as well.) C.S. Peirce commented once that the odd thing about logic is that everyone thinks they can do it from birth, but that, like all other areas of life, the skill of logical thinking takes learning and practice. Fallacies show us just how faulty our reasoning can be. Take the fallacy called affirming the consequent which asserts that just because one thing leads to another, doesn’t mean that the second thing leads to the first. While it is true that if your head is cut off then you are dead, it is not the case that if you are dead then your head is necessarily cut off. You might have been hit by a truck.

As obvious as this sounds, this fallacy is an indication of a persistent error in belief and in public argument. Most obviously, it offers a metaphor for how racist thinking works. I was once mugged by a Hispanic man, but it does not follow that if someone is a mugger then he or she is Hispanic. I also know a liberal who is a communist but it does not follow that a communist is necessarily a liberal. To assume otherwise would be to commit the fallacy known as affirming the consequent. Incidentally, although this is only slightly different, it does not follow from these experiences that all Hispanics are muggers, that all liberals are communists, or
to use a timelier example, that just because some terrorists happen to be Muslim, it is not the case that all Muslims are terrorists. To assume a universal truth from one or a few instances is a fallacy called generalizing from a particular (or hasty generalization).

There are many psychological reasons why we make these errors, including our very human tendency to preserve our own beliefs in the face of opposition. And most of us understand that the vast majority of Hispanics are law-abiding citizens, that most liberals are patriots, and that only a miniscule percentage of the more than one billion Muslims embrace violence. However, the fact that we know this now while reading quietly doesn’t mean that that we will remember it when we argue or get into a heated debate. (John Locke argues that one cannot claim to know something if he or she does not remember it.)

Philosophers, by profession, are tasked with pointing out fallacies when they spot them—and there are dozens more than I have listed here—yet members of the general public take it personally when someone points out an error in their reasoning. It is hard to argue with someone who takes inquiry as an insult, and philosophers are particularly good at not taking professional disagreement to heart. In this sense, they’re like the mafia—what they do isn’t personal, it’s just business. However, the problem of arguing relates to the next in my taxonomy of concerns, the problem of consequences. If someone comes to a conclusion, then certain things must necessarily follow. If someone spends all of their money on a new television, for example, they don’t have it to spend on food. If someone is at work, they cannot be at the ballgame (unless they work at the ballgame).

Again, these are simple examples, but let’s consider a more complicated one: the connection between excluding non-American workers from American manufacturing jobs and the necessary loss of value to the American paycheck that results. If the

While it is true that if your head is cut off then you are dead, it is not the case that if you are dead then your head is necessarily cut off. You might have been hit by a truck.
government expels all illegal immigrants from the United States, food prices will necessarily go up because employing them has been a major cost-cutting measure for the food industry. Also, if one stops outsourcing jobs to foreign countries, the cost of products will also rise because, again, labor costs increase. Therefore, those who support such policies must be willing to pay significantly more for goods and services. If they don’t, they are not recognizing the consequences of their positions.

Even so, people want cheaper goods, so what should the government do to lower prices? It can’t lower wages because neither outsourcing nor illegal migrant labor are permitted, so either American workers themselves have to take pay cuts or the government has to subsidize prices. If the government does either, the amount of take-home pay for the American worker is less, either because paychecks are smaller or taxes are higher. Thus, by necessity, someone must be willing to have less money if he or she aims to protect American jobs or borders.

How much this will cost average Americans is a matter of debate, and whether the rising costs is a price worth paying is itself a matter of contention. My point is that philosophers understand that claims have consequences that cannot be ignored, whereas the numerous people who want both to expel immigrants and limit outsourcing while also lowering taxes do not. This group might respond that one can further lower taxes by getting rid of welfare or stopping public funding for education, but still, even when all that is done, restricting immigration and limiting outsourcing lowers wages and raises taxes. There is no way around it.

Philosophers also understand that most of the time, claims and conclusions are uncertain. This is the problem of not knowing and the legacy of what has come to be called Socratic Ignorance. In Plato’s dialogue Apology, Socrates famously claimed that he was the wisest man in all of Athens because he was the only one who knew that he knew nothing. Philosophers, like

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Socrates, are comfortable with theoretical uncertainty, while the general public tends not to be. Thus, if a group of people leave a conversation knowing less than when they started, perhaps even doubting deeply held beliefs, philosophers consider the conversation to be a success while non-philosophers tend to think of it as a failure. Most people do not like the feeling of not knowing things, it makes them anxious. Philosophers revel in it, at least while they are working.

Naturally, most philosophers do not live up to the Socratic ideal of self-doubt. Most I know think that they are right and everyone else is wrong—they share the general public’s tendency to prefer their own answers to others’. While they acknowledge their fallibility in principle, they believe in practice that what they have committed to is in fact true. Years ago, I called the practice of espousing ignorance while not actually believing it as Socra-teasing. It is a game philosophers play. We pretend we think we are ignorant and everyone in the profession lets us pretend.

Thomas Kuhn has argued well that unwavering commitment to a theory actually drives the search for truth, and this may be true, but I would also argue that Socra-teasing, even if it is just posturing, is tremendously important because no inquiry can proceed without at least the theoretical presumption of fallibility. One must understand that there is always, again, at least in theory, the possibility of being wrong, even in the face of personal conviction. Fundamentalists of every stripe refuse this principle, they believe in practice that what they have committed to is in fact true. Years ago, I called the practice of espousing ignorance while not actually believing it as Socra-teasing. It is a game philosophers play. We pretend we think we are ignorant and everyone in the profession lets us pretend.

I have outlined what problems come with doing public philosophy, specifically those related to expertise, persistence, arguing, consequences, and not knowing. This should not be taken as criticism of non-philosophers; doing philosophy with the general public has become one of the most enjoyable parts of my job. However, if the general public wants to be taken seriously as interlocutors, they ought to acknowledge how difficult it is to do philosophy and recognize what standards of debate they will be held to. Here we can return to the question of threshold: how disciplined must philosophy be? I would suggest that anyone who acts in good faith to address the five problems I outline here, anyone who uses their intellect to seek expertise, to be persistent, to argue well, to recognize the consequences of their conclusion, and to acknowledge their fallibility is doing philosophy even if they fail miserably in the process.

Philosophy is not the product, it is the process. It is not the excellence itself, but the attempt to achieve such excellence. If the general public wants to do philosophy they must try to meet the standards of the discipline no matter how they might fall short, but if philosophers themselves want to be taken seriously they must recognize that others are just as capable and entitled to engage in philosophy as they are. Like any other hobbyist, the amateur philosopher has less-refined skills than the professional, but with a genuine interest in the discipline, they too have things to teach.

The philosopher has much to learn from the general public—Aristotle knew this; Plato did not—but the professional philosopher must also publicly model good philosophical thinking. He or she must go out and engage in conversation with those who are willing to participate while also giving credit where credit is due. Professional philosophy is in crisis because the general public doesn’t understand what the philosopher does, but the general public doesn’t understand what the philosopher does because the philosopher doesn’t do it with them. This must change. The only cure for the pervasive anti-intellectualism that surrounds us all is to celebrate the intelligence of everyday life. Roughly twenty-five hundred years ago, Plato described the general public as trapped in a subterranean world created by their ignorance, waiting, en masse for the enlightened thinker to lead them despite the darkness. This model is no longer feasible. Contemporary philosophy must be a joint project, a shared discourse between academe and the world that houses it. The general public has much to offer and professional philosophers must recognize everyday intelligence to survive. In this day and age, it is the philosopher who has to come out of the cave.
Wild Business: A Philosopher Goes Hunting

By Lawrence Cahoone

I was invited to lunch at an upscale Boston restaurant. My hosts, academic gourmands, ordered a sampler of unusual meats, wedges of tripe, pork brains, etc. I was not used to this, but as a guest I enjoyed the novelty. Since quail, pheasant, and duck were on the menu, I asked whether other game meats were served, and offered that my only effort in this direction was a venison liver pâté I had made. Intrigued, one of my hosts asked where I had gotten the liver. I told him it was from a deer I shot. He grimaced and looked away.

In urban and suburban America, and among the educated classes, hunting is often viewed as immoral and uncivilized, and in a decreasingly rural America, the rise of animal rights and animal welfare philosophies has supplemented a cultural turn away from hunting. We are in an odd position. We probably kill more animals than any society in human history—we are eating more meat than most cultures have been able to supply—and our incessant construction of buildings, roads, airports, and the like take away animal living spaces. But we simultaneously find the actual killing of animals abhorrent. There is a great disconnect between our indignation and the way we eat, drive, and build. Evidently, decent, sensitive, socially conscious people do not shoot and butcher animals; they pay minimum-wage workers to do it for them. We even apply this indignation outside our species, sending our children to movies like Shark Tales, where nasty carnivores are taught to be nice herbivores—then after the movie we stop for burgers. The philosopher has to ask the straightforward question: is hunting immoral?

Recent theories of animal rights ascribe to some non-human animals entitlements not to be harmed, while utilitarian theories of animal welfare count animal goods and harms as comparable to human goods and harms. Both conclude that we have moral obligations to avoid harm to animals; doing so needs a justification and can be permitted only if the harm is small enough and/or the human good that comes from it is great enough. In practice, this means animal experimentation, fur-wearing, and meat-eating are generally unjustifiable. Thus, from this perspective, if contemporary hunting is killing animals for sport—in effect, for fun—then it would seem to be, as Joseph Wood Krutch once called it, "pure evil."
Now, most contemporary hunting in America, like hunting by indigenous peoples, provides another good, namely nutrition. Most hunters eat what they kill. This itself is a good reason for not regarding contemporary hunting as a sport, but rather a cultural activity in which modern people try to return to an older practice of finding wild meat themselves, instead of raising domesticated animals and slaughtering them, or paying a rancher, processor, and butcher to do it for them. In the discussion that follows, I will restrict myself to considering hunting in which the prey is eaten. So, my question changes from whether hunting is immoral to whether hunting for food is immoral?

