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Philosophers Discuss President Obama: Hope, Pragmatism, Loneliness or all three?

In February 2008, a reporter for the *New York Times* published an article making the claim that “Mr. Obama seemed interested in thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Jean-Paul Sartre, whom he studied in a political thought class in his sophomore year.”

Philosophers remark upon the priority and prominence of hope for Obama and through Obama. But what, after all, is hope?

While not much has been made of Obama’s philosophical influences, plenty of

philosophers are talking about Obama. What do philosophers have to say? Read on.

There are those who think that Obama is a pragmatist. Colin Koopman, a lecturer in philosophy at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a blogger (cwkoopman.wordpress.com) thinks that Obama’s inaugural address was distinctly reminiscent of pragmatism. The pragmatism is most evident in Obama’s continual references to and reliance upon hope “which is of course as native to pragmatist thinking as it is to America itself.” Koopman suggests that Obama’s rejection of “stale political arguments” is also a rejection of the view that we can know in advance of experience what roles governments and markets should play in our lives. Koopman thinks Obama is taking a more experimental approach to government and market forces that would allow us to invoke one or the other, either government or market, when each is appropriate. This he views as Obama’s pragmatism since it supports “a philosophical orientation that will enable us to actually go on to do the tough work of answering

hard questions in a rigorous way.” Furthermore, he claims that what it “rules out is the idle posturing and silly promising that feigns to know in advance what we ought actually to do.”

Koopman thinks it is precisely this experimental approach that provides the hope Obama speaks of and which is familiar to Americans. Hope is appropriate when moving towards a better future without predetermined answers. And he thinks Obama shares this view. As he quotes, “It is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies,” said Obama. For Koopman, our ability as Americans to meet the current challenges is wrapped up with this hope. He writes, “whether or not we meet the challenges set before us turns on nothing more holy than what we will humbly do.”

While Koopman attributes Obama’s appeal to hope as a pragmatist ideal, Simon Critchley, a professor of philosophy at the New School for Social Research views it as something motivated by Obama’s belief in the common good as a reaction to a funda-

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Philosopher's Wisdom

"Let anyone try, I will not say to arrest, but to notice or attend to, the present moment of time. One of the most baffling experiences occurs. Where is it, this present? It has melted in our grasp, fled ere we could touch it, gone in the instant of becoming."

~William James, *The Principles of Psychology*

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mental loneliness. Obama's genius, the professor said, stems from detachment, not sincerity. His "inert, listless character generates in us a desire to love him." But not too fervently. Critchley draws a line between the "strangely restrained ecstasy" of the crowd at Obama's acceptance speech in Denver, and the "zealot's ecstasy" that Sarah Palin inspired a week later. For Critchley, this detached enthusiasm is a response to the opacity of Obama.

Critchley quotes Obama's book *The Audacity of Hope* where Obama writes "I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views" as being a testament to the opacity and fundamental loneliness of Obama. "There's something lonely about Obama's universe," says Critchley as reported by the *New York Observer* on September 19, 2008. He reflects the fundamental loneliness of each us, according to Critchley. "Obama's desire for union with a common good becomes unified with ours. For that moment, and maybe only for that moment, we believe, we hope. It is a strangely restrained ecstasy, but an ecstasy nonetheless." Again, like Koopman, Critchley latches on to Obama's appeal to hope as something fundamental to his philosophical position.

Slavoj Zizek, a philosopher writing in the *London Review of Books*, sees hope in the very fact of Obama's victory. He sees it as "a sign in which the memory of the long past of slavery and the struggle for its abolition reverberates; an event which now demon-

strates a change; a hope for future achievements." He claims that we as a country were so enthusiastic about Obama's victory not only because it happened against all odds, but because it proved that such a thing can happen and can continue to happen. It has provided us with hope.

Hope. All three philosophers remark upon the priority and prominence of hope for Obama and through Obama. But what, after all, is hope? And why, as Obama's book title suggests, would hope be audacious? Ultimately, the philosophers suggest that, as Critchley says, "we must believe, but we can't believe. Perhaps this is the tragedy that some of us see in Obama: a change we can believe in and the crushing realization that nothing will change." Or, as Koopman asserts, "There is no grandiose Destiny, no holy Reason, no indubitable Truth which will make us prevail. Our America depends on nothing at all but we Americans, we who are hopeful." Or, as Zizek writes "nothing was decided with Obama's victory, but it widens our freedom and thereby the scope of our decisions. No matter what happens it will remain a sign of hope in our otherwise dark times, a sign that the last word does not belong to realistic cynics, from the left or the right."