Notice that animal rights and animal welfare claims have a problem when it comes to how we treat wild animals. They do not fit well with ecology or environmental ethics. The latter generally agree that animals have value we ought to honor morally, but their priority is to preserve habitats and biodiversity. Thus, for most environmental ethicists, or anyone who thinks ecologically, wild and endangered animals are more valuable than domesticated and plentiful ones; animal deaths are a natural, even good feature of ecosystems; and vegetation, waterways, and terrain features are goods we may be obliged to protect even at the cost of animal lives. For example, if local populations of deer increase so much that they destroy vegetation or even cause erosion—Aldo Leopold once remarked that “a mountain lives in fear of its deer”—some environmentalists would support culling the herd. Then there is the issue of predation. If a rabbit has a right to life, doesn’t a coyote violate this right just as much as a human hunter does? Environmentally speaking, predation—animals killing animals—is a beneficial part of ecosystems, and to prevent the coyote from eating the rabbit is to harm not just the coyote but the ecosystem. The point is that animal rights and welfare views, which were invented mostly to deal with human harm to domesticated animals, need to be softened to deal with wild nature. Despite this complexity, there is a pretty reliable, although not inescapable, moral claim we can make: if eating meat is moral, then so is hunting. It would be difficult to argue that modern animal husbandry causes less harm to animals than hunting. Hunting probably causes more pain than most modern industrial killing techniques, although it likely causes less pain than the animal’s death from disease, starvation, exposure, or predation in nature. But hunting allows the animal its wild, free life until death, rather than subjecting animals to the stress of crowded feedlots or even the restrictions of free range grazing. And, if an act is immoral, hiring someone to do it for you is too; it can’t be that killing an animal yourself is wrong, but hiring minimum wage workers to do it for you and out of your sight is okay. Again, hunting is only immoral if meat-eating in general is immoral.

So, is it? Along with animal rights/welfare arguments, some assert a moral obligation to be vegetarian by noting that meat-eating is wasteful, that we could feed far more people by eating the grains we feed to domesticated animals, in effect eating lower down on our cultivated food chain. This might well be, but notice it does not apply to hunting, since
hunted animals must by definition be wild, and they must feed on wild plants or other animals.

Note also that even for animal rights and animal welfare arguments against meat-eating, the latter is wrong only because there is an alternative method of gaining the good it brings—nutrition—namely, farming, especially farming for high protein crops such as soybeans. Killing animals for food is wrong, they say, because we have another food production option that doesn’t kill animals.

**But farming does kill animals.** Farming colonizes otherwise wild lands and replaces them with artificial monocultures requiring a constant fight against wild nature’s re-colonization of that land. Farming kills animals by taking away habitat; by poisoning ground water with pesticide and fertilizer; by pollution from fossil-fuel-using machinery, refrigeration, and transportation of produce; by intentional killing of local herbivores to protect crops; and by machinery passes that kill ground nesting animals. Farming is by definition more environmentally intrusive than the selective, in-person culling of one or a few wild animals. Hunting significantly damages ecosystems only when unregulated by wildlife managers. That of course has happened, notably in North America in the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly because of unregulated commercial hunting. But such hunting is now illegal, and hunting is strictly regulated, with licensing fees and taxes on hunting equipment going to protect wildlands and species. That is what wildlife biologist Valerius Geist calls the North American model of public hunting, and it has successfully restored many wild species in recent decades.

Data on the number of animals killed by farming are hard to come by, but some sources indicate that farming’s animal deaths per nutritional unit is comparable to or greater than the animal deaths per nutritional unit for some kinds of hunting, e.g. of large animals like deer. That is, it is probably true that a unit of protein from hunted venison kills fewer animals than the same unit of protein from farmed soybeans when you add farming’s habitat destruction, the environmental harms to the deer or groundhogs the farmer shoots to save his crops, and all the rabbits, birds, snakes, and frogs killed by tilling, planting, and harvesting machinery. The philosophical, or moral, point is clear: farming and hunting both kill animals. The question is which type of farming or hunting, in which environment, regarding which crop or animal species, kills more or fewer animals for the same meal. The choice between hunting and vegetable farming is not a black-and-white choice between killing and not killing, but a choice between gray shades of more and less killing.

What about other goods of hunting? Are there any? Is there any other reason to hunt than nutrition? There are. Regulated, licensed hunting not only provides food, but performs what is at present a crucial role in limiting wildlife species that have no other natural predators. More personally, hunting may be the most responsible form of human carnivory. It embodies what is, from the point of view of environmental ethics, a central virtue, namely trophic responsibility: awareness of and
personal involvement in the sources of our food. This is the same sort of awareness that comes from vegetable gardening.

It is also a fact that hunting has long carried special meaning for its practitioners, meaning most homo sapiens who have ever existed (farming began to replace hunting only ten millennia ago). In the cosmologies of indigenous peoples the predator–prey relation was a moral relationship. It was an exchange in which the human provided the animal respect and thanks, a cultural immortality, and a limit on species populations, while the animal provided humans food and a lesson in the secrets of reality. Animal food was not a what but a revered who, pursuable only by the discerning seeker, a who that dies and becomes the seeker, transforming the latter in the process.

Although today’s hunters are not animists, they do engage in a similar practice. Hunting renews their membership in our human lineage and in the animal sphere, plunging us into the wild on what I call “wild business,” to pursue our existence by its rules according to the bargain of animal existence where life lives at the expense of life. As Ted Kerasote put it in his book Bloodties: Nature, Culture and the Hunt, “The elk in the forest, the myriad of small creatures lost as the combines turn the fields, and the Douglas fir hidden in the walls of our homes—every day we foreclose one life over another … Given this condition and my final inability to escape from it, I decided to go back to hunting … because it attaches me to this place and the animals I love, asking me to own what each of us ought to own in some personal way—the pain that runs the world.”

Now, the critic of hunting may respond that even if pain “runs the world,” we shouldn’t add to it. True enough. But as I have argued, contemporary hunting does not add to the anonymous animal suffering caused unseen by consumers (omnivores and vegetarians alike), but replaces it with death caused personally and directly, in which the animal’s life is intimately recognized and responsibility is taken.

In conclusion, we can say that animal death by hunter is on average less painful than death by farmer or by nature, and while it is more painful than death by enlightened animal husbandry, death by hunter allows the animal its wild life. Regulated, ethical hunting embodies the goods of trophic responsibility, honest carnivory, and a rare experience of animal inter-dependence. Even if one does not credit those goods as balancing the animal lives it takes, hunting must still be moral wherever preservation of species or ecosystems requires hunting as the only viable wildlife management tool, or where the animal cost of farming per unit of nutrition is equal to or greater than that of hunting. Both conditions hold at least some of the time. If so, then in a modern society where both meat-eaters and vegetarians are ever more distant from the sources of their existence, it is arguably good that some choose temporarily to return to the archaic practice of hunting, an activity common to many animals and essential to their ecosystems, so that the participatory awareness of the way life uses death in animal nature does not vanish from human society.

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Yield: Taking Measure of the Land

by Scott Stevens

photo by Shawna Widdel
In my father’s personal mythology of North Dakota, nothing captured the brutal intensity of life as his frequent reference to working “from can see ‘til can’t.” In the last years of his life, I greedily asked about his boyhood in Sarles each time we were together. Less interested in events than a way of life, I acted as scribe for loose bits of memory that captured how the family lived in the 1920s and 30s: the distressed farm, the low house without electricity or light, the tenuous four-mile tether to the smallest of towns. There was little romance in my father’s stories, almost no reverie of childhood, just a reliable well of hardship, deprivation, and work. Always work. Soil bears the fruit of effort, not intention, so the axis of daily life was the energy inhabitants put into the land because everything depended on what the land would yield. Robert Frost understood this unsentimental calculus of a life lived close to the earth when he wrote, “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.”

In those northern summers, “can’t” came late. As my father often reminisced, there wasn’t much else again until first light. It's common now to speak of North Dakota with a kind of twilight reverie—children the primary export, an unchecked exodus of talent and heart, whole towns eclipsing into “can’t see.” In the uncertainties of this fading light, we are left to wrestle with the legacies of place and what the land produced. Philosophers of geography study the effect of place on us and consider how we develop a “geographical self” dependent on the landscapes we inhabit. In essence, they ask what the land asks of us: how a place like North Dakota grows beliefs alongside bushels, cultivating in its people distinctive ways of thinking and feeling.

In 2004, I returned to my father’s birthplace to understand the weight of geography, the magnitude of this place his memory could never leave behind. Though I had never been there, I grew up aware that my people—and by extension, I—came from North Dakota. Even after my family dispersed across the west from Alaska to California, North Dakota remained the strongest current in our collective memory. I came to Sarles the first time to confront the lure of belonging. I wanted to understand what it means to call myself by a name that others share. Now I return to consider what is left of place when place is left behind.
To look across the cleared lots, the short plat easing back to prairie, is to wonder at the lives led here, to imagine their nobility and their insignificance. For some, at least momentarily, life made sense here, and then, after a time, it didn’t. So the people left. In the spaces emptied out, sometimes the need arises to make a story of it all. Alasdair MacIntyre speculates that we invent narratives because we need them to reason, despite their tendency to be less than completely rational. What we might call the preservation narrative repeats the story we know, motivating us to save what is left before it disappears forever; adaptation requires the willingness to tell a new story, a hybrid version that grows from the same resolve, the same dreamy fantasy that brought families up the rail line to discover what the land would yield, and what life it would sustain.

Standing atop the hillock that comprises the Sarles cemetery to the east of what was once a town, I find a burial ground of names, whole clans I recognize from genealogical registers recorded here in red granite, plot lines more clearly marked than the property lines to which those lives were tied. One of my five aunts had her ashes scattered here, but no others made the final return and no stone stands to mark the story of my family or the lives shaped by this town—the quarter century spent in the state.