Left or right, cynic or optimist, the future remains as it ever was: wide open. So, while the philosophers do not agree on their assessment of Obama's approach to government, or even who he is as a person, it is clear that they all wait in anticipation for what will result from the coming days of his Presidency.

Non-Philosopher's Wisdom

"I would not live forever because we should not live forever, because if we were supposed to live forever then we would live forever, but we cannot live forever, which is why I would not live forever."

~Miss Alabama 1994

Summer 2009 Course Descriptions

Session III: June 8-July 2

Phil 2110 **Critical Thinking**
MTWRF 10:00 a.m.-12:15 p.m.

Dr. Mark Tietjen

This course addresses the basics of how to think critically and how to evaluate arguments. By learning the fundamentals of logical reasoning and addressing contemporary cultural debates, we will focus on how to argue well and how to identify the fallacies of weak arguments. Students will also have the opportunity to apply skills they learn to their particular major fields of study.

Phil 2130 **Introduction to World Religions**
MTWRF 3:00-5:15 p.m.

Dr. Mark Tietjen

This course is a comparative study of the beliefs and practices of several world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We will explore not only the history of these faiths and their early doctrinal and communal development but their place in today's world.

Session IV: July 6-August 1

Phil 2120 **Introduction to Ethics**
MTWRF 10:00 a.m.-12:15 p.m.

Dr. Robert Lane

Everyone has beliefs about morality, and to some extent we all agree about what actions are right and wrong; for example, we all agree that murder is wrong and that helping those less fortunate than us is right. But there are many moral questions about which people disagree: is abortion immoral? what about human cloning? homosexuality? is it wrong to spend money on expensive cars and homes when people in other parts of the world are dying from malnutrition? This course will enable you critically to evaluate your own beliefs about concrete ethical issues like these. We'll also be dealing with more theoretical questions, such as: where does morality come from? (God? society? or somewhere else?); what makes an ethical argument good or bad?; and what general rules or principles ought we to live by? No prior experience in philosophy is necessary, so if you want to start thinking critically about morality, this course is a great place to begin. Required for all philosophy majors and minors.

Fall 2009 Course Descriptions

Phil 2100 02 **Introduction to Philosophy**
MW 2:00-3:15 p.m. Paff 102

Dr. Walter Riker

In this course we will examine several philosophical problems by considering what some historically significant philosophers have had to say about them. Our examination will also introduce you to the way philosophers tend to reflect on our world. Problems we will consider include the following: Do we have free will? Are we minds or bodies or both? What, if anything, can we know about our world? How could we come to know it? If people are free and equal, what, if anything, gives some people (i.e., the government) the right to tell others (the rest of us) what to do? Even if the government has this right, do citizens always have a moral duty to obey? What makes a good person or a good act "good"? Is morality relative to cultures? If not, then what is the source of morality? God? Something else? Can we prove that God exists? If God exists, why do bad things happen? If God exists, what can we know about what God wants from us?

Phil 2100-03 **Introduction to Philosophy**
MW 3:30-4:45 p.m. Paff 102
 Same as above.

Dr. Walter Riker

Phil 2110-01 **Critical Thinking**
MWF 9:00-9:50 a.m. Paff 306

Dr. Walter Riker

In this course students learn to recognize and evaluate several different kinds of arguments. Students will practice their developing skills by analyzing several influential contemporary arguments for and against different uses of animals (e.g., for food, research, entertainment, and companionship). This course satisfies the Oral Communication component of the Core Curriculum, so students will discuss these issues in both formal and informal settings.

Phil 2110-02 **Critical Thinking**
MWF 10:00-10:50 a.m. Paff 306
 Same as above.

Dr. Walter Riker

Phil 2110-04 **Critical Thinking**
MWF 11:00-11:50 a.m. Paff 306
 Same as above.

Dr. Walter Riker

Phil 2110-03 **Critical Thinking**
TR 9:30-10:45 a.m. Paff 306

Dr. Mark Tietjen

This course addresses the basics of how to think critically and how to evaluate arguments. By learning the fundamentals of logical reasoning and addressing contemporary cultural debates, we will focus on how to argue well and how to identify the fallacies of weak arguments. Students will also have the opportunity to apply skills they learn to their particular major fields of study.

Phil 2120-01 **Introduction to Ethics**
MWF 10:00-10:50 a.m. TLC 1103/04

Dr. Robert Lane

Everyone has beliefs about morality, and to some extent we all agree about what actions are right and wrong; for example, we all agree that murder is wrong and that helping those less fortunate than us is right. But there are many moral questions about which people disagree: is abortion immoral? what about human cloning? homosexuality? is it wrong to spend money on expensive cars and homes when people in other parts of the world are dying from malnutrition? This course will enable you critically to evaluate your own beliefs about concrete ethical issues like these. We'll also be dealing with more theoretical questions, such as: where does morality come from? (God? society? or somewhere else?); what makes an ethical argument good or bad?; and what general rules or principles ought we to live by? No prior experience in philosophy is necessary, so if you want to start thinking critically about morality, this course is a great place to begin. Required for all philosophy majors and minors.

Phil 2120-02 **Introduction to Ethics**
MWF 11:00-11:50 a.m. Paff 102

Dr. Robert Lane

Same as above.

Phil 3100 **Ancient and Medieval Philosophy**
TR 11:00 a.m.-12:15 p.m. Paff 306

Dr. Mark Tietjen

This course explores primary texts of some of the most important philosophers from the ancient and medieval world, including Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas and seeks to make their philosophical thinking relevant to that of their modern and contemporary successors. Required for Philosophy majors

Phil 3120-01W **American Philosophy**
MWF 1:00-1:50 p.m. HUM 209

Dr. Robert Lane

What is truth? What's the best way for me to form beliefs about the world? Is absolute certainty possible, or must we be satisfied with beliefs that are not certain? If there is no solid evidence for or against the existence of God, is it legitimate to believe that God exists? What is philosophy, and what is its relationship with science? This course tackles those questions and others by examining how they were treated by the thinkers who founded America's distinctive philosophical tradition: pragmatism. In particular, we will study the works of the classical American pragmatists Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, as well as three more recent pragmatists: Sidney Hook, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty. This is a Discipline Specific Writing (formerly known as "Writing Across the Curriculum" or "WAC") course, fulfilling one of two writing-course requirements for the College of Arts and Sciences.

Phil 3205-01 **Religious Texts**
TR 2:00-3:15 p.m. Paff 306

Dr. Mark Tietjen

Through an exploration of both scriptural and non-scriptural religious literature, this course considers many of the important themes of religion such as the nature and activity of God, the function of religious community, and the challenges of religious belief.

Phil 4140-01 **Existentialism**
MWF 11:00-11:50 a.m. HUM 209

Dr. Janet Donohoe

This course examines both atheist and religious existentialism through the texts of major existential thinkers such as Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, DeBeauvoir and Kierkegaard. Students are encouraged to think through the big questions existentialists raise about the meaning of human existence including whether there is any purpose for our existence, how we define ourselves, whether there are any reasons to be moral, and whether human existence is inherently meaningful. We will analyze theories in terms of the ramifications for the way we live our lives.

Phil 4300-01W **Senior Seminar: Heidegger and his Critics**
MW 2:00-3:15 p.m. TLC 1204

Dr. Janet Donohoe

This year's senior seminar focuses on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and the criticisms leveled against his philosophy by such philosophers as Jurgen Habermas, Hans Georg Gadamer, Emmanuel Levinas, and analytic philosophers yet to be determined. In addition to mid-term and final exams, students will be assessed by way of one major writing assignment that will be rewritten a few times in the course of the semester after feedback from both the professor and other students. The final paper should be suitable for submission to undergraduate philosophy conferences and will become part of the student's senior portfolio. Students will also present their research to the class and respond to questions from the professor and their peers.

Annual Philosophy Awards Ceremony

This year's awards ceremony will take place on Friday, April 3, 2009 at The Border. All Philosophy majors are invited to attend. There will be light refreshments available. This is a fun annual event where students and faculty have an opportunity to relax together and celebrate the accomplishments of students within our program. This is also when students who have been accepted into Phi Sigma Tau will be inducted into the honors organization. Students who have presented papers at conferences in the course of the year will also be recognized.

STUDENTS WHO WILL BE RECOGNIZED ARE:

Best New Major Award: Geoff Lundeen and Alice Barker

Gordon Watson Award in Philosophy: Philip Brewer

Inductees to Phi Sigma Tau: Ace Mendez, Donny Smith, Tania Celis, Jeffrey Brown, and Cadi Carmack

Meeting of Minds participants: Ace Mendez, Charles Bauch, Philip Brewer, Anna Potter, Timothy Wright, Igor Chernoknizhnyy, Jordan Hendricks, Shelley Donaldson, and Rosemary Bennett

Student Conference and Research Day Presenters: Charles Bauch, Timothy Wright, Geoff Lundeen, Donny Smith, and others pending acceptance to conferences.