If place acts as an extension and embodiment of us, and we of it, I expected to find in Sarles reaches of people and lines of lineage as distant and unwavering as the boundaries distinguishing one quarter section from another. On the township map, the lines are clear, just as the boundaries of family seem illuminated in the stories we tell of ourselves. They were these people of this land. Aristotle, so fond of particularity, saw the household as the primary unit of social organization, distinct and essential, a contrast to the state, an abstract fiction, a whole comprised by real, material family units. Aristotle had nothing on North Dakotans. To eke out a life for eight children on 160 acres of windblown farmland makes the concepts of “township” or “nation” recede further than the horizon. Where is state or nation in such a life? Looking backward, cemeteries and census records seem to ratify this perspective. The inevitable conflicts between a civic self and a private entity are almost always resolved in favor of our distinctiveness, the survival units of family, headstones of ideology.

Yet when lives are lived by muscle and the land is vast, cooperation is the only realistic mode of survival. An accurate genealogy of my family includes more than the names of my father and his seven siblings, more than his parents and their kin, extending into other families with even greater significance, carrying a greater debt. Working as one of Bert Marlette’s threshing crew, my grandfather learned that the Rosenberger homestead to the west was for sale and, following the recipe for ambitious young men at the time, set out to secure for himself a place among the landholders of Dash Township. But conventional as this story of itinerant worker and mechanic to landed farmer may have been, it is decidedly not the story of one man’s pluck and courage. It is, rather, the story of lives built on other lives.

Family is a labor that extends far beyond bloodline and threshold. Stories passed down by my father almost always contained references to nearby others. Most of the names that entered my awareness stood as markers of my family’s poverty: Marlette, who brokered the purchase of the land and continued to loan equipment to an incompetent farmer; Carl George, the postmaster and newspaper publisher who let us draw water from his well when the family wintered in the empty old hotel and later at the Grimshaw Bank; Thomas Murphy, whose family table made room among its eleven children to feed my uncles when food was scarce at home, a generosity made possible by the steadiness of Mr. Murphy’s income working for the railroad. I had learned to see these intersecting lines of influence as signs of weakness, but beyond the shadow of my family’s need these reciprocal acts reflect common practices of communal life, from threshing teams to the Order of the Eastern Star. MacIntyre proposes that there is virtue in our reliance on others, even to the point of suggesting that dependency is a central human trait. It is precisely our need for each other that makes us “us.”
To look across the cleared lots, the short plat easing back to prairie, is to wonder at the lives led here, to imagine their nobility and their insignificance.
Over time, material dependencies are replaced by mnemonic reliance. When I returned to Sarles for its centennial, I came bearing the fragments of history handed down in random moments of my father’s reflection. But the celebration, which temporarily swelled the town’s population from twenty-five into the hundreds, gave me relatives in remembering, strangers who owned more of my own family stories than I did. They told me where and how we lived, how my father was as a boy. We were connected in these syndicated accounts, each holding shares made more valuable because they were distributed among us, strangers all, yet familiars to each other.

What raises memory from dormancy? If I work backward, playing the game of family geometry, every moment of the present seems to link itself to these North Dakota origins. In these moments, what makes a place alive isn’t what it was but how what it was sows something new in us.

With Sarles out of sight, I stop along the rail-straight dirt road beside three evergreens that mark the old farmstead entrance. In my pocket I hold a picture of my father taken amidst the dust and horizonless expanse of the western exposure. At three years old he stands on a chair, blowing blond hair he would lose to scarlet fever at 9, a rare documented moment in a life without much time for such ceremonious luxury. There is a profound sense of isolation in the photo, a boy alone against an unblinking sky, as much an icon of social imagination as my father in the flesh. But this faith in the primacy of solitude is a fiercely cultivated act of forgetting.

Like the survey map that accentuates the distances between farmsteads, mainstream academic philosophers often favor the insights of the solitary mind discovering its abstract relationship to truth by universalizing its own perimeter of insight. I would not quarrel with them here. But there is another tradition of social philosophy that mirrors the lives of interdependence sown across the coulees of eastern North Dakota, a line of inquiry that wrestles with the idea of collective life, examining our relations with others, investigating how we develop a moral imagination to guide us in our interactions with each other. Life reduced to mere survival promotes deep social cohesion; only with relative affluence and security can we afford to allow our differences to rise as boundary lines between us.

Frost wrote memorably, “Men work together,’ I told him from the heart, ‘Whether they work together or apart.’”

My family’s reliance on the kindness of others reminds me that poverty is an individual construct, a feature of persons. Need is a community mirror, a call to recognize one’s own responsibilities to others. The mutual vulnerability of life on the northern plains made interdependence more fact than idea, and such connectedness engendered in its people a keen understanding of everyone’s common struggle. It was a given that life was hard here and rarely did any family have the resources to be completely self-sufficient, no matter how far removed.

Ironically, proximity is one concept philosophers use to understand how we imagine the plight of others and then learn to sympathize with their condition. The more distance, social or geographical, between social beings, the more difficult it is to imagine, feel, and act with respect to the circumstances of others. Moral philosophy explains that the sympathy we feel for another is always less potent than the immediacy of our own hardship. We feel our own circumstances more acutely no matter how similar another’s might be. But if there’s a common thread I found in conversations with children of Sarles, most now in their eighties, it is the shared understanding for each other’s hardship, the bond grounded by an equal struggle against the severities of this place. Forced together into material and sympathetic relations across great distance; the immediate proximity of experience collapses the distances of latitude.
I risk here, I know, a romanticism about entanglements at least as faulty as the problem of nostalgizing the agrarian past. Small towns like Sarles knew trauma, pain, and violation just as sure as any other. And as in all places, uncertainty about our collective boundaries led to communal silence over shameful acts of human frailty. Are those stories memorialized in some other graveyard? My own grandfather, haunted by a taste for liquor and a Women’s Christian Temperance Union wife with eight children, met failure with light feet and deserted the family when flax prices collapsed in the mid 1930s. The town did its best to help, but not even a hardy woman with eight children can harvest what won’t grow. Charity has open but shallow pockets, so my family carried its need to the pinewoods of Eastern Washington to begin the cycle of interdependence all over again.

What do the 19 people reportedly now remaining in Sarles depend upon? In all of our philosophical and civic debates over social safety nets and opportunity and individual initiative, we fail so often to understand what the early planners of these prairie outposts knew: it takes a critical mass to form the mutual interdependencies capable of sustaining a town. As material necessity has been replaced by un-grounded affluence, we no longer understand the conditions of our own survival.

What happens when these bonds forged across quarter section and dangerous isolation are traded for convenience of suburbia and the sunbelt? Does moral sentiment decay? Does it, like the barns and houses, sway first from disuse and then collapse, leaving only rubble for a few strangely curious passersby? Celebrating what we used to be is the easy story, the idea that this place was special among all others. Interdependence is reborn every day.

There is a truth here, standing with the few buildings that still exist and by those that are no more. But it is not a truth that is recoverable, at least not by propping up the towns and buildings we wish we could preserve. Sarles wasn’t once; it only came to be a reference against the expanse of sky by a confluence of factors so distant as to seem almost random, a series of timely accidents. I think the story of Sarles and of every other town closer to prairie than Pittsburgh is that cycles encompass our lives. Rousseau tells us societies have lives, they thrive and die. All things end. That tide of children leaving annually? Who wouldn’t want them to stay? Who wouldn’t want this land and the towns that nurtured their prior generations to remain?

Is it tolerable to think of towns like these without imagining a future for them? If nostalgia is fed by the fear of change and loss, I think we must wonder at our stubbornness in the face of what we have always known to be true: the horizon isn’t limitless, the soil not infinitely fertile. Place continues, as does memory. They are not forever the same.

These are American ruins. Towns like Sarles slide slowly away, testifying to what we have been and to something that we still are. Even something as mute as forty vertical feet of corrugated elevator-tin holds a complex story of human relatedness that is cheapened when we are merely nostalgic. In his poem, “The Place for No Story,” the poet Robinson Jeffers wrote, “This place is the noblest thing I have ever seen.” In its grandiose and abandoned school, its few remaining homes and even fewer businesses, Sarles gives way.

Scott Stevens carried his North Dakota roots (and several pounds of Sarles red granite) to Bellingham, Washington where he teaches writing and rhetoric at Western Washington University. He dreams one day of spending a year in Sarles to experience more completely the beautiful severity of the North Dakota landscape that shaped his ancestors.
Headlining the festival will be 2010 One Book South Dakota author and founder of McSweeney’s, Dave Eggers (What is the What, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, Zeitoun). Other exciting presenters include Jimmy Santiago Baca (A Glass of Water), Hampton Sides (Ghost Soldiers), Jeffrey Ketertba (Inklings) with his band the Prairie Cats, Alison Hedge Coke (Blood Run), Marilyn Johnson (This Book is Overdue: How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All), Peter Orner (The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo), Valzyna Mort (Factory of Tears), Rob Fleder (Sports Illustrated: The Football Book), Debra Marquart (The Horizontal World) and Pete Dexter (Sponner, Deadwood, Paris Trout). The line-up also includes an all-star cast of local authors including Jon Lauck (Daschle Vs. Thune: The Anatomy of a High-Plains Senate Race), Freya Manfred (Swimming With a Hundred Year Old Snapping Turtle), Jim Reese (Ghost on 3rd), Patrick Hicks (This London), Gary Harbo (The Black Hills Adventure), David Allan Evans (This Water. These Rocks.) and many others!

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Fireflies

By Jonathan Twingley
Insomnia has a sound. Usually it’s something like a hollow wooden tick-tick-tick – the sound of a clock – or sometimes it’s a faint metallic noise, mercury dripping into a rusty bucket of lukewarm pond water. It’s a frustrating sound because you can’t really put your finger on exactly what it is, but when the angels of sleep won’t come, that sound is there.