This list may not be exhaustive. If you have been involved in a philosophical activity which is not listed here, please contact your philosophy advisor to let us know. Congratulations go out to the students. Come help us celebrate the success of our students and our program!

Meeting of the Minds

What Are We Doing?: Technology and the Human Condition

Ever wonder how Facebook is changing your life? Ever wonder how MySpace and YouTube have altered our communities and the ways in which we interact? Technological "advancements" will come under scrutiny through this year's Meeting of the Minds. Some of the great philosophers have a few things to say about the role of technology in our lives. Come join in the conversation!

When: Tuesday, March 31, 2009 7:00 p.m.

Where: Kathy Cashen Hall

Who: Aristotle, Hegel, Heidegger, Arendt, Einstein, and Foucault

Why: Because we're philosophers.

Philosophers will be played by Ace Mendez, Charles Bauch, Philip Brewer, Anna Potter, Igor Chernoknizhnyy and Jordan Hendricks respectively. The discussion moderated by Timothy Wright, organized and directed by Shelley Donaldson. Publicity by Rosemary Bennett.

INTERESTED IN PHILOSOPHY?

Join the West Georgia Philosophical Society

Interested in philosophy? Enjoy open discussions on every imaginable topic? Then you should join the Philosophical Society. The Society is a registered student organization that meets every other week for lively discussions of philosophical topics. So far this year the discussion topics have ranged from the role of technology in our lives, to the question of what equality really means and whether all humans are equal, to the question of what philosophy is. Members of the society have also been involved in canned food drives, bake sales, and trivia nights at local restaurants. All students, regardless of their background or experience, are invited to join. In spring 2009 meetings will be held every other Monday at 12:00 noon in TLC room 3238. For more information, check out the philosophy Society's website at <http://www.westga.edu/~philsoc>, or contact Dr. Tietjen (mtietjen@westga.edu).

PHILOSOPHY HONORS SOCIETY

The Georgia Iota chapter of Phi Sigma Tau is West Georgia's philosophical link to the world of honor societies. The chapter consists of students who have demonstrated outstanding academic achievement and a sincere interest in philosophy. Founded to recognize and reward philosophical scholarship, the chapter provides both an academic and a social environment for its members. The criteria for membership are: a 3.0 overall GPA, the completion of at least two philosophy courses, a GPA higher than 3.0 in all philosophy courses taken, and the completion of 45 hours of coursework. For more information, go to <http://www.westga.edu/~pst>, or contact Dr. Lane (rlane@westga.edu) if you are interested in applying for membership.

Share your Wisdom at these Upcoming Conferences

If you have a paper that you are proud of, you should consider submitting it to one of these local conferences. Even if you're not so sure about presenting at one of these conferences, you can always go to the conference to see what other philosophy students are thinking about and working on, and what a philosophy conference is like. Complete information about each conference is available through links on the Philosophy website at www.westga.edu/~phil. You can also consult with any of the Philosophy professors who will be glad to help you work on a paper for submission.

University of Memphis Undergraduate Philosophy Conference

Conference dates: April 17-18, 2009

Submission deadline: March 1, 2009

6th Annual North Georgia Student Philosophy Conference

Conference dates: April 3-4, 2009

Submission deadline (abstracts): March 10, 2009

First Episteme Undergraduate Conference

Conference dates: March 27-28, 2009

Submission deadline: November 14, 2008

11th Annual Southern Appalachian Undergraduate Philosophy Conference

Conference date: March 21, 2009

Submission deadline: February 6 2009

Annual Georgia Student Philosophy Symposium

Conference date: March 14, 2009

Submission deadline: January 16, 2009

Summer Reading Suggestions

Dr. Donohoe recommends

Very Little...Almost Nothing
by Simon Critchley.

God as Otherwise than Being
by Calvin O. Schrag.

Dr. Lane recommends

Pragmatism by William James

*Breaking the Spell: Religion
as a Natural Phenomenon*
by Daniel Dennett

Dr. Riker recommends

Animal Liberation
by Peter Singer

*National Responsibility and Global
Justice* by David Miller.

Dr. Tietjen recommends

*Plato and a Platypus Wander into
a Bar...: Understanding Philosophy
Through Jokes* by Thomas Cathcart
and Daniel Klein.

*Why I am not a Christian and Other
Essays on Religion and Related
Subjects* by Bertrand Russell.



BUT REALLY, ART IS A PRIVATE LANGUAGE FOR SOPHISTICATES TO CONGRATULATE THEMSELVES ON THEIR SUPERIORITY TO THE REST OF THE WORLD.