In New York City, where I am tonight, an alley cat outside my studio window is howling holy hell for a mate. It’s summertime in this northern city and it’s hot, like being locked up inside a sweaty sock without an air conditioner and the cat outside my window, five floors down, doesn’t have anybody to love. I guess we’re all lonely and frustrated tonight.

I’m a healthy young man, but tonight I’m thinking about other things, all the old irrationals: Do I have testicular cancer? Will I ever find a woman to love? Did I shave yesterday? Should I get up and shave now? Will my receding hairline ever stop receding? Why is there more hair growing in my ears than on the top of my head? Will I lose my mind if I get really old? Is this cancer on my cheek, or is it just a pimple? Am I fat or am I average? If I meet that Woman, what if our kids are losers? Are Gypsies real? What if my plane crashes? What’s my triglyceride count? Do I drink too much whiskey? Do I drink too much coffee? I think I broke my pinky toe yesterday on the bathroom doorframe. Are my teeth rotting? When my Dad told me, “Good luck in New York, son, you’re gonna need it” was he wishing me well or kicking me in the pants as I left home? Did I make a bad career choice? Will I be able to pay my rent next month?

It’s never rational sorts of thoughts at 4:13 on a Monday morning, awake and alone.

My big dream growing up in Pensacola, Florida was to be a race car driver, and I’m not talking Formula One or that other sissy stuff – I wanted to be a NASCAR man with a hundred thousand people cheering me on at two-hundred miles an hour, blond girls in bikinis at all of the finish lines with bouquets of flowers and cans of ice cold beer. I had it very specifically planned out at a very young age: Get a job in some pit crew somewhere, and basically learn the ropes of the trade, work my way up to a pole position.

When we were growing up my friend Howard Trustless always laughed at me when we shared our ideas about what the future would look like because Howard wanted to be a baseball player, first base for some contender. He said NASCAR was a southern hick cliché. And that was another thing I never liked about Howard Trustless when we were kids: He had a handle on the English language at a very early age, always using words like cliché and articulate. I pretty much hated that about him.

But here I am, all grown up – almost thirty years old – living in New York City, driving a school bus for “under-privileged” kids in the Bronx. And it’s ironic, because until I had to give up my dreams of being a race car driver and take this crummy job, I actually felt privileged.
I’ve been lying here on my futon now for hours in this cheap little studio apartment. It’s not much but it’s all I can afford, driving the bus forty hours a week. And my thoughts are rambling away uncontrollably in that silent, after-hours way: Does eternity hurt? What’s the worse way to die, fire or drowning? Dear God: Please don’t let me die before my mother does, and let my mother live forever. And I’m realizing now these little flashes of light outside my window on the fire escape, and then the light slowly fading out, like lightning bugs, except it isn’t a little green light, it’s a little orange light. It flashes white each time at the beginning, glows faintly orange and then disappears for a minute or two. It’s a subtle thing, like fireflies, and has been going on outside on the fire escape for fifteen or twenty minutes. By the time I recognize it I realize that it’s been going on for a while. Maybe I’ve just been writing those little flashes off as part of the long, hot night.

I lift my head up and look over there, through the darkened little kitchen to the window leading out to the fire escape. Another firefly sparks and burns and fades. And there in the fading light is a figure, a scrawny skeleton out there on my fire escape wearing an overcoat in all this heat. Jesus, baby Jesus. What the hell is going on? I slip off the futon and fall down to the floor like water. This is my deepest nighttime paranoia manifest: Somebody – or worse, some thing – breaking into my apartment for blood or for money. Sweet Christ.

My biggest fear when I was a kid growing up on Pembroke Lane in Pensacola, Florida was burglars, uninvited guests casting their shadows on my bedroom door as they walked down the hall, poking their heads around the corner into my room. It was all imagination, but I used to lay awake for hours underneath the covers just sweating and shaking out of fear for that thing that wasn’t there. But in the end, that was the problem: If the burglars were there, what else was possible? Children need comfortable boundaries to keep them in, and to keep those other things out. Just the idea of that boundary being broken was terrifying. And it still is. There are fireflies on my fire escape and a dark figure. I live on the fifth floor of a pre-war building in New York City and there’s no reason for dark figures or fireflies to be up here. Not now. We should all be sleeping.

I’ve got to get closer, though, because I’m not a child anymore. I’m an adult. I drive a bus full of “under-privileged” kids forty hours a week. Paid holidays.

I slink along the wooden floor of the living room on my hands and knees, onto the cool linoleum of the little kitchenette of my studio apartment. Another little white light flashes, burns briefly and then fades away. In the brief light this time it’s obvious that the fireflies have some sort of dark keeper, some human thing out there on the fire escape. The kitchen window is open because it’s hot and I needed a cross draft tonight. I scoot along the floor there to the open window and pull my chin up to its ledge.

“Ruby?”

“Hey. It’s-my-birthday.”

Good God. It’s Ruby.

Ruby is a homeless man in our neighborhood, a sweet middle-aged black man, dangerously thin but seemingly impervious to all the various elements of New York City. The heat, the cold, the crime, the crack, the hunger – none of it ever seems to really bother Ruby. He’s been living in the parking lot of the fried chicken shack across the street from my apartment building for as long as I’ve been here, and he’s always treated me like a neighbor, like we’ve both bought into some sort of card game where when he asks me if I can spare any money, it doesn’t matter if I can or if I can’t. No hard feelings, that sort of thing. No bitterness.

“Jesus, Ruby, what the hell are you doing out here?”

“A-A-Ahm just looking…At...It’s-crazy-what-people-throw-away.” Ruby has a lapful of discarded Lotto tickets, all scratched up and bent and wet. “Youknow...L-L-Last week...I-got-five-hundred-dollars-off-one-of-these. Because…peoplelookatthemtoofast!”

I’ve known all sorts of people who speak like Ruby does, or at least in the ballpark – not quite a stutter, just a pattern of words that the brain can’t quite get in line in time for the mouth. As far as anybody can tell, Ruby lives off of these things, spent Lotto tickets that are really winners. Any day of the week – summer, spring, winter or fall – you’ll see him out on Broadway with his head down to the ground, like he’s hunting arrowheads on a beach in Pensacola. Or you’ll see him in some dark doorway late at night with his hand-me-down bifocals, scanning used Lotto tickets like a man in a high-stakes poker game at the Golden Nugget. And I’ve always accepted this about him: We’re all fighting for it. Ruby’s just sort of made up his own rules, like we all do, I suppose, but his rules are a little less conventional or, at least, a little more rigorous.

“Ruby. What are you doing up here on my fire escape?”

“It’s-my-birthday,” he says.
Every time you see Ruby he tells you that it’s his birthday. It’s a panhandler’s refrain, but he always says it and I don’t even think he realizes that he’s saying it anymore. It’s just a line he came up with, however-many-years-ago, and it sort of stuck because maybe it worked for a while as a sympathy vote for loose change, and then at some point he just kept saying it anyway. Or maybe he did say it on his actual birthday once, standing outside the dollar burger joint down the street, and for that night it really worked – worked like fire – and he was rolling in paper money for a day or two, all because he was down on his luck on his birthday and everybody has birthdays and everybody can sympathize with that.

“But Ruby, it’s five o’clock in the morning. And you’re on a fifth-floor fire escape. My fire escape.”

“People-never-really-look-at-these-things,” he blurs out in a contorted whisper, holding half-a-dozen spent tickets. “You-know…L-L-Last week…I-got-five-hundred-dollars-off-one-of-these.” In his lap among the spent tickets are matchbooks, too, the blank white kind you get with cigarettes for free at the bodega across the street. “I-used-to-work-in-advertising,” he says. “I-had-the-Perdue-Chicken-account.”

It’s dark on the fire escape now.

“Y-You know,” Ruby says, “peacocks always sleep in the trees because wolves can’t climb trees.”

He sets his wrinkled cards down and grabs a book of matches from his pile, tears one out, strikes it and quickly moves it to the top card in his hand, squinting there in the faint light at what’s been scratched away and what might still be there. A white flash, then orange, then dark again.

“Did you win anything tonight, Ruby?” I ask him quietly. I’m exhausted, but there’s a comforting breeze coming from out there on the fire escape.


“I’ve got to get some sleep, Ruby.”

“Nobody-ever-checks-these-things,” he says.

I stand up and head back to the old futon, lay my head down on the damp pillow and look up at the same ceiling. Ruby strikes another match out there on my fire escape and squints – a white flash, then orange, then dark again. I close my eyes and sleep comes easily now, because I’m not alone and Ruby’s safe from the wolves on his birthday. □
Why Philosophers Should Study Sports
By Paul Gaffney

At first glance, the “philosophy of sport” might appear to involve a curious mixture of interests: philosophy, after all, is usually considered to be one of the most sober-minded and serious of investigations, and as an academic discipline it has a long and noble history. Philosophers typically devote their energies to such profound issues as the meaning of life, the imperatives of justice, and the evidence for God’s existence. As is evident, these questions involve real intellectual work, and what makes the effort all the more daunting is the nagging worry that the answers might well be beyond human capacity to grasp.

When philosophy doesn’t connect with the general public, it can seem dry, difficult, and irrelevant to everyday life. Sports, on the other hand, seem to represent an escape from all that. Even the etymology of the word—from the old English disport, meaning diversion or redirection—suggests something less central and less indispensable than the basic themes of human existence. Sports are familiar and fun, and they are not that difficult to understand. If ‘serious’ is the word that best captures the mood of philosophy, ‘playfulness’ might be the word that best captures the mood of sports. So, before we do anything else, we have to ask whether we should be serious about our playfulness.

The answer, I believe, is yes—and for a variety of reasons. First, sports matter to people. Not only do participants and spectators take sports seriously, but for many people sports represent a fundamental, even a defining, component of the good life. For example, after the September 11th tragedy, The New York Times ran a series of short bios of the victims, generally about a paragraph each. An astonishing number of these pieces made prominent reference to the person’s favorite sport to play or favorite team to cheer on. Even an unsympathetic observer would have to be impressed—if not alarmed—by the amount of time, energy, and money that our culture devotes to sports.

According to at least one understanding of philosophy, philosophers should begin their research with the “received opinions,” that is, they should consider how people actually live and what they really care about, especially as they attempt to assess the human good. If sports are so much wasted time (which of course I don’t think they are), or if they are rather harmless releases of aggressive tendencies, or even if they are some grand expression of the human spirit, they still need to be “situated” in a structure of human values and objectives. In other words, whatever sport turns out to be, philosophers have to figure out where it fits into the human experience and how it relates to all of our hopes and dreams, into the meanings of our lives.

Many interpret sports symbolically, that is to say, as representing needs and drives that underlie the apparently playful engagement, motivations that might be unknown even to the participants themselves. I will cite two extreme instances. On the one hand, sports are thought by some to be instances of what we might call “domesticated warfare,” which is to say, sports may be seen as relatively safe expressions of our basically selfish and violent instincts. In this interpretation, the combatants in a sporting event struggle over scarce goods, such as fame, fortune, and glory, but they do so within strictly enforced regulations and without the usual bloodshed of war. (Most of the time, people don’t die.) Many believe—or at least hope for—the cathartic effect
of such institutional engagements; they want sports to get war out of our system. However, others worry that the sports culture actually cultivates a greater appetite for selfishness and aggression, that sports makes us more violent, more antagonistic. In either case, however, this understanding of sports describes its purpose in terms of what we might think of as the lower drives of human nature, the more animalistic side of who we are.

In contrast, there are some who see sports as an expression of our most exalted aspirations; Michael Mandelbaum, for example, has suggested that modern-day sports serve as substitutes for religious experience. The plausibility of this claim comes from the idea that humans have a deep-seated need to devote themselves to some larger purpose and to some greater community from which they derive a sense of belonging and meaning. In this understanding, both religious celebrations and sporting events represent breaks from the mundane, working rigors of everyday life. Both have their calendars of ritual and tradition and both present heroic figures that are worthy of emulation. In the United States, for example, one could make a strong case that Super Bowl Sunday is the most devout day of the year.

Leaving the symbolic understandings for the moment, others take sports more at face value. To some extent, we might consider sports as bearing some similarity to the arts: both are distinctively human, both are intrinsically valuable expressions of the human spirit, and both deeply satisfy their devotees. Sports hold out, in some analogous manner to the arts, the possibility of grace and beauty, and true achievement in both sports and art requires sustained dedication and integration of mind and matter. If some want to say, as some will, that sports are lesser expressions of the human spirit than the arts and that they are therefore inadequate vehicles for self-definition, then they need to explain that judgment because it is not obvious. If this ordering assumes that the arts were excellences of the mind or spirit, while sports were achievements of the body, and that the mind is naturally superior to the body, then the comparison is probably misinformed on both sides. All of the arts involve some physical expression in colors or sounds or textures, which demands technical mastery by artists, just as all sports require a mental focus, discipline, and clarity for optimal performance.

Regardless of how we choose to explain sports, all of the above takes seriously the fact that people care about them and very often find part of life’s meaning in their engagement. Finding out whether they are right or wrong is sufficient reason to be studied by the philosopher.

A second reason why sports merit our attention is that sports represent something like a culture unto themselves. They have an interesting relationship to other cultural institutions and to the larger society itself. That is to say, organized sports are rule-governed activities that reward a certain kind of excellence. Philosophers like to say that sports are structured by constitutive rules, rules that define the game, such as three strikes making an out in baseball, or that the ball must land within the lines in tennis. Constitutive rules can be contrasted with regulative rules that govern other, pre-existing activities such as the prohibitions and obligations of social interaction. In other words, with sports we have created conventional activities that allow for and isolate a kind of engagement between people that we consider to be valuable, and any failure to respect the boundaries represents an infraction carrying some sanction. Or, to put the point simply, in sports, if you cheat, you are no longer...
playing the sport itself, you are doing something different and less valuable than the activity you have abandoned. Cheating therefore deserves to be punished because it violates the integrity of the sport and the values that the sport represents.

It is very often suggested that participation in sports, particularly for young people, is a valuable educational experience. Through them, one learns how to strive for goals within definite boundaries, often in collaboration with teammates and in opposition to competitors; participants inevitably confront the realities of success and failure. Furthermore, the culture of sports is a strict meritocracy, at least in principle, and this commitment has occasionally stood as a noble example for the greater society. For example, a figure like Jackie Robinson—the player who broke baseball’s color barrier primarily because he was good and could help his team win—represents the inauguration of a whole new worldview, long before the culture caught up to civil rights with sufficient urgency. Indeed, as Stephen Miller has pointed out, our cherished ideals of democracy, inclusion, and fair play, all of which found their earliest expressions in the Western tradition in fifth century BCE Athens, were taken from the accepted code of honor in the Olympic Games, and only then given widespread political significance. The parallel cultures of sport and society are neither fully insulated from, nor fully integrated with, one another: some actions that are perfectly acceptable within the sports culture would be crimes outside of it—a vicious hit in football or hockey come to mind—and some behaviors that are acceptable in some non-sporting situations are strictly forbidden within the world of sports—betting on games, for example.

In the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says something that helps us understand the two reasons I have suggested for engaging in the philosophic study of sport: “We are un-leisurely in order to have leisure.” What this means is that we work in order to play, or that we do what is necessary to live so we can have the opportunity to celebrate our human lives. This distinction between work and play should not be confused as a statement about the amount of effort involved in the two spheres, because much of what we do in our leisure is quite demanding. Art, philosophy, religion, and all theoretical sciences are all, strictly speaking, leisurely pursuits—in fact, the Greek word for ‘leisure,’ scholé, is the root of our word for ‘school’. I think sports, at least in their best instantiations, belong in this same group, even if they are assigned a lesser status than some of the other leisurely activities. The point here is that it is precisely because sports are not necessary in a practical sense that they are so important in a human one: the playfulness of sport is one of its most compelling features, and the very reason we should take it seriously.

All the activities of the “real” world—such as providing for the necessities of life and health—might be more urgent and foundational than sport, but they are less important than the activities that we engage in once the foundation is provided. It follows from this that sports are not merely or even primarily intelligible as preparations for the “real” tasks of life. In other words, even if playing sports teaches us important life lessons, it under-appreciates their intrinsic value to regard them solely for their educational significance. To give a parallel example, it is an empirical fact that studying music in one’s youth is a good mental exercise and a contributing factor to later success on standardized tests but while this is all well and good, it is not the reason why playing the piano is a wonderful thing for a young person to do. Neither sports, nor music, nor any other of the leisurely activities need anything beyond themselves to justify their value.

We live in a competitive world. This claim is, at once, both a cliché and a philosophical problem that requires interpretation and evaluation. I consider competitive sport to be the purest mode of all the competitive institutions that structure modern society, the paradigm case that makes sense of their historical development and their implicit ideals. That is to say, it is precisely because adversarial law, market capitalism, and democratic politics approximate the ideals of a well-regulated and fairly played sporting event that we intuit their moral acceptability. We like the idea of a level playing field in our engagements, and we recognize the virtues of an open exchange. Even “serious” practices such as law, economics, and politics can learn something from the “playful” character and the competitive structure of sports.

Philosophers have good reasons to study sport because it possesses inherent value and provides an exemplar for many of our institutional procedures. And that is not all. Philosophy itself is animated by a kind of a competitive drive, both in its dialectical structure and in its need to confront rival claims. To be sure, philosophy very often studies serious topics, but ultimately it is nothing more mysterious than a good back-and-forth discussion between earnest contenders, a “play of ideas” that almost everyone enjoys when they are brought into the mix. In sport, philosophers should recognize something of their own enterprise.
When I was a philosophy major at the University of North Dakota, the fact that I am a female North Dakotan rarely crossed my mind. It wasn’t until I arrived at Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta that these two seemingly insignificant aspects of my existence began to color my experience as a philosopher. I was there to earn my Masters Degree and, as it turns out, very few women go to grad school for philosophy. Even fewer become professors. There were about twenty-five students in my incoming class, only three of whom were women. Of the three of us, I am the only one who is going on for a PhD in philosophy after graduation. And like many people I meet when I travel, most of my cohorts told me that I was the first person they had ever met, or even heard of, from North Dakota. For the first time being a woman and a North Dakotan became my defining characteristics.

Simone de Beauvoir argues in The Second Sex that, “A man would never
get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: ‘I am a woman’; and on this truth must be based all further discussion.” Like Beauvoir, I am forced to define myself by my gender; unlike her, however, I must add my home state to the mix. **Being from North Dakota can sometimes be a strange experience, because we are both proud and apologetic for it at the same time.** If I am friendly and hospitable, people say it is because I am from North Dakota. If I am shy or not aggressive enough as a philosopher, that too is attributed to the state. When I make an insightful remark about human nature, it must be because I’ve seen a different side of humanity in safe, little North Dakota, but if I haven’t read enough philosophy or haven’t interacted with diverse groups of people, it must be because I was raised in that backwards Siberia.

This duality is overwhelming. As North Dakotans, any time we step out of the comfort zone we are faced with simultaneous praise and shame. **We are called the epitome of “real America” but the rest of the country forgets that we exist.** In many ways then, being a North Dakotan and a woman in philosophy are analogous: neither trait falls within the widely accepted stereotype of a “real philosopher.” These qualities are what make my philosophical perspective unique, but they are also that which causes people to push me aside and not take me as seriously.

The fact that philosophy remains so uniformly male and largely urban is problematic because it results in the silencing of voices that do not
fit the norm. If philosophical inquiry continues to be defined by a homogeneous group of insiders, those who do philosophy differently will continue to be shut out. For example, feminist philosophy, a significant interest of mine, is often taken less seriously than more established branches of the discipline. The common conception is that feminist inquiry is not “real philosophy” because it approaches classical philosophical problems from an unusual angle. Merrill and Jaakko Hintikka explain that this misunderstanding originates in the view that “the problems with which [feminist philosophy] deals do not appear to have a sufficiently important theoretical component to be labeled philosophical; hence the analyses and solutions it offers are thought not worthy of the designation ‘philosophy’.” In other words, the problems dealt with by feminist philosophy are neither important nor theoretical enough to be called philosophy at all. But it is not the case that feminist or North Dakotan methods are neither philosophical nor unimportant. It is only that those already inside the established group of traditional academic philosophers conceive of a limited number of ways to do philosophy well. In reality there are numerous methods of inquiry that have yet to be recognized as legitimate. The problem, again, is the homogeneity of the profession as it stands now.

Like feminist philosophers, those in the Upper Midwest have the ability to make valuable contributions to the discipline. Most North Dakotans I have met are not aware that they do philosophy every day, hence the Institute for Philosophy in Public Life and their slogan “there is no ivory tower.” The motto implies that there is not just one right way of doing philosophy, but it has a second important meaning as well. Since many academic philosophers would reject the notion that North Dakotans are doing daily philosophy, it reminds the professionals that they do not have a monopoly on philosophical inquiry. Every time a North Dakotan calls into the Why? radio show to ask a question or make a point, for example, she forces academic philosophy to recognize that its definition of inquiry is too narrow. In such cases, the radio listener does not need to apologize for not fitting academic philosophy’s definition of an ideal philosopher. Rather, it becomes the responsibility of philosophical insiders to rethink their limited, uniform definition of what philosophical inquiry is. Perhaps academic philosophers need to begin to see themselves as mediators who facilitate discussion among communities, rather than as part of a special club with privileged access to true philosophical inquiry. This understanding of philosophy is both feminist and North Dakotan.

But the fact that we do not need to apologize for being North Dakotans should not be confused with the assertion that our philosophical perspective is intrinsically any more important than any other. Although our insights are valuable, unique doesn’t necessarily mean better. In reference to sexism, Simone de Beauvoir argues “People have tirelessly sought to prove that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man….If we are to gain understanding, we must get out of these ruts; we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh.” This means that until we move beyond the debate about whose perspective is most valuable, we will all be at a standstill. Similarly, my point is not to argue that North Dakota is better than any place else, but rather to suggest that we have a rare voice within the philosophical community that deserves to be heard as much as any other. Our collective timid nature as a state can no longer act as an apology to the outside world nor should it continue to give us a false sense of superiority.

The philosophical approach known as Feminist Standpoint Theory can help illustrate the epistemological contributions of silenced groups. Epistemology is the study of the nature and
limits of knowledge, and Standpoint Theory argues that what we can know is in some way related to our situations as individuals within social groups. For example, a woman has a special insight into what it means to be female that a man cannot have by virtue of her sex. However, being female only gives a woman privileged access to those areas of knowledge for which sex is relevant. Being female does not necessarily give someone privileged access to accounting, chemistry, or astrophysics because sex is not pertinent to these studies. Similarly, as North Dakotans, we have an insight into what it means to live in a rural area that someone from a major city simply cannot have, just as they have insights into urban life that we do not. Thus, if we remain silent, philosophical discussion will lack the unique North Dakotan standpoint that is necessary to see an issue from every angle. This is especially detrimental to philosophy when our viewpoints are silenced in discussions about which we have privileged epistemic status—those discussions in which our knowledge contributes something novel, such as discussions about the nature of justice in a small rural community or the place of identity in farm life. Our voices are essential for the philosophical community to describe the world the way it really is, not just the way urban dwellers see it.

It might seem as though our “North Dakotaness” probably isn’t relevant to most philosophical debates, but that simply is not true. Whatever our different standpoints may be, be they North Dakota, female or male, hetero-or homosexual, republican or democrat, etc, they affect the way we

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understand the world around us. A concrete example of a discussion that requires the North Dakotan standpoint is the nature of human cooperation. For North Dakotans, adversity comes largely from the forces of nature (floods, freezing temperatures, crop failure). The best way to overcome that hardship is to cooperate with one another and form tight-knit communities. Thus the amount of people who are willing to spend time sandbagging homes around the Red River each year is both astonishing and perfectly normal from the North Dakotan point of view. Because this level of cooperation is expected in North Dakota, we understand human nature and cooperation in a different way than people with different backgrounds. Philosophers who grew up in Atlanta often disagree with me about what it means to be a member of a community. For them, adversity usually comes in the form of other people rather than the forces of nature. This outlook on life changes the way a metropolitan person does social and political philosophy compared to someone with a rural background. But both the rural and urban understandings of adversity are necessary to achieve a realistic view of human cooperation because people not only live in both areas but, like me, they often move back and forth from one to the other. Similarly, a person with an urban background may be more open to diversity than someone from North Dakota, where people seem to be more prone to an intense fear of outsiders. A full account of the human experience requires both perspectives.

But being a female North Dakotan is not only about unique insights. Unfortunately, there are distinct downsides to being who I am. Bias may make it harder for me to find a job one day because as a woman I do not fit the stereotype of a philosopher (middle aged, white, male, with a beard, etc.). There will also likely be pressure to change my style of philosophy to better fit the norm, because neither feminist nor North Dakotan philosophy are as publishable in mainstream journals as other research is.

Because I got my undergraduate degree from North Dakota, I had to do extra work to catch up with my colleagues who got their degrees from more prominent schools. I didn’t have the network necessary to make my transition into grad school easier since I didn’t know of anyone from North Dakota who had ever gone to grad school for philosophy. So, my first year at GSU was extremely lonely because I was so far from home and had so few opportunities for philosophical interactions with either women or people from my home state.

But it is exactly what makes me an anomaly in philosophy that makes my voice unique and valuable. The philosophical community needs the voices of mothers from ND, Native Americans from ND, students from ND, framers from ND, vegetarians from ND, and every other combination of possible standpoints. Every time a North Dakotan is content to sit on the sidelines of philosophical argument, we do the academic community a disservice by denying them our unique perspectives; we no longer have an excuse to be philosophical wallflowers. When I speak up as a North Dakotan woman during a debate, I help to make the discussion more robust and diverse by adding my voice into the mix.

Elizabeth Sund just completed her Masters in Philosophy at Georgia State University in Atlanta, and will be headed to Melbourne Australia to commence her PhD at Monash University in June. She is looking forward to writing her dissertation on the beach, surrounded by marsupials and poisonous snakes. She hopes to return to North Dakota one day to teach philosophy.
PAINTED HORSES AND SYMBOLS OF THE LAKOTA
By S. D. Nelson

For the Lakota People of the Great Plains the Circle of Life is real. Their traditional use of bold colors and pictographic symbols offers insight into their world view. Native American author and illustrator, S. D. Nelson will provide a contemporary interpretation of traditional Lakota pictographic symbols, color usage, and ledger book art.

7:00 p.m. Thursday, October 21, 2010
Historic Fargo Theatre
Fargo, North Dakota
Free and Open to the Public
Bibliomancy

Stone dunes petrified mid-gust
are a palm you cannot read;
the dying lake defies your crying eyes.
You are the daring-glass
and the lark bedazzled. Phrenology
of the redrock reveals a dreamer,
anticipation his exquisite pain; perhaps
a defender of lost causes. The cards say
head west. You head west, where you dream
jellyfish bloom like dinner plates while
seals scarify their hides in inscrutable patterns.
Black cormorants shit their white stink
into the sea, where it swirls like the lees
in your wineglass. On the bluffs, you’re wondering
what your body would write on the rocks below
when you meet a stranger. Here the trail goes cold.
After endless spreads, you both decide
the cards have aligned against you.

Even lesser divinations of mice,
laughter, swinging wedding ring,
tell you nothing. You drive east, then north
and no sooner, a sparrow hits the windshield,
a special providence proclaims you’re getting warm.
The air worries with heat. Where lightning strikes
auspiciously, you find what you seek,
and your chest erupts with love.

Reading your hot entrails, we know how,
o how, your heart reeks of him.
— Heidi Czerwiec
A Lesson in Living

this land
from where my heart sprang
where my father took his first breath
my grandmother her last

horizon to horizon
I turned from you
head wrenched back over my shoulder
and I run to you again
asking you to find me here

somewhere

I once knew you
this place
and I scream to you to break this hurt against your granite stones
I lurch my despair off your buttes
I march
I march
I march
across your fields

I plead

as you gently twist my hair in the wind
and cradle me in the rolling hills
you return to me the rosy cheeks of my youth
and lead my feet on trails I once cut
over and
over and
over

all the while trees are falling
roots torn from the ground
birds crashing to earth

storms howling

and you soak up the tears
back to the dirt
as the first purple flower of spring pushes through
you speak not a word

and go on living

— Jessie Veeder Scofield
Advice

There are two kinds of people in the world:
    you and me.
And we’ve wrung our hands,
squandered our time like a cough.
Someone believes in deities,
    while deities believe in some others.
Believing, perhaps, is not the ultimate love
    for either of us. What to do?
There are two kinds of people in the world.
    More than one is not lying.

— Nancy Devine
What gives your life deeper meaning and content?

The Institute for Philosophy in Public Life is dedicated to the belief that anyone can be a philosopher. Through call-in radio shows, film series, institute lectures and discussion groups, and publications like On Second Thought’s philosophy issue, IPPL gets you involved in the philosophical action. No experience or credentials necessary.

Created to cultivate conversations between academic philosophers and the general public, the institute’s events are fun and accessible, archived online, and always free. Because everyone does philosophy daily and because doing philosophy makes the world a better place.

Is there a moral obligation to provide health care to others?  
What is forgiveness? Why and when should we forgive?  
What is the meaning of athletic competition?  
Is it possible to export democracy to other countries? Should we try to?

Why? Philosophical Discussions About Everyday Life – IPPL’s flagship radio show, broadcast at 5 p.m. on the second Sunday of every month on Prairie Public radio and online. Call-in, email, or join our chat room during the show to ask the guests questions. Some upcoming guests include: Carol Gilligan, Charles Taylor, Arthur Danto, Paul Sum, Brian Leiter, K. Anthony Appiah, and Robin Runge, discussing topics ranging from the meaning of art to the role of secular life in the modern world.

Do philosophy with Marlon Brando one month and with zombies soon after! The Art & Democracy Film Series highlights philosophy in the most entertaining of ways. Join IPPL at 7 p.m. on the last Wednesday of every month at the Empire Arts Center in downtown Grand Forks for a diverse list of films and an open-ended discussion afterward. Upcoming films include: On the Waterfront, Meet John Doe, Modern Times, Saturday Night Fever, Night of the Living Dead, and Sullivan’s Travels.

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Because there is no ivory tower.
Statewide Programming

June 13
Why? Radio Show
Eric Sevareid and the Philosophy of Journalism with guest Clay Jenkinson
Pre-recorded live in Minot, ND on June 3 at the Taube Museum.
5 p.m. on Prairie Public Radio

July 11
Why? Radio Show
Exporting Democracy Revisited: A report from Romania with guest Paul Sum
5 p.m. on Prairie Public Radio

August 8
Why? Radio Show
Domestic Violence and the Law: China vs. the U.S.A with guest Robin Runge
5 p.m. on Prairie Public Radio

September 12
Why? Radio Show
The Profession of Philosophy Redux with guest Brian Leiter
5 p.m. on Prairie Public Radio

October 10
Why? Radio Show
Topic to be determined
5 p.m. on Prairie Public Radio

November 14
Why? Radio Show
Topic to be determined
5 p.m. on Prairie Public Radio

December 12
Why? Radio Show
Topic to be determined
5 p.m. on Prairie Public Radio

Daily Dakota Datebook
Radio Features
8:35 am, 3:50 pm, 6:30 pm and 7:50 pm on Prairie Public Radio

Mondays
American Experience
Television’s most-watched history series, on air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America’s past and present. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE programs are broadcast nationally on PBS Monday nights at 9 p.m.

Bismarck

November 2009 – November 2011
Daily Exhibit: How Does Your Garden Grow
Gardening in North Dakota Exhibit
North Dakota Heritage Center

June 4
Author Susan Power Forward Thinking, Unbound Potential
Lecture, Book Signing
Belle Mehus Auditorium

July 16-18
Fort Lincoln Undergraduate History Conference & Symposium

September 30 – October 3
Eric Sevareid Symposium

Dickinson

September 16-18
Theodore Roosevelt Symposium
The President in the Arena
Dickinson State University

Fargo

October 21
Author Lecture S.D. Nelson
Read North Dakota Featured Author & Illustrator
Fargo Theatre

Grand Forks

June 30
Art & Democracy Film Series
On the Waterfront
Empire Arts Center

July 28
Art & Democracy Film Series
Meet John Doe
Empire Arts Center

August 25
Art & Democracy Film Series
Modern Times
Empire Arts Center

September 29
Art & Democracy Film Series
Saturday Night Fever
Empire Arts Center

October 27
Art & Democracy Film Series
Night of the Living Dead
Empire Arts Center

November 24
Art & Democracy Film Series
Sullivan’s Travels
Empire Arts Center

Hebron

July 2-3
Everett Albers Chautauqua
The Lure of the West

Minot

June 3
Why? Radio Show
Eric Sevareid and the Philosophy of Journalism with guest Clay Jenkinson.
Live Recording
Book signing with Clay Jenkinson and Jack Weinstein at Main Street Books
Live recording at Taube Museum
Reception at Main Street Books
Eric Sevareid was one of the founders of correspondent-based broadcast news. Soon after Edward R. Murrow and William Shirer coordinated the first news roundup from Europe on March 13, 1938, Murrow recruited Sevareid to report from Paris, where he had been working for the United Press. Although Sevareid at first had a poor radio voice, he proved his worth by the quality of his insights and his scripts. He was the first to report the Fall of France. He joined Murrow in London during the blitz. He reported the Allied invasion of southern Europe.

When he came home, he discovered that he was a celebrity and a media hero.

Sevareid, who grew up in Velva, North Dakota, never quite came to terms with his fame, but he continued to report for CBS until he accepted a position as analyst and commentator for the *CBS Evening News* with Walter Cronkite in 1963.

Featuring:
Gathering and delivering news has been Nick Clooney’s passion since he was a little boy in Kentucky listening to the unforgettable voices of Ed Murrow, Eric Sevareid, and William Shirer describing the panorama of WWII on the radio. He currently works for American Life TV, headquartered in Washington, D.C.

A long time colleague of Eric Sevareid, Bob Schieffer chief Washington correspondent for CBS News and anchor/moderator of *Face the Nation*.

Bob Edwards is a Peabody Award-winning member of the National Radio Hall of Fame. Edwards is the host of *The Bob Edwards Show* and *Bob Edwards Weekend*. He gained fame as the first host of National Public Radio’s flagship program, *Morning Edition*.

[www.sevareidlegacy.com](http://www.sevareidlegacy.com)
In one of his stories, a closet drama called “God, A Play,” Woody Allen has a character turn to the audience and ask, “Did anybody out there major in philosophy?” Nobody responds except Doris, “who majored in gym, with a philosophy minor.”

That’s me.

I won’t quite go as far as Dr. Samuel Johnson’s old friend Oliver Edwards, who, in meeting the great but deeply pessimistic lexicographer in later life, said, “I have tried, too, in my time to be a philosopher; but I don’t know how, cheerfulness kept breaking through.” I know my temperament is not a philosophical one.

I have come at life more as a philosophe than as a philosopher. I am pretty sure I do not have sufficient rigor of mind or commitment to ratiocination to be a serious student of philosophy, much less call myself a philosopher. There are
many cultural categories I cannot in good conscience place myself in: poet, artist, musician, dancer, broncobuster, and slam-dunker, among others. And then there’s philosopher. I don’t know which is more forbidding, Plato, whom I have read, taught, and whose Greek I struggled to parse, or Wittgenstein, who was all the rage during my years of graduate study abroad, whose work I know only in the shallowest way, from biographies of the great philosopher and philosophe Bertrand Russell.

The philosophes were public intellectuals of the Enlightenment. Few were formal philosophers. Voltaire, Diderot, and America’s Thomas Jefferson were reformers, encyclopediasts, philanthropists, and philosophical essayists who applied reason and skepticism to the study of philosophy, history, science, politics, economics and social institutions. As their hero Francis Bacon put it much earlier, they took all knowledge to be their province. Fueled by the new fashionable drug caffeine, meeting in chocolate and coffee houses, or, like Johnson, “drinking tea in oceans,” they turned their busy, buzzing minds in every direction, reviewing, revising, reforming everything they could get their hands on, and reclaiming the classical inheritance.

With that said, I’m pretty uncomfortable identifying myself even as a poor postmodern philosophe, but no part of me could ever make the claim that I was a philosopher or really even a serious student of philosophy, so what else do I have? I have read a good deal of philosophy in the course of my life, but in a loose, unsystematic way, and—as they say—cheerfulness kept breaking through. What follows, therefore, is the work of the least able contributor to this issue of On Second Thought.

The great question I face is: how does one get a modest useable education in philosophy without actually facing the great texts of philosophy head on? Is there a relatively painless way to absorb some philosophical concepts and controversies without giving one’s life to it, without losing one’s cheerfulness?

I remember reading straight through Bertrand Russell’s The History of Western Philosophy many years ago, and feeling pretty smug knowing that I had persevered through a book that, like all surveys and encyclopedias, gives attention to many things that I don’t find interesting, but which may be centrally important to someone (or everyone) else. Then I was chagrinned to read, in Ronald W. Clark’s biography of Russell, that the publishers who commissioned the book were disappointed with it, and that Russell’s fellow philosophers found much to quibble with in his survey of western philosophy. Still, as far as I’m concerned, Russell’s History remains the best and most painless way in to the world of philosophy for the non-professional. Among other things, Russell’s prose is always lucid and quite often witty. It is always a joy to experience the clarity of extreme intelligence.

There is also Frederick C. Copleston’s nine-volume History of Philosophy, which is probably more reliable because it has less of Russell’s wonderfully opinionated personality in it, but it is also, to my mind, much less compelling to read. I own and frequently consult W.T. Jones’ and Robert Fogelin’s five-volume History of Western Philosophy. I’m enormously fond of Jaroslav Pelikan’s The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine in five volumes. And if you are really out of time and energy, there is Will and Ariel Durant’s The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World’s Greatest Philosophers.

Those are the texts that have been available to the amateur and the dilettante all of my life. But more recently, beginning in 1999, there has appeared a very large, very interesting, and very agreeable alternative.

I cannot remember just when I first picked up some title in the “Popular Culture and Philosophy,” series, but it was at
a Barnes & Noble bookstore in Reno, Nevada, and I
know I was searching for something else. Walking past
“philosophy” in quest of “religion” I saw the title—I am
no longer sure which—and I did a literal double take. I
remember thinking, “This is an ingenious idea. I wonder if
it really works?” I think it might have been volume 10, Mel
Gibson’s Passion and Philosophy: The Cross, the Questions,
the Controversy.

The “Popular Culture and Philosophy” series had an
accidental beginning. William Irwin, an assistant professor
of philosophy at King’s College in Pennsylvania, decided to
write a book about the philosophical underpinnings of the
NBC sitcom Seinfeld. The success of his Seinfeld excursus
led him to collaborate with others on The Simpsons and
Philosophy, and The Matrix and Philosophy. In this ad
hoc way, a significant publishing phenomenon was born.
By now more than 25 “Popular Culture and Philosophy”
titles have been published, including studies of philosophy
and U2, Poker, Monty Python, Hip Hop, Harley-Davidson,
and even Facebook and the Atkins Diet. The books are
collections of related essays, all ostensibly driven by
philosophical concerns.

So far the best seller of the series has been The Simpsons
and Philosophy, which has sold more than a quarter of a
million copies. Aeon Skoble, one of its co-editors and also
the editor of the volume on Woody Allen, has been quoted
as saying, “Students are reading them and getting excited
about philosophy, and we even find some professors
working bits of them into classes. I’ve had total strangers
e-mail to tell me they’ve changed their major to philosophy
as a result of these books.”

According to Skoble, “The aim isn’t to dumb down
philosophy, nor to equate every pop culture artifact with
Shakespeare or Sophocles. Rather, we intend the books
to foster greater interest in philosophy, and to be an
interesting way to explore certain topics.”

Assuming that their audience is the same as the audience
of On Second Thought, i.e. well-educated non-specialists,
the books in this series only work if they accomplish one
of two things. Either they must use popular culture as a
window on philosophy or they must use philosophy as
a lens by which better to understand some construct of
popular culture: Baseball, the television show House,
or Facebook. The very best of them, I’m happy to
report, do both. If the series is an attempt to lure well-

enough-educated but philosophy-intimidated readers
into exploring philosophy because of the promised
entertainment value, it has certainly worked for me. I’m
guessing that it has worked for tens of thousands of others,
too.

In an essay on the nature of Woody Allen’s humor in Woody
Allen and Philosophy: (You Mean My Whole Fallacy Is
Wrong?), Lou Ascione unintentionally provides a defense
for this entire series of books. “Humor,” he writes, “can
be used to present philosophical ideas and/or to raise

“Humor, can be used to present philosophical ideas and/or to
raise important questions that many people would simply
reject outright because they are
not part of accepted culture.”
important questions that many people would simply reject outright because they are not part of accepted culture. Some
important philosophical ideas and questions are superficially unattractive to the general public, and therefore are unlikely
to even be considered for intelligent reflection if presented in a non-humorous context.” Precisely. People who might
not wish to explore Kierkegaard’s theories of self-actualization head-on, might find those same theories acceptable, even
extremely useful, if they are presented by way of illuminating the character strategies of Seinfeld. That, at least, is the
theory. How well does it work in practice?

To prepare for this essay, I have read the bulk of half a dozen of the titles in this series. I confess that my acquaintance
with popular culture is spotty and haphazard. I am not one of those folks who have adopted a favorite popular television
series, and argue for its significance in the face of good sense, not to mention the derisive skepticism of their friends.
I doubt that I have seen the majority of episodes of any television series in history with the possible exception of the
original Star Trek (1966-69), which I have watched principally for that moment when the native princess in the cellophane
bikini asks Kirk to show her what this thing “you call kiss” is, and then betrays not just her civilization but her whole
planet the morning after. I have read many but not all of the essays in the philosophy volumes on Mel Gibson’s Passion,
the Beatles, Woody Allen, The Simpsons, Monk, and House. And, most recently, Seinfeld and Philosophy: A book about
Everything and Nothing, the first book in the series. I chose to read these titles because I have a particular interest—
thanks to my 15-year-old daughter—in Monk and House, because I have read all of Woody Allen’s essays at one time or
another, because I’m fascinated by Passion Plays of every sort, and because Abbey Road and the White Album were the
two musical texts of my late adolescence. I read The Simpsons and Popular Philosophy because it’s the blockbuster of
the series, though I have not seen more than a handful of Simpsons episodes. I now intend to buy the series on DVD and
watch some of it, too.

I find the Popular Culture and Philosophy series both useful and extremely entertaining. I have in the past few days
read definitions—shortened, simplified, but earnestly developed—of postmodernism, Marxism, deconstruction, post-
structuralism, existentialism, the nature of the sublime, classicism, romanticism, nihilism, and transcendentalism, among
others. I’m sure that a properly full philosophy professor would likely look up over the top of the book in question to say,
“Well, of course, it’s a lot more complicated than that, but I suppose this works well enough as a popular introduction,
though I’d quibble with the phrase....” But in no case have I felt that one of these proffered definitions was erroneous or
misleading.
One of the best things about this series is that it is written for general readers, not specialists and professional philosophers. Because of that, there has to be some check on jargon and what might be called “insider discourse.” Some of the essayists fail to remember this and the result—one assumes—is that their contributions to the books go unread. Another advantage of this genre is that the authors feel compelled to explain things that would simply be taken for granted in professional discourse. Thus, in The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D’oh! of Homer, Dale E. Snow and James J. Snow provide a superb definition of parody: “Parody (at its best) reveals to us an aspect of something heretofore not seen or appreciated. It jars us from our complacencies by showing us where a convention or idea may end up if unfettered by other ideas or conventions.” In professional discourse no re-definition of parody would be provided because, presumably, none would be required.

Samuel Johnson said, “men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.” This is equally true for the writer and the reader. A return to definitions and first principles is an essential exercise in staying in intellectual shape. That’s one reason that some of the ablest senior professors in elite universities elect to teach introductory courses, while many entry-level and mid-level academics make the mistake of disdaining the teaching of fundamentals. Almost any person who regards her or himself as well-educated, benefits from continual returns to the basic foundation and vocabulary of their knowledge base.

For me, the books in this series are at their best when they serve as explorations of the popular culture in question, with just enough philosophy to make that a more satisfying and insightful project. In reading these essays I discovered that once I surrendered to the concept of taking pop culture seriously as a text or work, I became fascinated by what might be called the humanities possibilities of something I have, like everyone else, merely ingested in the passive way of a media consumer.

There are, of course, significant weaknesses in this series of books. For example, they are spotty. There is no attempt—to provide a comprehensive survey of western philosophy. (If you want that, you are going to have to consult Russell, et al.)

Furthermore, because these books are compilations of essays by a large number of writers and not controlled by a single interpretive intelligence, they are inevitably mixed bags. Some essayists have surrendered to the essential waggishness of the concept better than others. In any collection of essays by various hands, whether focused on pop or high culture, some contributions are inevitably more thoughtful, more insightful, and better written than others.

Moreover, some types of pop culture lend themselves to this sort of philosophy-lite treatment better than others, and some pop culture lends itself to philosophical extrusion better than others. In an ironic way, The Simpsons makes for better material than the Beatles, in part because The Simpsons has a well-established story line with a continuity of prolonged and remarkably consistent fictional characterization, while the Beatles wrote approximately 250 songs, each essentially a discrete text. Even the albums that might be said to have an overarching thematic integrity—Sargent Pepper, Abbey Road, the White Album—remain, in some essential sense, ad hoc collections of songs.

I find cultural commentary compelling, because I am interested in and I desire to understand the world I live in, which is not the world of John Henry Cardinal Newman. I am interested in his world too, but I am a little lonely in that world and not at all lonely (for cultural conversation) in mine.

Let’s face it. Milton’s Paradise Lost is read by a few hundred thousand people per year, Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde by a few thousand or perhaps merely a few hundred. Seinfeld has tens of millions of viewers, many of whom know Seinfeld much better than I know John Donne or Lewis and Clark. Literally millions of people know the plots, characters, texts and subtexts of Seinfeld, and use scenes from the sitcom as one of their primary cultural reference points. There are hundreds of thousands of people who can quote whole scenes from the sitcom the way an elocutionist quotes Shakespeare. It is not at all uncommon
There are hundreds of thousands of people who can quote whole scenes from [Seinfeld] the way an elocutionist quotes Shakespeare.

to hear someone—even a learned lecturer—saying to a public, “Do you remember that episode of Seinfeld in which the Soup Nazi…?” or “Do you remember the time the reporter concludes that Jerry and George are gay, not that there is anything wrong with that?” One rarely hears people saying, “Do you remember when Milton likens Satan's shield to the moon as seen through Galileo’s optic glass?” It might just be possible to do a book in this series called Jane Austen and Philosophy but it would be ruinous—from a financial perspective—to publish one called Dickens and Philosophy, or Dostoevsky and Philosophy (even though I would instantly pre-order both) because there is not enough common culture there (any longer) to gather a readership. And yet, 100 years ago Dickens and Philosophy would have been a very hot literary commodity.

Two things about this series really impress me. First, I like it that serious intellectuals wish to communicate with the general public. At a time when the dialogue between the academy and the off-campus world is so dysfunctional that it threatens to inspire the forces of reaction to question the need to fund universities at taxpayer expense, these books take seriously the mission of academic outreach. At a time when some of the jargon of the cultural studies movement is bandied about rather loosely in and out of the academy, by people with little or any real understanding of such terms, these books give people a chance to come to terms with the cultural vocabulary of our times without wading through Derrida or even Terry Eagleton. These books cannot compete in the marketplace unless they speak to the public in what Wordsworth called “a language really used by men.” In doing so, they perform a vital Jeffersonian service to our culture. Second, I like it that these intellectuals regard Star Wars and the Matrix and the Sopranos as texts worthy of serious explication and interpretation.

It’s not that every lover of Buffy the Vampire Killer or Mel Gibson’s Passion will turn to these books. Probably most admirers of this series are people like me, curious to see what can be said philosophically about the Atkins diet or The Wizard of Oz; people who would like to get more serious about philosophy but for whatever reason are not likely to start by way of the Tractatus or Heidegger’s Being and Time; people who understand that popular culture is serious business even when it is vapid, people who want to explore the cultural world as it actually plays itself out in the 21st century, rather than live in loneliness on the shrinking island of the canon.

Because we live in a world where most of the cultural action is now in media, it is important that we teach young people to “read” those texts as creatively and rigorously as we once tried to teach them to read King Lear. It’s no longer a question of relevance. It is now a question of survival—the survival of the academy, the survival of Jeffersonian civic engagement, and the survival of our increasingly (and militantly) philistine culture.

Clay Jenkinson is the Director of the Dakota Institute in Bismarck, North Dakota. He is the author of six books and has just completed his second documentary film, The Charisma of Competence: The Achievement of William L. Guy.
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